

SSTAGE Newsletter

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Taking Stock: The Importance of Self-Assessment for Long-Term Implementation of a Response to Intervention Framework

By Amanda Sailors, Ph.D.
Madison County School District



The Madison County School District has been working for nearly a decade to implement the RTI framework for academics and behavior. In that time, we have seen an increase in academic performance across subject areas, a decrease in discipline incidents, and most recently, the percentage of students who were identified as needing Special Education services has begun to decline. Our intervention efforts paid off with our students and we were recognized with the district level SSTAGE STAR Award for Promising Practices in 2013!

Yet, as a system that believes in the idea of continuous improvement, we saw a need in the spring of 2014 to take stock of our RTI program. Are we implementing all of the components of the theoretical framework with fidelity? How do we continue to build advanced tiers of support for our students? Have we become sloppy with processes and procedures over time? All of our schools implement PBIS, and as part of that implementation we complete self-assessments of the implementation each year. Therefore, why can't this self-assessment be done for our entire RTI framework?

We created a Response to Intervention Implementation Checklist that was adapted from the recommendations by Keller-Margulis (2012) for assessing fidelity of implementation. The implementation checklist was completed at each school, using a collaborative approach. Minimally, the building principal and the school psychologist worked collaboratively to complete the self-assessment. At the secondary level, the entire RTI team (composed of administrators, counselors, the school psychologist, intervention teachers, and the RTI Coordinator for the system) completed the self-assessment.

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Newsletter Committee

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From the Editor...

We know that many of you are in the process of tying up loose ends before leaving for Thanksgiving Break. On behalf of the Newsletter Committee, we hope that you all enjoy your much-needed and well-deserved respite, and come back feeling renewed for the final push of the school year.

If you haven't already, remember to mark your calendars and register for the 9th Annual SSTAGE Promising Practices Conference, which will be held January 14 at the Classic Center in Athens. You can [CLICK HERE](#) to find out more information about and register for the conference.

As always, please do not hesitate to email us with questions, comments, or ideas for future newsletters (newsletter@sstage.org) - your feedback is welcomed and appreciated!

Jacqueline Scales, Ed.S.

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So, what did we learn from the self-assessment? In some ways, it was a validation for what we already knew. We knew we needed better universal screening measures at the secondary level and we have been diligently working to implement those. In addition, we already knew that we had a strong Tier I implementation with universal screenings and core reading instructions at the elementary level. However, we were also able to pinpoint new focus areas. For example, our elementary schools continue to struggle with setting progress monitoring goals along with graphing interventions (and changes) appropriately. They also struggle with the consistency of procedures for data review and movement between tiers. While many of the weaknesses documented at the secondary level were expected, the self-assessment helped us to highlight specific actions to address these weaknesses in implementation. It was determined that additional training was needed at the secondary level, as well as additional guidance regarding the process for moving students in and out of tiers and necessary documentation in the advanced tiers.

Completing the self-assessment at each school allowed us to not only focus on the individual school's needs, but also see overall areas where RTI implementation could be improved. In addition, the self-assessment allowed us to move beyond general observations, such as, "We need to do more at the secondary level," and focus on concrete action steps. This process of self-assessment, and a continuous improvement mindset over time, will only serve to strengthen our RTI implementation in Madison County.

Keller-Margulis, M.A. (2012). Fidelity of implementation framework: A critical need for response to intervention models. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(4), 342-352.

National Center on Intensive Intervention

By Morgan Potts, Ed.S.



Every school has students who, despite appropriate implementation of research-based interventions, continue to struggle significantly with their academic growth or behavior. Large numbers of students, especially those with disabilities, continue to drop out or leave school with inadequate skills. Despite federal education law, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), accountability for the success of students with disabilities continues to be a national concern.

The National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) aims to provide schools and districts with a framework for providing individualized, intensive interventions to these students. Interventions are individualized and intensified by changing the group size, frequency, duration, and/or the portions of the intervention itself. The intensive interventions website was produced under U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

In addition to extensive information regarding the process for intensifying interventions, the site includes valuable resources such as:

- Technically reviewed academic and behavior progress monitoring and interventions, several of which are free
- Webinars
- Short "Ask the Experts" video clips
- Guides for planning standards aligned instruction within a multi-tiered system of supports
- An E-newsletter

The NCII provides intensive implementation support to 12 school districts while simultaneously conducting research to assess the Center's success in building district capacity and improving student performance.

For more information, visit the National Center on Intensive Intervention's website at www.intensiveintervention.org.

Improving Written Expression for All Learners: Developing a Writing Pyramid of Interventions

By Donna McClain, Ph.D.

Region 4 Representative



SEE: Over the past few years, various specialists and service providers in the Ware County School System have discussed our need to improve student writing skills, especially with the recent changes in testing responses from multiple-choice to short-answer. Recently a team of professionals met to review data and discuss the needs of our students, including all subgroups from Pre-K through 12th grade, while also reviewing interventions the system currently has in place.

PLAN: Based on an analysis of the data and a review of our current interventions, a draft pyramid was developed. We contacted Sopris Voyager to obtain a quote for implementing their "Step Up To Writing" and "Step Up to Writing for Math" programs to be used specifically for the Special Education students in upper elementary and middle school. Given that we could not afford to purchase and provide training for all staff on these programs, we began to focus on students who needed help the most.

Our team met and divided the writing skills into various areas such as language, visual-motor skills, knowledge of conventions, generation of ideas, and organization. We recognized that a student could have difficulty in writing due to deficits in any of these areas. A review of the Writing Next (Graham & Perin, 2007) report, which was completed by the Alliance for Excellent Education for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, revealed eleven key elements for effective writing instruction for adolescent learners. Among these were summarization, collaborative writing, making specific product goals, word processing, sentence combining, prewriting, inquiry activities, process writing approach, study of models, and writing for content learning. Once we identified a reliable set of writing elements, skills, and competencies, we focused on potential strategies and interventions.

DO: Currently most of our teachers are trained in "6+1 Writing Traits," so we included this intervention at the Tier 1 level. In addition, we added the "WriteScore" and "WISE" (Writing in Schools Everyday) methods into Tier 1. In Troia's 2013 book Best Practices in Writing Instruction, "writing strategies" involved teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions. "Summarization" involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts and appears to mirror "close reading" activities in our middle school classrooms. "Collaborative writing" uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions. "Specific product goals" is a method teachers use to assign students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete. Given that these elements are interspersed throughout currently used models, committee members placed all of these elements in Tier 1.

At Tier 2, we anticipate that teachers will need to identify students by reviewing work samples and scores on benchmark assessments. During the early stages of Tier 2, student need will be identified so that target areas may be developed. Goals will be set and strategies/interventions will be introduced in small groups or in one-on-one settings. Students at the lowest end of the performance scale will be monitored using "Correct Writing Sequences" (CWS) while students with more advanced skills will be monitored via district writing rubrics. Consultation with the Occupational Therapist for students with visual-motor difficulties or with the Speech-Language Therapist for students with language delays is expected. In addition, students may be placed on Reading Assistant and/or Fast ForWord to improve vocabulary knowledge if this is identified as an area of need.

If a student does not appear to respond to Tier 1 or Tier 2 interventions, then we will refer to Tier 3 and obtain a standardized score on an instrument such as the Test of Written Language and/or the Test of Orthographic Competence, depending upon the target area of need. After interventions, such as Reading Assistant, Fast ForWord Language 1, and/or Fast ForWord Language 2 have been implemented with progress monitoring, students will be administered an alternate version (e.g., Form B) of the previously administered assessment tool. Comparisons of pre- and post-testing will provide a measure of improvement with one standard deviation suggested as an indication of positive response to intervention. We anticipate a 4 to 6 month period of intervention prior to re-test.

CHECK: Although we have barely begun, we anticipate that students will respond more positively to instruction as a result of our attention to this area of concern. We plan to review test scores for the next two to three years to assess effectiveness. The results of implementation will be assessed in the summer of 2016.

(For further information about this process, please contact Donna McClain at dmcclain@ware.k12.ga.us.)

RTI Applications for Behavior Interventions

By Wallace Blackstock, Ed.S.

Region 2 Representative



"Yep. Whenever Mrs. Clarke raises her eyebrows at me."

At the recent "Using RTI Data to Make Decisions: Analysis to Action" conference, keynote speakers Dr. Matthew Burns and Dr. T. Chris Riley-Tillman, tackled the topic of RTI assessment including universal screening, diagnostic assessment, and progress monitoring. The conference presentation was based on the book RTI Applications, Volume 2: Assessment, Analysis, and Decision Making, co-authored by Burns and Riley-Tillman along with Kimberly Gibbons. Dr. Riley-Tillman focused on the "response" in RTI, with regard to behavior interventions. "The heart of an RTI model is the question whether a child responded to an evidence based intervention" (p. 65). With this premise in mind, he

urged his audience to make effective decisions using assessment, design, and analysis based on how a student responds to the intervention being used.

In his presentation at the conference, Dr. Riley-Tillman spoke to the importance of assessment in guiding data-based decision making, identifying the need for intervention, selecting an intervention that will have the greatest likelihood of success, and determining if the intervention chosen is providing adequate success. He frequently reiterated the need for fidelity in the assessment and implementation process. In order to achieve valid and reliable outcomes, it is crucial to provide precise and consistent implementation of the intervention.

Dr. Riley-Tillman notes that through a universal screener, the school professional and/or data team can identify if the problem is a class-wide problem, small-group problem, or an individualized one. A class-wide problem would be addressed by the classroom teacher for the whole class (Tier 1). Both small-group and individual problems may be initially addressed at Tier 1, but also may progress to Tier 2 or Tier 3 depending on the category of the need. "What differentiates the three tiers is not the size of the group, but the level of analysis needed to determine the intervention and the resources needed to deliver it" (Burns, Riley-Tillman, & Gibbons, 2013, p. 26).

Problem solving is needed at each tier and grows with complexity at each successive tier. It is crucial with any behavior issue to identify the precursor or antecedent to the problem behavior. Without knowing what causes or sets up the problem, one cannot take the necessary steps to extinguish the inappropriate behavior or increase the desired behavior. Furthermore, without knowing the "why" for a behavior, constructing an intervention for decreasing or replacing the problem behavior with an appropriate behavior is haphazard. Dr. Riley-Tillman vehemently expressed how important the antecedent is. He stated that the externalized behavior is not nearly as important as knowing why the behavior happened. In his example of "throwing a chair across the room," he acknowledged that the behavior is unacceptable, but it will go unchanged or even increase in severity if the "why" for the behavior is not uncovered and addressed. Merely punishing the behavior is inadequate for alleviating the behavior.

While there is neither time nor space to fully expound on the above topics, RTI Applications, Volume 2: Assessment, Analysis, and Decision Making delves further into these topics to explore, explain, and educate the reader on evidence-based practices in school settings. Burns, Riley-Tillman, and Gibbons offer practical guides for meeting challenges relating to behavioral, mental health, and academic settings. If you did not attend the conference, you can purchase OnDemand video access to all of the conference workshops for a one-time fee.

The OnDemand videos are accessible to subscribers through June 2016. To purchase the OnDemand video access, go to <http://sstage.bizvision.com/product/12388>.

NEWSLETTER TRIVIA QUESTION

Fall 2015 Trivia Question:

What are 4 types of differentiation discussed in the Fall 2014 SSTAGE Newsletter?

(Helpful Hint: Answers can be found on the [SSTAGE website](http://sstage.org).)

****Please submit answers via e-mail to newsletter@sstage.org by Friday, December 11.****

Correct responses will be entered in a drawing to receive a free book!



Teaching Students From Poverty

By *Wanda McPherson, Ed.S.*
Region 1 Representative



In the January 16th edition of the Washington Post, Lyndsey Layton reported that the majority of public school students are in poverty. “For the first time in at least 50 years, a majority of U.S. public school students come from low-income families, according to a new analysis of 2013 federal data.” Although this may come as a surprise to some, Georgia has seen an increase in the number of Title I schools because more students are receiving free and reduced-price lunches. The challenge comes as educators seek ways to address more rigorous student achievement expectations while simultaneously meeting the needs of students who come from backgrounds and cultures of poverty. Research indicates that students from poverty are more transient, have poorer attendance, lack parental involvement, struggle with academic expectations, have more suspensions and are more often referred for Special Education services.

In their books, both Ruby Payne and Eric Jensen describe the negative effects of poverty on the physical, social/emotional, and cognitive well-being of children and families. However, studies have found positive ways that appropriate education and interventions can overcome these factors and break the cycle of poverty for families. Success stories today are prevalent in the media such as Michael Oher, the NFL player whose life is depicted in the movie “The Blind Side.” Just Google “celebrities that overcame poverty” and you will find several articles including one naming 16 of the world’s most famous people including Albert Einstein, Oprah Winfrey, and Jay-Z who overcame very difficult obstacles early on in their lives.

Poverty impacts students’ physical needs and it is commonplace to find children who lack food, clothing, and safe living environments. Schools and communities are coming together to address these needs collectively by hosting clothing closets and offering initiatives such as the Backpack Buddies program. Under the federal McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act, homeless children are ensured transportation to and from school free of charge. This law stipulates that these children may attend their last school enrolled or the school they attended when they first became homeless, regardless of what district the family resides in. By decreasing the transiency, education remains consistent and homeless students have the same opportunities for higher student achievement and graduating high school as their non-homeless peers.

With children of poverty, what do today’s classroom educators do when faced with the high academic expectations before them? The research supports building relationships with students first. President Theodore Roosevelt said it best, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” A student can tell right away if a teacher cares. Classrooms that have teachers that welcome each child with a smile and greeting set a tone of respect. Payne, Jensen, and others offer strategies for schools and classrooms to meet these challenges, including embodying respect, embedding social skills, and being inclusive without lowering the academic expectations. In fact, it has been shown that when students are presented with high expectations and goal setting, they will meet those expectations and move beyond. However, the opposite is also true. When presented with low expectations, many students will make little, if any, progress. The classroom is “ground zero” for overcoming the stressors of living in poverty. Education can be the equalizer if we know what to do.

Teaching social expectations and appropriate social skills is vital to these students. Teachers can take 5 to 10 minutes of instructional time daily to teach and model appropriate social skills. Children in poverty do not come to school understanding these social and behavioral norms or expectations. Teachers often interpret lack of eye contact as disrespect, when in fact the child has not been taught how to appropriately respond and may not understand the definition of respect. Schools that incorporate “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports” (PBIS) define, teach, and support appropriate student behaviors in a school-wide approach, including appropriate social skills. PBIS schools see a reduction in office referrals and an increase in student achievement as students are in the classroom receiving the instruction, rather than in the office. Another effective strategy is “Check or Connect” or “Check in and Check Out” (Behavior Education Program). In both of these evidence-based interventions, a student meets with a staff member twice each day in a positive, non-academic approach with the goal of improving appropriate behaviors in the classroom. This intervention is most effective when the check-in, check-out person is a staff member other than the classroom teacher, thus providing multiple positive role models.

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Standards-based instruction and assessments are requiring students show competency in higher order and critical thinking skills. Students from poverty lack background knowledge and vocabulary skills to meet these demands. The teacher must do several things to assist a child of poverty:

- **Provide Engaging Instruction:** An unengaged student from poverty or middle class will not perform or increase in achievement. Teachers can serve as facilitators or coaches guiding students to the desired goal.
- **Adjust the Instruction:** Teachers must differentiate instruction based on each students' readiness level, interests, and learning profile.
- **Make It Meaningful:** Standards-based instruction must be meaningful to students. The teacher must help the student connect the standards to real life needs.

With the challenges before educators today and the growing number of students in public schools living in poverty, it is imperative that school administrators and teachers know their population and work together as a team to address their student needs and build positive relationships. One good place to start is by sharing your smile and a few caring words with your students each day.

References:

- Crone, Deanne A., Leanne S., Horner, Robert H. (2010, Guilford Press, New York, NY). Responding to Problem Behavior in Schools, Second Edition: The Behavior Education Program.
- Jensen, Eric. (2009, ASCD, Alexandria, VA). Teaching with Poverty in Mind, What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It.
- Payne, Ruby K. (2013, Baytown, TX). A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach.

Useful Websites:

- Check and Connect: <http://checkandconnect.umn.edu>
- Differentiation Central: <http://www.diffcentral.com/model.html>
- Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/25/successful-people-obstacles_n_3964459.html
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: <https://www.pbis.org>
- Washington Post: http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/majority-of-us-public-school-students-are-in-poverty/2015/01/15/df7171d0-9ce9-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html

