Looking at the Core Characteristics of RtII with a Different Lens

Response to Instruction began in Pennsylvania in 2006 with a handful of pilot schools and has continued to gain momentum with an addition of another ”I” for Instruction in 2009. RtII is now implemented in over 175 schools in Pennsylvania. The RtII framework is a data driven, early intervention strategy designed to improve student achievement. Though first applied to struggling learners, it became evident to the authors this process could be replicated with advanced learners. In the subsequent paragraphs we outline how the components can be adjusted to improve advanced learner’s achievement. With the addition of the growth model data in Pennsylvania (PVAAS) and the PA Teacher Effectiveness System that includes building level, teacher, and elective data, it has become evident that our proficient and advanced learners are not always making a year’s worth of growth. If this trend characterizes your school system, then perhaps the following information would be helpful.

A Response to Instruction and Intervention Framework is comprised of nine key elements in Pennsylvania. By using the same components, but from a different perspective, it becomes clearer how an RtII system could support the advanced level learners.

High Quality Curriculum – Standards Aligned Instruction – All advanced learners receive high quality differentiated, research based instruction in the general education classroom. In order to accomplish this goal, educators must have a deep understanding of not only their grade level standards, but also an awareness of where the content and skills leads in order to provide enrichment and/or acceleration. In order to make the appropriate instructional decisions, teachers also have to be adept at analyzing data.

Universal Screening – The process of utilizing universal screening to determine which advanced learners measure beyond grade level benchmarks is very similar to that of the struggling learner. The focus for advanced learners is to use pre-determined thresholds for students who need tiered support based on how discrepant they are from grade level trajectories. Are they “somewhat above” (Tier 2) or “far above” (Tier 3) the achievement levels of the grade level population? By looking at the percentages of students who are discrepant on the advanced level, the data team can best determine where the support is most needed…in Tier 1, Tier II, or Tier III.

Data-Based Decision Making – Universal Screening Data is just one measure that informs the instructional decisions, which for the advanced learner determines whether to provide enrichment, acceleration, or both. To answer that question, the data team needs to dig deeper using formative or diagnostic measures to provide multiple data points. Acceleration at the extreme end of the continuum (i.e. grade skipping) is the most intensive level of intervention, but enrichment and acceleration on the lower end of the continuum (i.e. curriculum compaction) can be more appropriate for the advanced learners.

Tiered Support – The level of intensity provided in an RtII framework that supports struggling learner’s increases as the level of need increases. This intensity is characterized by changes in group size, frequency of service, amount of time in addition to core instruction, and the scientific validity of the tools used to build skills. If the term advanced learners were substituted for the term, struggling learners, the same descriptors for intensity would hold true. Ninety percent of the students’ needs should be met in Tier 1 through the implementation of differentiated instruction. Once it’s been determined by the teacher through pre-assessment that the student has mastered unit concepts; differentiation might include a change in pace, content, task, or product.

Other considerations at Tier I include:

* Compacted Curriculum Units
* Independent Learning Contracts
* Activity Menus
* Learning Centers
* Differentiated Assignments (in lieu of classroom assignments)
* Cluster Grouping
* Flexible Grouping
* Professional Development for general education teachers

If a student requires more intensive support, as evidenced by the data, Tier 2 could include:

* Individualized change of pace, content, task or environment that might be outside of the classroom
* Acceleration in one content area while sustaining current grade level placement
* Advanced course material typically one year above grade level
* Advanced Skill group instruction
* Support is in addition to differentiated instruction in Tier I

For a limited percentage of the population who require the most intensive support, Tier 3 could look like this:

* Individualized change of pace, content, task, or environment that may be out of grade level or even school depending on age of student
* Acceleration in multiple classes
* Advanced course material
* In addition to differentiated instruction in Tier I at the grade level the student is currently working at.

Professional Development – In order to facilitate this change teachers need to build their tool box regarding their understanding of multiple grade level standards, using data to guide instruction, designing tasks with a high degree of rigor and relevance, planning solid classroom management techniques for the multi-tasking classroom, and collaborating with other content or specialist teachers. Because implementing RtII for advanced learners is a big endeavor for districts to initiate, we recommend starting with a small number of teachers at the onset. Narrowing the range of abilities in the classroom to facilitate the use of flexible grouping more efficiently should also be considered. This is not a recommendation for homogeneous grouping, but rather a suggestion for considering cluster grouping as referenced in the work by Dr. Brulles and Dr. Winebrenner.

Shared Ownership – In order to move advanced learners forward, it will take an “all hands in” approach. This component of RtII is really no different than what is currently considered for struggling learners. Professional development should be considered for classroom cluster teachers, gifted support teachers, reading specialists, counselors, psychologists, and principals. School leaders are an integral part of helping to identify the designated cluster teachers to insure a desire to work with this population of learners. It does present additional work for the teacher in the areas of assessment and data analysis, instructional planning, and collaboration. The counselors and psychologists who typically serve on the data team now look at data as a mean of determining which students need Tier II and Tier III support with an enrichment or acceleration purpose. Reading specialists may be called upon to conduct additional diagnostic assessments to help review existing data to find the instructional level of the advanced student. Principals have to have a deep understanding of the process to successfully field questions form parents and develop a schedule that supports differentiation and acceleration for advanced learners.

Leadership - Administrators embarking on this system change need to visit classrooms and listen to the voices of all teachers that guide the advanced learners. From that vantage point they can prioritize steps and make decisions about where to start. Case in point, leaders mandated use of pre-assessment for every unit led to a suggestion by grade level teachers that the district should consider using end-of-year grade level assessments for certain students. The teachers posed the question; if the students have mastery of unit goals might they have mastery of all grade-level standards and need to be accelerated vs. enrichment alone? Steps to implementation are not linear, thus a leader needs to be willing to adjust as the process unfolds. Once the priorities are identified, the role of the leader shifts to providing high support while holding the staff accountable through evidence in lesson planning, reflection and observation.

Parent Engagement – Response to Instruction and Intervention is first, and foremost, a general education framework. Permission from parents to improve instruction to meet a child’s needs is not required. However, communication is beneficial and reassuring for parents to see continuous progress in their child’s learning. As the intensity level of the service increase, so should the amount of communication with the family.

Some lessons learned regarding implementation would include:

1. Narrowing the range of abilities in the general education setting (cluster grouping) helps the teacher when charged with the responsibility of accommodating the needs of all children in the classroom.
2. Build a schedule that allows for flexibility of staff (gifted support teachers) and students needing acceleration. To determine the scheduling needs, assessment must occur in the spring.
3. Pre-Assessment is a non-negotiable. Consider starting with one subject at a time. Students can earn their final grade for a unit of study from their pre-assessment.
4. Forums for open communication with all stakeholders are vital for success.

No matter where you are in your implementation of a Response to Instruction and Intervention framework, just starting out or sustaining, you can consider implementation for advanced learners. Using the components provided to initiate and develop the process makes the transition easier since the teachers work for existing structure to work from. We are in the process of implementation of RtII with advanced learners in both a large suburban district and a medium-sized rural district and would welcome inquiries.

References: Brulles, Dina, Ph. D., and Susan Winebrenner, M.S. .*The Cluster Grouping Handbook*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2008. Print.

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