

Using Response to Intervention to Support Struggling

Better use of available instructional time will help students who appear to be slow learners.

Mary K. Lose

Every school is challenged to match instruction to the needs of its struggling learners. Even though they are not disabled, some children require instructional modifications to keep up with their grade-level peers and benefit from good classroom instruction. One approach is to provide children who have been described as slow learners more time to keep up with their peers. But what if, instead of more time, we were to make better use of the instructional time that we already have? More important, what if we were to reject the term “slow learner,” and instead provided interventions that help struggling learners accelerate their performance and catch up to their average-progress peers?

IN BRIEF

By rejecting the term “slow learner” and using evidence-based response-to-intervention approaches, principals can effectively help struggling learners. This article includes six action steps principals can take immediately to support these learners.



Learners



One way to do this is to implement response-to-intervention (RTI) approaches within the revised Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that are evidence-based and responsive to children. As the school's instructional leader, the principal is perfectly poised to respond to this important challenge facing schools. In this article, I introduce the underlying principles of an appropriate RTI approach within the IDEA and present action steps that a principal can take immediately to support struggling learners.

Fundamental Principles of RTI

Within the IDEA, principals have two options for addressing the needs of their schools' most at-risk learners and to reduce the number of learners inappropriately identified as learning disabled. The first option is that school districts can use up to 15 percent of their special education funds to pay for early intervening services and to provide teachers with professional development to deliver instructional interventions to their lowest-performing learners. The second option offered by the IDEA is RTI, which can be used to provide early interventions without labeling learners who are at risk for school failure as learning disabled. RTI promotes early identification and prereferral intervention to determine if a learner responds to the intervention.

The goal of these two options is to limit referrals based on inadequate instruction or limited English proficiency and to reduce the number of children identified for learning disability services. State education agencies may establish their own criteria for identifying children with specific learning disabilities; however, the state criteria must also permit school districts to choose an RTI approach appropriate to their local contexts.

Research has shown that indications of a student's learning difficulties usually appear early, typically after one year in school (Clay, 2005). If schools expect their learners to meet achievement standards, then learners must be identified early using assessments that explore the

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full range of their multiple knowledge sources, interests, and skills. By using sound assessment measures, schools can reduce the risk of inappropriately identifying children as learning disabled when what they need are appropriate instructional modifications to start them on the path to accelerative learning.

Effective instructional interventions require the provision of evidence-based early-intervening services. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences has established that one-to-one tutoring in grades 1-3 by skilled tutors must meet the gold standard for effectiveness for the lowest-performing learners. Other researchers have documented the importance of individually designed and delivered lessons for the lowest-performing literacy learners who make up the largest category of at-risk learners in the early grades (Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Under the provisions of the IDEA, schools are also required to monitor learner progress through data-based documentation of learner achievement. Annual reporting of learner progress helps schools and the community to monitor the effectiveness of their intervention services for learners and advocate for equity in serving all of the low-achieving learners regardless of their economic status, race, or ethnicity. A sensitive, observant teacher who also serves as a skilled diagnostician is best able to monitor learner progress. Because he or she works closely with the learner, the teacher is able to adjust and

refine instruction in response to subtle changes in the learner's current control of his or her learning.

However, teacher expertise doesn't develop in a vacuum. Thus, the provisions for early intervening services also recognize and call for investments in teacher development on behalf of the most struggling learners. Because they are the learners most vulnerable to poor instruction, the most at-risk learners require the most competent teachers (McEneaney, Lose, & Schwartz, 2006). Research has shown that investments in teacher expertise through quality professional development yield greater learner achievement outcomes than any other expenditure of school resources (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

Action Steps for RTI

Given these fundamental principles of RTI within the IDEA, what are the action steps that a principal can take now to ensure that struggling learners reach their full potential and continue to learn in regular classrooms? Here are six action steps that can be implemented immediately:

Abandon the phrase “slow learner.” This phrase suggests incorrectly that a child's ability to learn is a fixed condition. Provided with an appropriate intervention tailored to his or her needs, and with the support of an expert teacher, any child can learn and make accelerative progress.

Allocate school resources to implement interventions that are evidence-based. The most credible and reliable source for educational interventions is the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). The WWC rates programs using scientific evidence in seven core areas: beginning reading, character education, dropout prevention, early childhood education, elementary school math, English-language learners, and middle school math curricula. By consulting the WWC, principals can implement proven interventions and ensure that precious school resources are not wasted on programs that lack a scientific research base.

Invest in early versus later interventions for learners. There is no justification for a “wait-to-fail” approach. Research has shown that a sign of a child’s learning difficulties usually surfaces early, in kindergarten or first grade. If schools expect learners to meet achievement benchmarks to reduce the widening of the achievement gap, learners must be identified and responsive interventions provided at the first indication of a difficulty. The key is to ensure that learners do not habituate failure, give up on themselves, and fall hopelessly behind their peers, unable to catch up and take advantage of good classroom instruction.

Invest in teacher expertise versus scripted, prescriptive approaches to students’ learning difficulties. The most struggling learners require the most skilled, responsive teachers who can make moment-to-moment instructional decisions in response to a learner’s developing competencies. Lock step, prescriptive approaches to instruction require teachers to follow a preplanned set of procedures that are inflexible and unresponsive to the infinite variety of learners’ abilities and learning needs. Because they are delivered by teachers-as-technicians, these one-size-fits-all approaches may be more harmful to the learner and more costly to the school in the long run.

Assist struggling learners through individualized, intensive instruction. Abundant anecdotal and research evidence supports the concept that learners learn “by different paths to common outcomes” (Clay, 1998). Skilled, responsive teachers observe the variety of paths taken by individual learners and design instruction that is responsive to their unique learning needs. Although many youngsters respond quite well to whole-class and small-group instruction, the most struggling learners need the most intensive instruction, delivered individually and adapted precisely to their needs. Because no two children ever learn in quite the same way, no one approach to learning has been shown to be effective for all learners.

Launch a schoolwide philosophy that

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“all children can learn and it is the shared responsibility of our staff” to realize this goal. Responding to the needs of struggling learners requires ongoing communication and collaboration on the part of teachers and principals. When principals establish the context and provide the time for teachers to plan thoughtful, effective, and efficient responses to children’s learning, the foundation for a philosophy of shared responsibility for all children can become a reality.

If learners appear to be slow learning, perhaps it is because they haven’t yet been provided with the interventions they need to accelerate their own learning. Fundamental to the above action steps is a rejection of the phrase “slow learner” and substituted in its place a fundamental belief in all children as constructive learners who can excel when provided with the most appropriate evidence-based interventions to ensure their success. Resources that rate interventions on the evidence of their effectiveness are now becoming readily available and the principal is in an ideal position to invest in such evidence-based approaches to learning interventions. 

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WEB RESOURCES

Intervention reports by the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse are a reliable source for determining a program’s effectiveness.
www.whatworksclearinghouse.org

The International Reading Association maintains an extensive list of RTI resources in its RTI Resource Library, including a report titled “Implications for Reading Teachers in Response to Intervention (RTI).”
www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_rti.html#background

The goal of the Reading Recovery Council of North America is “to dramatically reduce the number of first-grade students who have extreme difficulty learning to read and write and to reduce the cost of these learners to educational systems.” The council has a section for administrators with links to briefing papers and research summaries on learning disabilities, RTI, and the IDEA.
www.readingrecovery.org/pdf/reading_recovery/SPED_Brief-07.pdf