

Information Brief:

# RTI Implementation Processes for Middle Schools

Planning, developing, implementing, and sustaining organizational change, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), is a complex endeavor. This brief is designed to give practitioners guidance based on the implementation activities of middle school practitioners across the country. We recognize that secondary schools must consider many unique features when implementing RTI (e.g., student class schedules, grading requirements, course credits, and curricular focus) (National High School Center, National Center on Response to Intervention, & Center on Instruction, 2010). Thus, the stages and processes of implementation need to be considered carefully when practitioners expand RTI from elementary to secondary settings (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2010).

As we discuss implementation processes, we refer often to the “essential components of RTI,”

- Universal screening
- Progress monitoring
- Multi-level prevention system
- Data-based decision making

The essential components work together in a broad, school-wide organizational framework that allows staff to make

data-driven instructional decisions to meet all students’ needs. The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) uses the following definition of RTI:

Response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multilevel prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities (NCRTI, 2010, p. 2).

To deepen our understanding of how RTI operates at the middle school level, staff from the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) identified and interviewed administrators and staff at 42 middle schools across the country. (For information about how the middle school sites were selected, see Appendix). Our discussions with these practitioners provided us with a rich understanding of activities and considerations (e.g., goals, processes, challenges, structures, sequences, timelines, and supports) of middle school staff implementing RTI.



Implementation is a process that takes time; the length of implementation varies by school. Implementation science has identified that implementation of innovation evolves through a series of steps (Fixsen, et al., 2005). The NCRTI (adopted from Fixsen, et al., 2005) suggests schools focus on the following four steps: (1) exploring and adopting, (2) planning, (3) implementing, and (4) sustaining. For the purposes of initial implementation, this brief focuses on the first three stages of the process. Within each implementation stage, we have selected topics that middle school practitioners have identified as being pivotal for implementation.<sup>1</sup>

This brief reviews implementation considerations and provides guiding questions for SEA-, LEA-, and school-level personnel to consider as they move forward with their own implementation activities.

**1. Exploring and adopting stage.** During this stage, administrators take investigative steps to explore RTI for possible adoption. For practitioners' purposes, exploration occurs at a very broad level, so it does not include the specific details of each school's essential components. For this stage, this brief highlights four areas of consideration:

- Focus
- Culture
- Leadership
- Leadership team

**2. Planning stage.** During the planning stage, school leaders and the leadership team begin to prepare for implementation by increasing staff knowledge, formulating plans, creating guidance documents, and readying the school structure for implementation. For this stage, this brief highlights two main areas of consideration:

- Staff knowledge building
  - RTI introduction
  - Communication
  - Continuous professional development
- Plan development

**3. Implementing stage.** During this stage, school staff puts the essential components in place. For this stage, this brief focuses on two implementation examples for middle schools:

- One essential component
- One small group



## Exploring and Adopting

Exploring and adopting is critical in the RTI implementation process. Until stakeholders are clear about what is being implemented and why it is being implemented, many may be reluctant to support implementation efforts. Effective leadership sets the context for successful implementation of RTI by creating broad awareness and initial buy-in for the implementation of an innovation. For RTI to achieve success in the performance of individual students and school improvement, full support of local leadership is required.

In this stage, school and district leaders carefully research and consider the implications and expected RTI outcomes. During our observations, school practitioners emphasized a few key factors:

- **Focus** includes the goals and outcomes that a school expects to achieve from the implementation of RTI. What student achievement outcomes are we trying to address?
- **Culture** means the elements of the school's organization, structure, and culture that facilitate implementation. What elements of the school's organization lend themselves to successful implementation: broad participation, indicators of change, systemic leadership? What elements of the school's culture lend themselves to successful implementation: transparency, open communication, collaborative practices? What needs to change?
- **Leadership** refers to the administrators who are responsible for leading the RTI implementation activities. Who among the administration is leading the innovation?

- **Leadership Team** refers to the staff members and leaders who are involved in planning, consensus building, and implementation activities. What are the leadership team's function, support, resources, schedule, and membership?

### Focus

The focus of implementation is the reason for which a school or district decides to implement a change process. The key question is phrased something like, "What do we want to accomplish with RTI implementation?" Before implementation, administrators decide how and why RTI could meet the academic and behavioral needs of students.

*Our RTI initiative started with a reading crisis. We needed the students to be able to read.*

For example, middle school administrators reported three common goals for implementing RTI:

- Closing the student achievement gap
- Meeting AYP every year with every subgroup of students
- Addressing undesirable and oftentimes disruptive behavior

*We started [by] looking at the data of those students with behavior problems. We then started looking at our other data and realized that problem behaviors were correlated with reading gaps. We realized we needed to solve the reading problem.*



When determining your school or district's focus, consider a few of the benefits that other sites reported after implementing RTI. They cited outcomes that suggested a broader range of positive benefits than they had anticipated.

- Many schools reported that an unintended outcome was that students had fewer behavior problems when their academic needs were being met.
- One school mentioned that since progress monitoring was now the norm, students' instructional needs were never a question. The progress monitoring data provided a profile of students' proficiencies in the curriculum.
- Students had higher self-confidence in their academic abilities.
- After implementation, most school cultures focused on meeting the instructional needs of all students. Staff developed a stronger ownership in the progress of all students, not just students in their respective classes.
- RTI brought staff closer: "The school environment is less cliquy and confrontational," and "there is a positive vibe."

Agreeing on a focus can provide the impetus for implementing RTI. School leaders can work to clearly establish and communicate the goals and expected outcomes to create the foundation for innovative implementation. The following questions can help to guide the conversations around your RTI focus.

- What outcomes do you expect from RTI implementation?
- What goals do you want to achieve and how do you think RTI will help you achieve them?
- How will RTI help you to promote the learning goals of students?

## Culture

Before implementing the essential components of RTI, administrators should address the school's culture to support RTI among staff members. Shaping the school culture often begins with administrators setting clear expectations that RTI is pivotal and necessary for meeting the needs of the student body. Culture changes typically develop throughout implementation activities. For example, practitioners (administrators and staff) in several schools in this study reported that cultural changes began as staff worked together during team meetings and collaboration sessions and progressed during implementation activities. When NCRTI staff asked what had changed most about the culture, most staff members and administrators at the middle schools stated that they embraced a culture of "every student can learn" and "all staff members are responsible for all students." For many schools, this shift in roles and responsibilities was a significant and difficult challenge to current practices. Administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, counselors, school psychologists, reading specialists, and math specialists worked in conjunction to provide students with the academic or behavior supports that they needed.

*It [RTI] has helped every teacher become a better teacher, just knowing that there is a lot of support for this child, not just one teacher alone.*



*It seems “matter of fact” for us. The school culture lends itself to the ability to do a program like this. This is just the way we’re doing things. There was so little pushback from the staff. It could be the differentiated instruction, or the existing culture, the great staff, that they are committed and enthusiastic to make a difference for kids.*

A supportive school culture is extremely important to the successful implementation of RTI. Evaluate the current infrastructure in your school by identifying existing practices, routines, and policies, and examine the culture in your school. Be sensitive to prevailing attitudes, beliefs, values, norms of behavior, and expectations that embody the culture at your school.

- How will you cultivate an atmosphere that is conducive to the RTI priorities of the school?
- What is the current culture of your school?

## Leadership

### ***District and building leadership***

Strong district and building (principal) leadership was a common theme at schools visited that successfully implemented the essential components of RTI. The building administrators in this study were fully involved and invested in the entire RTI implementation process. When asked if RTI could succeed without strong participation from principals and other leaders, the universal response across middle school sites and staff was, “No. Leadership is crucial.”

*I always think that administrators’ [support and leadership] is going to be the first thing that needs to be in place. A strong administration that truly believes in the importance of that [RTI] no matter what the issue.*

Responses to interviews indicated that principal leadership facilitated understanding among staff in the following areas:

- RTI terms and procedures
- RTI structures
- Changes to school structure during and after implementation
- Expected benefits and outcomes from RTI
- Potential implementation challenges

*If leadership isn’t on board, the initiative won’t be sustainable.*

The principals who were interviewed for this study provided leadership for many activities, procedures, and practices, including the following:

- Making necessary changes to school schedules
- Establishing building priorities
- Designating time for teacher collaboration
- Addressing professional development needs and schedules
- Promoting staff understanding and knowledge-building activities
- Allocating resources
- Implementing fidelity checks
- Leading meetings about data-based decision making



Leading data-based decision making meetings is an example of a vital role of principal leadership. Often, school staff reported that one of the most challenging features of RTI was collecting and using student screening and progress monitoring data in a consistent, objective, clear, and rule-based manner. Thus, the building leadership plays an important role in emphasizing the use of student and classroom data.

The building principal must take the lead in implementation activities, but that lead must also be supported with a team of staff. Administrators facilitate decisions about resources, structure, staff roles, and implementation practices. Most school administrators emphasized the importance of strong support from the district.

- Do you have strong leadership that will support RTI implementation?
- What principal resources and supports promote RTI implementation?
- What district support and resources for RTI implementation?
- How will you emphasize the use of student and classroom data?

### **Staff leadership**

In some instances, staff initiated discussions about adopting an RTI framework in response to the school's challenges, but the school principal was the critical ingredient for adoption. Although principals endorsed and led implementation activities, they emphasized that most decisions were made in collaboration with other staff members. Such collaboration facilitates the decision making process and staff participation, buy-in, and understanding of RTI. Principals stated that systemic leadership was necessary for establishing RTI as their school's framework for

addressing the goals of the school (e.g., improved student achievement and behavior). In particular, principals wanted staff leaders to do the following:

- Embrace the new RTI framework
- Join the data-based decision making team
- Help establish professional development priorities, plans, and schedules
- Teach intervention classes
- Attend professional development and training sessions

*As an administrator, it is critical to have the teachers push [RTI] forward, while the administrator is in the background pushing.*

Teachers who will be your staff leaders should be recruited during the exploration process because they are central to building systemic leadership. These leaders are important in gaining broader staff buy-in, particularly during activities that develop the knowledge and skills of staff in the district and school. Identify which staff will excel in different roles, including those who are best suited to help set priorities, work toward consensus, mentor others, and lead the implementation process.

- Who are the staff leaders in your school?
- In which positions will your teachers excel?
- How will you empower staff to help lead implementation?

### **Leadership Team**

Many administrators in middle schools stated that one of the most important actions they took while exploring RTI was to assemble the RTI leadership team. Several principals in the study assembled their teams very early in the process; one stated



that building the leadership team was the first activity she did. When determining which staff members would best fit on the leadership team, principals in the study were careful to consider the strengths, backgrounds, and characteristics of staff. Schools varied in how they developed their team, selected members, composed the team, and set priorities and responsibilities. For example, selection decisions by administrators included the following considerations:

- “I [principal] selected them [leadership team members] based on knowledge, passion, leadership potential, and expertise.”
- Staff requested to participate on the leadership team.
- Some relied on research to help guide team membership.
- General education teachers took turns participating in meetings and decision making, thus, “they [were] always involved.”

Staff team membership was largely based on the needs and resources of each school. Universally, the principal was a key member, but the composition of team members varied and was determined by expertise, fit, and interest. Thus, consideration involved more than just titles. Teams needed members intimately knowledgeable about curriculum, instructional practices, assessment, scheduling, and evidence-based practice. Among the participating school sites, teams most commonly included the following members:

- Principal
- Guidance counselor
- School psychologist
- Special education teacher
- RTI specialists/interventionist
- District representative
- General education teacher

A leadership team should be established to facilitate decision making about implementation guidance, training needs, staff development, implementation of screening and progress monitoring assessments, and intervention implementation. The leadership team should establish a realistic schedule to discuss RTI planning, guidance, and implementation of next steps. Ultimately, the team must work for the betterment of the students, staff, and school.

- How will you choose staff leaders to help set priorities, establish consensus, offer incentives, and begin the implementation process?
- Which staff members are best suited for the leadership team?
- How will you identify the team roles to be filled and match those roles to your staff?
- How will you decide who will be on the team? Research? Volunteers?



## Planning

The purpose of the planning stage is to develop clear plans, processes, and procedures that lead to successful implementation, and to construct the infrastructure and structural supports that will support RTI implementation. By establishing the infrastructure and proper supports *prior to* implementation, sites are more likely to experience increased buy-in from practitioners and the community, more timely benefits for students, and more efficient use of resources. In the participating schools, leaders and the leadership team built consensus, formulated plans, created guidance, and prepared the school for implementation. Two considerations were central to these activities.

- **Staff knowledge building** ensures understanding and gains the support of your staff and includes actions such as:
  - Introducing RTI to staff
  - Developing a common language
  - Communicating programmatic elements and essential components
  - Providing ongoing professional development that focuses on the RTI essential components
- **Plan development** occurs when the leadership team formulates a plan to move forward with implementation activities.

### Staff knowledge building

To be successful, any organizational change must have broad staff support and understanding. Staff knowledge-building activities often lead to staff understanding, acceptance, and buy-in. Therefore, we emphasize staff knowledge building activities during the planning stage because up to this point in the implementation process, only staff participating in the leadership and planning team

activities (i.e., not all staff) had been involved in the early exploring stage. The rest of the staff is brought into the process as the school builds plans for such activities as RTI introduction, established communication channels, and professional development sessions. The administrators in this study established structures and resources that encouraged staff to fully participate in and understand the process and essential components of RTI.

Principals reported the importance of ensuring that all staff members were

- Knowledgeable
- Involved
- Empowered
- Well trained

Principals reported several key actions to facilitate staff understanding and buy-in of RTI:

- Develop an implementation plan with staff
- Clearly state purpose, goals, and expected outcomes from implementation
- Establish frequently used communication pathways
- Support teachers with ongoing professional development
- Listen to and address the concerns of staff
- Have a shared language of RTI concepts

*The buy-in is essential because once the teachers are on board and see the importance of the program, then it is easier to make the necessary tweaks and changes in the school to ensure success.*





## RTI introduction

Many principals focused on being transparent and clear when introducing activities to implement RTI—including implications, changes, language, goals, challenges, and benefits. One of the first steps of the implementation process is to introduce RTI to staff as soon as possible, including providing information about the purpose, goals, and expected outcomes.

*On the last teachers' day of the year in 2008, I [the principal] arranged for an all-staff information session about RTI. All the teachers were split by department and watched the presentation on closed-circuit television. They were told about RTI, what it is, and how it will work in [this middle school]. It allowed the teachers to all know what was about to happen the following year. Then, the staff immediately responsible for initial implementation spent the summer planning.*

Principals often included the following information in RTI introductions:

- Purpose and goals of implementation
- Potential and expected benefits for students
- Essential components of RTI and how they fit into the existing school structure
- Focused communication
- Transparency of information sharing
- Responses to staff concerns

*It was an evolutionary process. . . .  
Staff [was] involved from  
the beginning.*

*We started with the barriers that staff  
have problems with and then try to  
debunk those barriers.*

## Common language

Implementing RTI may introduce new terms and concepts that are unfamiliar to staff. The principals and staff reported that having the school establish a common language for RTI was a pivotal factor to facilitate staff buy-in. Structuring time that allows for regular, ongoing conversations among staff helps foster the use of a common language. In one school, the principal used a staff meeting to share the language of RTI and explain how the students would benefit from the approach.

Principals highlighted several actions that helped to facilitate a common language:

- Sharing focused and transparent information about
  - Team meetings, processes, and decisions
  - Outcomes of data-based decision making
  - Implementation steps
- Establishing regular teacher collaborations and communication time
- Building capacity in the leadership team
- Working with district staff to establish a framework across schools
- Providing hands-on, RTI-focused professional development and training
- Visiting other schools that had already implemented RTI



*We have a common knowledge base about RTI, special education, data collection, and how to use data.*

### **Communication**

Thoughtful, focused, and transparent communication channels are essential to facilitating staff involvement, trust, and a shared understanding throughout the entire RTI implementation process. Principals in this study emphasized that communicating the decisions of the leadership team to the rest of the staff built trust and understanding about the RTI processes.

Some schools used the following techniques to share team decisions:

- Communicate decisions and plans through weekly professional development sessions and/or staff meetings
- Send e-mails with meeting minutes/overviews to all staff
- Share intervention plans and progress monitoring data with all staff (data transparency)
- Invite all staff to participate in meetings on a rotating basis (e.g., during each meeting, ask two visiting staff members to fully participate in the decision making or planning processes)

### **Professional development**

Schools in this study emphasized professional development for teachers as a vital factor when building staff knowledge and competencies. Universally, schools used professional development to ensure that staff members who were responsible for beginning implementation had the appropriate skills and support to implement their areas of responsibility.

Furthermore, school administrators scheduled RTI-related in-services throughout the year to provide ongoing professional development. Continuous knowledge building facilitated teachers' understanding of the RTI process and prepared them to teach interventions with fidelity, monitor students' progress, and use data to make instructional decisions.

*[Professional development] takes a lot of resources and time, but it is necessary to keep all staff informed and up-to-date on the innovation, techniques, and curriculum.*

Think about how and when RTI will be introduced to staff members. A common language and transparent information and communication channels should be introduced as soon as possible. Furthermore, consider the structure and plan of providing ongoing professional development.

- How and when will you inform staff about RTI implementation?
- How will you ensure everyone has a common understanding and knowledge of the purpose and language of RTI?
- How will you communicate decisions that are made by the leadership team to staff?
- What is your professional development plan to build staff knowledge?
- What supports and resources do you have in place for staff?



## Plan Development

Middle school leadership teams in this study made decisions about infrastructure; scheduling; funding; resources; staffing; screening and progress monitoring assessments; and intervention programs, tools, and strategies.

The following actions help to facilitate such decisions:

- Establish a timeline to focus on RTI planning, guidance, and implementation steps
- Clearly define implementation goals for essential components, assessment tools, and intervention programs
- Plan and schedule professional development training for staff
- Identify staff members who are best suited to lead implementation activities for each essential component of implementation (e.g., screening, progress monitoring, and multi level instruction)
- Ensure that coaches are trained to assist teachers in implementing interventions and assessing fidelity

Several administrators said that visiting neighboring schools with an established RTI program was useful for learning about other schools' models, resources, methods, and tools. The administrators and staff emphasized that students' academic success was at stake and thus a crucial activity for each school was to carefully research and choose the tools—such as screening assessment(s), progress monitoring assessments, and tiered intervention methods—that were best suited for the needs of their students.

As you begin to develop your implementation plan, you will want to look at your current school structure and schedule; existing funding, resources, and interventions, as well as the skills and knowledge of your current staff. Your leadership team will recruit and support key staff members best suited to lead each essential component implementation.

- How will the leadership team clearly define procedures (establishing a list of roles, responsibilities, and expected task accomplishments) for staff members?
- How will the leadership team clearly define implementation goals (structure, assessment tools, intervention programs, training)?
- What is a realistic timeline or schedule for your implementation goals?
- Who will be in charge of key roles and responsibilities?
- How will the leadership team implement the RTI essential components?

For schools interested in researching currently available screening assessments, progress monitoring assessments, and tiered intervention programs, NCRTI has reviewed currently available tools for classification accuracy, reliability, and validity. Charts of these tools are accessible at <http://www.rti4success.org>.



## Implementing RTI

Some sites may choose to begin implementing RTI on a small scale. This might mean starting in one school, grade, content area, or classroom or focusing on one or two components of RTI. Regardless of where and how implementation begins, sites will need to make adjustments and adaptations based on their initial attempts to implement RTI. In making these changes, sites may need to revisit earlier stages, explore their needs, adopt new guidelines and procedures, or build infrastructure for new procedures.

When NCRTI staff asked schools for their recommendations to other schools that are just beginning implementation, the most common response was “start small.”

From conversations with middle school practitioners, two implementation methods emerged:

- **One essential component** – school staff members implement RTI by slowly incorporating one component at a time (e.g., progress monitoring).
- **One small group** – middle school staff implements all essential components with a small pilot group (one grade or one reading class) within the school.

### One Essential Component

Staff at some schools began their implementation process by implementing one essential component at a time. Most middle school staff members who chose this method began by first choosing and administering a universal screening assessment, allowing them to collect baseline data on their students. During the planning process, schools had identified a screening assessment that they thought fit their needs. School administrators emphasized

that screening was a logical starting point for their models because they were able to appropriately identify which and how many students needed interventions. The screening data provided a global snapshot of the current risk status of students and also became a baseline against which staff could compare subsequent progress.

Administrators offered the following recommendations:

- Create a timeline for the implementation of each RTI essential component
- Provide professional development to staff prior to implementation of each component
- Begin with a component that makes sense for your school, considering existing tools, structures, and resources

*Screening is probably the most critical piece, because if we don't screen, we have no way of knowing whether we have a class-wide problem or we have an individual student problem, and the interventions are so different, so that's really crucial for us.*

*As the complexity of reading increases as you go from one grade to another, you still can't forget about those universal screens that may scoop up some students you may have missed before because they were making it with their understanding at one level, but the bar got raised and now they're falling behind.*



When school administrators began implementing screening measures, they had already established plans and timelines to implement the other essential components. After starting with screening, administrators implemented the other essential components (not always in this order):

- Data-based decision making. For example, the leadership team made instructional decisions based initially on screening data, and later incorporated progress monitoring data to drive instructional decision making.
- Multi-level interventions based on screening data. For example, if screening for reading, schools implemented reading interventions for primary-, secondary-, and tertiary-level classes.
- Progress monitoring schedules for each level of intervention.

The middle school administrators who chose to implement one component at a time ensured that teachers were well trained in that essential component prior to its implementation. Having staff well versed in the component helps schools to move fluidly through the implementation process. For example, once multi-level instructional interventions were in place, schools quickly began progress monitoring to evaluate student responsiveness to ensure students were benefiting from the interventions. With progress monitoring information, they had data on which to evaluate instructional decisions.

*If I had to do something differently, I would intentionally develop the progress- monitoring piece earlier. I think that's the one piece that if I had to go back and do it over, I would have really worked hard to get that Tier 2 and Tier 3 progress monitoring in place sooner.*

With implementation plans as a blueprint, school administrators methodically built their RTI models by implementing one essential component at a time.

## One Small Group

When some schools implemented RTI, they opted to “start small” by focusing on a full-model pilot with a small group of students, thus creating a model for later school-wide implementation. For instance, schools started by implementing all essential components (screening, data-based decisionmaking, multilevel instruction, and progress monitoring) with one small class of students. This approach is different from implementing only one essential component throughout the school.

*Start with a small group of teachers to establish the system, as well as gain the buy-in from the rest of the staff. When the rest of the staff can hear the stories of success and see the improved data of the students receiving interventions, they are more likely to be on board.*

Administrators made the following suggestions:

- Collect data from the pilot group
- Investigate which components and their associated features worked well
- Identify which components and their associated features needed to be refined
- Scale up to other classes, grades, and content areas



For example, the leadership team identified (usually with state assessment data) a group of students struggling in reading. The students completed a screening assessment to determine the best instructional interventions for the group. The staff then implemented an intervention program and monitored the progress of the students. Because the group of students was initially small, staff more easily implemented all RTI components. Staff members involved in the initial innovation were able to inform and train fellow staff when the school was ready to scale up implementation. In one school, the early adopters became liaisons and coaches for rest of the school staff.

*Now there are liaisons with a literacy coach, data person, and district person who can give feedback and support [to the rest of the staff].*

One school in particular decided to begin with the neediest reading students. When data and student outcomes indicated that the reading intervention was effective, the school implemented math interventions the following year.

*We started small and started piloting it. Last year, it was rolled out to a larger group. The benefit was that we learned from the small pilot first.*

Starting with a small pilot group, while also placing school-wide emphasis on solid core instruction, can ease the transition to a school-wide RTI approach. The emphasis on ensuring that instruction in the core curriculum is effective for the majority of students is very important to the broad implementation of RTI. If the core curriculum is not effective for the majority of learners (e.g., 80% of the students), then interventions in higher preventative levels are less likely to be effective. Furthermore, if less than 80% of the students are benefiting from the core curriculum, that screening data should indicate a need for a broad programmatic evaluation.

*Start small. We are successful; we've started small. Do not look too big too quickly. Look at the Tier 1 curriculum first and ask, 'Is that [Tier 1 curriculum] good?'*

Administrators frequently stated that starting small and seeing some success led to increased understanding, knowledge, and enthusiasm among educators and students, which facilitated the implementation of RTI.



All schools stated that starting small is the most important consideration when implementing RTI. Schools should implement the method that the leadership team chose during the planning phase—either a single essential component or all of the essential components with a small group of students. One drawback is that starting small might result in reduced buy-in or participation from staff. Be sensitive that starting small requires keeping other staff involved, even if they are not directly engaged in implementation activities. Staff can be represented on the leadership, data, or professional development planning teams; as mentors; or as evaluators of implementation fidelity. One of the worst scenarios would be RTI becoming an activity that creates “we” (the implementers) and “they” (the other staff) camps.

### ***One essential component***

If you choose to begin implementing one essential component, choose the component that best fits your school’s existing knowledge, resources, structure, and needs.

- Which essential component will you implement first?
- How you will sequence and introduce the other essential components?

- Who will lead the implementation of each essential component?
- How will you evaluate whether each component is being implemented as intended?
- How will you determine whether implementation is effective?

### ***One small group***

Starting small has many advantages, one of which is that those involved in the initial implementation will be knowledgeable and able to assist others when RTI is scaled up.

- Does starting with a full-model pilot fit your needs?
- With which small group of students will you start?
- What is the implementation plan for the pilot group?
- Who will lead the pilot implementation activities?
- How will you evaluate whether the pilot group is effective?
- What is your timeline for scaling up RTI to the rest of the school?



## Conclusions

The research literature is clear that successful implementation of such frameworks as RTI follows sequential stages (e.g., Fixsen et al., 2005; Prestine & Bowen, 1993). We hope that the guiding questions, guidelines, and considerations described in this information brief help middle school practitioners progress logically through the stages of RTI implementation.

Implementation of any school-wide framework poses challenges because it requires staff to make changes to the school organizational structure and practices, as well as changes to staff roles and responsibilities. Several broad themes of implementation activities emerged in our work with the middle schools:

- Principals need to serve as active leaders to shape the implementation process; define staff roles; identify resources; research effective and promising practices and tools; develop plans; and lead implementation activities.
- Throughout all of these activities, keeping staff informed and empowered, while developing their understanding of RTI, is vital to rigorous and successful implementation with high fidelity.
- School staff needs to identify and look for markers of observable changes to determine whether the activities, structures, processes, and essential components are providing positive outcomes.

The participating middle schools frequently reported that having data-based decision making structures allowed staff to identify students' learning needs, which resulted in higher student learning gains, improved self-esteem, and intrinsic motivation. One teacher had a piece of invaluable advice: "Be dedicated to collecting the data in a consistent manner and make it scientific." This suggestion is central to the core of any RTI framework. Teachers experienced positive outcomes in their classrooms and they could more easily target instruction to the needs of each student. One teacher commented, "It makes me more aware of what I'm doing," and another learned, "There is more that I can do in my classroom." RTI provided middle school teachers with tools, resources, and supports to manipulate and refine their teaching styles and with teaching methods based on how well their students were learning.





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## Appendix

### Our Approach

Staff from the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) used a mixed-method evaluation model to collect descriptive data from middle schools that were implementing Response to Intervention (RTI). Staff conducted telephone interviews with school administrators, held onsite administrative and staff discussion groups, observed multi-level prevention classes, and observed meetings with district and middle school personnel about the conceptualization, implementation, essential components, outcomes, and current status of their RTI practices.

Staff from NCRTI used a snowball sampling method from such venues as school Web sites, RTI summits, conference presentations, self-nomination, peer nomination, and publications to initially identify potential middle school sites that exhibited some level of RTI planning and implementation. We contacted 82 schools and asked them to participate in this project. Forty-two agreed to participate and also met our initial selection criteria of implementing the four essential components of RTI. We conducted in-depth, 2-hour phone interviews with staff from these 42 schools.

The next stage of data collection involved telephone-based data-collection surveys. At minimum, we sought to include schools with the following criteria (based on Shinn, 2008):

- One screening assessment at least one time per year in one content area
- Progress monitoring at least one time per month for secondary level interventions
- Progress monitoring at least two times per month for tertiary level interventions
- At least three levels (or tiers) of prevention
- A predetermined data-based decision making process

We invited 20 schools that met all the above selection criteria to participate in the follow up phone survey. Of the 20 invited, 17 schools participated in the follow up data collection phone survey that included questions to obtain information about the following areas:

- Data collection activities
- School wide screening scores
- Progress monitoring data collection
- Student movement in the multi-level prevention system
- Numbers of students at each instructional level
- Fidelity of implementation practices
- Professional development practices

When schools demonstrated positive student outcomes based on their data, we asked to visit to observe RTI practices and identify implementation characteristics that were common among the middle schools. We visited 12 middle schools. Most of these 12 schools served sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The



schools were rural, suburban, and urban, located in all regions of the United States; Northeast, South, Midwest, Southwest, and West. The schools' populations ranged from a low of 172 to a high of 1436 students, with the median population at 658 students. The schools were diverse in regard to economically disadvantaged students. Measured by percentage of reported free and reduced lunch, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students ranged from a low of 7.9 percent to a high of 81.1 percent of the school population. The schools' ethnic diversity also varied. The non-white population ranged from a low of 5.1 percent to a high of 82.6 percent of the schools' populations. The average non-white population was 30 percent.

The onsite visits included four components:

- Three discussion groups with school faculty about implementation processes, staff roles, benefits for students and staff, challenges, and next steps
- An interview with the principal about implementation activities, professional development, the leadership team, scheduling, structures, staffing, resources, and the role of parents
- Observations of data team meetings to gather information about data-based decision making, discussion structure, agenda, staff involvement, frequency, and length
- Observations of classes at each intervention level, focusing on class structure, length, numbers of students, instructional program/strategy, adherence, exposure, quality of delivery, program differentiation, and student engagement



## About the National Center on Response to Intervention

Through funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, American Institutes for Research and researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas have established the National Center on Response to Intervention. The Center provides technical assistance to states and districts and builds the capacity of states to assist districts in implementing proven response to intervention frameworks.



**National Center on Response to Intervention**  
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