RTI AT WORK™

Response to Intervention

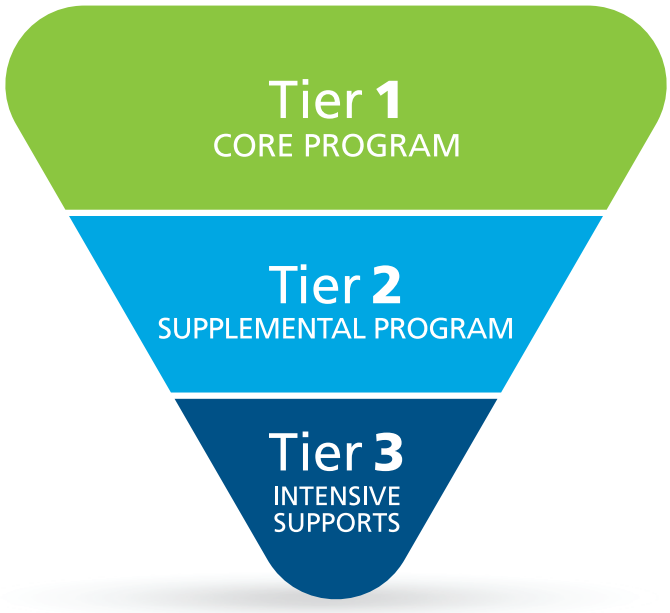
CENTERED ON **STUDENT LEARNING**

The Critical Question:
HOW DO YOU RESPOND WHEN **STUDENTS DON'T LEARN?**

There are numerous research-based programs and initiatives designed to improve teaching and learning. Many focus on improving teacher pedagogy, classroom curriculum, school assessment and grading practices, and site leadership. While these areas are certainly worth attention, in the end, schools cannot ensure the success of every student unless they can effectively intervene when students struggle. Research and evidence in our field is conclusive—response to intervention (RTI) is the best way to intervene. Also known as a multitiered system of support (MTSS), RTI is a systematic process that ensures every student receives the additional time and support needed to learn at high levels. RTI's underlying premise is that schools should not delay providing help for struggling students until they fall far enough behind to qualify for special education. Instead, schools should provide timely, targeted, systematic interventions to all students as soon as a need is identified (Buffum et al.).

Traditionally, the RTI process is represented in the shape of a pyramid.

The RTI pyramid is separated into tiers, with **Tier 1** representing core instruction, **Tier 2** supplemental interventions, and **Tier 3** intensive student supports. The pyramid shape is wide at the bottom to represent the instruction that all students receive. As students demonstrate the need for additional support, they receive increasingly more targeted and intensive help. Because timely supplemental interventions address most student needs when they are first emerging, fewer students require the intensive services offered at **Tier 3**, which explains the tapered shape of the RTI pyramid.



Based on his meta-analysis of over eighty thousand studies relating to the factors inside and outside of school that impact student learning, researcher John Hattie found that RTI ranks in the top three educational practices proven to best increase student achievement. When implemented correctly, RTI has an exceptional average yearly impact rate of 1.07 standard deviation (Hattie, 2012). To put this in perspective:

- A one-standard-deviation increase is typically associated with advancing student achievement by two to three years (Hattie, 2009, 7).
- Based upon longitudinal studies, the yearly typical impact rate of a classroom teacher's instruction ranges between 0.15 and 0.40 standard-deviation growth (Hattie, 2009, 20). This means a school that successfully implements RTI will leverage a process that is several times more effective than a school that leaves it up to individual, isolated teachers to meet the instructional needs of their students.
- The greatest home/environmental factor that impacts student learning is a family's economic status. Students who come from more affluent homes—defined as middle class or higher—gain a yearly academic benefit of 0.57 standard-deviation growth per year (Hattie, 2009, 298). This home support has contributed to an achievement gap on standardized tests between affluent households and students of poverty, a rate that has grown over 40 percent since the 1960s (Reardon). Meanwhile, the college graduation rate gap has increased over 50 percent since the late 1980s (Bailey and Dynarski). RTI's impact rate of 1.07 is over twice as powerful as what some students might receive at home each night and provides educators a proven, powerful tool to close our nation's largest achievement gap.

Knowing what we know today about how best to respond when students struggle, there is no debate:
RTI is the right work.

If RTI works,
then why do we still have an achievement gap?

In the fall of 2015, the following headline appeared on the front page of *Education Week*: "Study: RTI Practices Fall Short of Promise." The study referenced, conducted by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, studied the yearly reading progress of over 20,000 first-through third-grade students. The study reported that the first graders who received reading interventions actually did worse than virtually identical peers not receiving the RTI support. More troubling, students who were already in special education and/or older than average for their grade performed "particularly poorly if they received interventions" (Sparks).

Yet, when digging deeper into the findings, researchers found implementation practices at a majority of the participating schools are misaligned to the guiding principles of RTI.

Interventions cannot make up for **Tier 1** practices defined by teacher isolation, tracking students by perceived ability, assessing students with archaic grading practices, and expecting parents and special education to be the primary solution for struggling students.

- **Sixty-nine percent of schools in the impact sample offered at least some intervention services during Tier 1 core instruction.** In such schools, intervention may have "displaced instruction time and replaced some small-group or other instruction services with intervention services. As a result, reading intervention services may have been different from, but not necessarily supplemental to, core reading instruction" (Balu et al., 11). A basic tenet of RTI is that interventions should be provided in addition to effective Tier 1 core instruction, not in place of it. When students miss new critical grade-level core curriculum to receive interventions, it is akin to having students take one step forward (improvement in a remedial skill), while taking one step back (missing a new essential grade-level skill).

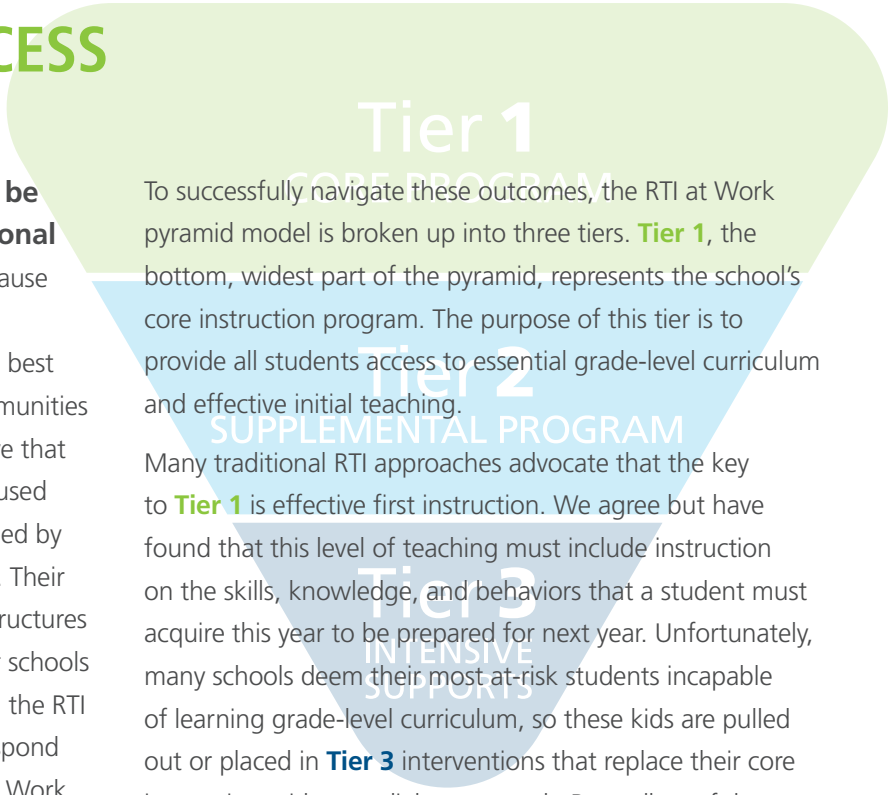
- **The study found that "even in schools using the more traditional model of providing intervention services only to readers below grade level, classroom teachers played an additional role and provided intervention services to 37 percent of those groups in Grade 1"** (Balu et al., 11). RTI advocates that interventions should be provided by staff with a higher level of expertise in a student's targeted area of need. While a classroom teacher might meet these qualifications, it would be unrealistic to expect the teacher who provided the initial teaching of a specific standard to always have more effective ways to reteach this skill to the same students who did not learn it the first time it was taught. Our experience is that teachers don't save their best instructional practices for Tier 2 interventions. More often, students receive the same pedagogies that were used in core instruction, only this time, they are provided in a smaller-group setting.

The RTI at WORK PROCESS

A successful system of interventions must be built upon a highly effective core instructional program. We call our approach **RTI *at Work*** because our recommendations are the combination of two complementary, research-based practices proven to best ensure student learning: professional learning communities and response to intervention. Specifically, we believe that the best way to create a collaborative, learning-focused school is through the **PLC at Work** model, developed by Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour. Their PLC process creates the culture and collaborative structures needed for a strong core instructional program. For schools that function as a professional learning community, the RTI process provides the systematic steps needed to respond when students don't learn. Hence the name: RTI at Work.

The RTI at Work process is designed to achieve four primary outcomes:

- If the ultimate goal of a learning-focused school is to ensure that every student ends each year having acquired the essential skills, knowledge, and behaviors required for success at the next grade level, then all students must have access to essential grade-level curriculum as part of their core instruction.
- At the end of every unit of study, some students will need additional time and support to master this essential grade-level curriculum.
- Some students will enter each school year lacking skills that should have been mastered in prior years—skills such as foundational reading, writing, number sense, and English language. These students will require intensive interventions in these areas to succeed.
- Some students will require all three tiers to learn at high levels.



To successfully navigate these outcomes, the RTI at Work pyramid model is broken up into three tiers. **Tier 1**, the bottom, widest part of the pyramid, represents the school's core instruction program. The purpose of this tier is to provide all students access to essential grade-level curriculum and effective initial teaching.

Many traditional RTI approaches advocate that the key to **Tier 1** is effective first instruction. We agree but have found that this level of teaching must include instruction on the skills, knowledge, and behaviors that a student must acquire this year to be prepared for next year. Unfortunately, many schools deem their most at-risk students incapable of learning grade-level curriculum, so these kids are pulled out or placed in **Tier 3** interventions that replace their core instruction with remedial coursework. Regardless of the quality of initial teaching, if a student's core instruction is focused on below-grade-level standards, the child will learn well below grade level. Because the fundamental purpose of RTI is to ensure all students learn at high levels—grade level or better each year—all students must be taught at grade level. Every student might not leave each school year having mastered every grade-level standard, but every student can master the learning outcomes deemed indispensable for future success.

There will be a point in every unit of study when most students have demonstrated mastery of the unit's essential learning outcomes, and the teacher will need to proceed to the next topic. However, because some students may not master the essential curriculum by the end of the unit, the school must dedicate time to provide these students additional support to master this essential grade-level curriculum without missing critical new core instruction. This supplemental help to master grade-level curriculum is the purpose of the second tier—**Tier 2**—in RTI at Work pyramid.

The RTI at Work PROCESS

This is a critical point—**Tier 2** in our RTI at Work process is not determined by the size of the intervention group or the duration of the intervention. Instead, it is defined by the learning outcomes being targeted. Supplemental help should focus on providing targeted students with the additional time and support needed to master the specific skills, knowledge, and behaviors that were identified to be absolutely essential for a child's future success in **Tier 1**. Classroom teaching teams should take primary responsibility for leading **Tier 2** academic interventions, as these outcomes directly relate to their areas of expertise. Because supplemental interventions are focused on very specific learning targets, placement into **Tier 2** interventions must be timely, targeted, flexible, and driven primarily by team-created common assessment aligned to grade-level essential standards. Equally important, supplemental intervention time can be used to extend student learning. When students master essential curriculum during core instruction, the school's flexible instructional time can be used to move students beyond proficiency and into more advanced levels of learning, including supporting students in honors and advanced-placement curriculum.

If a school provides students access to essential grade-level curriculum and effective initial teaching during **Tier 1** core instruction, and targeted supplemental academic and behavioral help in meeting these standards at **Tier 2**, then most students will succeed. However, there will inevitably be a number of students who enter each school year lacking the foundational skills needed to learn at high levels.

Common foundational skills problems include:

- difficulty decoding and comprehending grade-level text
- difficulty writing effectively
- difficulty applying number sense
- difficulty comprehending the English language (or the school's primary language)
- difficulty consistently demonstrating social and academic behaviors
- other complications due to health/home

Foundational skills involve more than achieving a specific learning standard. They include a series of skills that enable a student to comprehend instruction, access information, demonstrate understanding, and behave appropriately in a school setting. If a student is significantly behind in just one of these foundational skills, he or she will struggle in virtually every grade level, course, and subject—and frequently a school's most at-risk youth are behind in more than one area. Therefore, for students who need intensive remediation in foundational skills, the school must have a plan to provide this level of assistance without denying these students access to grade-level essential curriculum. This is the purpose of **Tier 3**. Because students develop foundational skills over time, schools must provide intensive interventions for targeted students as part of their instructional day by highly trained staff in the students' targeted area(s) of need.

Lastly, and most importantly, some students are going to need all three tiers to learn at high levels—this is why it is called a multitiered system of supports. Students are not moved from tier to tier. Instead, the tiers are cumulative. All students need effective initial teaching on grade-level essential standards at **Tier 1**. In addition to **Tier 1**, some students will need additional time and support meeting grade-level essential standards at **Tier 2**. Morevover, in addition to **Tier 1** and **Tier 2**, some students will need intensive help in learning essential outcomes from previous years. Students in need of **Tier 3** intensive help in remedial skills will most likely struggle with new essential grade-level curriculum the first time it is taught. Therefore, these students will need **Tier 2** and **Tier 3** while receiving new essential instruction at **Tier 1**.

Creating this level of support cannot be done effectively by an individual teacher in his or her own classroom. We tried this model for many years—it was called a one-room schoolhouse. Instead, ensuring high-level learning requires a schoolwide, collective, collaborative, coordinated, all-hands-on-deck mentality. This is why structuring a school to function as a professional learning community is the key to effectively implementing RTI.

Making the Work Doable

In our first book, *Pyramid Response to Intervention: RTI, Professional Learning Communities, and How to Respond When Kids Don't Learn*, we began with the statement, "This book is written for practitioners by practitioners" (Buffum et al., 1). We did not create RTI or MTSS. We are educators who worked collaboratively with our colleagues to successfully turn this powerful research into daily practice. Our schools were not immune to misinterpretations and missteps. In fact, we hit just about every possible pothole and speed bump on our journey. But because we stayed committed to the process, these mistakes helped us develop the simplified approaches, practical processes, and proven tools needed to dramatically increase student learning. Our work has been further enriched and refined through our collaboration with schools around the world. The RTI at Work process is grounded in research, but equally important, has been tested, revised, and validated in real-world conditions that educators face daily.

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Learn more about Mike Mattos.