



LOCAL SCHOOLS ARE APPLYING  
RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION  
PRACTICES TO LITERACY LEARNING

## RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION



Response to  
Intervention  
improves student  
achievement by  
directly linking  
ongoing assessment  
to instructional  
decision-making.

**Pictured above:**

At J.X. Wilson School, teacher Marlene Fink prepares first-graders Savannah Janik-Pecknold and Carolina Valencia for paired reading by reviewing the previous day's story. This is an example of a small group intervention activity in RTI pilot schools.

**R**esponse to Intervention (RTI) is taking off in our region this year with a new pilot project involving 12 schools from eight Sonoma County districts, plus four schools from Napa Valley Unified. These schools have all agreed to engage in a multi-year effort to improve student achievement in literacy through implementation of Response to Intervention concepts and practices. They are being assisted in this collaborative venture by SCOE, Sonoma County SELPA, and researcher Mike Vanderwood, Ph.D., from the University of California, Riverside.

Response to Intervention is a schoolwide system for improving student achievement by directly linking ongoing assessment to instructional decision-making. In the words of noted RTI expert Dr. George Batsche, "RTI is the practice of providing *high-quality instruction* and interventions matched to student need, *monitoring progress* frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and *applying child response data* to important educational decisions."

In practical terms, Response to Intervention is the process of engaging in what Dr. Vanderwood calls the "three -ings."

- **Screen-ing:** Universal screening of all students in the school, beginning in kindergarten, to detect risk for problems.
- **Interven-ing:** Providing additional small group instruction that targets the assessed literacy needs of those students who are at risk for problems.
- **Progress monitor-ing:** Briefly checking intervention students every two weeks to gauge progress and make instructional adjustments.



## TIERS OF SUPPORT

### Tier 1: Primary Intervention

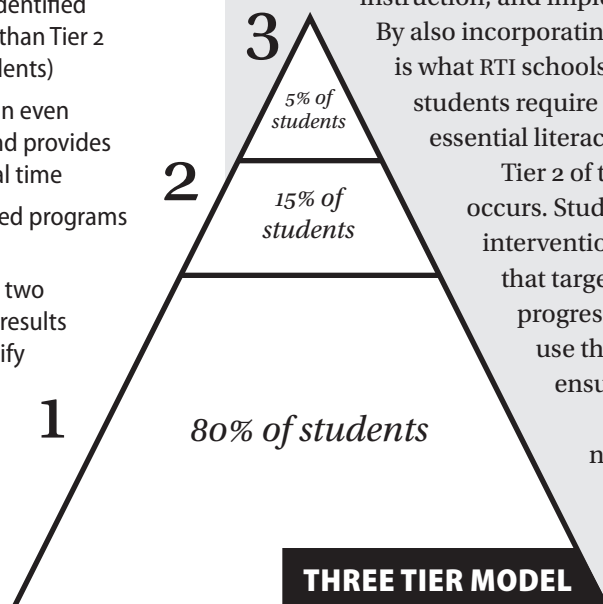
- Provided by the classroom teacher to all students
- Utilizes core instructional programs and differentiated instruction
- Includes universal screening
- Meets the needs of about 80% of students

### Tier 2: Secondary Intervention

- Serves students identified as needing more than Tier 1 (about 15% of students)
- Uses targeted small group instruction
- Applies progress monitoring every two weeks, then uses results to fine-tune/modify the instructional program

### Tier 3: Tertiary Intervention

- Serves students identified as needing more than Tier 2 (about 5% of students)
- Groups students in even smaller groups and provides more instructional time
- May use specialized programs
- Applies progress monitoring every two weeks, then uses results to fine-tune/modify the instructional program



## THE IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK

Each school participating in the Sonoma County pilot is using a common, research-validated assessment system known as DIBELS, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, to screen students and monitor progress. Using DIBELS assessments, *every student* is being screened three times per year and the progress of students receiving supplemental intervention is checked every two weeks. Through its interactive website (<https://dibels.uoregon.edu>), DIBELS is also providing schools with data analysis tools and reports to support key instructional decision-making during monthly “data meetings” that engage staff in looking at student assessment results and planning program adjustments.

The selection of DIBELS for Sonoma County’s RTI project was based on information from the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring. Here, a team of federally supported educational psychologists thoroughly vet progress monitoring tools such as DIBELS, posting their findings online at [www.studentprogress.org](http://www.studentprogress.org). Thanks to their research, educators using progress monitoring tools now have access to timely and accurate feedback about how well each at-risk student is responding to the interventions being provided. With this information in hand, they’re able to make appropriate changes in instruction for students who are not on track.

Consistent, ongoing use of progress monitoring may be the most unique characteristic of RTI. Much like a physician uses blood pressure readings or a dieter references a scale, Response to Intervention schools use progress monitoring to provide objective evidence about how well students are learning. If students are not realizing sufficient growth, school teams can design a program change.

## PROVIDING TIERS OF INTERVENTION

The framework for implementing RTI is often called the “three tier model” because it provides three distinct levels of intervention support. The general education core program forms the first tier of this framework. It delivers “primary intervention” via a research-based curriculum, differentiated instruction, and implementation of strategies that support student learning. By also incorporating universal screening into Tier 1 instruction—which is what RTI schools are doing—educators are able to identify which students require assistance beyond the core program to reach essential literacy goals.

Tier 2 of the RTI framework is where “secondary intervention” occurs. Students who have been identified as requiring additional intervention receive Tier 2 instruction in small, intensive groups that target their assessed needs. These students undergo progress monitoring at least twice a month. School teams use the objective data from the monitoring assessments to ensure that the intervention is having the desired impact.

Based on careful analysis of assessment data, a small number of students may be identified for more intensive or “tertiary intervention” at Tier 3. Tier 3 instruction divides students into even smaller groups, provides them with more instructional time, and often utilizes specialized curricular programs.

## CONNECTING RTI TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

Another very exciting component of Response to Intervention is the possibility of using student progress monitoring data to qualify students for special education services. John Namkung, director of the Sonoma County SELPA, notes that our current system of identifying students as learning disabled using the IQ-achievement discrepancy model has unintentionally resulted in a wait-to-fail model: students fail over a 3-4 year period before the system provides intervention. RTI turns that thinking inside out by ensuring that students receive systematic help the moment their needs are detected in kindergarten—before failure occurs.

When it reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, the federal government approved the use of Response to Intervention as one tool for identifying children with learning disabilities. Since that time, RTI has begun to take root in many states, both as a viable school reform model and as a way out of the wait-to-fail trap of conventional special education eligibility procedures.

Schools in the Sonoma County pilot have agreed to use progress monitoring data for qualifying and exiting students from special education and they are being supported in this process by both SELPA and SCOE. Information about the impact this has will be gathered over the next several years and shared countywide.

## HARNESSING OUR COLLABORATIVE KNOWLEDGE

It's important to understand that Response to Intervention is not a program, instructional philosophy, or curriculum. You might say that it's a

## CORE RTI PRINCIPLES

- **Teach all children:** All children can learn and educators are responsible for identifying and fostering conditions that promote learning for all children.
- **Intervene early:** It is best to intervene early when academic and behavior difficulties are relatively small.
- **Use a multi-tier model:** By effectively differentiating the nature and intensity of instruction via a multi-tier model, the educational outcomes for all students are enhanced.
- **Use a problem-solving process:** When educators use a clearly defined problem-solving process, they can pinpoint learning problems and determine why they are happening, identify interventions that will help rectify the problems, and monitor student progress to ascertain whether the interventions worked.
- **Use assessment:** Three types of assessments—screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring—are used to gauge the extent of student learning.

*Screening* is low-cost, repeatable testing of critical age-appropriate academic or behavioral skills. It is a first step to identifying “red flags” and determining whether additional assessment is needed.

*Diagnostic assessments* provide in-depth feedback related to strengths and weaknesses in each skill area. This helps determine what students already know and what instruction is needed.

*Progress monitoring* measures each student's level of performance against identified learning goals at regular intervals. Progress is quantified by comparing expected and actual rates of learning. Instructional strategies can then be adjusted to meet individual student needs.

- **Use evidence-based instruction:** Instructional practices and interventions that have foundations in scientifically based research accelerate student progress. Curriculum and instruction should have demonstrated effectiveness for the student's situation and the school setting.
- **Monitor progress:** Progress monitoring is a form of dynamic assessment that measures change in students' level or rate of learning. The best progress monitoring tools are sensitive to growth and can be applied frequently to monitor student progress over time.
- **Use data:** Student data should be used to make instructional decisions and determine classification and placement decisions (e.g., moving students from the first to the second tier of intervention). This requires that an ongoing data collection system be in place.

Adapted from *Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation*, National Association of State Directors of Special Education



## PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

### **Bennett Valley Union**

Strawberry School  
Yulupa School

### **Dunham**

Dunham School

### **Mark West Union**

San Miguel Elementary

### **Oak Grove Union**

Oak Grove Elementary

### **Piner-Olivet Union**

Schaefer School

### **Rincon Valley Union**

Matanzas School  
Spring Creek School

### **Twin Hills Union**

Apple Blossom School

### **Wright**

Stevens (Robert L.) School  
Wilson (J.X.) School  
Wright School

framework for harnessing the collaborative knowledge and energies of a school through the systematic use of assessment data to guide instructional decision-making.

In the Sonoma County pilot schools, RTI is taking on a different look at each implementation site. The daily activities, staffing, instructional strategies, use of curricular tools/technology, etc. vary as the schools direct resources toward the specific needs of their students. However, the core RTI principles—screening, intervening, progress monitoring, collaborative decision-making, multiple tiers of intervention—are in place at each site.

Although this pilot started just a few months ago, the 12 participating schools are already expressing optimism and excitement. Dr. Sue Field, superintendent of Bennett Valley Union School District, has been encouraged by “the depth of conversation it has started among regular education and special education faculty and staff about students, their needs, the data, and the interventions necessary to assist students in overcoming areas of deficit.”

Randy Coleman, principal of Rincon Valley Union’s Spring Creek School, says that RTI is “providing the ‘meat’ for the district’s Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiative. The teachers are excited to be using assessments and interventions that are proven to measure progress effectively.” RTI has united the faculties at this district’s two participating schools in an effort to meet the needs of at-risk readers.

## MATCHING STRATEGY TO STUDENT

Response to Intervention is based on the idea of ensuring that each student be afforded the opportunity to learn. By providing interventions of increasing intensity and carefully monitoring learning progress, RTI schools are discovering what works best for individual students. They are adapting instruction and intervention to each student’s specific needs and trying new, more targeted techniques when difficulties persist, rather than doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

When interventions work, *fewer* students are referred for costly special education services and *more* students are able to reach essential learning goals. While it’s too early to assess the results of the strategies that schools in the Sonoma County pilot are putting into place, the significant research already conducted at RTI sites across the country indicates great potential for success. ♦



For more information about Response to Intervention or the RTI pilot, contact Kevin Feldman, Ed.D., SCOE’s director of reading and early intervention, at [kfeldman@scoe.org](mailto:kfeldman@scoe.org) or (707) 524-2759.

## INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

- Visit the SCOE website, [www.scoe.org](http://www.scoe.org), and select Response to Intervention in the Teachers & Administrators box. You’ll find a varied collection of RTI-related resources, with links to additional sites for more information.
- Contact the principal at any of the Sonoma County RTI sites listed above and schedule a time to **observe RTI in action**.
- Mark May 22 on your calendar and plan to attend the **RTI Summit** that will be held at SCOE. This conference will feature some of the nation’s most respected RTI experts—George Batsche, Judy Elliot, and W. David Tilly. More information will be available in the coming months.



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