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## **Responsiveness to Intervention: New Roles for Speech-Language Pathologists**

*By Barbara J. Ehren, EdD, CCC-SLP, Judith Montgomery, PhD, CCC-SLP, Judy Rudebusch, EdD, CCC-SLP, and Kathleen Whitmire, PhD, CCC-SLP  
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association*

The responsiveness to intervention (RTI) process is a multitiered approach to providing services and interventions to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity. It involves universal screening, high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, frequent progress monitoring, and the use of child response data to make educational decisions. RTI should be used for making decisions about general, compensatory, and special education, creating a well-integrated and seamless system of instruction and intervention guided by child outcome data.

As a schoolwide prevention approach, RTI includes changing instruction for struggling students to help them improve performance and achieve academic progress. To meet the needs of all students, the educational system must use its collective resources to intervene early and provide appropriate interventions and supports to prevent learning and behavioral problems from becoming larger issues. To support these efforts, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA '04) allows up to 15% of special education funds to be used to provide early intervening services for students who are having academic or behavioral difficulties but who are not identified as having a disability.

RTI also provides an alternative to the use of a discrepancy model to assess underachievement. Students who are not achieving when given high-quality instruction may have a disability. This approach was authorized in IDEA '04 through the following provisions: (a) local education agencies (LEAs) may use a student's response to scientifically based instruction as part of the evaluation process, and (b) when identifying a disability, LEAs shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability.

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) can play a number of important roles in using RTI to identify children with disabilities and provide needed instruction to struggling students in both general education and special education settings. But these roles will require some fundamental changes in the way SLPs engage in assessment and intervention activities.

## **Challenges and Opportunities of the New Model**

RTI requires changes in terms of assessment approaches as well as models of intervention and instructional support. Regarding assessment, there are challenges to SLPs working in districts that undertake the shift from traditional standardized approaches to a more pragmatic, educationally relevant model focused on measuring changes in individual performance over time. Such challenges include the shift from a “within child” deficit paradigm to a contextual perspective; a greater emphasis on instructional intervention and progress monitoring prior to special education referral; an expansion of the SLP’s assessment “tool kit” to include more instructionally relevant, contextually based procedures; and most likely the need for additional professional development in all of the above. In addition, the use of formal evaluation procedures may still be an important component of RTI in many districts. Teams must still conduct relevant, comprehensive evaluations using qualified personnel. SLPs’ expertise in language may be called upon to round out comprehensive profiles of students having academic or behavioral difficulties.

Regarding intervention and instructional support, SLPs must engage in new and expanded roles that incorporate prevention and identification of at-risk students as well as more traditional roles of intervention. Their contribution to the school community can be viewed as expertise that is used through both direct and indirect services to support struggling students, children with disabilities, the teachers and other educators who work with them, and their families. This involves a decrease in time spent on traditional models of intervention (e.g., pull-out therapy) and more time on consultation and classroom-based intervention. It also means allocation and assignment of staff based on time needed for indirect services and support activities, and not based solely on direct services to children with disabilities.

## **New and Expanded Roles**

SLPs working in districts that choose to implement RTI procedures are uniquely qualified to contribute in a variety of ways to assessment and intervention at many levels, from systemwide *program design* and *collaboration* to work with *individual students*. SLPs offer expertise in the language basis of literacy and learning, experience with collaborative approaches to instruction/intervention, and an understanding of the use of student outcomes data when making instructional decisions.

### ***Program Design***

SLPs can be a valuable resource as schools design and implement a variety of RTI models. The following functions are some of the ways in which SLPs can make unique contributions:

- Explain the role that language plays in curriculum, assessment, and instruction, as a basis for appropriate program design
- Explain the interconnection between spoken and written language

- Identify and analyze existing literature on scientifically based literacy assessment and intervention approaches
- Assist in the selection of screening measures
- Help identify systemic patterns of student need with respect to language skills
- Assist in the selection of scientifically based literacy intervention
- Plan for and conduct professional development on the language basis of literacy and learning
- Interpret a school's progress in meeting the intervention needs of its students

### ***Collaboration***

SLPs have a long history of working collaboratively with families, teachers, administrators, and other special service providers. SLPs play critical roles in collaboration around RTI efforts, including the following:

- Assisting general education classroom teachers with universal screening
- Participating in the development and implementation of progress monitoring systems and the analysis of student outcomes
- Serving as members of intervention assistance teams, utilizing their expertise in language, its disorders, and treatment
- Consulting with teachers to meet the needs of students in initial RTI tiers with a specific focus on the relevant language underpinnings of learning and literacy
- Collaborating with school mental health providers (school psychologists, social workers, and counselors), reading specialists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, learning disabilities specialists, and other specialized instructional support personnel (related/pupil services personnel) in the implementation of RTI models
- Assisting administrators to make wise decisions about RTI design and implementation, considering the important language variables
- Working collaboratively with private and community-employed practitioners who may be serving an individual child
- Interpreting screening and progress assessment results to families
- Helping families understand the language basis of literacy and learning as well as specific language issues pertinent to an individual child

### ***Serving Individual Students***

SLPs continue to work with individual students, in addition to providing support through RTI activities. These roles and responsibilities include the following:

- Conducting expanded speech sound error screening for K-3 students to track students at risk and intervene with those who are highly stimulable and may respond to intense short-term interventions during a prolonged screening process rather than being placed in special education
- Assisting in determining “cut-points” to trigger referral to special education for speech and language disabilities
- Using norm-referenced, standardized, and informal assessments to determine whether students have speech and language disabilities
- Determining duration, intensity, and type of service that students with communication disabilities may need
- Serving students who qualify for special education services under categories of communication disabilities such as speech sound errors (articulation), voice or fluency disorders, hearing loss, traumatic brain injury, and speech and language disabilities concomitant with neurophysiological conditions
- Collaborating with classroom teachers to provide services and support for students with communication disabilities
- Identifying, using, and disseminating evidence-based practices for speech and language services or RTI interventions at any tier

### **Meeting the Challenge**

The foundation for SLPs’ involvement in RTI has been established through the profession’s policies on literacy, workload, and expanded roles and responsibilities. The opportunities for SLPs working within an RTI framework are extensive. To some, these opportunities may seem overwhelming—where in the workday would there be time to *add* all of these activities to our current responsibilities? Certainly if the traditional roles continue, it would be difficult to expand into these new roles. The point of RTI, however, is not to add more tasks but to reallocate time to better address prevention and early intervention, and in the long run serve more students up front rather than at the point of special education evaluation and service. Where RTI has been faithfully implemented, this seems to be the outcome. Some districts report reductions in special education referral and placement; even where placement rates have remained stable, staff nevertheless report a change in the way they spend their time. The reallocation of effort will

hopefully lead to more effective interventions, both for students who remain in general education and those who ultimately qualify for more intensive services.

Successful RTI programs rely on the leadership of a strong principal or designated leader who has budgetary power and the ability to bring all educators to the same table to share professional development, children, time, space, money, and curriculum resources. The sharing of resources is sometimes a stumbling block, yet strong leaders can overcome these barriers by keeping the focus on the children being helped. SLPs can begin the RTI process by sharing with principals the benefits of an RTI approach and the support offered through IDEA, including the incentive that 15% of a school's special education funds can be used to launch the RTI process.

***To meet this challenge, SLPs will need to be***

- open to change—change in how students are identified for intervention; how interventions are selected, designed, and implemented; how student performance is measured and evaluated; how evaluations are conducted; and how decisions are made;
- open to professional development—training (as needed) in evidence-based intervention approaches, progress monitoring methods, evaluation of instructional and program outcomes, and contextually based assessment procedures, and the implications for both preservice and in-service training;
- willing to adapt a more systemic approach to serving schools, including a workload that reflects less traditional service delivery and more consultation and collaboration in general education classrooms;
- willing and able to communicate their worth to administrators and policymakers—to educate others on the unique contributions that SLPs can make consistent with the provisions of IDEA '04.

IDEA '04 does not mandate significant change or prohibit traditional practices. Rather, it encourages the adoption of new approaches that promise better student outcomes. Such innovations in education offer numerous opportunities to enhance speech-language services to the benefit of all students.

**Key Resources**

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2006). Responsiveness-to-intervention technical assistance packet. Available at [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

Butler, K., & Nelson, N. (Eds.) (2005). Responsiveness to intervention and the speech-language pathologist [Special issue]. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 25(2). (See six articles on RTI and SLPs.)

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- Mellard, D. (2004). *Understanding responsiveness to intervention in learning disabilities determination*. Available from [www.nrcld.org/publications/papers/mellard.html](http://www.nrcld.org/publications/papers/mellard.html)
- National Association of State Directors of Special Education. (2005). *Response to intervention: Policy considerations and implementation*. Available from [www.nasdse.org](http://www.nasdse.org)
- National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2005). *Responsiveness to intervention and learning disabilities*. Available: [www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org)
- School Social Work Association of America (2006). *Response to Intervention*. Available: [www.sswaa.org](http://www.sswaa.org)
- Strangman, N., Hitchcock, C., Hall, T., Meo, G., & Coyne, P. (2006). Response-to-instruction and universal design for learning: How might they intersect in the general education classroom? Available: [www.k8accesscenter.org/documents/RTIandUDLFinal.2.pdf](http://www.k8accesscenter.org/documents/RTIandUDLFinal.2.pdf)

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American Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
10801 Rockville Pike, Rockville, MD 20852  
[www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)