CHAPTER 2

How to Use the Tiered Framework

THE TIERED FRAMEWORK

Everyone doing RTI talks about "tiers" of instruction. When we describe Tiers 1, 2, and 3, we are referring to different types of instruction that is used with students. Tiers are one way that instruction can be described to differentiate among levels of intensity. Many people using RTI use three tiers, but some districts use four. For example the state of Georgia uses a four-tiered model, while Texas uses a three-tiered model. It does not really matter how many tiers there are; what matters is how instruction differs between them. This chapter talks about different types of instruction for each level, or tier, of RTI.

Intervention versus Instruction: What's the Difference?

We are often asked, "What's the difference between intervention and instruction?" The truth is these words can be used to mean the same thing, but (just to make things complicated) not everyone uses them that way. *Intervention* is a general word that means "to come between." This term is used by doctors, teachers, psychologists, and others to describe any circumstance that is put into place to change a situation. By intervening, it is hoped that what comes after the intervention will be different from what came before. Instruction is a more precise term that is really a type of intervention. The word *instruction* means to direct or teach. We can use instruction as a type of intervention to help students. Instruction is the primary type of intervention used in schools, which is probably why so many people use the terms interchangeably.

To help make things clearer, in this book we use the word *instruction* when we are talking about teaching used with *all* students, and we use the word *intervention* when we talk about teaching used with just *a few students* at a time. There are some other words that are sometimes confused when people talk about RTI. We define those before we go on to explain how the different tiers work.

Accommodation versus Intervention

Many teachers are familiar with the term *accommodation*, a word that is often used to describe ways of helping students who are struggling with an assignment. The word *accommodate* means "to make fit." Another word that is often used to mean the same thing as accommodate is *adaptation*. These words are often used to describe changes in teaching for students with disabilities. Both accommodation and adaptation are methods of including students in classroom activities. For example for a student in a wheelchair, it would be important to ensure that the door to the room was adapted to fit the wheelchair. If there were steps into the room, it would be important to adapt them so the student could enter. Such accommodations are changes in the environment designed to allow one or more individuals to participate. Accommodations make it possible for students with disabilities to participate in school activities. Interventions are different.

Intervention ("to come between") is very different from *accommodation* ("to make fit"). Intervention includes anything that is designed to change the setting or individual in specific ways. Doctors often use medication for intervention. They know that the presence or absence of a specific substance like aspirin or Tylenol will affect body temperature. For this reason, they use such medicines to intervene with a fever and change the body temperature. Similarly, teachers can intervene to change a student's learning outcomes. If a student has very poor reading skills, specific reading instruction can be used as an intervention to change the student's reading skills. In this case, instruction is a type of intervention for a student who needs it.

Differentiated Instruction

Another term that is often brought up when talking about RTI is differentiated instruction. We have already defined instruction. The word *differentiate* means "to make distinct or different." *Differentiated instruction* is teaching that is different from what was used before or what is used for other students. Differentiated instruction is really another way of saying instruction as intervention and is what RTI is all about. It means using the kind of instruction that a student needs, even if it is different from what other students need. Basically, the different tiers of RTI provide differentiated instruction to students according to what they need. Differentiated instruction is not separate from RTI, but is how RTI happens. Now that we have defined these words, let's look at how differentiated instruction can be used as intervention.

WHAT ARE THE TIERS?

As mentioned earlier, there are different ways of describing RTI tiers. Table 2.1 summarizes a number of the terms that have been used to define what happens at each tier. At the end of the day, it does not matter what you call the type of instruction at each tier. What matters is that it's different from what came before and it is based on what the student needs. For example, the three tiers can be referred to as core, supplemental, and

TABLE 2.1. Terms Used to Describe Multiple Tiers of Intervention

Tier	Terms		
1	Primary	Universal	Core
2	Secondary	Strategic	Supplemental
3	Tertiary	Intensive	Intensive

intensive instruction that students receive. Alternatively they can be known as primary, secondary, and tertiary, or as universal, strategic, and intensive. All of these are terms that help *differentiate* how instruction is different at each tier. It is important to know that there are aspects of the instruction at each tier that are similar to what's happening at other tiers. Each level is similar in some ways and different in others. These distinctions are described and instructional examples are provided for each tier of support.

Changing Tiers = Changing Intensity

The main way that instruction differs across the tiers is the intensity. *Intensity* means "degree of strength." A less intensive intervention is not as "strong" as a more intensive one. The strength, or intensity, of instruction is the main way we can provide intervention for students. When we think about increasing the intensity of instruction (for low- or high-performing students), we consider the following main characteristics: grouping, time, assessment, and format. Grouping refers to how students are grouped for instruction. Time refers to how long instruction will occur each day. Assessment refers to how often student progress is measured. Format refers to how skills are taught that are matched to student needs. Table 2.2 shows what instructional features are used at each tier.

Each of these characteristics is distinct. While important on their own, they are more powerful when used together in the right amounts. Think of baking, for example. Unlike some other types of cooking, where there is freedom for tasteful expression, baking requires specific amounts of ingredients to produce the right result. Too much flour and the batter is not moist enough. Too little baking powder and the cake does not rise. It is important to follow the recipe in order to learn the right amounts and combine the ingredients together so we can hope for a good result.

The same is true for increasing the intensity of instruction for students. A teacher can put her students in small groups according to need, but if she doesn't have enough time, she won't be able to get them to where they need to be. Another teacher might target the skills her students need to learn, but if she doesn't monitor their progress, it will be difficult to tell accurately who is improving. To increase intensity, it is important to consider the right mix of ingredients to make it work for the students. With the right balance, teachers can propel kids to make great gains in performance and end up with the best results. We want you to review your school year in June, look back on the year, and realize how much you did for your students.

TABLE 2.2. Characteristics of the Tiers in Reading

	Instructional features				
Tier	Who?	Grouping	Time	Assessment	Format
1	All students	Whole group and small group	90 minutes per day	Monitoring quarterly or three times per year	Derived from the core curriculum and adapted to meet student needs and address standards and benchmarks
2	Below grade level	Small-group instruction (three to six students)	30 minutes per day plus core group instruction, 2–3 days a week; 120 minutes total, 2–3 days a week	Progress monitoring once per week or twice per month	Targeted toward skill deficits and matched to student area of need
3	Severely below grade level	Small-group instruction (two to three students)	30 minutes per day plus core group instruction, 5 days a week; 120 minutes total, 5 days a week	Progress monitoring once per week	Intensive, targeted instruction with ample opportunities to respond and multiple opportunities for practice

The Triangle

Most people doing RTI use a triangle to represent what RTI is all about. Since one of us had previously published a triangle graphic, we have reproduced it here to show all the parts of RTI in one picture. Figure 2.1 shows all the steps of RTI. We use a triangle in RTI graphics to portray how each tier is used by successively smaller groups of students. The base of the triangle can be thought of as the front door of a school. It is the point of entry for all students. When a student comes to school, instruction starts with the core curriculum, which is Tier 1. This part of the triangle is used for Tier 1 because it is the largest, which reflects how it is something applied with *all* students. About 80% of the students in a school should be successful with Tier 1 alone. The rest of the triangle shows the supports available for the other 20% of students. Tier 2, portrayed in the middle of the triangle, includes additional instruction for those students who have not yet succeeded with Tier 1 alone. About 95% of your students should succeed with Tier 1 plus Tier 2.

There are some students who will not be successful even with Tier 1 plus Tier 2 instruction, however. For these students, Tier 3 is offered. Tier 3 makes up the smallest part of the triangle because it represents only about 5% of your students. If a student is still struggling after getting Tier 1 plus Tier 2, he or she is having a lot of trouble in school. Although specific procedures must be developed in each district, once a student moves from Tier 2 to Tier 3, it can mean that the student may need special education. Tier 3 usually includes more intensive intervention for the student as well as a comprehensive evaluation to see whether the student needs special education. But the good news is that Tier 3 will only be needed by about 5% of your students. One of the main features of Tier 3 is diagnostic teaching.

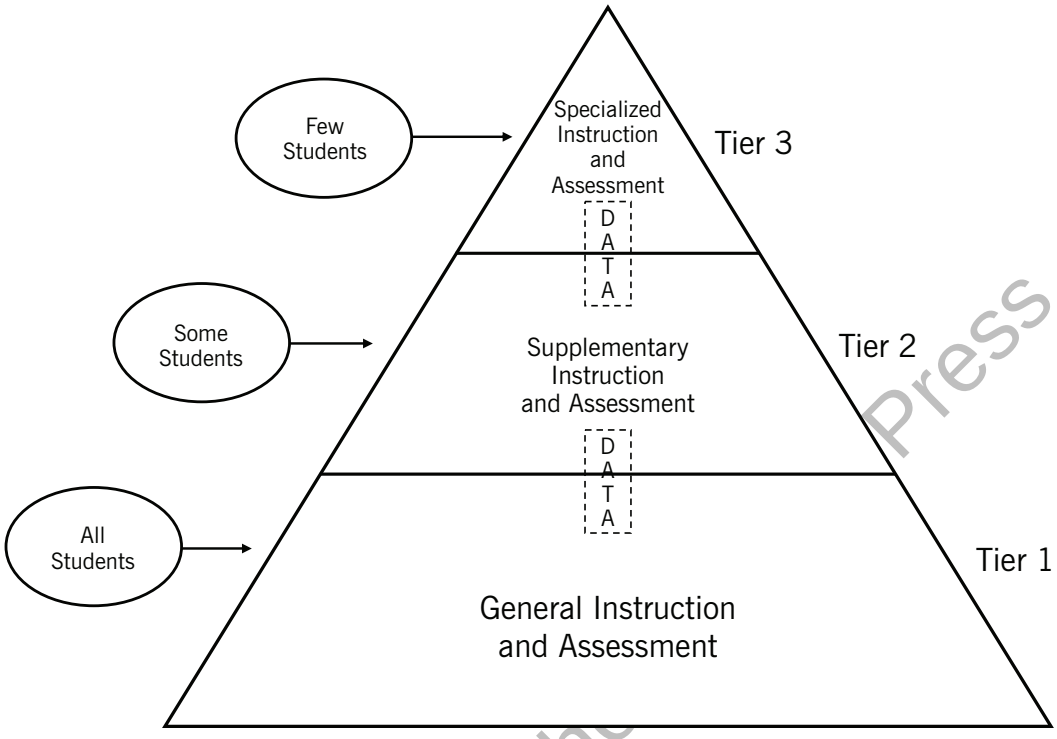

FIGURE 2.1. The three-tiered RTI model. From Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005). Copyright 2005 by The Guilford Press. Reprinted by permission.

Diagnostic Teaching

Diagnostic teaching is a method of using data from teaching sessions to help identify a student's learning needs. In many ways, all of RTI uses aspects of diagnostic teaching, which includes teaching specific skills to students and monitoring their learning to see whether they "got" it. If the student learns what's taught, more difficult new material is taught. If the student does not "get" it, then the skills need to be retaught.

In RTI, teaching on the basis of what students have or have not learned before is used all the time. The difference between doing this across the three tiers is the intensity of instruction. Some students are not able to succeed with Tier 1 plus Tier 2 instruction, and for them Tier 3 becomes important. For such students, more intensive, specific, diagnostic teaching is helpful because it allows the teachers to learn exactly where learning is breaking down. In addition, diagnostic teaching can show what instructional methods do work for a student.

Diagnostic teaching is more intensive and time-consuming than general instruction, and for this reason it makes sense to use it only when needed. The data gained from diagnostic teaching can be used as part of the comprehensive evaluation. For example diagnostic teaching methods could be used with one or two students at a time to figure out why they have not mastered specific math skills. Such teaching could include asking the student to complete a page of math facts while a teacher or specialist watches. Once the student has completed the page, the teacher can correct the answers and then

review them with the student individually. At this point the teacher would point out and describe specific errors.

The next phase of the teaching would be to use direct instruction to teach the student the skill(s) matched to the prior errors; then the student would be tested again to see whether the instruction worked. For students who make gains from the teaching sessions, there would be evidence that very structured instruction is effective for the student. For students who don't make gains from such sessions, there is evidence that even highly prescriptive teaching is not effective. For students who still struggle after Tier 3 instruction, it may be necessary to conduct additional assessments to see whether there are generalized problems with skills such as memory that affect all learning activities.

You probably noticed that there is a box with the word *data* between each of the tiers. The box has a slotted line around it. That box goes across the tiers with the slotted line to remind us that decisions about which tier a student needs are only made according to data. Put another way, data are the pathway by which instructional decisions are made. For example, students who need Tier 2 instruction for a while will eventually not need it anymore, and when the data show this, they will go through the door back to Tier 1. The goal is to find the intervention that helps each student succeed while providing core instruction for all (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Simmons, 2004).

Consider the instructional features shown in Table 2.2. Think about the following two questions:

1. What steps seem easy?
2. What steps seem difficult?

For the steps that seem difficult, what are the reasons for the difficulty? Could you brainstorm ideas to address the potential barriers? We emphasize focusing on the "alterable variables" of instruction like time, grouping, and assessment because they are characteristics that we can control. Unlike a student's background, socioeconomic status, or innate abilities that we cannot change, we can change the factors that influence instruction in the classroom.

Tier 1 Interventions

At Tier 1, or the core curriculum, all students are involved. Notice the word *all*. This means everybody, everyone, the whole class. With the exception of students with severe disabilities, all of your students should receive core instruction. There may even be some students with severe disabilities who benefit at Tier 1. That is a decision for the individualized education plan (IEP) team that works with such students. The question about who participates in the core instruction comes into play when students who receive special education services are pulled out of core reading instruction to receive special education reading instruction instead. Special education reading instruction is important; it is necessary to teach students with reading difficulties using a skills-based format, focusing on the critical skills they need. It is targeted, focused, and essential for growth. The rule for deciding whether a student can be "pulled" from core instruction is if it's written into an

IEP. State and federal rules require that *all* students participate in the general education core instruction *unless* not doing so is explicitly written into the student's IEP. So if you have any students whose IEPs say that they will be pulled from core for instruction in any subject, those are the only ones who should not be in the room for core instruction; every other student should participate during core (Tier 1) instruction time.

Students who require Tier 2 interventions, or supplemental support, need solid core instruction as the foundation for the additional instruction provided in Tiers 2 and 3. This core forms the base of their learning. It allows students to learn from their peers, including high and low performers. The core helps the teacher to see how everyone is doing and note what skills might need to be emphasized more. It is the crux of their instruction, and everyone should have the opportunity to learn from it. For these reasons, it is critical to create a schedule that allows all students to participate in core instruction and has room for the supplementary help provided in Tiers 2 and 3. If the scheduling question is really bugging you, jump ahead to Chapter 12 and read about daily schedules that fit in all tiers of intervention.

Grouping

Grouping at Tier 1 can take many forms. While the core implies all students, it does not mean that instruction is provided to all students in a large-group setting. Core is something everyone receives, but it does not have to only occur with whole-group instruction. Grouping at Tier 1 is a combination of whole-class and small-group instruction.

Whole-group instruction occurs daily and is part of the routine schedule. It is designated by the teacher and used to communicate concepts. Small-group instruction also occurs daily and provides students more opportunities to work on the skills they need. In these small groups, students work closely with the teacher, receiving the instruction that matches their needs. These small groups are flexible in that they change according to how students perform. Students are not locked in, as they were in ability groups of the past. Students are grouped according to need and reorganized based on data showing acquisition of skills and rates of growth.

Time

The time factor is huge for teachers. It is the instructional characteristic that can make such a huge difference, if there is enough of it. And of course, it's the hardest to find. Research in the area of beginning reading indicates that students need at least 90 minutes of daily instruction at Tier 1 (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2008). With this time, students have the opportunity to learn in whole and small groups and use time to practice their newly learned skills.

That's an hour and a half—a lot of time in a day already packed with activities. But it is what is needed. The more time devoted to instruction, the more progress students will make. Many districts feel the pinch when they learn this information, and they slowly try to take it in as they consider their school day. It's true, there's not enough time for everything. It is here that you consider your mission statement, your values, and your goals as a

district. What are the priorities? What do you keep? What do you consider minimizing? How do you work in 90 minutes of reading instruction? Every district does it differently, but they make it happen. It takes time, creativity, conversations, and approval, but it is doable and it is necessary to get our students to where they need to be. For examples of daily classroom schedules that include 90 minutes of daily reading instruction, see Chapter 12 on schedules.

Assessment

Assessment at Tier 1 occurs either quarterly or three times a year. All students will be assessed during these times to ensure that they are making progress and acquiring new concepts and skills. If your core curriculum is meeting the needs of most of your students, then they will only need to be assessed a few times a year. As a teacher you are always doing quick informal assessments, though. You're always collecting information, whether it's notes, portfolio products, test results, or quizzes that you give as part of your core instruction. Formal assessments can be saved for the end of the quarter, when everybody is assessed with the same measure to compare students again and note rates of growth. The assessments conducted at Tier 1 are often known as universal benchmark screening. More information about how to do universal screening can be found in the book *Response to Intervention: Principles and Strategies for Effective Practice* (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005).

Instructional Format

There are many curricula from which districts can choose. Refer to Chapter 3 to review the considerations for adopting a new core curriculum. It is important to consider whether the curriculum is research based and whether it will match the needs of your student population. It is also important to review the program's ideas for differentiation and determine whether there is enough time to teach the lessons adequately. Finally, it is crucial to consider the assessments within the curriculum and whether they provide useful information to teachers when administered to students. Even if a district reviews each of these components and considers the implications, there is a dilemma that still may be faced. Consider the following school.

Reconciling "Each" with "All"

There is a common struggle among teachers: Do I address all of the students' needs or try to get through all of the lessons? Covering all of the content in each lesson is a task in itself, let alone trying to balance individual student needs as well. This was the case at Willow Elementary School among the second-grade teachers. A new core curriculum was purchased the previous spring, and the teachers were working together to learn the materials and prioritize the skills. Each lesson was filled with a lot of content, activities, and ideas for generalization. Although the teachers appreciated the options, they were also overwhelmed with prioritizing what to definitively teach and what to use if time allowed. If

they weren't going to teach the whole lesson, what should they leave out? What should they emphasize? How should they make these decisions and feel confident that they are heading in the right direction? Clarity was reached on a professional development day when they were given time to work as a team. During this time, the teachers used the district standardized benchmark to guide them in knowing what to include and what to use as needed. With the help of their educational consultant, Amy, they were able to determine what skills should be emphasized when, and identify the strategies in the book that would work best for each skill. The teachers used their student screening data to determine what students needed support and what skills should be explicitly taught. Using that information, they were able to supplement the core with additional activities to support those students in need.

Mrs. Lyons and Mr. Dell were pleased to know that giving the weekly word test was beneficial for some students, but not mandatory for all. This provided everyone more time to work on fluency and comprehension with their students. Ms. Jackson and Mrs. Ray were happy with the decision to make paired partner reading optional, because they were already doing it as part of their introduction activities every day. They decided it was useful for students in need of additional fluency practice, but not all students would benefit from it. Some students were performing too well to simply focus on fluency. Others were still working on phonics and needed lower-level stories to read with a partner. The second-grade teachers reached consensus on both decisions and agreed to implement the ideas as a grade level. Finally, they worked with the third-grade teachers to ensure that they were covering all of the necessary skills before students moved on to the next grade.

Communicating about the key concepts and ensuring that the main components were covered helped the teachers to know that they were teaching what they were supposed to, even if they weren't covering all of the material in each lesson. This discussion helped them to see that while the curriculum should be followed, it also needs to be differentiated to meet student needs in the most effective and efficient ways. It was the beginning of a series of conversations they had throughout the year. Implementing and evaluating the curriculum was an ongoing process, but one that became easier as they learned more about their students and how to prioritize their needs.

You may be looking at your lessons now, wondering, "How do I get it all in?" It is likely that you can't, given the time in each day. Even with 90 minutes of reading instruction, it would be difficult to get it all in, so you don't. You realize as a teacher that your instruction is derived from the district's standards and benchmarks and that the curriculum is a tool to get you there. You realize that getting everything in is not the point. You start to see that when you focus on the standards and benchmarks, you have a destination for your students.

The core curriculum, your Tier 1 instruction, is not the end. It is the means to the end. It is a tool, a set of materials, a package of concepts and skills that you use to help your students meet the standards and benchmarks of your subject and your grade level. With that realization comes freedom—not necessarily freedom to do whatever you want, but freedom to choose the activities and techniques that address what you need to work on, to select the tasks that address the benchmarks, and to pick the skills that your students need to improve. Think of the standards and benchmarks as your destination, and the curriculum as the map that will get you there. You do not have to do it all. Working as

a grade-level team with school support staff like an educational consultant or the reading specialist can foster good conversations and make these decisions easier. It is helpful to work together and decide what is most important for your students, given their skills and specific needs.

Tier 2 Interventions

At Tier 2, students have been identified as being in need of additional instruction. They require a combination of supports to help them make progress and succeed. Who are these students? These are the ones who have been identified as performing below where they need to be. They are not severely different from their peers, but they are performing below the norm. These are the students who may just need a little "bump" to get them going, or they may need structured support over time to help them catch up to their peers. They fall somewhere in the middle, between students who are on track and students who are significantly at risk and at least two grade levels below their peers.

Grouping

To provide the supplemental support, students can be placed in groups of three to six students. This size is beneficial for two reasons. First, it allows each student to receive additional individual time with the teacher. Each student receives more attention than he or she would in the larger setting. Second, it allows the students to learn from one another. Being in a small group, they get to hear other students' responses, work together, and practice new skills as a team, rather than on their own.

You may be thinking, "It would be nice if I only had three to six students in my class who needed extra support." And this often can happen. Each class is unique, with their own strengths and areas to improve. You may have seven to ten students who need additional support, or even more. In this situation, it is important to ask the question, "How would my time be spent most efficiently?"

Let's say you are faced with a class in which 10 students are below grade level and in need of supplemental support. Many teachers operating in an RTI model faced with this situation will decide to set up two supplemental groups. Then there are five students per group, and they can be divided by skill level. The teacher will work with one group and his associate will work with the other. On the surface, this is a fine solution. Students are receiving the support they need, and the groups are small enough to teach well. But is this the best way to help 10 students in need?

Thinking back to the 80–15–5 rule, we know that if 80% of the students in our class struggle with the core instruction, then something needs to change within the core. If you have a class of 25 students, and 10 of them need additional instruction, what does that tell you about your core? Sixty percent of your students are successful with the core, while 40% are not. We're hoping for 80% who are successful and 20% who need more support. There are more students who need support within the core, so changing the core instruction would be the most efficient way to meet all of the students' needs.

Instead of setting up two additional groups, teach the skills to the whole class, because a large enough percentage of students need this support. You will reach more

students by teaching everyone the necessary skills and you will be more efficient with your time. Adding to the core by reteaching and practicing concepts allows you to teach what is missing to the students who need it. But when more than 20% of students in a class need such instruction, teaching it to everyone is the most efficient solution in situations when progress is not sufficient with the core alone.

Time

The time necessary to help students make progress at the supplemental level is an additional 30 minutes, two to three times a week. This provides students anywhere from 60 to 90 additional minutes of instruction, which they receive along with their regular core instruction. This amount of time is effective for helping students make the jump and catch up to their peers. Alternatively, the time could be organized so that students get 10 to 15 minutes of extra instruction five days a week. The main thing is that the students receive *extra* instruction in addition to the core program.

It may seem like a lot, and it is. It's supposed to be. This is what students need to accelerate their growth. They won't be able to improve their skills without additional time. Think of a situation where you learned something new—in small doses, it is difficult to learn a new skill because there is limited time to practice. The same is true for students learning to read, do math, write, or improve their behavior. They need ample opportunities to learn so they can practice, practice, practice, and begin to generalize their new set of skills.

Assessment

Students participating in Tier 2 should be assessed once a week or once every other week. This provides you with data frequently, so you can make decisions about what is working and what needs to be improved. At first, it sounds like a lot of assessment. By using brief progress monitoring measures, though, the testing is quick and relatively easy over time. With many measures requiring 3 minutes or less, you get a good bang for your buck. For more information on Tier 2 assessment see Chapter 4, on progress monitoring.

Instructional Format

Instruction at Tier 2 comprises a variety of research-based interventions that are targeted in that they are skill specific and matched to student need. There are many available interventions to choose from, and some are highlighted in the following intervention chapters. One of the most important steps in implementing an intervention is that it is matched to student need. Without a match, the student will be practicing skills that are good, but not directly related to what they *need* to make progress. Spending 30 minutes two to three times a week working on skills that are not necessary becomes a waste of time for you and an unfair waste of time for the student. The format for Tier 2 lessons depends on the skills the student needs to learn. Generally, Tier 2 lessons will focus on a specific skill area such as blending or fluency. By focusing the lesson on just the area in which the student needs help, the value of the lesson time is maximized.

Tier 3 Interventions

At Tier 3, students are severely below grade level. They have been identified as having significant needs and require ample additional instruction to help them succeed. These are students who may be receiving Title 1 services or be placed in special education. They typically see a reading specialist or special education teacher in a separate room, where they go to receive support.

It is important to note here that because these students need so much instruction, they should be receiving it with intensity, meaning that they receive very directed instruction for a significant period each day. In some schools, these students have traditionally been pulled from their core instruction in reading, for example, to receive their reading instruction in the special education room. This instruction may occur for 45 to 60 minutes, which is all the student will receive per day. Sadly, this is the opposite of what these students need. Not only do they receive less time than they need, but they miss out on their core instruction with peers, losing the opportunity to learn from them and be exposed to grade-level content.

In school districts using a collaborative model with special education, students may be exposed to the core instruction and receive additional help as needed. They still need to meet the time requirements, though. In school districts using a pull-out model for special education services, these students are unlikely to receive the time that they need to be successful. They are separated from their peers, receive different instruction, and come back to the classroom having missed what other students in their class learned. Regardless of the model your district operates under, it is important to note that these students should be exposed to as much instruction in their area of need as possible. With such a gap to close, they need ample opportunities to practice, so they can begin to learn new skills and make them part of their repertoire. It's important to note that students with severe gaps in learning may or may not have an IEP. This points out that, at the end of the day, it's the instruction that matters. For this reason, some Tier 3 interventions include both general and special education students.

Grouping

Students at Tier 3 still benefit from working in a group and learning from their peers. They do require intense attention as well. Thus, groups of two to three students work well at this level. The teacher can devote time to each student individually as well as work easily with the whole group on specific skills. Keeping the group small is important, because of the intensity of their needs.

Time

Similar to the Tier 2 group, it is recommended that Tier 3 students receive 30 minutes of additional instruction. The difference is that instead of receiving extra instruction two to three times a week, they receive 30 minutes additional every day. This results in 120 minutes of instruction in the area of need per day.

"One hundred twenty minutes of instruction!" you may be saying. With limited time already, how are we supposed to make this work? There is no magic answer. If there is not enough time, then the schedule must be changed. Priorities need to be determined and used to analyze the schedule and make changes as needed. Administrative support is crucial. There must be an understanding that this is necessary to get students where they need to be. Without this time, it will be difficult to help students make the progress they need.

Assessment

Progress monitoring must occur once per week at Tier 3. These students have such gains to make that weekly data are important for determining progress. Without this information, it is hard to determine what is going well and what needs to be fixed. The weekly data help you as a teacher to decide whether your intervention is working. If it isn't, something needs to be changed. If the student is getting help from several people including yourself, the data play a key role in showing whether your coordinated efforts are working.

Instructional Format

Instruction at Tier 3 is composed of a variety of research-based interventions that are intensive, specific, and address student skill deficits. As at Tier 2, there are many available interventions to choose from. Some can be done easily, with little preparation. Others require more preparation time. Some are best used as practice activities, while others provide a new way to teach concepts and skills. Regardless, the match to student need is the priority. Find the need, target the skill, and remediate the deficit. That is the ultimate goal. If done correctly, students who were the lowest in your class at the beginning of the year can make gains to become among the highest performers. This is the case with Julia, a kindergarten teacher who works in a large suburban school district.

Hit the Ground Running

Julia is a kindergarten teacher who is faced with a diverse class each year. About half of her students come from families whose native language is something other than English. Many of them receive free and reduced lunch. At the beginning of the school year, her kindergartners are given the district assessment to determine who is considered at risk, some risk, and low risk. One of her students, Manuel, began in August scoring low on the literacy assessment. He was considered an "at-risk" student because he scored low on letter recognition, letter sounds, concepts of print, rhyming, beginning sounds, and sight words. Manuel and seven other students in Julia's class received low scores and were placed in a literacy intervention group to support their skills. Julia's reading block is 2½ hours each day. Her at-risk students received an additional half-hour intervention on top of the reading block 4 to 5 days a week.

During the intervention, Julia worked with a small group of five to eight students, focusing on early phonemic awareness skills. She used the alphabet chant, played the "Closer to Z" game, used dice with different letters on it, and many other instructional strategies that allowed her students to practice their emerging skills.

During the 2½-hour reading block, her at-risk students also received small-group instruction with Julia where they continued to practice their skills. Their block consisted of small-group instruction for a half-hour, center activities for a half-hour, a reading intervention program for a half-hour, whole-group instruction for a half-hour, and writing instruction for a half-hour. There were many activities to hold the students' interest and many opportunities to learn with a partner or in a small group.

This combination of instruction, along with a solid block of time, contributed to Manuel's reading success. At the end of the year in May, Manuel had made amazing progress. He moved from the "at-risk" category to being one of the top five performing students in Julia's class. He is reading many words, enjoys picking up books, and has greatly improved his spelling when writing. Julia believes it is the instruction that made a difference, but it is also because she had the time.

With a 2½-hour block of time that was protected, Julia was able to work intensely with her students, targeting those performing at all levels. She helped her students make progress because she determined their areas of need and matched her instruction to those needs. She maximized her reading time, understanding that many of her kids did not have books at home, and she left the school year almost forgetting how her students performed in August. She had to look through their files to remind herself that she actually did get many of her lowest kids to do what they need to be doing: reading.

The Instructional Match

Imagine you were skiing, took a hard fall, and broke your ankle. When you went to the doctor, an X-ray was done to confirm that you broke a bone. The doctor decided to give you aspirin, because it is a research-based medicine that has been proven to alleviate pain. While you appreciated the minor relief from pain, you then expected something more: a cast, for example, to set the broken bone, and crutches to make you more mobile, as your ankle healed over the weeks. You expected that the doctor would give you directions on how to take care of your ankle. The doctor, however, did not provide any of these remedies. He insisted that aspirin was enough, as it has been proven to work, and will likely address your pain. You understood that aspirin would be helpful, but knew that without other support, your ankle would take a long time to heal, if ever.

This is an extreme situation that we would never expect to happen. Physicians are trained to know how to most effectively and efficiently help a broken ankle heal, and it does not just include a daily regimen of aspirin, which is not strong enough and not targeted to the real issue: a broken bone.

Consider this situation and compare it to your students in need. Let's say you have a research-based reading intervention that you have used in the past. It has many studies supporting its use, and you have found it to work with your kids in the past. It has become a default option, where you consider it before any other interventions, similar to aspirin.

While this intervention works and does wonders for some, it doesn't always give you the results you want. Over time, some students respond, but others don't. Some make great progress, but others come to a standstill for weeks at a time. What is going on here?

While you have found a research-based intervention, it will not work for everybody. While many interventions are effective, just like aspirin, without a match to specific need, the intervention will not help your students make progress, or make your ankle heal any faster. The critical piece in solving these problems is the match. In both health care and teaching, it is important to match the need to the support. If I need a cast, give me a cast. If I need phonemic awareness instruction, give me phonemic awareness instruction. If I need long division instruction, give me long division instruction. Find the need, match the support, and begin to see the progress.

As you read the interventions in subsequent chapters, it is important to keep the match in mind. Select the strategy based on what you know about the student. If you don't know exactly what he or she needs to work on, find out. Use your classroom assessments. Create tasks for students to complete. Determine what you do and don't know about the student. Figure out what they need to work on, prioritize the skills, and use this information to select the most appropriate intervention.

RESOURCES

Building RTI Capacity

buildingrti.utexas.org

This project is part of the Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts (VGC) within the College of Education at the University of Texas–Austin. Major activities include supporting Spotlight Reading and Math RTI, building the knowledge and skills of RTI specialists statewide, conducting statewide RTI conferences, and using technology to promote RTI-related information.

National Center on Response to Intervention

www.rti4success.org

The center's mission is to provide technical assistance to states and districts and building the capacity of states to assist districts in implementing proven models for RTI. There are four areas of service: (1) knowledge production, (2) expert training and follow-up activities, (3) information dissemination, and (4) an evaluation that provides formative assessments to help improve the delivery of their services.

What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)

ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc

Established in 2002, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is a central and trusted source of scientific evidence for what works in education. An initiative of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, the WWC produces user-friendly practice guides for educators that address instructional challenges with research-based recommendations for schools and classrooms. WWC provides reports about a number of specific curricula.