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## Response to Intervention: Should it be used?

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# Response to Intervention: Should it be used?

## **Abstract**

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Response to Intervention:

Should it be used?

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent Response to Intervention is used in urban schools at the secondary level. The lack of current research shows that its use is sporadic at best as compared to suburban schools and more affluent areas. Through interviewing administrators and special education teachers in an urban school district in upstate New York, it was evident that Response to Intervention is being used with varying levels of success. There are common roadblocks, which prevent the successful implementation. These roadblocks can be broken down into three themes: confusion with the process and practices, time to schedule the interventions, and resources including physical space within the school, funding to train new staff and provide interventions services, and the staff themselves.

### **Response to Intervention: Should it be used?**

The skills of reading and writing begin early in a child's life, and student success in these areas hinges on their literacy skill development. Research has shown that the progress of one's literacy skills can be a predictor for success in schooling and later on in life (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007). Young students often face significant challenges in learning to read due to the fact that they lack essential early literacy skills at the start of schooling. As students continue to grow and progress through childhood, the gap between students who have established strong literacy skills and those who have not widens. Unfortunately for many of these children, they do not catch up and are at high risk for failure and/or being referred to special education services (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Response to Intervention is a way to address students' academic needs in school. Through the Response to Intervention process, student progress is closely observed in order to determine which students are not meeting standards. Students who are struggling are entitled to receive additional instruction and services in order to expand their academic skills. The further support provided through Response to Intervention enables students to make educational gains which will help them throughout their years in K-12 settings, in higher education, and in their future careers. Along with providing services to students who are struggling, the steps involved in the Response to Intervention process helps to accurately identify students who may need special education services.

Current research shows that Response to Intervention works well in suburban and more affluent districts across the nation. What the research fails to show is the existence and effectiveness of Response to Intervention in urban schools (Rinaldi, Higgins-Averill, & Stuart,

2011). There are roadblocks to the implementation of any educational program and Response to Intervention is no different.

The current study explores Response to Intervention programs in an urban school district in upstate New York. The study analyzed if schools in the district had Response to Intervention programs, how the programs were organized, which students can attend the programs, the effectiveness of the supports, and feedback from teachers and administrators regarding the Response to Intervention services. The purpose of this research was to determine what the roadblocks are to implementing Response to Intervention in an urban district.

### **Literature Review**

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a process that includes research-based instruction and interventions for struggling learners. Response to Intervention serves as a dual process for students and schools in that it intervenes to attempt to prevent long-term academic struggles as well as identify students with learning disabilities. The overall goal is not to classify students, but rather to give them what they need to show academic growth. The design is powerful in that it can address all students in all contexts (Hughes & Dexter, 2011).

Response to Intervention is a significant process because of the multiple purposes it serves. As an early intervention service, the models (1) screen all children for academic problems, (2) monitor the progress of children at risk for difficulties in these areas, and (3) provide increasingly tiered levels of intense interventions in these areas based on how responsive or unresponsive a student is (Mellard, McKnight, & Woods, 2009). The students who do not respond adequately may be referred for an evaluation for special education services. As compared to previous models for identifying students with learning disabilities, the RtI process is less likely to over represent populations of students because it is not based on a single

assessment. If a student fails an assessment or benchmark it does not mean they have a disability. It could possibly be due to poor teaching or even a poor assessment. Students with learning disabilities represent approximately five percent of the school age population and roughly 50% of all students identified with disabilities. However, research is showing that these numbers could be dropping due to the successful implementation of RtI (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Some schools are seeing a 50% drop in the referral rate for students who may have a learning disability after the first year of RtI's implementation and another 50% in the following year (Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill, 2011).

In this literature review, I argue for the use of RtI as a school-wide approach as an early intervention service for struggling learners as well as the approach for determining whether students have a learning disability. If schools are going to become serious about measuring students' responsiveness to instruction and find new ways of addressing students with learning disabilities, then this must become a comprehensive, collaborative, school-wide approach.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Inclusion Theory**

Inclusive education means that all students within a school, regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, and abilities are part of the school community and are treated as such. The goal of any single education program is to assist students in maximizing their potential and performance. Students with disabilities should be given full access to the supports they need in order to achieve academically in the same curriculum as every other student. (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). For students with disabilities, the environment where they are placed in and in which they strive to achieve this outcome is under constant debate. Excluding students from regular classes can be harmful and unethical.

Theohariss (2007) explains that "social justice is a grounding principle of inclusion since it supports respect, care, recognition, and empathy and challenges beliefs as well as practices that directly or indirectly encourage the continuation of marginalization and exclusion" (p. 224). The concept of social justice is a significant part of inclusion theory, leading to creating an ethical and safe educational environment where there is equal opportunity for all students. Inclusion theory is based upon the belief that students with disabilities are expected to achieve academic success while learning amongst their non-disabled peers. Including the voices, perspectives, and thoughts of all students is at the core of socially just schooling (White & Cooper, 2012).

Response to intervention is a process and intervention service that seeks to help students achieve such success within the general education curriculum and in the same classes among peers without disabilities. The general education classroom teacher is most likely the only interventionist in the early tiers of RtI. This places a tremendous amount of responsibility on the general education teachers as they differentiate instruction and monitor the progress of their students. Inclusion and the RtI model have the potential to significantly change classrooms in this sense (Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011).

### **Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development**

Lev Vygotsky theorized that when students struggled to complete a task independently, they would be able to do so later on with some targeted assistance (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007). This has become what educators call scaffolding. Danish, Pepler, Phelps, and Washington (2011) write that "the space between what a child can accomplish on their own (their current development level), and what they are capable of with the help of a more capable other" through scaffolding, is described as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and helps students reach their full potential (p. 456. ) This area, the ZPD, is where educators should be

focusing on when instructing students in order for students to to achieve academic growth. Instruction that is below where students are developmentally would lack a challenge whereas instruction that is above students' developmental level is not effective. Using scaffolding, teachers can use their knowledge of a child's current levels to alter instruction or intervene to help students grow academically (Thousand et al., 2007).

The Zone of Proximal Development is consistent with what RtI strives to accomplish with learners. Students receive interventions in areas of need which, results in an autonomous increased performance over time. Interventions help support a student to reach previously unattainable levels of academic achievement. If and when this happens, these interventions can be removed once a student can achieve on his/her own consistently. Borthick, Jones, and Wakai (2003) articulate that “scaffolding is a way to actualize the ZPD by reducing the learners’ uncertainty in a task situation and providing support that is contingent upon learners’ responses” (p. 115). Often times students need guidance or minor interventions to assist them in achieving what they once could not do on their own. Focusing on the ZPD in conjunction with an RtI model can help maximize a student’s learning potential.

### **Background & Process**

Response to intervention was included in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a means of identifying students with learning disabilities. The IDEA does not require schools to use the RtI model; rather it simply encourages its adoption. While RtI is new to many educators, research argues that many state and local districts have been using models similar to it for decades (Mellard et al., 2009). More recent models of RtI have included tiered instructional approaches, which were lacking in earlier intervention models. Tiered levels give educators a systematic way of increasing the intensity of

interventions when there is continued failure by the student (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). Response to Intervention is used to improve students' academic outcomes and to identify students with specific learning disabilities. Response to Intervention however, like any other model, is only as good as its implementation. Progress monitoring and screening are vital to the RtI process. They are critical in terms of making conclusions based on students' responsiveness and unresponsiveness to instruction. When frequently monitoring student progress and differentiating instruction as needed, it becomes easier to identify students at risk for failure or struggling within a given curriculum (Cicek, 2012). This is vital when making decisions about curriculum and instructional methods.

To increase the effectiveness of RtI, IDEA 2004 provides schools with monies to allocate towards early intervention systems. In fact, Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) note that IDEA permits schools to use as much as fifteen percent of their special education funds towards systems such as RtI. Money is spent on training highly qualified educators and for the overall development of research-based instruction for the benefit of the child. However, regardless of the model schools wish to employ, IDEA requires an assessment of instructional response for students who demonstrate below average or low achievement (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009).

Universal screening of students is the first step in the RtI process. Often times all students in a grade level will be tested on a benchmark assessment. Students who do not meet the mark will either be assessed again to ensure that they require an intervention and that the original assessment was not simply an anomaly. Mellard et al. (2009) note, "assessments help educators decide whether or not students have been appropriately matched to the curriculum and that the instruction is beneficial and not lacking" (p. 186). Not all students will respond positively to the RtI process. Typically, those students who do not respond positively are

students who have a disability and their lack of achievement is not the result of the absence of adequate instruction, but rather the lack of required special services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Monitoring the progress of at-risk students is the next vital step. There are several ways of doing this. Most notably are tests that compare student test scores to other students locally or even sometimes at the national level. Curriculum based measurements have become “the most likely procedure to be used in RtI evaluations of academic performance” (Johnston, 2011, p. 524). This is done in large part because these measurements were created in special education and are taught in education training programs (Johnston, 2011). Curriculum based measurements can assess students in multiple areas and can be done quickly. The frequency with which a student’s progress is monitored is dependent on his/her responsiveness. Assessments can be done weekly, bi-weekly, monthly and so on. As the interventions increase in intensity, progress should be monitored more frequently (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). It is paramount that progress is monitored before and after every assessment.

Tiered levels of instruction are designed to assist students who are not responsive to universal interventions. The intervention changes at each tier and becomes more intensive. Intensity can be increased in a variety of ways. Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) note that using more teacher-centered instruction is generally one of the first steps when students are moving among tiers. Additionally, increasing the frequency of the intervention, adding to its duration, using small groups, and utilizing different expert educators are also ways in which interventions can become more intensive. If students are not responsive to the next level of interventions, more data should be collected about the student, including all interventions previously used. Often times at this point, outside agencies can become involved (Pavri, 2010). When interventions and

instruction is not adequate or the student is unresponsive after this level, special education assistance and services are considered.

### **Traditional Model**

Throughout the history of education, communities have searched for the answer of ‘fixing’ what is wrong with children. Explaining why some children struggle to learn and what to do about it has utilized a considerable amount of resources. Johnston (2011) notes that this is especially true when students have what is deemed as adequate intelligence, but struggle with academic tasks, such as reading. Students are generally labeled with a learning disability and then receive specialized services to attempt to meet their academic needs.

The traditional discrepancy model or IQ discrepancy model seeks to show a discrepancy between achievement and intelligence. Evans (1990) explains that when the discrepancy is characteristic of students with learning disabilities, it is used to aid in such a diagnosis. There are a multitude of assessments to test for different needs and the process can be long and tedious for a child. One of the major issues with the traditional discrepancy model is that it is mathematical. Formulas fail to show outside factors and thus can be biased. Evans (1992) argues this method is not the best practice to evaluate discrepancies. This is especially true when they are severe. Failure to look into other factors can result in the over identification of students with learning disabilities. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) argue that the IQ-discrepancy model has earned its criticisms by employing a “wait-to-fail model that undermines early identification and intervention [...] and fails to distinguish when low achievement is due to disability versus ineffective teaching” (p. 73). Due to these criticisms, this model can be seen as unreliable, and thus, a push for RtI has been promoted.

**Concerns with RtI**

There is a great deal of confusion among professionals as to the fidelity and integrity of RtI as a legal, defensible procedure for identifying students with a learning disability (Daves & Walker, 2012). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act does not mandate that schools use RtI as its model for identifying students with a learning disability, but merely recommends RtI's usage as a school-wide approach in order to achieve maximum results. The IDEA Committee Conference Report (CCR) describes a model RtI program and recommends the development of more "effective implementation of responsiveness to intervention models" (James, 2004, p. 3). Research is showing that in order for schools to be more successful with the implementation of RtI, they first must use it on a school-wide level. It is at this point in which it can be improved on a school-by-school basis.

Many schools appear to be divided as to what scientific, research-based interventions are. Daves and Walker (2012) note that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) describes them as objective procedures used to make valid inferences regarding the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act describes "scientific, research-based" in the context of implementing early academic services (p. 69). With switching and developing models there has been confusion. However, some schools have actually reported that their teachers feel more comfortable using concrete guidelines because it eliminates subjectivity (Pavri, 2010). The key is allowing enough time for teachers to become acclimated with the RtI process.

Studies have shown that teachers' perceptions of their ability to be successful with students in the RtI process have greatly increased over time (Stuart et al., 2011). Teachers have indicated that they have clearer goals and expectations for themselves as well as their students in

year two and beyond of RtI's implementation. Teachers also saw the benefits of RtI when identifying students' academic needs earlier and intervening sooner (Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012). The possibilities of student growth are opened through RtI, especially when it has been established in a school through a collaborative, comprehensive approach.

### **Implications & Conclusion**

There are several implications for teachers. First, it is evident that for any RtI initiative to be successful there must be coordination and support from the district and individual schools. Furthermore, teachers, both special education and general education, need to be committed to not relying on special education services as the only remedial option available (White, Polly, & Audette, 2012).

In addition to coordination, there needs to be a high level of teamwork within schools. Also, between teachers and support staff is vital. Research has shown that the RtI process works much more fluently in the second and third years of implementation (Stuart et al., 2011). During these years, teacher expectations have risen and referral rates have dropped. It would be beneficial to have RtI leadership teams to help plan and resolve implementation issues as they arise. Implementing RtI in a school undoubtedly means more work for teachers; however, they cannot be left to bear the entire burden. Teams can help review collected data, design intervention plans, monitor said plans, and communicate with parents about plans and results.

One of the most important requirements for RtI to be successful is for teachers to become more involved with understanding the learning process. For this to happen, teachers must recognize the increased diversity in classrooms at all levels. There is little research that suggests that the RtI model is being used successfully or at all in diverse populations or in urban schools (Rinaldi et al., 2011). The majority of studies are performed in more affluent suburban districts.

There are realities that exist in urban schools that challenge the implementation of RtI. Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, and Noguera (n.d.) write that “The structural concerns of persistent low achievement, limited teacher and leadership capacity, poor data and data inquiry infrastructures, and low expectations of students are not new phenomena but, rather, are historic conditions in urban schools” (p. 1). Response to Intervention is a framework that can be used to create positive outcomes for all students and attention must be paid to these challenges in order for it to be successful.

Although there are positive results when implementing RtI, research has also shown that there are risk factors, which make certain groups of children vulnerable to difficulties in acquiring early literacy skills (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007). The researchers argue that “weaknesses in skills and subsequent reading failure are most common among low-income, non-White children and among children with limited proficiency in English” (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007, p. 199). This population is most commonly found in urban schools as in comparison to suburban and rural schools. Urban districts are “frequently marked by higher concentrations of poverty, greater racial and ethnic diversity, larger concentrations of immigrant populations and linguistic diversity...” (Ahram et al., n.d., p. 1). Student success is dependent on the development of literacy skills. If there is a population who struggles with developing these early literacy skills, then there should be great efforts at intervention. Early intervention services can benefit students by not allowing them to fall behind as it will be increasingly difficult for the students to catch up. Why then, does research show that systems such as RtI are not being implemented in urban school districts? Why are these students not being afforded the same opportunities as others who reside in suburban areas? Additional research needs to be conducted to determine the roadblocks to the successful implementation of RtI in urban schools.

The design of RtI is powerful as it can address needs in any context within a school. Districts need to take advantage of this model and adapt it in a way to fit to their schools and situations. The ultimate goal must be to assist students in maximizing their potential and turning that into higher levels of academic achievement in conjunction with reducing the overreliance on special education services.

## **Methodology**

### **Context**

This study is taking place in an urban district in upstate New York. I chose an urban district to conduct this study because of the immense amount of present research that exists in suburban and rural districts. Research conducted in this setting will allow for a different viewpoint and more importantly shed light on the existence of RtI and schools' success with it, or lack thereof.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study are administrators, (including principals), and teachers in this particular urban district. Student perspectives will not be particularly helpful for this study; however, at some point it would be beneficial to obtain their views and experiences, if any, with the RtI process. The professionals in these schools within the district will be able to provide data pertaining to the existence of RtI in these schools and to the extent to that it is successful. They will also be able to describe the potential roadblocks to successfully implementing RtI.

The participants who responded to my survey about RtI were comprised of four principals, three assistant principals, and two special education teachers. Principal A has held his position for over seven years and has certifications in special education, school administrator and supervisor, and school district administration. Principal B has also held his position for over

seven years and is certified in special education, education administration, and math. Principal C has been a principal for over three years but less than seven years and is certified in education administration and social studies education. Principal D has been at his position for over seven years and is certified in childhood special education and education administration. Assistant Principal A has been in this position for over one year but less than three years and is certified in special education and math. Assistant Principal B has been at his position for more than one year but less than three years and is certified in special education, education administration, and computer education. Assistant Principal C has also been working at this position for more than one year but less than three years and is certified in childhood special education and education administration. Teacher A is a middle school RtI instructor and has been at his position for over one year but less than three years. This teacher is certified in elementary education and special education. Teacher B has been teaching for over seven years and is also certified in elementary education and special education.

### **Researcher Stance**

For this study I was active as an interviewer by sending out surveys through email. I do not have much to gain from being an observer in a classroom for this particular study as it is aimed more towards the existence of RtI, its success, and the possible roadblocks that inhibit its success.

I am working towards a Master's of Science in Special Education and have a Bachelor's of Arts in History. I also hold teaching certification for social studies grades 7-12. I am not currently employed in a district, but I am substitute teaching in the district where this study is taking place.

**Method**

The purpose of this study is to examine the existence of the RtI process within a particular urban district. Current research shows that RtI is prevalent within suburban districts across the nation, but there is very little evidence which suggests this is the same for urban districts. In addition to learning if RtI is used, I would also like to know administrators' attitudes towards the process if it is used, and if they find it successful. On the contrary, if the process is not used, I investigated why this was the case and what were the roadblocks to its successful implementation. Some schools may use RtI, but find that it does not work for them or is an incomplete process as research has shown in other districts. Incomplete refers to RtI being used as an early identifier for students with learning disabilities, but then failing to monitor students' progress frequently or at all.

The data details the administrative or teaching positions of the participants as well as the period of time they have held their current positions. Furthermore, the participants explained whether or not RtI is used in their school/ district and their overall experiences with the process. They had the opportunity to detail their successes with RtI as well as the potential roadblocks that are holding it back.

**Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

The survey questions were sent by email to the participants' school district email addresses. Each email contained a letter of consent as well as a brief introduction of the study. It was clear in the letter that by submitting the survey they were in turn giving their consent to participate in my research. Therefore, the participants voluntarily participated in the study. I designed the survey through Qualtrics, which is a computer survey program. As Qualtrics Software collects the surveys, there is no way to tell who responded to them. They are all

anonymous and only distinguishable by their positions in their schools or district. There is not enough information to identify any one specific participant and thus the confidentiality of all have been protected.

### **Data Collection**

After receiving the surveys, I read through them several times. By closely analyzing the survey, I was able to identify trends. I organized the survey results into a chart format and separated the data by the participants' positions in the school, years that each participant has been serving in his/her current position, the certifications held by the participant, whether or not RtI is used in the school, and if so, how many years. In addition, I organized the data into the experiences these participants have had with RtI, how many students utilize the RtI process, how the students are identified, which supports they can take advantage of, the successes of RtI and finally, the roadblocks to successfully implementing RtI in this particular urban district. After the data was entered into these specific sections in my chart, I color coded similarities and differences across the board.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Introduction**

After receiving survey results from administrators and special education teachers, the data illustrates commonalities and differences as to the extent of the success of RtI in this particular urban district. There is evidence that RtI is being used in every school in which the participants were surveyed. Most of the responses coincide with current research. However, there are some responses that conflict what previous research. For example, schools are not finding the RtI process easier after three years and these schools are struggling with collaborative

efforts. Based upon the data, I found that not every school is making the same progress with RtI. Some schools are much further along than others in implementing RtI.

### **Years Used in Schools**

Although all of the participants from the schools surveyed in this district are using the RtI process, the amount of years in which it has been implemented is not an indicator of its success. Stuart et al. (2011) argues that success with the RtI process improves over time because teachers have a better idea of what is expected of them and they have clearer goals going forward. Furthermore, this is especially true after year two and beyond. This is a contradiction to what some of the research in my findings state. For example, Assistant Principal B claims the school has used RtI for five years and is still developing and there have been issues with a “lack of clarity from [the] district as to processes/procedures” (Personal Survey, March 3, 2013). After five years, this school is still struggling to use the RtI process to benefit their students. All of the other schools, where participants were surveyed, are at least in their second year of using RtI with five schools in their third year, which according to current research, is where RtI should become a smoother and more polished process (Stuart et al., 2011).

### **Experiences**

I was able to group the experiences of those who were surveyed into two separate groups: positive and negative. However, a commonality between all of the schools was that there are difficulties with all phases of implementing RtI. Both Assistant Principal A and Principal B felt that it is hard to get the process of RtI working in their schools because as Principal A articulated, there are “many more kids in need than services” (Personal Survey, March 1, 2013). Principal B felt that RtI is “time consuming, not enough support for all needs” (Personal Survey, March 9, 2013). Both of these administrators are seeing issues where there are a lot of students

who need extra help/services, but the program to help them is not available or is at a point in which they cannot benefit.

There are also situations where schools lack the appropriately trained staff to make RtI work the way it is supposed to. Special education teacher B claims, “it is not working in our school; there is not a full time person dedicated to RTI because of funding. One vice principal and two school psychologists are working as the RTI team” (Personal Survey, March 6, 2013). Special education teacher A states, “I think it can work when it is used the way it is recommended...small groups, pre/post tests, push-in/pull-out” (Personal Survey, March 5, 2013). Both of the schools that these teachers work in are in their second year of implementing the RtI process and due to a lack of appropriate resources, they are having a negative experience. Teacher A claims that it ‘can’ work, which would imply that it is not working at the moment. Both of these teachers also claim that one of the roadblocks to successfully implementing RtI is the lack of resources.

There are only two administrators surveyed who claim that the process is working at some level in their schools. Principal C claims that RtI “started off very slowly and fragmented, but has been getting better/polished with time” (Personal Survey, March 19, 2013). This coincides with current research, which suggests the process improves over time. Assistant Principal C, like Principal C, found that the process is working in his school and it “helps a majority of the students involved in the process” (Personal Survey, March 23, 2013). Although these two administrators agreed that the RtI process is working in their schools, the experiences of the remaining administrators and teachers differ from current research in that the process is not improving over time.

### **Number of Students and How They Are Chosen**

Those surveyed were asked to list how students were chosen to be a part of the RtI process and how many students were receiving RtI services in their schools within this particular urban district. When charting the findings, it was apparent that there are differences between the schools as to which students are recommended to go through the RtI process. There are two distinct differences: the students who are struggling and those who are failing. Everyone interviewed used one of these distinctions except the RtI instructor and special education teacher A. Special education teacher A stated, “we use math/ELA data from Aimsweb, and practice state tests” (Personal Survey, March 5, 2013). Aimsweb is an online tool used for universal screening and progress monitoring for students involved in the RtI process. Aimsweb also guides teachers and administrators as to the best practices and tools available that will be most beneficial to the students based on the data they have imputed. Special education teacher A also states that his school also uses state tests to recommend students for RtI. This is a process that many educators use to determine a baseline or benchmark to where a student should be and this idea is on par with current research as described by Mellard et al. (2009).

When reading through the data, some administrators and one teacher claimed that students who were failing were recommended to go through the RtI process. It was not clear through their answers as to what the students were failing. It is possible that they could have failed a test in a class or they may have failed a benchmark assessment, which was part of the universal screening process used in RtI. This would conclude that they were already involved in the process.

Another conclusion drawn from the data is that students who are failing a class are recommended to go through the RtI process. Special education teacher B stated, “low

functioning students, regular education as well as special education students. Students who have failed regents exams and those who are not on target to graduate”(Personal Survey, March 6, 2013) are recommended for the RtI process. Thus, in special education teacher’s B school, there are a wide variety of ways in which students are chosen to participate in RtI.

Some of those who responded to my survey were not as specific in their responses regarding which students participate in the RtI process. For example, principal C stated that “any student who is failing or struggling to keep up” (Personal Survey, March 19, 2013) should be involved in the RtI process. It is difficult or nearly impossible to ascertain what ‘struggling’ means in this case and thus is not helpful in determining who is selected or recommended to receive further intensive instruction. Principal B also explained that “any [students] who are struggling or failing to show signs of improvement” (Personal Survey, March 9, 2013) are recommended for RtI services. Like Principal C, Principal B does not provide a detailed explanation other than to state that students who do not improve academically qualify for RtI. It cannot be determined what an acceptable level of improvement is within this urban school.

The majority of the schools had around twenty to twenty-five percent of their students receiving RtI support. However, the school where special education teacher A worked, claimed 71 out of 83 (85%) middle school students received extra help in the form of RtI (Personal Survey, March 5, 2013). This school had the highest percentage of students involved in the RtI process and was also the only school that claimed to use the services of Aimsweb to help monitor and recommend students. There may be a correlation between the two because with Aimsweb, all students are involved in the RtI process at the beginning, in that they are all tested. This differs from the other schools that took part in this study. The administrators and special education teacher B were not as specific as special education teacher A as to the process they use

to recommend students. Due to this, it is difficult to identify any other similarities between how many students are recommended and how the process is conducted. There is a degree of gray area into which further research would need to be completed in order to understand how each school specifically recommends students for RtI services.

### **How Students Receive Support**

The services provided to students varied from school to school, but there were some similarities. It is very clear through this research that the support provided to the students is determined by the individual schools within this urban district, as there is little uniformity. Four of these schools offered help afterschool or as an extended day. However, these four schools also held classes or time during the day for support as well.

Special education teacher A explained that the support “is all academic intervention from myself” (Personal Survey, March 5, 2013), but did not give details as to how the services were provided. This was the only school where one person explicitly gave support. I found it surprising that this was also the school with the highest percentage of students needing support. Only the schools where principal A and D worked were there more, with 112 and 124 students needing support, respectively. The remaining number of students receiving services were given as percentages so it would be impossible to determine the actual numbers given this data.

Special education teacher B also explained, “ALL students have 1 period class 4 days per week of RtI for a class they failed or credit recovery” (Personal Survey, March 6, 2013). In this school, as detailed previously, students who have failed Regents exams or who are not on target to graduate (meaning they are failing classes) are recommended for RtI. Given this information, I can assume that ‘all’ means the 36 students in this school who meet one of those criteria and does not mean all students in the school (please see Appendix A).

Based upon the surveys, there are three schools in which RtI support is provided in small group settings. For example, in the schools where principal D and assistant principal C work, students are receiving small group instruction during the school day only, not after school. It is not clear if these students are pulled out of their regular class schedule for this instruction or if this time is built into their schedules. It is also not apparent how often this support is given or available to these students. The school in which principal C works is the other school offering group instruction or group work; however, it is offered after school and not during the school day.

Four of these schools also offer academic intervention services. More information is needed to determine the model in which this support is implemented. Due to the fact that these four schools do not specifically state that the academic intervention services are provided after school, it is assumed that they are provided during the school day. This service is generally provided as a teacher pushing into a classroom or pulling students out of a classroom. Only assistant principal B explains that academic intervention service classes are held during the day apart from the review classes, which are held afterschool.

The last form of support, which was consistent in more than one school, was in the form of 1:1 support or instruction. Principal C and D were alike in that 1:1 support in their schools were only given in the higher tiers of RtI and small group instruction was the method used prior to the 1:1 support. Assistant principal A and principal B both offered 1:1 support or tutoring in their schools, but they were not specific as to who received this support in relation to which tier they were in.

There is no definitive correlation as to how many students are receiving support and the method in which they receive it. The methods vary from school to school and as will be detailed

further, with varying levels of success. The main forms of support that were evident in the surveys were: small group instruction both before and/or after school, 1:1 support, and academic intervention services. Only the schools where assistant principal A and principal C work, are all of these methods used.

### **Success with Response to Intervention**

Determining the successes and failures of RtI is an essential part of this study. Both can be determined by simply asking these administrators and teachers about what has been successful in their schools regarding RtI. Perhaps one of the most telling examples of failure in this district is the fact that four of the schools left this area blank on their surveys. These schools have all developed and implemented RtI at some level and 44 percent of those surveyed had nothing to say about its success. This omission speaks volumes to how the process works and how difficult it can be to implement. What is surprising about this data is that these schools, which had nothing to say about the success, had varying experiences. Principal C explained, “[RtI] started off very slowly and fragmented...has been getting better/polished with time” (Personal Survey, March 19, 2013). This principal experienced some success by claiming that the process has become more polished over time, but when asked what was successful about RtI, there was no response given. Conversely, principal A suggested RtI was “cumbersome and lengthy” (Personal Survey, March 1, 2013) and principal D thought RtI was “slow, difficult to get up and running” (Personal Survey, March 26, 2013) even after three years of development in both schools.

Those who answered the question acknowledged that RtI has been successful in their schools in some way. For example, assistant principal A explained, “[a] handful of kids take advantage of the extended days offered” (Personal Survey, March 1, 2013). Assistant principal

A's school offers after school instruction. There was no mention if students had success with academic intervention services or 1:1 tutoring from this assistant principal, as these are other supports offered at this school. Principal B, whose school has 20% of students who receive RtI services, had a similar response as principal A in claiming that RtI "is advantageous for a few students" (Personal Survey, March 9, 2013). Since the principal did not further expand upon his response, this may be indicative that perhaps RtI services are not successful at principal A's school. It may be hard to quantify how many students RtI has helped in this school at the students' respective tiers, but if it were seen as more of a success, principal's A response may have been more optimistic.

Potentially the most successful response came from assistant principal C who claimed, "student grades have soared, teamwork between staff" (Personal Survey, March 23, 2013). Not only has RtI helped the students' grades improve, but it has also brought the staff together. This response coincides with the idea that teamwork and collaboration are vital to the success of RtI as described by White, Polly, and Audette, (2012).

Both special education teachers A and B had responses that differed from the administrators, but were similar to each other. Teacher A described the success of RtI by writing: "I think it helps us target those in need and clearly identify what that need is" (Personal Survey, March 5, 2013). This teacher's response is much more specific as to how RtI is helpful and successful in this particular school. The response is at the base of what the RtI process can do with universal screening, as described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006). Staff determines why there is a lack of achievement and then the best way in which to help that student improve academically.

Special education teacher B explained RtI has been successful in his/her school by “looking at specific students and creating a plan for them to be successful” (Personal Survey, March 6, 2013). This response takes special education teachers A’s description a little further. The first part refers to universal screening as mentioned above in special education teacher’s A response, and the second, special education teacher’s B response, refers to using research based interventions in conjunction with an appropriate curriculum as described by Daves and Walker (2012). Both of these descriptions differ from the administrators’ responses because perhaps the teachers have a different viewpoint of RtI. The administrators allude to some students taking advantage of the extended days and grades increasing whereas the teachers described how the RtI process is used to help students. I think it is safe to assert that the teachers work with the students in closer proximity than administrators and thus they see how RtI services are implemented, as well as the effects of the services..

### **Roadblocks to the Successful Implementation of RtI**

Determining the roadblocks to implementing RtI is the peak and ultimate goal of this study. Roadblocks are different from drawbacks and negatives. Roadblocks are what inhibit a program or a motion from moving forward successfully. They are an obstacle or a barricade that can be broken down and overcome, but first, they must be realized to determine how they can be met.

Unlike with the successes of RtI, the administrators and teachers were all able to comment on the roadblocks to implementing RtI in their schools. When reviewing the responses, it became clear that there were three distinct themes among them all: time, resources, and confusion.

**Time**

Students' schedules are already packed and full of classes to begin with. Finding time to schedule interventions and supports can and has proved difficult. Almost half of the administrators and teachers surveyed felt that time was a roadblock to successfully implementing RtI in their schools. For example, principal A felt "time to meet with students" (Personal Survey, March 1, 2013) was a roadblock. This can refer to scheduling to find time for students to take advantage of the services the school offers or possibly time for students to be tested to see where they are academically. Principal D explained, "finding time to work with students after school and to train staff" (Personal Survey, March 26, 2013) has been a roadblock to implementing RtI. This principal is specific in claiming it is difficult to train staff due to their schedules as well as time to work with students after the long school day. In order for RtI services to be successful, teachers trained in RtI need to stay after school to work with students requiring RtI support. These teachers may have other commitments after school, such as serving as club advisers, coaches, or working with other students who need help. It is also not clear as to how frequent these students need to stay after for these interventions to take place. The remainder of the teachers and administrators simply listed 'time' as a roadblock, among other things and did not further expand their responses.

**Resources**

Almost 70 percent of responses included the word 'resources' or a synonym I deemed as a resource. For this section, resources include: amount of staff, funding, and space. Because time was listed separately by almost half of the respondents, I felt it deserved its own space and thus it is not included as a resource in this section even though the argument can be made that time is certainly a resource.

Assistant principal A described, “change in staff, loss of service providers...” (Personal Survey, March 1, 2013) to be a roadblock to successfully implementing RtI in his/her school. If a school spends the resources to train other resources (teachers) and the teachers leave their positions or if other educators are hired by the district/school, the process must start over and thus some progress may be lost. Keeping staff on the same page and collaborating is a vital part of the RtI process. Change in staff could certainly be seen as a hindrance to its implementation.

Both special education teachers and an administrator mentioned funding/money as being a roadblock to implementing RtI. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) note that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act allows for fifteen percent of special education funds to be allotted for programs such as RtI. This funding can be used to train staff and obtain scientific research-based materials. Funding is also necessary to pay for services such as Aimsweb, which can cost four to six dollars per student and thousands more for multiple training sessions (Pearson, 2012).

In regards to space, special education teacher A mentioned, “it is hard to do it well with limited space and resources” (Personal Survey, March 5, 2013). It is not exactly clear what this teacher means by space, but it can be assumed it means physical space within the school. If this teacher refers to space as a resource, it is also very likely that other teachers and administrators feel that lack of physical space is a roadblock to the successful implementation of RtI in urban schools.

### **Confusion**

The findings of Daves and Walker (2012) conclude that there is a great deal of confusion among the professionals in regards to RtI as to the procedures and the law behind it. Assistant principal A explained that one of the roadblocks to successfully implementing RtI was the “constant change of name and focus of RtI” (Personal Survey, March 1, 2013). As more and

more schools further implement RtI there are bound to be changes. Schools will determine what works best and for who' however, change inevitably causes confusion. Getting staff to collaborate and work with one another can prove difficult and is vital to the success of RtI. Assistant principal C explained that "getting everyone on the same page has proved difficult" (Personal Survey, March 23, 2013). If RtI has just been implemented in a school and staff is collaboratively working together and then changes are made, or if the administration feels procedures should go in a different direction, then that could certainly prove difficult. Having teachers and support staff on the same page along with administration is important for any education program to work and be successful.

Assistant principal B explained that a roadblock they were dealing with was, "[a] lack of clarity from [the] district as to processes/procedures" (Personal Survey, March 3, 2013). It was clear through this research that the experiences, supports, and the way students were recommended for RtI services varied from school to school. Due to this, it is evident that the district has not laid out certain procedures and processes to implement RtI that every school must follow. This is also clear as the amount of years each school has implemented RtI varies from two to five years and they are all still developing.

### **Conclusion**

When researching RtI it quickly became apparent that little to no studies had been completed regarding its existence in urban schools. I sought to determine if RtI was being implemented in urban schools in upstate New York. Furthermore, I wanted to discover what educators experiences have been with RtI and lastly and most importantly, what the roadblocks were to the successful implementation of RtI in urban schools.

I was able to quickly determine that RtI has been implemented in every school . Although the schools in the survey are at different levels of implementation of RtI, each school does have RtI supports. It is also evident that RtI is not overly successful in any of the schools that participated in the study. Each school is facing similar challenges, which is making it difficult to successfully implement RtI.

After carefully looking at all of my research, I identified additional difficulties regarding RtI in these urban schools. When reading through responses in connection with how students are recommended for the RtI process, I noticed that many of the schools are relying on similar models that plagued the traditional discrepancy model. Schools are waiting for students to struggle or fail before providing additional supports to students, outside of the general curriculum. This wait-to-fail model, as described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), is ineffective as it undermines early identification and intervention and fails to distinguish when low achievement is due to disability versus ineffective teaching. When students are screened early, they have the opportunity to receive the additional skills they need to be successful. Failure to do this results in students struggling and/or failing directly. Special education teacher A was the only respondent in this study that referred to using software to target students in need and identifying precisely what they need in order to make academic gains.

It is also apparent that there is very little, if any, coordination between the schools in the district. This is due to the fact that there are gaps between schools as to when RtI was implemented. Some schools have been using RtI for two years and others have been implementing these services for over five years. Yet, each school has not established a consistent RtI model. This suggests that the schools within the district are not aligned regarding RtI processes and services. It seems as though each school is implementing protocols as separate

entities in the same district. White, Polly, and Audette (2012) have detailed that there must be support and coordination between schools within a district or community for RtI to be successful. The apparent lack of coordination in this district may be having a negative effect on the overall successful implementation of RtI.

The next step in continuing this research would be to survey administrators and staff members in suburban schools and in more affluent areas in upstate New York and compare their responses. It is apparent that the issues that exist in urban schools are not major roadblocks in suburban schools in regards to implementing RtI. Ahram et al. (n.d.) argue that there are realities that exist in urban schools, which are harmful to the implementation of RtI. The researcher writes that “the structural concerns of persistent low achievement, limited teacher and leadership capacity, poor data and data inquiry infrastructures, and low expectations of students are not new phenomena but, rather, are historic conditions in urban schools” (Ahram et al., n.d. p.1). Research would need to be completed that questions the existence of these issues outside of urban schools to determine how they differ or exist at all. By further studying the implementation of RtI across suburban and urban districts, recommendations can be made to better equip schools in developing consistent, well defined, and evidence based procedures and services. Therefore, this research can have implications for district level administrators, school administrators, and teaching faculty.

There are limitations in this study. In the future, in-person interviews would be used as they would allow for further questioning and would result in more information. Too often in this research, responses were short and did not thoroughly capture participants’ experiences with RtI. Taking the time and having the opportunity to sit with a participant and interview him/her would yield more data. For example, principal A was asked to respond to a question regarding who is

recommended for RtI and the response was “failing” (Personal Survey, March 1, 2013). In a face-to-face interview, one could ask what they were failing - whether it be one class, all classes, one test, or failing at multiple levels.

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## Appendix A

- 1.) What is your title/position in the school and or district?
- 2.) How long have you held this position?
- 3.) What are your certification areas?
- 4.) Is the Response to Intervention process used in your school/district?
- 5.) If yes, how long has it been used for? If no, why is RtI not being used in your school/district?
- 6.) What has been your experience with the RtI process?
- 7.) Which students are recommended to go through the RtI process?
- 8.) How many classified students are there in your school/district?
- 9.) How do students receive RtI support? What types of supports are available (i.e. AIS services)?
- 10.) What has been successful about the RtI process at your school or in the district?
- 11.) What have been some roadblocks to implementing RtI in your school or in your district?

Running head: RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

Appendix B

Position	Years	Certifications	Used	How long	Experience	Who Goes?	How many	Support	Success	Roadblock
Asst. P	7+	SPED, SAS, SDA	Yes	3 Years	Hasn't really gotten off the ground. Many more kids in need than services.	Any students struggling academically or socially	25% or so	AIS, 1:1 tutoring, extended day, counseling, work scholarship	Handful of kids take advantage of the extended days offered	Change in staff, loss of service providers, constant change of name and focus of RTI
Principal	1-3	SPED, Math	Yes	3 Years	Cumbersome and lengthy	Failing	112 out of 1100	afterschool review classes or AIs classes during the day	(Left Blank on purpose)	Time to meet with students
Asst. P	1-3	SPED, Admin, Computer Ed	Yes	5 Years, Still developing	I have been attending a collegial learning circle this year. District is in development	Students who struggle academically - Identified for more intense support after Level I implementation at classroom /school level	30 %	Our School: 3V period/advisory during school day. After school tutoring; agency support	(Left Blank on purpose)	Lack of clarity from district as to processes /procedures; Funding to provide support i.e. staffing
Middle School RTI Instructor	1-3	Elementary Ed, SPED	Yes	2 Years	I think it can work when it is used the way it is recommended... small groups, pre/post tests, push-in/pull-out	we use math/ela teacher input, data from Aimsweb, and practice state tests	for this current cycle there are 71 out of 83 middle schoolers receiving tier II or III math and/or ela	it is all academic intervention from myself	I think it helps us target those in need and clearly identify what that need is	it is hard to do it well with limited space and resources

SPED Teacher	7+	Elementary Ed, SPED	Yes	2 Years	It is not working in our school, there is not a full time person dedicated to RTI because of funding. One vice principal and 2 school psychologists are working as the RTI team.	low functioning students regular ed as well as special ed students. Students who have failed regents exams and those who are not on target to graduate.	36	ALL students have 1 period class 4 days per week of RTI for a class they failed or credit recovery	looking at specific students and creating a plan for them to be successful .	MONEY, TIME, RESOURCES, and TEACHERS
Principal	7+	SPED, Admin, Math	Yes	3 Years	Time consuming, not enough support for all needs.	any who are struggling or failing to show signs of improvement.	Around 20%	tutoring 1 to 1, AIS.	t is advantageous for a few students.	confusion, time, money, lack of staff.
Principal	3-7	Administration, Social Studies Ed	Yes	In 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	Started off very slowly and fragmented. Has been getting better/polished with time.	Any student who is failing or struggling to keep up	1/4	Group work after school, AIS services. 1:1 support in higher tiers.	(Left Blank on purpose)	Time, resources. Training new teachers/staff.
Asst. P	1-3	Childhood SPED, Admin	Yes	4 Years	Helps a majority of the students involved in the process	Any who are failing significantly	20%	small group instruction	student grades have soared, teamwork between staff.	getting everyone on the same page has proved difficult.
Principal	7+	Childhood SPED, Administration	Yes	3 Years	Slow, difficult to get up and running	Students who test low or are failing	124	small group instruction. 1:1 in higher tiers	(Left Blank on purpose)	training staff. Finding time to work with students after school. Scheduling.