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Addressing Response to Intervention within Personnel Preparation Programs: Six Approaches

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INTRODUCTION

Response to Intervention (RTI), as a model for improving services to all students, has been a growing phenomenon since the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) defines RTI as “the practice of (1) providing high-quality instruction/intervention matched to student needs and (2) using learning rate over time and level of performance to (3) make important educational decisions” (NASDSE, 2006, p. 5).

IDEA permits, but does not require, local education agencies (LEAs) to use an RTI model when determining the educational needs of a student with disabilities. Specifically, RTI may be used as part of the process for determining eligibility for special education services under the category of specific learning disabilities. The law states: “*When determining whether a child has a specific learning disability..., a local educational agency shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability*” [20 U.S.C. 1414(b)(6)(A)].

Further, “*In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures*” [20 U.S.C. 1414(b)(6)(B)].

As states and LEAs have begun to respond to this provision through funding, technical assistance and/or explicit mandates, institutions of higher education (IHE) programs are increasingly recognizing and responding to the demand for educational personnel prepared to implement an RTI model at both the system and individual student level.

The purpose of this document is to describe how personnel preparation programs in six states currently incorporate RTI into their curricula. This document was completed as part of Project Forum at NASDSE’s cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

DATA COLLECTION

Interviewees were recruited via (1) an email sent out to all OSEP 325T grantees¹ requesting volunteers from IHEs that incorporate RTI into their personnel preparation programs; and (2) an email sent out to all state directors of special education requesting that they provide contact information for any IHE programs in their state incorporating RTI into their personnel preparation programs. Volunteers from these two groups were asked to provide a brief written description of their programs, and the six IHEs who responded were then invited to participate in in-depth interviews. During December 2009 and January 2010, interviews were conducted with faculty from the following IHEs: Calvin College (Michigan); Oklahoma State University; Portland State University (Oregon); University of Central Florida; University of Northern Colorado; and University of Southern Maine. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common themes and findings are reported in the following section of this document.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Program History

The six programs included in this study all began explicitly teaching RTI as part of their personnel preparation curricula approximately five or six years ago in response to the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. All of the interviewees stressed, however, that many of the components of RTI—e.g., data-based decision making, differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, multi-disciplinary prereferral teams and/or multi-tiered models such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)—were already being taught prior to IDEA 2004, most commonly in school psychology and/or special education programs.

In the case of two IHEs included in this analysis, the political impetus for incorporating RTI into the curriculum went beyond the reauthorization of IDEA. For example:

- *University of Central Florida*—Following the release of the most recent IDEA regulations, Florida's director of special education initiated two projects in tandem: (1) a three-year project to develop an RTI infrastructure by funding RTI pilot projects at the building level, thereby increasing the need for personnel familiar with an RTI model; and (2) grants to university teams developing collaborative plans for infusing RTI competencies into their personnel preparation curricula. An interdepartmental team from the *University of Central Florida*, including representatives from school psychology, general education, school counseling and special education was awarded one of these grants, which helped ensure that RTI was infused into the curriculum across its personnel preparation programs.
- *University of Northern Colorado*—In 2009, the state of Colorado issued a mandate that LEAs use an RTI model as opposed to a discrepancy model for diagnosing learning disabilities. In response to this mandate, the *University of Northern Colorado* has worked closely with the Colorado Department of Education to ensure that newly trained teachers, as well as veteran teachers, are prepared to function within an RTI model.

¹ The purpose of the 325T program is to redesign and restructure high-incidence teacher preparation programs so graduates will meet highly qualified teacher (HQT) special education requirements and will be prepared to teach students with high-incidence disabilities. Forty-two IHEs were awarded 325T grants.

In addition to the passage of state and federal mandates, interviewees reported that the impetus for incorporating RTI included the hiring of expert faculty; alignment of curriculum with the standards of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP); and/or the fact that RTI already matched the vision/agenda of personnel preparation departments by providing a more intentional way of preparing “responsive, transformative educators.” Most interviewees also stressed that their programs incorporated RTI into their curricula because they believed it to be “best practice in education” and the revisions to IDEA simply legitimized the concept. Several interviewees added, however, that because RTI was included as part of IDEA 2004, it was easier for departments outside of special education and/or school psychology to dismiss it as a “special education initiative.”

Program Components

RTI-Related Coursework

A few interviewees reported that school psychology and/or special education programs offer courses with RTI in the title or program descriptions that explicitly address RTI. For example:

- *University of Southern Maine*—The school’s psychology program offers a course explicitly dedicated to RTI. The *University of Southern Maine’s* continuing education branch, the Professional Development Center, also offers two online courses on RTI.
- *University of Northern Colorado*—The special education department has recently added a Master’s degree called Intervention Specialist, funded through a 325T grant, that has an emphasis on RTI and leadership. The purpose of this new degree is to create teacher leaders who are experts in the RTI model; highly qualified in literacy, math, or both; and have a significant amount of leadership training.

“We’re aware of increased need for training in RTI, especially because we want to see students as change agents.”

Most interviewees, however, including those from the *University of Southern Maine* and the *University of Northern Colorado*, explained that RTI was not just taught in one or two courses, but infused *throughout* the curriculum. Courses most likely to incorporate components of RTI include those on assessment, literacy methods, collaboration and consultation, learning disabilities, instructional strategies, current trends and issues in education and PBIS. Several personnel preparation programs also require a culminating project that incorporates various components of RTI (e.g., data-based decision making, differentiated instruction and progress monitoring).

The degree of formality with which RTI is included in the curriculum varies from IHE to IHE. For example, one interviewee noted that RTI is explicitly referenced in several course syllabi, whereas another noted that the inclusion of RTI within coursework is less systematic (i.e., a team of students could choose to research and report back to the class on RTI, but RTI might not otherwise be addressed).

School psychology and special education programs appeared most likely to address RTI systematically within the curriculum. For instance, the interviewee from *Calvin College* described an “intentional link from course to course, gradually building on different aspects [of RTI].” General education and other personnel preparation programs seemed less likely to embrace RTI as a central component of the curriculum and one interviewee noted that general education faculty give “a lot of lip service [to RTI], but not much more.”

“We didn’t want to have just one RTI class or program; we wanted to infuse it throughout.”

Several interviewees described accountability mechanisms in place at the IHE-level to ensure that all candidates are knowledgeable about RTI. For example, at the *University of Central Florida*, courses are departmentally approved so that the same syllabus and course description will be used by all faculty members and/or adjuncts. Because RTI is specifically referenced in several course syllabi, this ensures that students taking these courses will be exposed to RTI regardless of who teaches them. The interviewee from *Oklahoma State University* noted that credentialing bodies such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and NASP could also help ensure that preparation programs maintain a certain level of practice with regards to RTI.

Programs Requiring RTI-Related Coursework

According to most interviewees, RTI-related coursework is most commonly a requirement for special education (6 IHEs) and/or school psychology (4 IHEs) candidates, followed by general education (3 IHEs), educational leadership (1 IHE), school counseling (1 IHE), early childhood (1 IHE) and speech pathology and audiology (1 IHE) candidates. According to two interviewees, explicit RTI exposure was only required at the graduate level, although undergraduates may be introduced to some of the core principles associated with RTI. Interviewees from several special education and school psychology programs mentioned that their programs frequently take an active role in providing information on RTI to candidates from other programs. For example:

“As things stand today, [RTI] still requires a crusader, someone who says, ‘We need to be doing this because it’s the right thing to do. It’s the best practice.’”

- *University of Northern Colorado*—While the general education teacher preparation program does not require exposure to RTI, candidates are required to take an introductory special education course and that course is heavily infused with RTI. Furthermore, *University of Northern Colorado* faculty presents on RTI as part of the School of Teacher Education’s literacy practicum seminars.

RTI-Related Fieldwork Requirements

RTI-related fieldwork opportunities and/or requirements vary from IHE to IHE, but the majority of candidates attending the preparation programs described in this study are exposed to RTI models during their practicum experiences. For example:

- *Oklahoma State University*—School psychology practica explicitly include an RTI component and special education practica will soon do so as well. *Oklahoma State*

University has hand-selected sites, made arrangements with each site guaranteeing that RTI will be part of candidates' practicum experiences, and in many cases worked directly with LEAs to support their adoption of an RTI model. Students are encouraged to take a leadership role at their practicum sites and experiences include participation in universal screenings as well as work with individual students.

- *University of Southern Maine*—Both school psychology and K-8 special education candidates are required to complete a number of fieldwork hours relating to RTI, including a comprehensive project tracking one student throughout the RTI process. Many school psychology candidates also have an opportunity to assist with universal screening, depending on the degree to which the LEA has adopted an RTI model.
- *University of Central Florida*—Because of state-level support for local-level RTI initiatives, the *University of Central Florida* works closely with LEAs to cultivate awareness of RTI and assist them in developing RTI implementation plans. As a result of these collaborative partnerships, almost all school psychologist and special education teacher candidates are exposed to school and student-level RTI experiences during field placements.
- *University of Northern Colorado*—Because schools throughout *Colorado* are required to implement an RTI model, all special education candidates are exposed to RTI during their two field experiences and one student teaching experience. In addition to completing an action research project, where candidates implement an intervention and monitor student progress, many candidates also have opportunities to attend RTI meetings and be part of problem-solving teams.
- *Portland State University*—Although only 25-50% of candidates are currently placed in a school that uses RTI, a major part of *Portland State University's* departmental vision is to partner explicitly with LEAs that embrace RTI.

Components of an RTI-Related Curriculum

Teacher Communication with Parents—Interviewees from five IHEs reported that their RTI curriculum addresses teacher communication with parents, most frequently by including discussions of RTI as part of their program's collaboration and consultation sequence. The sixth interviewee noted that because RTI was not embedded in courses throughout the program, teacher communication with parents was most likely not explicitly addressed.

Collaboration with Other Professionals—Interviewees from five IHEs reported that their RTI curriculum addresses collaboration with other professionals, most frequently by discussing the RTI "team process" as part of the collaboration and consultation sequence. The sixth interviewee noted that because RTI was not embedded throughout the program, professional collaboration as part of the RTI model was most likely not discussed.

Age Ranges—All six interviewees noted that their curricula address the use of RTI for older students as well as for younger children. Most noted, however, that RTI for middle and high school students was much less well developed and understood.

RTI as Instructional Framework and/or Diagnostic Model—Interviewees from four IHEs noted that RTI is taught both as an instructional framework and as a diagnostic model, with

one of interviewees positing a third approach—i.e., teaching RTI as a tiered “services model,” particularly as a way of securing general education buy-in. Interviewees from the other two IHEs reported that RTI was taught as an instructional framework, but not as a diagnostic model, because members of the faculty were divided in terms of best practices for diagnosing learning disabilities.

RTI Models

Interviewees from three IHEs reported teaching specific RTI models. Florida, for example, has a well-developed model (based on the NASDSE model) and a state RTI plan around which the *University of Central Florida* does much professional development. Several interviewees, however, stressed the importance of exposing candidates to multiple RTI frameworks and reminding them to be prepared for whatever model their school happens to use. All interviewees described using a 3-tiered approach, and one reported exposing special education teacher candidates to a 4-tiered approach as well. Most interviewees noted that their IHE’s approach to RTI addresses behavior as well as academics (and highlights the links between a PBIS and RTI model) and includes progress monitoring as well as universal screening for all children (e.g., DIBELS²). Two interviewees noted that their RTI model did not include a standardized protocol for moving students from tier to tier in order to allow for professional discretion.

Collaboration

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Depending on the organizational structure of the IHE, as well as the degree of collegiality among general education, special education, school psychology and other departments, interdisciplinary collaboration in developing and implementing RTI curriculum takes different forms at different IHEs.

- *University of Southern Maine*—The school psychology and special education programs co-offer an assessment course that incorporates RTI and have recently developed a concentration in RTI for Master’s degree students that will combine coursework in school psychology and special education. Special education faculty members are also providing support to the instructor of an English as a Second Language (ESL) assessment course on how to incorporate RTI.
- *Portland State University*—The IHE has two dual licensure programs, an Inclusive Elementary Educator Program and a Secondary Dual Educator Program. The latter program, in particular, provides opportunities for general education and special education faculty to collaborate on infusing RTI into the curriculum.
- *University of Central Florida*—The initial impetus for RTI-based collaboration at the *University of Central Florida* was the state-sponsored RTI grant to IHEs, for which the *University of Central Florida* applied and received. Also, the *University of Central Florida’s* 325T grant mandates interdisciplinary collaboration.

² The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) data system provides a tool to measure skill level and database for schools and districts to enter and report on student performance results.

- *Calvin College*—Faculty from general and special education have been meeting together to discuss which state program standards are not being addressed and/or not being addressed *consistently* as part of the curriculum and faculty members now recognize the need for infusing RTI into general as well as special education coursework.
- *University of Northern Colorado*—Before 2009, there appeared to be limited RTI-related collaboration. In response to *Colorado's* RTI mandate, however, there is currently more interdisciplinary dialogue about how to infuse RTI into the general education curriculum. General education has convened a committee focusing on adding an assessment course that addresses RTI, for example, and the committee includes a special education representative well-versed in RTI models.

When asked whether any collaborative mechanisms were in place enabling interdisciplinary dialogue on the topic of RTI, interviewees identified the following:

- *Calvin College*—General education and special education meet together as faculty for departmental meetings and professional development.
- *University of Southern Maine*—All initial certification programs are located in teacher education, including both general and special education, so faculty meetings are *de facto* interdisciplinary.
- *University of Central Florida*—The curriculum committee is interdisciplinary by college. Also, the college of education has been organized into special interest groups (SIGs), and a group focusing on RTI was recently proposed.

Collaboration Beyond the IHE Community

In addition to ensuring that personnel preparation programs are meeting state needs in the area of RTI training, interviewees all stressed the importance of being aware of, and participating in, state- and local-level RTI initiatives. Most commonly, faculty serve in an advisory capacity on state-level committees and/or provide professional development at the local-level. For example:

- *Portland State University*—Faculty representatives serve on various *Oregon* Department of Education initiatives (e.g., Effective Behavior and Instructional Support Systems [EBISS, the statewide PBIS program] and the RTI Project). Leadership for these projects has much overlap and members are currently working to ensure that the RTI Project works successfully with other initiatives.
- *Oklahoma State University*—Special education faculty from *Oklahoma State University* are working on the state RTI Committee; developing an RTI manual to assist LEAs in implementing RTI system-wide; and conducting regional and statewide RTI trainings. *Oklahoma State University* students can also complete their practicum requirements by participating in an RTI pilot program located at 15 sites around the state.
- *University of Northern Colorado*—In addition to working on state-level RTI committees and helping *Colorado* develop its RTI model (e.g., developing implementation guides and promotional videos), *University of Northern Colorado*

special education faculty assist LEAs in implementing RTI by developing online professional development courses addressing RTI and assessment at the request of LEA administrators.

- *University of Southern Maine*—School psychology faculty works with the *Maine* Department of Education (MDE), as well as numerous LEAs to plan, implement and evaluate RTI practices across the state. *University of Southern Maine* faculty also participated in a recent conversation with other *University of Maine* campuses regarding how faculty could provide RTI guidance to MDE. According to the *Maine* interviewee, as part of the state's partnership with the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ)³, the *University of Southern Maine* is part of a "cutting edge program that allows interns and schools to work together on RTI."
- *University of Central Florida*—The *Florida* state education agency (SEA) funds professional development partnerships between each *Florida* IHE in collaboration with the LEAs in the IHE's catchment area. One of the topics that *University of Central Florida* examines in collaboration with the eight LEAs in the central *Florida* area is RTI. *University of Central Florida* faculty members are also represented on the SEA's State Transformation Team for RTI Implementation and attend *Florida's* summer institute on RTI awareness for teams of IHE professors.

Other collaborative efforts mentioned by interviewees that extend beyond the IHE community include work with the National Center on RTI and participation in the National Center on Progress Monitoring 2008 conference on progress monitoring within an RTI framework.

Financial and Human Resources

Funding Development of RTI-Related Coursework

Interviewees from three IHEs reported receiving external funding to support development of RTI-related coursework: *Portland State University* and the *University of Northern Colorado* received 325T grants and the *University of Central Florida* received \$30,000 in seed money from the SEA in the form of IDEA flow-through dollars for targeted projects. The other three IHEs received no special funding for RTI-related coursework. Interviewees from all six IHEs reported that RTI was now a permanent part of the curriculum and not contingent on outside funding or the presence of a particular faculty member. One interviewee acknowledged, however, that the departure of key personnel can often change the complexion of a program and another noted that its faculty had chosen not to make RTI a core feature of the program because a new initiative could come along that was more effective.

Staffing of RTI-Related Courses

Of the IHEs interviewed, faculty teaching RTI-related courses belong predominantly to special education and school psychology departments, but also to general education, school counseling and early childhood education departments.

³ CTQ is a technical assistance and dissemination (TA&D) project co-funded by OSEP and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE). For more information go to: <http://www.teachingquality.org/>.

Most commonly, faculty prepare for teaching RTI-related coursework during their doctoral programs or through independent research, but also via campus-based professional development activities and/or statewide professional development activities.

Interviewees reported that the special education teaching and school psychology faculty responsible for RTI-related coursework were usually aware of local- and state-level RTI initiatives, but that general education faculty responsible for RTI-related coursework was less likely to be so. Exceptions to this included *University of Northern Colorado* and *University of Central Florida* general education faculty, located in states where RTI is either mandated or heavily promoted at the state level.

Program Evaluation

None of the six IHEs included in this study formally evaluate the outcomes of the RTI components of their curricula (e.g., tracking students exposed to RTI coursework in order to further evaluate effectiveness). However, interviewees reported using the following types of efforts to gather data regarding the effectiveness of RTI-related coursework:

- *University of Central Florida*—As part of its program evaluation form, the department of school psychology includes a section on RTI-related coursework and field placement. Within the department of special education, several course evaluation forms specifically address components of RTI, but there is no program-wide evaluation of how well RTI-related competencies are addressed.
- *University of Southern Maine*—Current accreditation of the school psychology program focuses on RTI and will require the gathering of data as part of the program's self-study.
- *Portland State University*—Student work samples align with tenets of RTI, as well as with pre- and post-tests, and are used to gauge levels of student mastery of the RTI model. Faculty members also consult regularly with LEA partners to ensure that *Portland State University* candidates are skilled practitioners of RTI.
- *Oklahoma State University*—The department of special education surveys field-based supervisors regarding how well candidates have mastered various components of RTI.

Strengths, Challenges and Recommendations

Strengths of IHE Programs

Interviewees identified numerous strengths of their RTI curricula. Although none were common across all six IHE programs, these included:

- faculty collaboration within and across departments;
- interdisciplinary commitment to educating all children, regardless of disability;
- infusion of RTI principles across the curriculum as opposed to addressing RTI within only one or two courses;

"If you're going to develop an RTI strand, or integrate [RTI] into the curriculum, you must have people well trained in the model and buy-in to the model."

- comprehensive training of candidates, including both conceptually based components and “real-world” or applied components;
- multiple required assessment courses, allowing ample time for introduction to, and mastery of, an RTI approach;
- opportunities for faculty to spend extensive time in local schools (e.g., 30+ hours per year); and
- collaboration with SEA and LEA leaders.

Challenges to Implementing a Successful RTI Curriculum

When asked to identify major challenges to implementing a successful RTI curriculum, interviewees identified several. In addition to lack of time and resources—a perennial problem—interviewees most commonly mentioned the need for increased collaboration between general and special education faculty. Several described tensions arising as a result of ideological differences between general and special education faculty, especially in regards to general education’s shared responsibility for the education of students with disabilities. Current efforts to improve cross-departmental collaboration include, for example, identifying critical concepts that are universal across general and special education preparation programs and discussing how RTI incorporates these concepts. Another interviewee described plans for restructuring the college of education that would include the creation of an inter-disciplinary RTI interest group.

A second significant challenge has to do with faculty resistance to nationally mandated paradigms and/or conflicting philosophies regarding certain core principles of RTI. Intellectual freedom is usually considered a cornerstone of academia, and as one interviewee noted, if RTI is brought in using a “top down” approach, this “wears away at the fiber of the institutional process.” Other interviewees, however, were more welcoming of external pressures to integrate RTI. In the words, of one: “Mandates always help—whether you like it or not!” And in the words of another: “When external accrediting institutions put pressure [on IHEs], changes are more likely. I would welcome a state-level initiative... as long as it’s consistent with good [RTI] policy.”

Related to this, were faculty members’ concerns that RTI may be just another trend. One interviewee noted that many faculty members were posing the question, “Is this a band wagon? Something that will just come and go?” Another interviewee commented, “I don’t like the idea of having it separate and calling it RTI, because we might change the term in 10 years.”

Several interviewees mentioned the fact that because RTI represents a paradigm shift for the way education services are delivered, what candidates are learning in their IHE programs may not always complement more traditional structures and systems currently in place at the LEA-level. Interviewees stressed the need to prepare educators and school psychologists to be “change agents.”

Other concerns raised included the need to find ways of ensuring that teachers prepared via alternative routes to certification are also well-versed in the core principles of RTI; and the fact that states like Colorado that mandate LEAs to adopt an RTI model do not necessarily provide adequate training and technical supports to ensure fidelity of implementation at the local level.

Recommendations

When asked what personnel preparation programs should do when thinking about developing more explicit RTI curricula, interviewees generated the following recommendations:

- Secure support from leadership (e.g., departmental chairs) for revision of programs.
- Provide faculty release time to revise old courses and develop new ones to reflect core RTI principles.
- Ensure that any RTI initiative at the IHE level is taken on as an interdisciplinary project (e.g., involving college-wide conversations about RTI).
- Ensure that instructors are knowledgeable about RTI by hiring faculty with training and/or providing necessary professional development opportunities for existing faculty.
- Take advantage of existing resources (e.g., web-based information on RTI such as PowerPoint presentations, white papers) in order to expand faculty and student knowledge of RTI principles, practices and initiatives.
- Infuse components of RTI into multiple courses.
- Include RTI as part of field placement and/or student teaching experience.
- Integrate RTI into the general education curriculum more explicitly— e.g., requiring familiarity with an RTI model as part of initial certification for all general education candidates.

“Special education has got to let go. They need to collaborate strongly with general education. Special education cannot own RTI.”

SUMMARY

The degree to which RTI is incorporated into personnel preparation curricula, interdisciplinary collaboration is involved in developing and implementing RTI-related coursework and IHE faculty collaborate on SEA- and LEA-level RTI initiatives appears to vary from IHE to IHE. However, IHEs included in this study share a common commitment to the core principles of RTI and the importance of preparing education professionals to work within an RTI framework. Increasingly, school psychology and special education programs require familiarity with RTI on the part of their graduates and several general education as well as other programs are also requiring RTI-related coursework. Several special education and school psychology programs also require an RTI-related field placement experience. In

“We see RTI as a means rather than an end. The end goal is student success.”

addition to teaching courses that address RTI, most faculty members interviewed provide leadership to state- and local-level RTI initiatives and offer inservice trainings to LEA staff. Although challenges to the implementation of successful RTI curricula exist, particularly in terms of lack of buy-in on the part of general education faculty, interviewees identified a number of program strengths and generated several recommendations for other IHE

programs planning to integrate RTI into their personnel preparation curricula. Perhaps most importantly, interviewees stressed the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and the infusing of RTI-based concepts across the curriculum.

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