

Introduction



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OVERVIEW

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-446) (IDEA 2004) was signed into law on December 3, 2004, by President George W. Bush. IDEA 2004 includes provisions that could lead to significant changes in the way in which students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) are identified. Of particular relevance to the process of SLD determination are the following provisions of the statute:

- Local educational agencies (LEA) shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability (IDEA 2004).
- LEAs may consider a student's response to scientific-based instruction.
- Responsiveness to intervention (RTI) is not specifically identified in the law.
- LEAs are given flexibility in determining SLD implementation options.
- Using special education funding to provide early intervening services for all students is permitted.

This movement toward change stems from criticisms of current SLD determination components, procedures, and criteria. These criticisms include irrelevance of aptitude-achievement discrepancy and cognitive measures to instructional planning or outcomes, lack of equitable treatment across educational settings, and delays in disability determination. Another criticism of practices has been that students were judged to have an SLD without an assessment of the availability and use of general education interventions that have proven their effectiveness for students presenting similar behaviors of concern (e.g., limited reading acquisition). One could not be confident that the achievement and behavior problems that a child presented were inherent to the child or attributable to shortcomings in the instructional settings.

Earlier statutes regarding the determination of SLD included a provision for evaluating the extent to which students had received appropriate learning experiences. However, no systematic process was outlined in the earlier regulations for ensuring that the learning experiences provided before referral for evaluation were those that have been found to be typically effective for the child's age and ability levels. The responsiveness to scientific-based intervention concept in IDEA 2004 is an elaboration or greater specification of this basic concept. With this emphasis, school staffs may consider how a student's performance in general education and, more specifically, the student's performance in response to specific scientific, research-based instruction informs SLD determination.

WHAT IS RTI?

The definition of responsiveness to intervention (RTI), on which the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities' (NRCLD) writing is based, follows:

RTI is an assessment and intervention process for systematically monitoring student progress and making decisions about the need for instructional modifications or increasingly intensified services using progress monitoring data. The following is the fundamental question of RTI procedures: Under what conditions will a student successfully demonstrate a response to the curriculum? Thus, interventions are selected and implemented under rigorous conditions to determine what will work for the student.

Researchers have endorsed the incorporation of a scientific, research-based intervention process as an identification criterion because it combines the important features of assessment and instruction and addresses many of the limitations currently associated with aptitude-achievement discrepancy models of SLD identification. The RTI concept is conceptually connected to previous federal statutes regarding the determination of SLD. Those previous statutes included a provision for evaluating that students had received appropriate learning experiences. The RTI concept in IDEA 2004 is an elaboration or greater specification on this basic concept. In addition to the provision of appropriate learning experiences for all students, essential features of RTI also include the early identification of students as being at risk for academic failure.

Optimal learning outcomes occur when students' skills and abilities closely match the curriculum and instruction within the classroom. When a mismatch occurs, student outcomes and learning suffer. Quality classroom instruction usually provides a good match for most students. But for other students, success is not easy. The hypothesis is that, with RTI, these struggling students can be identified early and provided appropriate instruction, thus increasing the likelihood that they can be successful and maintain their class placement.

RTI can be used as a process that is one part of the evaluation for the determination of SLD. A strong RTI process includes the following critical features:

- High-quality, scientifically based classroom instruction
- Student assessment with classroom focus
- School-wide screening of academics and behavior
- Continuous progress monitoring of students
- Implementation of appropriate research-based interventions
- Progress monitoring during interventions (effectiveness)
- Teaching behavior fidelity measures

RTI WITHIN THE PROCESS OF SLD

DETERMINATION

Although RTI addresses some significant shortcomings in current approaches to SLD identification and other concerns about early identification of students at risk for reading problems, RTI should be considered to be one important element within the larger context of the SLD determination process. RTI as *one* component of SLD determination is insufficient as a sole criterion for accurately determining SLD. RTI provides the following information about a student:

1. Indication of the student's skill level relative to peers or a criterion benchmark
2. Success or lack of success of particular interventions
3. Sense of the intensity of instructional supports that will be necessary for the student to achieve

Incorporating this information into SLD determination procedures has the potential to make important contributions to identifying students with SLD in schools. In addition to an RTI process that helps ensure appropriate learning experiences and early intervention, identification of SLD should include a student-centered, comprehensive evaluation that ensures students who have a learning disability are accurately identified.

Although IDEA 2004 provides flexibility to LEAs in determining SLD identification procedures, the following recommendations by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) should help guide the development of these procedures (NJCLD, 2005):

- Decisions regarding eligibility for special education services must draw from information collected from a comprehensive individual evaluation using multiple methods, including clinical judgment and other sources of relevant information.

- Students must be evaluated on an individual basis and assessed for intra-individual differences in the seven domains that comprise the definition of SLD in the law: listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, and mathematical calculation.
- Eligibility decisions must be made through an interdisciplinary team, must be student centered and informed by appropriate data, and must be based on student needs and strengths.
- As schools begin to execute a process of decision making that is more clinical than statistical in nature, ensuring through regulations that this team of qualified professionals represents all competencies necessary for accurate review of comprehensive assessment data will be critical.
- As the research base expands, this *RTI Manual* and the tools contained within can be modified for other domains, such as social behavior, math, and writing.
- The RTI components featured in this *RTI Manual* extend beyond the regulations and are included to help you facilitate implementation rather than only guide you in regulation adherence.
- The items that are listed in the evaluation tools contained within each section are based on a review of school-based and research-based RTI implementation procedures (e.g., Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002; NRCLD Symposium on RTI, 2003; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Processes for SLD identification have changed and will continue to do so. Within that context, remembering that RTI is but one resource for use in the SLD determination process is important. More broadly speaking, RTI procedures have the distinction that when implemented with fidelity, they can identify and intervene for students early in the educational process, thereby reducing academic failure among students.

PURPOSE OF THIS RTI MANUAL

Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI): How to Do It (RTI Manual) is offered as a tool for implementing RTI. The *RTI Manual* can help you understand, design, and evaluate the RTI features that you will implement. This *RTI Manual* is based on current research regarding the features of RTI. Although we believe it provides comprehensive coverage of the critical features of RTI, we also have included numerous resources for pursuing further information.

As you use this *RTI Manual*, please keep the following points in mind:

- At this time, information from scientific, research-based interventions is primarily focused on early reading. This is understandable when one considers that, according to the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002), the reason that most students identified as having learning disabilities were in special education was that they had reading difficulties. In addition, research has indicated that the number of students identified for special education and as having learning disabilities decreased after the implementation of early and rigorous reading programs (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly & Vaughn, 2004).

HOW THIS RTI MANUAL IS ORGANIZED

The *RTI Manual* includes the following sections:

1. School-wide screening
2. Progress monitoring
3. Tiered service delivery
4. Fidelity of implementation
5. School examples, student case studies, and research examples

Within each of the first four sections of the *RTI Manual*, we have followed a consistent format for presenting information and tools to implement RTI.

We first present overviews, definitions, and features of the relevant RTI component. This helps orient the reader to each RTI component and develops an understanding of its critical features and role within the larger system of RTI. Included in each component section is an evaluation tool outlining the features that currently define best practice. These tools are meant to provide both formative and summative evaluations of your RTI process.

Next, we provide a planning tool that your school can use to determine specifics about implementing the essential tasks for each RTI component. This planning tool follows the same general framework:

- Personnel roles and responsibilities within the RTI component
- Implementation
 - essential tasks for the RTI component
 - standards for judging whether you have met the criteria for implementation
- Resources
 - internal resources you will need to consider for implementation
 - external resources available for the RTI component

Finally, the last section of this manual, *School Examples, Student Case Studies, and Research Examples*, presents descriptions of how model sites identified through an NRCLD research study have implemented specific components of RTI, the resources required, and the challenges they faced. The section also describes longitudinal data from individual students who have received services under an RTI delivery model. It concludes with descriptions of research studies in which RTI models have been implemented.

CONCLUSION

Although RTI represents a promising way of addressing many issues associated with SLD identification, unanswered implementation questions remain. We must ask how many issues relevant to SLD determination are due to the specific assessment components as well as the limited fidelity with which those components have been implemented. Further, we must consider how well schools could implement an assessment process that incorporates significant changes in staff roles and responsibilities while lengthening the duration of disability determination assessment.

Another significant consideration is that current research literature provides scant scientific evidence for how RTI applies in curricular areas other than early reading and beyond primary or elementary school-age children. In conjunction with the standards that have been developed (National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment [NCSESA], 1996, and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 2000), science-based research needs to be conducted using the RTI construct in the areas of later reading (e.g., reading comprehension) as well as science and mathematics. Using an RTI framework across educational disciplines as well as grade levels is consonant with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110) (NCLB 2001) and promotes the values that schools have an obligation to ensure that all students participate in strong instructional programs that support multifaceted learning.

Our goal in providing this manual is to help you think about implementing RTI in terms of manageable concrete steps. We believe you will find this manual helpful as your school considers implementation of RTI.

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