

What Is the Rationale for Using RTI?

RTI is a preventive approach that aims to identify struggling students before they fall too far behind their peers. It is important to note that some students struggle with reading due to causes other than learning disabilities. Regardless of the cause, RTI will help students obtain the appropriate instruction and interventions to improve their academic progress. Additionally, by providing intervention in the early grades, RTI may also prevent the inappropriate identification of students for special education services. Think about RTI as a safety net that provides needed supports to students without first waiting for them to fail.

The policymakers who included RTI as an option in IDEA 2004 have high hopes that RTI will:

- Encourage and guide professionals to intervene early on behalf of a greater number of students who are at risk for school failure
- Represent a more valid method of identifying learning disabilities (LD) by decreasing the number of "false positives" (low-achieving students given LD labels but whose problems are actually due to inadequate instruction rather than to disabilities)

What Are the Benefits of Using RTI?

Let's explore in more detail the two major benefits of RTI mentioned above:

1. Early intervening
2. Identification of learning disabilities

The Benefits of Early Intervening

The term *early intervening*—providing assistance to students early, when they begin to struggle—is used in IDEA 2004 and refers to the provision of preventive services to students *before* they are identified as having disabilities. (The term should not be confused with *early intervention*, which refers to special education services for very young children.) As you learned in the Challenge scenario, many students struggle with reading skills throughout their elementary school years. Research has shown that students who have difficulty learning to read are unlikely to catch up with their peers without early, intensive, and effective interventions. Many of these students do not receive the intensive instruction they require until after they are identified as having reading disabilities, which usually does not occur until third grade or later.

An important feature of RTI and of the process of early intervening is that they provide research-validated interventions when students begin to struggle, including students who do not have disabilities. Here are some key points to remember. RTI and early intervening:

- Ensure that all students receive high-quality instruction in the general education classroom
- Promote immediate intervention as soon as students' reading problems are revealed
- Prevent substantial reading difficulties from developing
- Reduce inappropriate referrals and placements in special education for students with learning disabilities

Benefits for the Identification of Learning Disabilities

The RTI approach has many benefits, particularly when applied to the identification of students with reading/learning disabilities. Some of those advantages include:

- Ensuring that struggling readers have received high-quality instruction *before* referrals to special education are made
- Using classroom data, rather than subjective observations, to make decisions about whether students should be referred for an evaluation for special education services
- Delivering services as soon as students begin to struggle

Debate and controversy have surrounded the process of identifying students with learning disabilities almost since the inception of the learning disabilities field. Many of the concerns stem from the use of IQ tests in the assessment process. However, RTI provides viable solutions to many of these concerns. The table below reviews some concerns with the IQ-achievement discrepancy model and describes how the RTI approach addresses those concerns:

Concerns About the IQ-Discrepancy Model	RTI's Solutions
Assessments do not always discriminate between disabilities and the results of inadequate teaching.	The likelihood that ineffective instruction is a cause of learning difficulties decreases.
Students can be misidentified due to teacher or testing bias.	Bias inherent in some teacher referrals and the assessment process decreases. Identification is based on actual classroom performance (i.e., progress monitoring data).
Students must first fail in order to qualify for special education services.	Fewer students struggle before receiving help. The amount of time students struggle is significantly decreased.
Results from assessments do not inform the instructional process.	The progress monitoring data aid in placement decisions and may be used to inform and evaluate the instructional process.
Many students do not meet the discrepancy criteria but would still benefit from early identification and support to remediate their skills.	Students who are struggling academically receive immediate support and intervention.

Considerations About RTI

The RTI approach is very different from the IQ-achievement discrepancy model. Therefore, changing to the RTI approach should be done after careful planning and coordination. Personnel from schools, districts, and states need to think carefully about how they will:

- Evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the reading instruction being used in the general education classroom
- Ensure that all education professionals (teachers, paraprofessionals, etc.) are knowledgeable about the RTI approach and are well trained to implement the instructional interventions
- Monitor instruction and intervention frequently to evaluate its effectiveness
- Modify the current roles and responsibilities of staff members (e.g., school psychologists, teachers, paraprofessionals) involved in the identification and intervention process
- Determine assessment procedures and placement criteria

One final consideration for the implementation of RTI is its effectiveness with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Some proponents of the RTI approach suggest that improved general education instruction and the use of validated interventions will improve academic skills and subsequently reduce overrepresentation of these students in special education. This is an issue that should be considered carefully.