

# Parent Advocacy Brief

## A Parent's Guide to Response-to-Intervention



**M**illions of school age children experience difficulties with learning. Their struggles in school may be due to factors such as inadequate instruction, cultural or language differences or, in some cases, a disability such as a learning disability. For years schools have attempted to provide help to these students using a variety of approaches – including programs such as teacher assistance teams, special education and Title I (early reading and math assistance).

In recent years, Congress has added new provisions to our nation's federal education laws – the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) – that are designed to encourage school districts to provide additional support for struggling students within general education. This support should be provided as early as possible – when students show the earliest signs of difficulty.

While schools have attempted many ways to help struggling students, including those with disabilities, the current focus is on a improved, research-based process known as **Response-to-Intervention** (or Responsiveness-to-Intervention) (RTI) (see box). Like any successful school initiative, parents play a critical role in RTI.

NCLD has written this Parent Advocacy Brief to provide an overview of the RTI process, describe how it is implemented in schools and offer questions that parents can ask.

**Note:** The manner in which states and school districts might implement a Response-to-Intervention model will vary greatly, so be sure to check with your state or local school district for additional information about RTI.

### What is Response-to-Intervention (RTI)?

The RTI process is a multi-step approach to providing services and interventions to students who struggle with learning at increasing levels of intensity. The progress students make at each stage of intervention is closely monitored. Results of this monitoring are used to make decisions about the need for further research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education, in special education or both.

The RTI process has the potential to limit the amount of academic failure that any student experiences and to increase the accuracy of special education evaluations. Its use could also reduce the number of children who are mistakenly identified as having learning disabilities when their learning problems are actually due to cultural differences or lack of adequate instruction. Information and data gathered by an RTI process can lead to earlier identification of children who have true disabilities and are in need of special education services.



## Benefits of Response-to-Intervention

The use of an RTI process as part of a school's procedures for determining whether a student has a learning disability and needs special education services can potentially:

- Reduce the time a student waits before receiving additional instructional assistance, including special education if needed
- Reduce the overall number of students referred for special education services and increase the number of students who succeed within general education
- Provide critical information about the instructional needs of the student, which can be used to create effective educational interventions
- Limit the amount of unnecessary testing that has little or no instructional relevance
- Ensure that students receive appropriate instruction, particularly in reading, prior to placement in special education.

## Limitations of Response-to-Intervention

- While many schools have been using RTI for a number of years, RTI is generally being used as a school-wide prevention model – not specifically as an approach used to identify students who have learning disabilities.
- In addition, schools' use of RTI tends to be focused on the early elementary grades and limited to the academic area of reading, with some focus on early math. As schools attempt to develop RTI processes that address and strengthen other academic areas and focus on students beyond elementary school, little information or research on which to base such models is available.
- Since an RTI process identifies the lowest performing students within a group – such as a class or grade – within the school, students who are highly intelligent (frequently referred to as “gifted”) yet aren't performing up to their potential will most likely not be identified for intervention. While these students may have a learning disability, they typically would not be identified as needing special education through an RTI process.
- Lastly, RTI alone is generally not sufficient to identify a learning disability. While the information collected during the RTI process will, as mentioned above, play an important role in making decisions about student need and creating effective instructional plans, additional information is needed to satisfy the evaluation requirements of IDEA and make a well-informed, individualized decision about each student.

Despite these limitations, a well implemented, research-based RTI process promises to offer earlier, more relevant help for students at risk for learning disabilities and provide critical information about the instructional needs of the student, which can be used to create effective educational interventions.

### Important Terms to Know

**Intervention:** A change in instructing a student in the area of learning or behavioral difficulty to try to improve performance and achieve adequate progress.

**Progress monitoring:** A scientifically based practice used to assess students' academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Progress monitoring can be implemented with individual students or an entire class. (See page 4 for more information)

**Scientific, research-based instruction:** Curriculum and educational interventions that are research based and have been proven to be effective for most students

**Universal screening:** A step taken by school personnel early in the school year to determine which students are “at risk” for not meeting grade level standards. Universal screening can be accomplished by reviewing a student's recent performance on state or district tests or by administering an academic screening to all students in a given grade. Students whose scores on the screening fall below a certain cut-off point are identified as needing continued progress monitoring and possibly more intensive interventions.



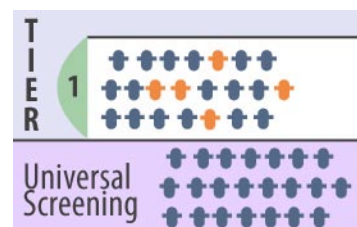
## A Three-Tier RTI Model

While there is no single, thoroughly researched and widely practiced “model” of the RTI process, it is generally defined as a three-tier (or 3-step) model of school supports that uses research-based academic and/or behavior interventions. At all stages of the process, RTI should focus on discovering how to make the student more successful rather than focusing on the student’s lack of success.

### A three-tier RTI model includes:

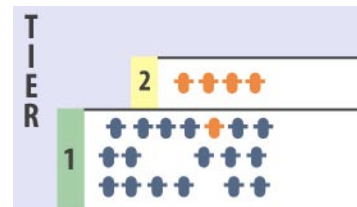
#### ► Tier 1: Screening and Group Interventions

Students who are “at-risk” are identified using universal screenings and/or results on state or district-wide tests and could include weekly progress monitoring of all students for a brief period. Identified students receive supplemental instruction, or interventions, generally delivered in small groups during the student’s regular school day in the regular classroom. The length of time for this step can vary, but it generally should not exceed eight weeks. During that time, student progress is closely monitored using a validated screening system such as curriculum based measurement (see below). At the end of this period, students showing significant progress are generally returned to the regular classroom program. (Note: this step may be broken into 2 separate tiers in a 4-tier model) Students not showing adequate progress are moved to Tier 2.



#### ► Tier 2: Targeted Interventions

Students not making adequate progress in the regular classroom in Tier 1 are provided with more intensive services and interventions. These services are provided in addition to instruction in the general curriculum. These interventions are provided in small group settings. In the early grades (K-3) interventions are usually in the areas of reading and math. A longer period of time may be required for this tier, but it should generally not exceed a grading period.

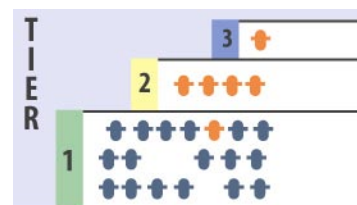


Students who continue to show too little progress at this level of intervention are then considered for more intensive interventions as part of Tier 3.

Depending on a school’s particular model of RTI, parents may or may not be involved in Tier 2. Ideally, schools involve parents at the earliest stages of RTI by explaining the process in face-to-face meetings, providing written intervention plans and requesting parental consent.

#### ► Tier 3: Intensive Interventions and Comprehensive Evaluation

Students receive individualized, intensive interventions that target the student’s skill deficits. Students who do not respond to these targeted interventions are then considered for eligibility as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The data collected during Tiers 1, 2 and 3 are included and used to make the eligibility decision. (Note: This part of the process may be broken into 2 separate tiers in a 4-tier model).



At any point in an RTI process, IDEA allows parents to request a formal evaluation to determine eligibility for special education. An RTI process cannot be used to deny or delay a formal evaluation for special education. For more information on IDEA provisions see NCLD’s Parent Guide to IDEA at [www.LD.org/IDEAGuide](http://www.LD.org/IDEAGuide).

## The Importance of Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring is a scientifically based practice used to assess students' academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction they are receiving. It can be implemented with individual students or an entire class.

Progress monitoring is a fundamental and necessary component of RTI. The information gathered through progress monitoring is used throughout the RTI process to make important instructional decisions about the student.

To implement progress monitoring, the student's current levels of performance are determined and goals are identified for learning that will take place over time. The student's academic performance is measured on a regular basis (weekly, bi-weekly or monthly). Progress toward meeting the student's goals is measured by comparing expected and actual rates of learning. Based on these measurements, teaching is adjusted as needed.

Whatever method of progress monitoring a school decides to use, it is most important that it is a scientifically based practice that is supported by significant research.

### Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM)

The form of progress monitoring that is scientifically validated is Curriculum Based Measurement or CBM. CBM is one way of tracking and recording a child's progress in specific learning areas. Using CBM, teachers regularly assess students' performance (e.g., each week) using very brief, simple tests. The results help teachers determine whether students are learning well from their instructional program. CBM results also provide the teacher with the information needed to tailor instruction for a particular student. CBM practices, supported by a great deal of research, are available in pre-reading, reading, spelling, mathematics and written expression for grades 1-6. CBM procedures have also been developed for kindergarten and middle school.

Some examples of CBM are:

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)  
<http://dibels.uoregon.edu>

AIMSweb  
<http://www.aimsweb.com>

Monitoring Basic Skills Progress (MBSP)  
<http://www.proedinc.com>

Yearly Progress Pro  
<http://www.mhdigitallearning.com>

More information on these and other scientifically based progress monitoring tools is available from the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring at [www.studentprogress.org](http://www.studentprogress.org).

### Essential Components of RTI

According to the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) ([www.nrclid.org](http://www.nrclid.org)) the essential components of Response-to-Intervention include:

- Monitoring a student's progress in the general curriculum using appropriate screenings or tests (assessments)
- Choosing and implementing scientifically proven interventions to address a student's learning problems
- Following formal guidelines to decide which students are not making sufficient progress or responding to the intervention
- Monitoring how the student responds to the intervention by using assessments at least once a week or once every two weeks
- Making sure the interventions are provided accurately and consistently
- Determining the level of support that a student needs in order to be successful
- Giving parents notice of a referral and a request to conduct a formal evaluation if a disability is suspected as required by IDEA.