



Seven ways to kill RTI

Even good interventions can go bad if they're not planned and supported well. Heed some warning signs about Response to Intervention.

By Brandi Noll

Who knows if there will be newspapers five years from now. But, if some of them are still around, will we see such an entry?

OBITUARIES

Response to Intervention (1982-2018)

Once believed to be a promising new initiative designed to reduce the number of students struggling with reading, and in turn further reduce the number of students labeled with disabilities, Response to Intervention (RTI) has officially been thrown to the wayside as just another unsuccessful school reform initiative. Although the official cause of death has yet to be determined, the causes were most likely poor implementation, misguided intentions, and a lack of time and attention spent on the components that matter most.

As much as I hope that this obituary doesn't come true, I fear it will, especially if schools across the nation continue to make the types of implementation errors that I have witnessed over the last several years. An educator and advocate for struggling readers, I have had a multitude of experiences with schools, districts, and states as they try to align practices with the RTI framework. And while I would never concede that implementing RTI is either quick or easy, my hopes that RTI will succeed have begun to dissipate.

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Quite similar to love at first sight, I remember when I first heard a woman speak about Response to Intervention. I left that meeting filled with excitement and hope. At the time, I was a Title I reading tutor working with a small group of struggling readers in the hallway and using lower-level texts during core reading instruction. General statements such as, “These five students are my low readers” served as data, and teachers had no expectation of accelerating students with the goal of re-entry into regular language arts instruction. The same students ended up on the Title I intervention list year after year.

RTI was exciting because educators were no longer blaming the child for not learning. Instead, we were

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focusing on the instruction that teachers provided and how well that instruction matched the needs of each struggling reader, needs that were confirmed using data. I was blown away by the idea that teachers would collect data during an intervention to determine if the intervention was making a difference and that we would change what we were doing if we found it was unsuccessful.

I was immediately hooked and a little peeved that I had never before considered what seemed like such an obvious concept.

I enthusiastically and almost immediately joined my school district in a multi-year journey to change the way we were doing things. We did what I now refer to as RTI stuff. (Although the term stuff is far from academic, I have failed to find a more appropriate term to describe our practices.) Four years later, I realized that we’d had little to no effect on reading achievement, had not improved the reading abilities of our most struggling students, nor reduced the number of students who repeatedly fell below expectations.

I went into a period of deep reflection and began to expand my research. I realized that our initial goal was similar to educators’ across the nation: implementation of RTI. The goal should have been effective implementation of RTI. Indeed, RTI is not an initiative that can simply be planned out on a drafting table and implemented in a short time by merely checking off a list of tasks. Instead, RTI requires a great deal of information gathering, critical thinking, networking, training, uncomfortable conversation, time, and, most important, learning from the past. My goal in writing this article is to share how schools can go wrong, affectionately described here

as surefire ways to kill RTI because these actions and processes are likely to lead to little growth in reading achievement, which may very well result in ineffectiveness and thus abandonment of the initiative.

Top 7 ways to kill RTI

#1. Attempting to improve classroom instruction by mandating a core reading program.

Commercially produced, core reading programs are not evidence-based; instead, they are research-based. Although publishing companies use research to help develop a series of year-long lessons that include traces of research-based components, none have shown evidence within well-designed, unbiased, scientific studies to actually improve student achievement. Especially disappointing is that studies have shown that a core reading program does not affect the reading achievement of at-risk students (McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, & Zeig, 2006). Requiring strict fidelity to a core reading program has failed to raise student achievement in reading (Ryder, Sekulski, & Silberg, 2003).

Districts should focus on integrating highly effective, research-based strategies rather than mandating the materials teachers use with these strategies. In addition, teachers should use assessment data to plan and sequence instruction, rather than a strict scope and sequence of skills planned by publishers who know nothing about individual student needs. Educators must be critical consumers by recognizing the strengths and weakness of any instructional materials and, most important, addressing the weaknesses of those materials.

Schools and teachers who are considering commercially produced materials can and should evaluate the materials in advance. Several tools are available for this and cost little or nothing (Table 1). Instead of assuming that materials are perfect or that materials teach students, educators should focus on teacher skills because these skills can be used consistently over time regardless of the materials. It saddens me that we place more faith in teaching tools and materials than in teachers themselves.

#2. Ignoring the power of high-quality Tier I instruction.

Many districts struggle with ways to effectively reduce the number of students who need remedial instruction in reading — students serviced in Tiers II and III. In fact, many districts spend an inordinate amount of time and money trying to find ways to assist struggling readers who need more intensive instruction in order to catch up to their peers. However, some districts fail to recognize the unbri-dled power of high-quality instruction. By ensuring

TABLE 1.
Tools for reviewing and evaluating core reading programs

TOOL	DESCRIPTION	AVAILABILITY
<i>A Consumer's Guide to Analyzing a Core Reading Program Grades K-3: A Critical Elements Analysis</i> by Deborah C. Simmons and Edward J. Kame'enui (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate for use with K-3 core reading programs • Designed by the National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators and the Institute for the Development of Educational Achievement 	Available for free at www.nj.gov/njded/grants/docs/AppendixF.pdf
<i>Guidelines to Review Comprehensive Core Reading Programs</i> by the Florida Center for Reading Research (n.d.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate for use with K-3 core reading programs • Designed to assist the Curriculum and Instruction Team at the Florida Center for Reading Research in reviewing core reading program alignment with current research 	Available for free at www.p12.nysed.gov/readfirst/technicalassistance/ccrp.pdf
<i>Reading Guide to Program Selection (Reading GPS)</i> by Peter Dewitz, Susan B. Leahy, Jennifer Jones, and Pamela M. Sullivan (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools available for grades K-6 core reading programs • Companion to the book <i>The Essential Guide to Selecting and Using Core Reading Programs</i> 	Available for free at www.reading.org/General/Publications/Books/SupplementalContent/bk707_supplement.aspx

that high-quality Tier I instruction matches student needs through differentiation and small group instruction, the school can lower the number of students who need more intervention.

Thirty minutes of intervention can't make up for poor classroom instruction during the other five to six hours of the school day. Illustrative of this point, I recall discussing the data for one school year — a list of students who had been in Tier II at various times during the year — with a principal. We were searching for characteristics of interventions that could explain why most of them had remained in the intervention all year; relatively few had successfully reintegrated back into Tier I. As we examined intervention groups, we sorted students according to a variety of categories, such as type of intervention, who administered the intervention (paraprofessional vs. certified teacher), the time spent in intervention, and so forth. We discovered the key characteristic: Students from generally low-performing classrooms stayed in intervention all year, and students from highly successful teachers' classrooms eventually exited intervention groups. Consistent, high-quality classroom instruction all day, every day, should be a number one priority for keeping students from initially entering or re-entering Tiers II and III.

#3. Failing to provide professional development in an effective manner.

A plethora of research has demonstrated the most advantageous ways to inform, engage, and motivate practicing teachers in designing and delivering high-quality reading instruction. Schools should provide

on-site professional development so teachers can have assistance with implementing literacy concepts in their own rooms, with their own students, and using their own materials. Ongoing professional development should also be personalized, differentiated, and data-driven. Educators should participate in regular examinations of whole school data in order to identify major areas of weakness, which can be addressed by focusing and implementing whole-group professional development.

Additionally, administrators and supervisors should examine and act on assessment data that may uncover teachers whose student data are lagging behind. These issues must be addressed individually, allowing teachers to examine data in the company of administrators and school leaders and to create and gather resources and create professional development plans that respond to individual areas of weakness. Unfortunately, educators who aren't being effective either don't know they are (because administrators fail to share classroom data with them) or don't know how to improve and require professional guidance.

#4. Searching for quick fixes.

Richard Allington explored this idea of educators searching for a quick-and-easy fix to their literacy woes in his appropriately titled book, *No Quick Fix, the RTI Edition* (Teacher's College Press, 2007). Rather than searching for the easiest, quickest fixes, educators should be seeking solutions that have been proven to work in other districts. I have attended far too many professional presentations

TABLE 2.

Organizations that provide unbiased, scientific reviews of reading programs

ORGANIZATION/SITE	DETAILS
Florida Center for Reading Research www.fcrr.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Download the report <i>Extensive Reading Interventions in K-3</i> (PDF), which summarizes and synthesizes findings from 12 research studies that explored intervention for early readers.
Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE) www.bestevidence.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Created by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education's Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education. Reviews both beginning reading programs (for grades K and 1) and programs for struggling readers.
What Works Clearinghouse http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Publishes the evidence and levels of effectiveness of many popular reading intervention programs on the market.

Thirty minutes of intervention can't make up for poor classroom instruction during the other five to six hours of the school day.

given by or about school districts that share their laundry list of RTI stuff. Unfortunately, I haven't seen audience members at these presentations —

usually administrators in other districts looking for ways to implement RTI — asking the obvious and essential question: Do you have evidence that it works?

Rather than passing on ineffective practices, or practices that have had little effect on student achievement, educators should be seeking strategies that actually improve reading achievement. Fortunately, there

are districts that have achieved success in a variety of ways; however, they are much harder to locate, possibly because they aren't spending their time presenting at conferences but instead busy making sure that they get it right. One common denominator among successful districts is that they believe nothing of importance in their reform process has been either quick or easy.

#5. *Believing that commercially produced intervention programs, rather than highly trained, knowledgeable educators, can improve reading.*

Too often, I have viewed menu-like lists created by district RTI leaders of intervention options for students who find themselves placed in Tiers II or III. Commercially produced, boxed intervention programs dominate these lists. This is most unsettling since research has shown that few intervention programs actually improve struggling readers' ability to read. Several unbiased sites can provide potential consumers with scientific evidence of the effective-

ness of popular intervention programs. (See Table 2.) What this evidence shows is that commercially produced programs sporadically improve isolated skills such as alphabets — students' ability to read words in isolation — but most fail to improve real reading.

Rather than spending valuable resources buying commercial programs, educators should examine research about highly effective, teacher-designed intervention practices. Table 3 includes essential characteristics that research has demonstrated to be most effective at improving students' reading abilities. Interventions that give students opportunities to work on skills as they read and write are most likely to improve their reading and writing. Also, when skilled teachers provide interventions based on student data, especially detailed observational data, and can respond to demonstrated student needs on the fly rather than following planned lessons from a commercially produced intervention, students are more likely to become more skilled readers.

#6. *Failing to include assessments that measure the effects of instruction and intervention on reading of connected text, rather than word lists.*

Assessments should reflect student growth in reading and writing. Too often, educators solely use assessments that isolate and assess skills removed from the reading process. I have observed students who are able to successfully perform these isolated skills while simultaneously showing almost no growth in real reading within the intervention or the classroom.

Some districts have eliminated assessments that require students to read in front of an interventionist or classroom teacher while the educator records notes about the strategies that students use or fail

to use while reading, such as informal reading inventories and running records. Instead, districts are replacing such assessments with timed readings of grade-level passages in which the administrator of the assessment is directed to tell the student the word they cannot read after waiting just three seconds for the student to figure it out. But this gives the interventionist no information about the strategies a student uses, knows, or needs to learn. If we want struggling readers to become strategic, like their successful counterparts, we must know how they problem solve as they encounter decoding or word knowledge issues as they read. We must also use assessments that let us observe their reading strategies in order to inform our future instruction and to measure their growth.

#7. Failing to provide teachers with the support they need to analyze assessment data.

Many districts have a long list of required assessments. As new assessments are mandated, the time required to administer, score, and record them continues to consume teachers' time in and outside the classroom. As a result, teachers have little time to analyze the results to make instructional changes. Not only do teachers lack time for this task, many also don't know how to do this effectively. Few, if any, teacher preparation or professional development programs spend much time training teachers to deeply analyze data in order to plan instruction. When teachers rely on core reading programs to dictate the content and pace of their instruction, the need to analyze data and make changes seems counterintuitive.

I have sat side-by-side with many primary grade teachers who have stacks of data on their desks, but

little knowledge of how to turn that data into instructional changes. Many districts falsely believe that if teachers have a plethora of data, then they must be using it to improve their teaching. But many teachers are drowning in numbers with little time or skill to do anything about it.

Conclusion

I've often heard that we need to study history in order to ensure that we don't repeat it. This concept also holds true in reading education. We must learn from the experiences — positive and negative — of those around us who are trying to accomplish the same educational goals. If schools want to increase the reading achievement of all students, while also reducing the number of students who require additional intervention, we must spread the word about what works and what doesn't work. We must rely more on scientific evidence than word-of-mouth suggestions if we hope to keep RTI out of the graveyard of ineffective school reform initiatives. **■**

References

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TABLE 3.
Characteristics of highly successful interventions

- Effective intervention should contain the following elements: phonological awareness, decoding and word study, guided and independent reading of progressively more difficult texts, writing, and comprehension strategies while reading real text.
- Interventions provided by paraprofessionals can be effective when the intervention is fairly structured and provided one-on-one. Otherwise, certified teachers should be used.
- One-to-one group size is highly effective, however group sizes up to three can have positive effects on intervention outcomes.
- Interventions are most effective when they occur regularly (4-5 days per week).
- Early identification of students (kindergarten or 1st grade) in need of intervention is of utmost importance.

Source: Scammaca, N., Vaughn, S., Roberts, G., Wanzek, J., & Torgesen, J. K. (2007). *Extensive reading interventions in grades K-3: From research to practice*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

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