

Ensure the Successful Implementation of Interventions in a PLC

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“When it comes to how educators should respond when students struggle in school, the research and evidence in our field have never been more conclusive—response to intervention (RTI) is the right way to intervene.”

—Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, & Janet Malone

There is agreement that RTI is the most effective way to respond to students who are not learning, and an RTI framework is commonplace in schools, yet implementing the RTI process is one of the most confounding challenges principals and teachers face.

To shed some light on this conundrum, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a study of the intervention practices of schools across the United States (Balu et al., 2015). Results of the study suggest that to successfully implement RTI, principals should ensure four conditions exist in their schools. First, leaders must assign the most effective members of the faculty and staff to work with the most vulnerable learners. Second, students must have access to additional time and support without missing direct instruction in core subjects. Third, intervention programs must be of sufficient frequency and duration to positively impact learning. Finally, teams must use data from multiple sources to make decisions about student participation in intervention programs.

Condition 1: Ensure Leaders Assign the Most Effective Staff Members to Work With Our Most Vulnerable Students

It seems obvious that the most effective staff members should be responsible for working with students who are not yet proficient, but this is not always the case. In schools with limited interventions for students performing below expectations, researchers Rekha Balu and her colleagues (2015) find a combination of specialists, classroom teachers, and paraprofessionals delivers interventions. Paraprofessionals represent the most common alternative at 37 percent, with classroom teachers at 26 percent, and specialists at 18 percent.

The question principals must consider is not who would deliver but who would *best* deliver the additional time and support. The choice of who is best suited to provide students with support is based on factors like background and experience, specialized training and expertise, or instructional effectiveness (that is, the performance of a group of students on a recent common assessment). Principals must ensure that whoever delivers interventions has the necessary tools and strategies to help students succeed.

Students deserve the most qualified—not the most available—adult to deliver interventions. If the goal is to create interventions that work, principals must commit to assigning the most effective and qualified staff members to work with the most vulnerable and struggling students.

Condition 2: Ensure Students Have Access to Interventions Without Missing Direct Instruction in Core Subjects

Any effective intervention program is built on the belief that all students can learn. While it's true that not all students learn at the same time or in the same way, schools functioning

as PLCs believe that given enough time and support, all students will learn (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). An effective intervention program provides extra support in addition to core instruction. This would seem logical but, once again, Balu and her colleagues (2015) report this condition is not always present.

Balu and her colleagues (2015) find that students received additional time and support both inside (during) and outside (in addition to) the core instructional block. In some schools, more than half of all intervention groups met during core (Tier 1) instruction. As a result, not all students received intervention services in addition to their core instructional time. The implication of this practice is “intervention may have *replaced* rather than supplemented some instruction services during the core” (Balu et al., 2015, p. 60). Too often, educators pull students from classroom instruction when they struggle. This practice means the most vulnerable students miss important initial instruction, which causes them to fall further and further behind. Whenever intervention supplants rather than supplements classroom instruction, underperforming students—those with the greatest needs—may actually receive less direct instruction.

In schools functioning as a PLC, principals ensure students have access to additional time and support without missing direct instruction in another core subject. Struggling students need more time to learn, not less.

Condition 3: Ensure Interventions Are of Sufficient Frequency and Duration to Positively Impact Learning

Our experience tells us the frequency and duration of intervention programs fall short of what we recommend. Best practice calls for ninety minutes of reading instruction during core instruction (Balu et al., 2015). For students not learning as teachers expect in Tier 1 instruction, they must provide additional Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to their core instruction.

Balu and her colleagues (2015) find the length of daily intervention sessions falls within a range of twenty to forty minutes. The research team recommends teachers deliver Tier 2 interventions three times a week and Tier 3 interventions four to five times a week. Using thirty minutes (the midpoint of the range) as the standard, students in Tier 2 would receive ninety minutes of additional intervention programming and as much as 150 minutes in Tier 3. This simply is not what is typically available to students in most schools.

Commitment 4: Ensure Actionable Data Are the Basis of Identification, Assignment, and Movement of Students Within Intervention Programs

Without an assessment system that generates a variety of formative and summative measures for classroom teachers, students’ movement from one tier to another is determined by relatively few points of data from a single source (Pierce & Jackson, 2017). This practice is problematic because it assumes all assessments provide actionable data, all students have the same needs, and a standard set of interventions will be equally effective for all students. Unfortunately, none of these assumptions is true. “Regular data collection allows staff to critically gauge the effectiveness of their instruction and interventions” (Pierce & Jackson, 2017, p. 6).

“Because RTI is proven to be the best way to intervene when students need additional time and support, schools that function as a PLC should not view RTI as a new initiative but instead, as deepening their current intervention practices.”

—Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, & Janet Malone

Balu and her colleagues (2015) focus on reading interventions at the elementary level, but their findings are applicable in other settings. What is clear is that if schools want to increase

the likelihood that interventions will help students learn, they must ensure that (1) the most effective staff members work with the most vulnerable students, (2) students have access to interventions without missing direct instruction in core subjects, (3) interventions are of sufficient frequency and duration to positively impact learning, and (4) data from multiple sources are the basis of identification, assignment, and movement of students within intervention programs.

References

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