

Ten Intervention Tips to Help Students Respond

by Bruce Oliver

Introduction: The “RtI” statements below are designed to provide insights for educators to consider. As you read through the tips, consider which of the following statements best captures where you are with each: **I'm Already There, I'm Working on This, or That's Something I Haven't Thought About Or Tried.**

Recapture the Inspiration

Think about the earliest days of your teaching career; it may have been twenty years ago, last year, or just last week. If you are like many teachers, you approached your chosen profession with energy, enthusiasm, and a firm belief that you would reach each and every one of your students; that you would not let any obstacle get in the way of your or their success; and that you would never lose your belief in the capacity of all students to learn. Perhaps, reality set in and your optimistic viewpoint began to wane. Over time, the rigor and reality of what it means to “teach children” settled in. As a result, some of us forget our initial passion. If you see yourself in the above description, take some time to recall those early days and remember what it felt like to come to work every day with excitement and dedication to students and their learning.

Remember the Individual

When you plan lessons and units, you often think about teaching a concept or presenting content to the entire class. We all know that students do not learn uniformly or at the same rate. Experience also teaches us that when students are given a task to complete, not all students possess the necessary skills or prerequisite knowledge to complete the required work. By using your knowledge of the standards, the assessments, and the individual learners, you can complete a task analysis prior to giving the students an assignment. By analyzing the task, you can work with individuals or small groups to fill in learning gaps, or give the students a comparable task to match their readiness level.

Remove the Impediments

Whenever students show signs of lagging behind in their learning, it is important to take proactive steps to determine the reason for the learning difficulty. A timely examination on our part may provide solutions to deterrents which may be keeping the students from making progress. Solutions may range from providing a range of resources to discussing possible outside of school issues with a school counselor to allowing the student to pair up with a peer to one-on-one private conferences with the student. What is most important is that we take action before the struggles become deeper and more difficult to diagnose.

Revisit the Indicators

An increasing number of today's educators are gathering and analyzing student achievement data on a more frequent basis in order to determine if students are mastering the content being taught. Many of the assessments that teachers use may be short answer or multiple choice instruments. Some students do not do well on these types of assessments. Before jumping to the conclusion that a student is not learning, we should expand our repertoires of indicators that demonstrate if and how students are moving toward mastery. Alternative or non-traditional indicators may include one-on-one conversations with students (including teacher feedback) and allowing the student to correct errors and resubmit the assignment, or allowing the students to complete an outline or graphic organizer to demonstrate their knowledge of a concept. In the real world, we show what we know or have learned in multiple formats. Limiting how students can show what they have learned may lead to misjudgments or even a misdiagnosis of a student's learning problem. Yes, we do have to eventually help students develop test-taking skills, but the fact that standardized tests are most often multiple choice does not mean that we need to use that format exclusively in the classroom.

Recognize the Investment

Imagine what it must be like for students to put forth considerable effort to show what they have learned only to have the assessment returned with a disappointing single letter grade at the top. With substantial workloads, we may provide limited or no feedback at all on the quality or extent of a student's learning. Many assessments are returned incorrect items marked in red, a grade, and no growth-producing feedback. When students receive multiple or continuous work products of this nature, they may become discouraged and start to wonder, "What's the use?" When students view themselves as incompetent or even unable to learn, they may begin to give up altogether. Yet when we focus on what students have done "right," and provide on-going encouragement, the clear message conveyed is that the students' efforts are valued, they're making progress, and their investment in their learning will pay off in the long run.

Resist the Inclination...to rush to judgment

At the first signs of a student's struggle, some educators begin thinking about the possible supports or services the student might access beyond the current classroom setting. Reading specialist and author Richard Allington suggests that the first step in our thinking should be to ask ourselves what we are doing or not doing instead of trying to determine what is wrong with the child. As Allington wrote, "Teachers instruct in ways they deem appropriate. If a student struggles and falls behind, especially in reading, the conclusion may be that the child has a neurological problem and this may require special services." A wise teacher explores alternative methods to isolate the learning problem and then continues to seek the approach to learning that will work with that individual student.

Revise the Instruction

In order to help struggling learners be more successful, we may need to take a look at how we are teaching and perhaps add some new ways of thinking to our practice. New teaching approaches may include the following revisions:

- Present information concretely as opposed to abstractly and relate the content to real-world experiences
- Break lessons and tasks into smaller, meaningful chunks
- Connect new learning to content which has already been taught
- Pair students with peers who can assist them in meeting learning goals
- Allow students to demonstrate competence in a variety of ways
- Include repetition and frequent practice of discrete skills
- Use computer-assisted instruction to reinforce basic skills
- Have students set short-term goals in writing and review the goals periodically to assess progress toward their achievement
- Give students who work slowly extra time to complete their tasks
- Make sure that learners have close and trusting relationships with several adults on the staff
- Communicate a “you can do it” attitude to students and reward their effort and progress

Refute Their Indifference

Teachers often pose the question, “What do you do when students won't do anything?” I believe in my heart that students do not enter school with a defeatist attitude. Things happen along the way that cause them to become mired in failure and soon they see no point in even trying. But I hear stories of success in which teachers have turned students on to new learning. What are some specific things we can do to address the apathetic attitude of certain students?

- Model enthusiasm; despite the passivity that students might exhibit, it should not stop the teacher from getting excited about the new learning that will take place
- Make students feel important; pay close attention to what they think and how they act to look for clues, and if that does not work, be forthright and ask them what's important in their lives
- Give students choices; often students will stop trying because they are asked to repeat the same difficult tasks over and over; they might feel empowered when they have some say in how they will show what they have learned
- Share laughter and make it okay to show joy (and maybe even act silly) in the classroom
- Look for and acknowledge small victories; some students have been down for a long time and it may take time to build them back up

Re-inspire Their Imaginations

Some of the most successful teachers are those who “catch their students off guard” by behaving in an unorthodox manner as they deliver instruction or challenge students to problem solve by thinking creatively and using their imaginations. When students are given the opportunity to work with peers to apply or transfer prior learning in interesting ways, the conversations among small groups are often animated, inspired, and even dynamic. Moreover, when we devise intriguing questions to pique students' curiosity as they plan lessons, we often discover that there is a great deal more going on inside students' heads than what is conveyed in a pencil and paper test.

Re-imagine the Ideal

A current TV advertisement shows a group of students participating in a spelling bee. Well into the bee, after multiple rounds, the proctors appear to be worn out because no student has yet to miss a word. Eventually the exhausted head proctor declares everyone the winner. The tag line for the ad is “Rethink Possible.” It caused me to wonder what it would be like if we all applied that kind of thinking to our teaching and learning roles. It may seem idealistic or even a bit unrealistic but a change in thinking may just be the spark that can ignite our passion. It further brought to mind the essential question which guides all **Just ASK** workshops:

What do schools and classrooms look like when they organize around a commitment to the achievement of high standards by all students?

Reimagining what it would be like when students are successful, and following through with great instruction can cause us to feel renewed, energized, and more fulfilled. Isn't that why we got into this profession in the first place?