Psychology in the Schools, Vol. 49(3), 2012
View this article online at wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/pits

DOI: 10.1002/pits.21598

DISTRICT-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS IN SUPPORTING AND SUSTAINING RTI IMPLEMENTATION

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Although Response to Intervention (RtI) implementation efforts have been occurring in schools across the country for more than a decade, questions and concerns are emerging, as some schools are not observing significantly improved student achievement or behavior outcomes as expected. In the literature on RtI implementation, most authors indicate there are multiple levels of support that are required for effective RtI implementation. These include individual professional development regarding the rationale for RtI and for developing necessary skills; building-level support encompassing necessary resources, leadership, and structures that promote RtI; and district-level support to drive the broader system. In this article, we identify district-level supports that are important for school psychologists to consider as they work to initiate or extend RtI routines. The district-level factors discussed here are organized into the categories of leadership, assessment and data management, culture and beliefs, professional development, staff recruitment, and resource allocation. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Response to Intervention (RtI) implementation efforts have been occurring at some level in most school districts across the country, with some schools having started these efforts a decade ago or more. As the efforts at restructuring and reforming service delivery around the RtI framework have evolved, many questions and concerns are beginning to emerge regarding these efforts. Although some schools have achieved exceptional results through RtI implementation (e.g., Vail School District, AZ, VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2005; Minneapolis Public Schools, Heartland, 2005; Marston, Muyskes, Lau, & Canter, 2002), many are having difficulty in determining what, if anything, has changed. In our work with schools across the Midwest, we have encountered many school districts that have made a commitment to implementing RtI systems but are still having difficulty gaining momentum for these efforts. Many schools have established RtI structures and are collecting a great deal of data related to student learning outcomes, but are not realizing significantly improved student achievement or behavior outcomes. The following quote supports our observation: "The effect sizes reported for research studies of RtI are less consistent than many of its supporters profess and those studies reporting strong results are highly likely to have levels of treatment fidelity that are atypical" (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009, p. 131).

In other words, many schools/districts seem to have gotten on the RtI highway in the past decade, but not all are making progress toward the destination of improving student outcomes. A few schools seem to have found the "fast lane" and are on cruise control, but some schools are feeling lost. Further, some schools are looking for the next exit, as they are tiring of the journey, and some are on the side of the road with a flat tire. In many situations where schools are struggling to initiate or sustain momentum for their RtI efforts, we observe there is not a coherent support structure built at the more macro level of the school system—the district level.

The school psychology literature contains an immense amount of information regarding the RtI framework and specific technical aspects, but has discussed system-level structures much less frequently. Certainly, it is critical for school psychologists to understand the RtI framework and the technical components to support RtI implementation, but acting on this knowledge alone does not seem to be sufficient to produce substantial and sustainable change in many settings.We believe that

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school psychologists also need to consider several system-level factors that affect RtI scale up and sustainability to maximize the effect on students and increase the probability of sustainability.

This article outlines critical system-level structures that are often overlooked or ignored by school psychologists and others working to develop RtI initiatives or to extend and sustain existing initiatives. Although school psychologists may not have direct control of these system factors, the knowledge and skills of school psychologists can influence these factors nevertheless. In fact, it is our observation that many of the schools and districts that have made substantial progress in establishing RtI initiatives have done so because of substantial support and direct system-level actions taken by school psychologists in those settings. Thus, one of the objectives of this article is to provide information to psychologists about critical district-level factors to consider in planning support for RtI initiatives.

Definitional Issues

Because this article defines critical district support structures for implementing RtI, it is important that we establish, at the outset, the definition of RtI that guides this work. For this discussion, we adopt the definition of RtI presented by Burns and VanDerHeyden (2006): "RtI is the systematic use of assessment data to most efficiently allocate resources in order to enhance learning for all children" (p. 3). We choose this definition over others because it can be applied equally well to an analysis of district systems as well as building systems and even to individual student decisions. Further, this definition focuses specifically on the key roles of data, allocation of resources, and student learning outcomes. Clearly, these issues are among those impacted by district-level decisions and actions. Finally, we adopt this definition because it recognizes RtI as a framework for the enhancement of learning for all children, not just those who are struggling or have certain demographic characteristics.

It is also important to note that we view RtI at the system level to be related closely with the concept of "continuous school improvement." The term continuous school improvement has recently emerged in the education literature to describe a process of strategic planning and frequent review of effectiveness at the broadest levels of the system (Conyers & Ewy, 2004; Schmoker, 1999). In many ways, this concept of continuous improvement reflects the application of RtI principles to district-level decision-making procedures. Bernhardt and Hebert (2011) define continuous school improvement as the process of improving the school organization on an ongoing basis that includes using data to define the current status of the system and establish system goals, analyzing causes for current status, planning system actions to achieve goals, and evaluating results routinely to guide system decisions. These authors state:

> Until you get continuous school improvement right, you cannot get RtI right. If you do continuous school improvement right, you will have a good start toward an effective RtI system. If you do RtI right, you will be engaged in a continuous school improvement process. (Bernhardt & Herbert, 2011, p. 1)

As others have observed, continuous school improvement is the process of "using RtI to do RtI" (D. Tilly, personal communication, October 8, 2010).

We agree with the premise that systematic decision making and continuous progress evaluation are important for improving schools broadly, and we see the concepts of continuous school improvement or RtI thinking applied at the district level as critically important to promoting effective RtI efforts throughout the school system. Moreover, we observe that RtI implementation requires a significant educational reform, including changes in the way we think and act at all levels of the system. Inherent in this view is the recognition that RtI is not a program or an initiative, but rather a process that is incorporated throughout a district to drive all educational decisions. Therefore, it is

our assertion that effective implementation of RtI has to consider the school district entity, as well as school buildings, as units of change.

Consideration and evaluation of district-level structures and supports for RtI implementation are important, regardless of where a school district is in its developmental path toward implementation of RtI systems. Whether individual schools are just beginning to learn about RtI frameworks or are working to sustain successful implementation efforts, the quality of coordination and support provided by district-level staff and the procedural structures in place will have a large influence on the eventual or ongoing success achieved by the individual schools. Without this understanding and conceptual support from the district level, many school improvement efforts lose momentum and eventually fade. Without effective district coordination and decision making, RtI efforts tend to become fragmented and unfocused, and thereby unsustainable. Much has been written already about some of the important district-level structures and supports, including the factors relating to professional development, communication mechanisms, and goal setting (Harlacher & Siler, 2011; Miller & Kraft, 2008; O'Neill & Conzemius, 2006; Schmoker, 1999). In our work with more than 20 school districts across the Midwest, we have observed key district-level factors that are associated with successful and sustainable RtI efforts. The structures we observe and discuss here are consistent with those identified in the literature on "highly effective schools" (Bell, 2001; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Reeves, 1999; Togneri, 2003). This article will focus on five of these critical issues, including (a) assessment and data management, (b) culture and beliefs, (c) staff recruitment, (d) resource allocation, and (e) leadership. We include a discussion on leadership (despite the fact that it has already been discussed widely in the literature) because this is commonly identified by school personnel and researchers (e.g., Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) as the most important factor for effective school improvement. The sections that follow will provide details of each of these characteristics and will outline the impact of these on effective RtI implementation.

Leadership

Leadership is among the most important factors to the success of any change effort (Fullan, 2010). Discussions with staff from any school system engaged in RtI implementation will find a large majority of staff who report that leadership (or lack thereof) has been a substantial influence leading to success or failure of their implementation efforts. In our work, we have surveyed more than 700 school staff members from multiple schools and have found that only 11% "strongly agree" with the statement: "In our district/school, district level leadership provides active commitment and support for school improvement actions (e.g., meets to review data and issues at least twice each year)." Further, we found that nearly 50% of school staff we have surveyed "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with this statement. This is cause for concern if one agrees that RtI processes require substantial system change. Clearly, it will be difficult to make progress or sustain the change effort without support and involvement of those who are driving the bus.

Successful, efficient, and effective RtI systems require district-level leadership and support. Although bottom-up efforts at the individual building level can go quite far, explicit support from the district-level administration is clearly a necessary factor. We observe that many well-developed building efforts falter without effective district leadership. The concept of leadership as it is discussed here includes leadership actions from district administrators and established leadership teams, but also leadership functions served by other staff and stakeholder groups, as well as school board members.

Based on our experience, we have concluded that there are three main factors associated with district-level leadership that serve to promote effective and sustainable RtI systems: leaders' knowledge of RtI principles and practices, leadership structures, and organizational frameworks. Each of these components will be discussed separately in the following sections.

Leadership Knowledge

Obviously, it is necessary for all individuals in a district to have knowledge of RtI principles and a common language, as well as a shared understanding of the rationale for the effort for these initiatives to become established in a meaningful way (Batsche et. al., 2005). This is especially important for those whose decisions and actions affect the entire school system. Although there is some variability in who makes decisions between different educational systems, district leaders always have substantial control to make, or influence heavily, decisions that will impact student learning in all district buildings. Thus, it is surprising how frequently we observe settings where district leaders have only limited knowledge of RtI concepts and limited awareness of implementation actions or results. As discussed earlier, school staff surveyed regarding district leaders' engagement in RtI initiatives frequently indicated little or no involvement of district leaders. In our opinion, this is not because district leaders are resistant to or inherently unsupportive of these actions, but rather, usually because district infrastructure does not include the routine analysis of instructional practices or instructional outcomes by district leaders.

It appears that it is common that planning of instructional initiatives does not include district-level leaders. Many district leaders have schedules that are extremely full; thus, it is challenging to coordinate efforts that involve these individuals in the process. Therefore, it is often just easier to initiate actions without bringing the district leadership along from the beginning. Despite this challenge, we advise RtI implementers to educate and engage district leaders deliberately in the entire scale-up process to maximize the probability of gaining momentum and sustaining these efforts for the long term. This will likely result in a slower scale-up process or will cause the slowing of existing efforts, but without attention to developing leadership at the broadest levels, the RtI initiatives will be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain.

Specifically, district leaders will need to have knowledge of the conceptual framework of RtI, the basic principles, and the rationale for a systematic and data-based process for decision making that allows for clear and specific support for RtI to be communicated. We have observed many districts that have expended considerable time and resources in establishing RtI processes and infrastructure at the building level, only to have these efforts falter because of the decisions and actions of district leaders unfamiliar with or unaware of basic RtI concepts and principles. Typically, when district leaders are not specifically involved in RtI efforts, they are involved in planning and promoting other actions intended to improve district outcomes. In these districts, we often see multiple initiatives and plans that compete for attention and resources, none of which can establish momentum for long enough to achieve results. Without district leadership that is knowledgeable, aware, and, to some degree, involved in RtI scale-up activities, sustainable RtI efforts are not likely to occur.

As an example, one of the important tenets of RtI practices is the use of evidence-based instructional techniques and intervention practices. If there are not individuals with leadership roles at the district level who understand this concept and support it, decisions about instructional programming generally are deferred to local "experts" who are perceived as credible on the basis of their role, title, or years of service. Frequently, these decisions made by the local "experts" are biased by personal experience and professional judgments, as opposed to using high-quality evidence from research. Unless district leaders are able to establish an expectation that recommendations for instructional programming be accompanied by the supporting research, education will continue to demonstrate a strong tendency to "chase every shiny thing" that comes their way. Therefore, it is important that district leaders have knowledge of the importance of using evidence-based practices and what constitutes an evidence base. In our work with districts, we ask district leaders to discuss the research on which they have based their decisions regardinginstructional programming and

materials. As one might guess, very few are able to answer this question. Perhaps the best answer we frequently receive is, "That is a *very* good question!"

It is worth noting that in addition to cultivating RtI knowledge among district leadership, it is also necessary to embrace a process of continually updating knowledge. Evidence-based practices and interventions are continually evolving as new scientific knowledge becomes available. Therefore, district leadership needs to not only understand the need to consider evidence from research, but also to be aware of the dynamic nature of evidence-based practice. This requires that districts instill appropriate structures to continually consume information from the professional and research community.

Leadership Structures

Leadership structures include the routines and processes that exist at the district level that guide district decisions. In some districts, these routines are rather informal and are based on casual input and the authority of a few individuals. For data-based processes such as RtI to be effective at the individual building level, the district must establish and sustain routines for decision making that incorporate data from building-level efforts and follow a systematic process that includes routine evaluation of progress on district objectives (Bernhardt, 2006, Bernhardt & Hebert, 2011). In our work, we ask building- and district-level staff to describe how decisions are made in their district. The answers to this question are often very different from site to site and at the district level. Moreover, it is common for staff, including teachers and administrators to report that they really do not know about the process that guides decisions in their district. Without clear leadership structures and routines to guide analysis of effectiveness, provide specific routines for decision making, and explicit communication about these routines, actions become haphazard and random. In these settings, actions are perceived to begin and end without explanation. Under these conditions, staff adopt a "this-too-shall-pass" attitude toward improvement initiatives. In these environments, staff members become disengaged from the process and feel free to choose whatever actions make the most sense to them.

Regardless of the specific structure of district leadership in each district, it is important to recognize that a main role of district-level administrators is to facilitate the development of clear outcome targets and to establish routines that support the efforts of each building. As previously discussed, RtI efforts are best conceptualized and evaluated at the individual building level. Therefore, there is a fine balance between district level coordination and support of these heterogeneous efforts and the stymieing effect of micromanagement. The most successful schools we have observed have district leaders that are knowledgeable and supportive of RtI implementation, but do not try to control the process. Rather, in these settings, there are systematic and deliberate routines for decision making that incorporate research evidence, local data, and professional expertise. Through the support and maintenance of these procedures, leaders in districts successfully implementing RtI systems confidently allow the process to guide the decisions rather than imposing individual authority. Additionally, personnel at the district level are able to contribute to RtI by coordinating efforts across buildings as needed, sharing resources, and assisting with data and assessment needs.

Organizational Framework

Whether you call it culture, values, ethos, or mission, district leadership has to not only embrace the ideas and principles underlying RtI (e.g., that all students can learn) but also an organizational framework to coordinate and communicate the emphasis on systemic excellence (Fullan, 2006). Organizational frameworks, whether developed internally or adopted from an external source, provide clear descriptions of the important processes and decision-making structures that exist. In addition,

these tools describe the relationships among these factors, which must be considered in assessing outcomes and progress toward identified goals.

Such an organizational framework allows for continuous system improvement by defining the processes for goal setting, analysis of needs, evaluation of progress, and revision as needed, regardless of the specific movement being embedded. In its essence, an organizational framework depicts how the problem-solving process applies to the school system. This type of a process is crucial, as a responsive data-based decision-making system cannot be reduced to a manualized set of actions. In this "thinking is required" model of RtI we believe it is necessary to have a leadership culture that embraces a framework for organizing its efforts.

Although there is a plethora of organization frameworks that may be useful to consider as examples, we have encountered two specific models that districts have used successfully as a starting point for guiding their thinking and planning related to RtI implementation. First, the systems change model for RtI (Curtis, Cohen, & Castillo, 2006) defines three broad stages of the change process that influence efforts to scale up RtI systems. These three stages are labeled: *consensus building*, *infrastructure development*, and *implementation*. To these we have added *sustainability* to reflect the need for deliberate strategies for generalizing and maintaining RtI systems. Districts seeking to scale up or improve their RtI processes find it helpful to define their actions within these stages and to consider their results with respect to this model in determining which actions are needed to move forward toward higher levels of implementation.

A second framework that is emerging as a model to guide district improvement efforts related to RtI has been described by Wallace, Blase, Fixsen, and Naoom (2008). This framework identified the roles and structures necessary for implementing research findings in educational practice. This model includes definitions of the processes and stages of implementation as well as the roles of support necessary for effective implementation. Readers interested in additional information on this model are directed to visit the very informative National Implementation Research Network Web site at http://www.fpg.unc.edu/∼nirn/.

District leaders may be inclined to avoid the process of defining their system with the aid of these organizing frameworks because of strong pressure to take action. However, without clearly articulated guiding frameworks for implementation, many districts become lost and confused when it is discovered they are not making progress toward their desired outcomes. Without a "roadmap" for the system, it is easy for district leadership to become overwhelmed or disjointed in their efforts. We recommend that districts at all stages of RtI implementation identify relevant organizing frameworks to guide their RtI implementation because we have observed that it is extremely challenging to effectively assess, organize, guide, evaluate, and update different and complex efforts occurring across multiple school sites without a model to organize these actions.

Coordination of Assessment and Data Management

Effective use of student outcome data is the foundation on which RtI systems are built. One of the biggest challenges for schools trying to implement RtI frameworks is the establishment of effective assessment procedures and developing staff skills for using data to drive instructional decisions (VanDerHeyden & Tilly, 2011). Through no fault of their own, teachers and other staff typically do not have sufficient training and experience in assessment techniques, concepts of measurement, or interpreting data to be effective in using data for instruction. Therefore, a critical component of district-level support is to identify or select individuals with expertise in these areas to provide coaching and support for all staff. Although general professional development activities, such as staff inservices or conference attendance, can increase knowledge in this area, these "one and done" efforts are not sufficient to support the depth of knowledge and procedural skills needed for effective use of data to guide instruction. In addition to these general support activities, effective RtI implementers

provide ongoing training and support through the use of coaches that are embedded within the system. Often, individual coaches are psychologists at the building level who are supported by a coordinator at the district level.

The staff responsible for coordinating these coaching efforts are charged with ensuring that assessment routines can be integrated across grade levels and buildings within the district so that a coherent picture can be developed regarding program effects and individual student performance. Without effective data management and analysis, even the best assessment data will not be useful to those trying to make educational decisions. Districts demonstrating successful RtI processes have recognized the need for the coordination of assessment procedures, data management, and staff development in basic measurement concepts, interpretation of data, and data-based decision making (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). To address these needs requires that one or more individuals be given the responsibility for coordinating and carrying out these activities. Many larger districts have established a position at the district-level that serves this role; other districts have incorporated these responsibilities within existing district level staff roles. Regardless, the assignment of these roles and the provision of adequate time for those assigned to accomplish these tasks should be prioritized by district leaders wishing to establish RtI systems for their schools.

One of the important tasks for district-level staff who are assigned to the coordination of assessment and data management is to develop a clear and coherent assessment framework that identifies the purposes of the assessments used and connect these assessments to decision-making processes in the district. It is crucial that these assessment frameworks be based on credible research supporting the tools and procedures selected. Therefore, persons assigned this responsibility must be well versed in the assessment research literature.

An assessment framework is needed to establish a clear articulation of the assessment procedures deployed in terms of their purpose and placement within the decision-making routine. Without a well-articulated assessment framework, assessment systems become random and haphazard. When this occurs, there is great variability in the form and function of assessments that generates confusion or conflict. In districts without a clearly articulated assessment framework, we often observe that a great (often too great) amount of data is being collected, but staff are unable to make sense of the data or use it for instructional decision making. Examples of tools for outlining a district assessment framework can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

Beyond defining and managing the assessment process and coordinating the production of summary data reports for teachers, a district-level coordinator can also serve a critical role in communication across the district. Although a certain amount of building-level autonomy is necessary for establishing RtI structures to fit each building context, it is also important that there is coherence across the district. The district-level coordinator needs to structure the role to allow participation on a regular basis with building-level leadership teams. In this way, the coordinator becomes a conduit for information from the district level and also across buildings.

A third important role for the individual responsible for district-level data management and coordination is that of producing summary reports from the data collected. These summary reports must be accessible to teachers and building teams in a timely manner so that decisions can be made using relevant data about student performance. The task of integrating data into summary formats, including visual representations, can be aided by database tools associated with the various assessments selected, but it is typically necessary for someone to integrate information from these various data sources into simple summary reports for considering aggregate outcomes and disaggregated results across different subgroups.

Finally, district coordination of data review activities at the building and district levels is needed to promote effective data interpretation. Annual routines for reviewing district outcomes across buildings and discussions regarding the implications for planning are important activities that

Assessment Framework Matrix

Question is about...	Type of Assessment	Purpose of Assessment	Reference	Answers	Actions	Analogy
System or System Unit	Summative	Drive L-T Improvement Planning	Benchmarks Comparables High Performers	-How are we doing overall? How did we do? -What direction are we headed? -Where should we focus efforts to improve?	Continue, refine or change the plan	Standings
Cumulative learning outcome	*Grades*	*Communicate learning outcome*	*Teacher Defined Standard*	*What level of mastery was attained*	*Continue course sequence, repeat, or remediate*	*Individual statistics*
Patterns of progress toward system outcome goals	Interim	Identify groups "on-track" and "off-track"	Relevant benchmarks	Who is responding to instruction? Who is not responding to instruction?	Continue, refine or change instruction	Scoreboard
Individual status or growth toward specific learning objectives.	Formative	Individual short-term progress	Aimline	Is this student mastering the essential skills? Is the instructional program working for this student?	Continue, extend, refine or change materials, pace, instructional approach, etc.	Play by play outcomes

FIGURE 1. Assessment framework matrix. Long-Term (L-T) = XX.

promote communication and coordination across the buildings in a district. These annual reviews with selected building-level leaders promote awareness and learning across settings within the district. Without district-level coordination of these activities, including involvement in building-level planning and data reviews as well as district-wide review activities, RtI efforts are sporadic and can develop in ways that become counterproductive in the scope of the larger system.

Culture and Beliefs

Perhaps one of the most overlooked factors affecting RtI implementation is the role of culture and beliefs that exist in a school or district (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009). The prevailing attitudes and beliefs of staff in a district, as well as the historical traditions and values that have evolved in each district, have a strong influence on the behaviors of staff and students alike. Others have framed these issues within the concept of consensus building (Kurns & Tilly, 2008). However, one labels it, the influence of the prevailing culture and beliefs that exist should not be overlooked as RtI systems are developing or when RtI efforts become stalled.

In our work, we have developed a staff survey adapted from the Self-Assessment of Problem Solving Implementation used in Florida schools (Castillo et al., 2010). This survey includes questions related to both beliefs and practices. One of the most consistent findings we have observed in reviewing responses from over 600 educators is that a surprisingly large number of individuals disagree with statements about the capacity of all students to achieve grade level benchmark skills (see Figure 3). One of the foundational beliefs necessary to support RtI implementation is that "we can effectively teach all children" (National Association of Directors of Special Education, 2005, p. 19). Furthermore, most districts incorporate a similar statement about the capacity of all children to learn in their mission and vision statements. However, our data indicate that a large number of educators may not believe that it is possible for all children to achieve specific learning targets. For those who do not believe this, the premise of RtI becomes nothing more than another platitude. In

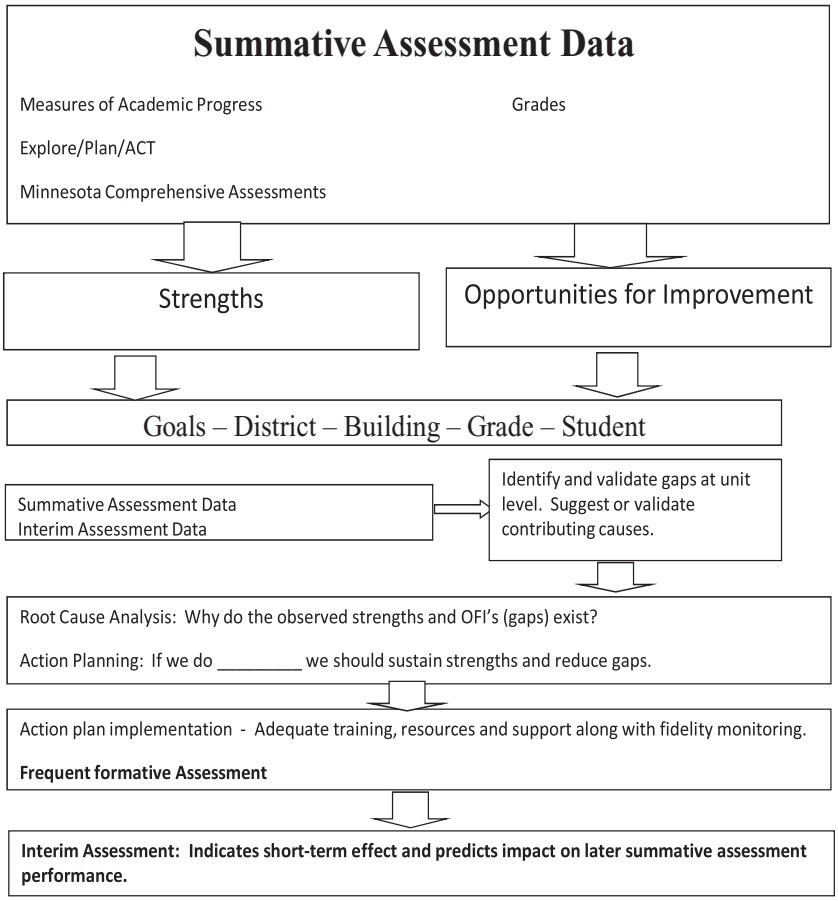

FIGURE 2. District assessment framework. Opportunities for Improvement (OFI) = XX.

districts where RtI has been well established and effective, staff believe that a systematic analysis of student responses to high-quality interventions will eventually yield information that can be used to close observed skill deficits. For those without this belief, participation in progressive intervention, data analysis, and problem solving will have a considerable likelihood of being marked by limited integrity and persistence of effort. As the implementation of RtI practices becomes more difficult, it may not seem worth the effort if there is a belief that "this student" or "these students" simply do not have the capacity for achieving the same learning targets as their peers.

To address this issue, we recommend structured opportunities to discuss these beliefs and the implications of these for engagement in the RtI process. An activity that can be helpful in this regard is to have staff anonymously record the percent of students who they believe can achieve grade-level learning targets and then to represent these graphically. This visual then can serve as a starting point for exploration of the sources of these beliefs and provide a rich discussion among those who endorse the capacity of all or nearly all to achieve established learning targets and those who believe that substantially fewer than 100% can make it. These discussions will often reveal several biases that can be addressed with evidence that challenges these biases. For example, some staff might identify that students from impoverished environments often have difficulties in achieving

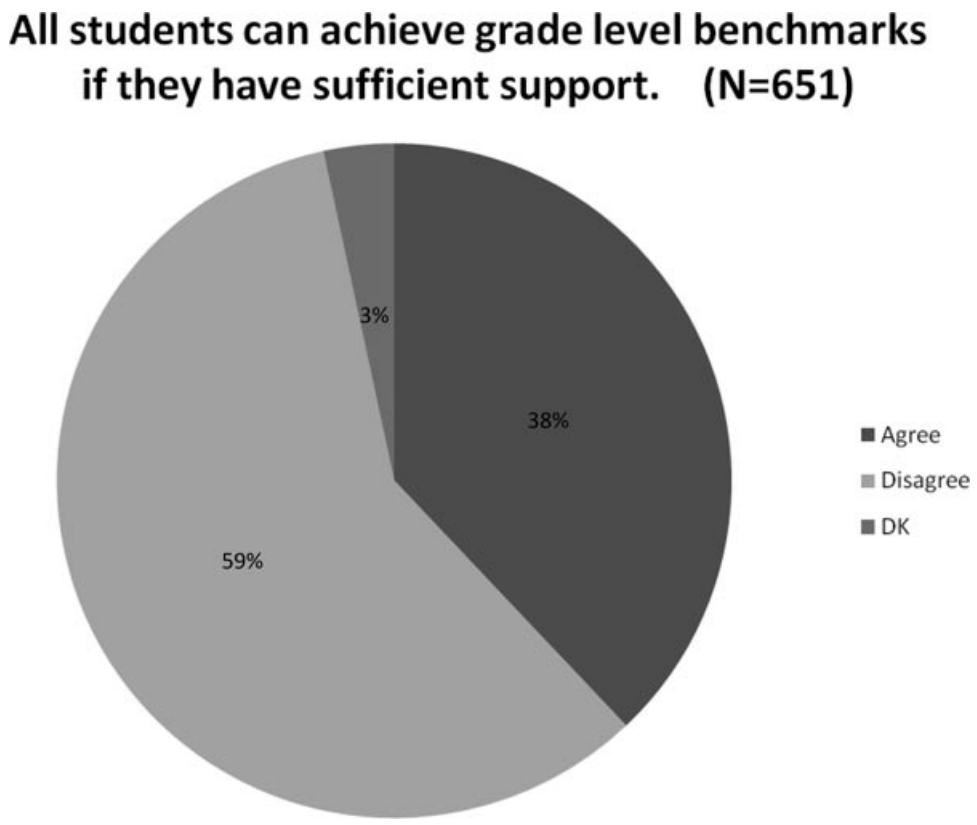

FIGURE 3. Staff beliefs about students' achievement potential. DK = don't know.

benchmark goals. Information from schools such as the "90-90-90" schools, where 90% of students are receiving free and reduced lunch, 90% of students are minority, and 90% or more are achieving grade-level benchmarks (Reeves, 2003) is useful for challenging these biases. More powerful yet are local examples of successful skill development among students or groups that typically do not meet learning targets. In more than one school where RtI systems have been successfully established, we have heard teachers exclaim that "we believe all students can achieve grade-level skill targets because we have seen it happen in our own school."

Without attention to the fundamental culture and beliefs that exist among district and building staff, along with the actions to address mismatches between RtI principles and prevailing beliefs, RtI efforts will falter. Districts where this occurs may have established the structures and tools associated with RtI and thus report that they are "doing RtI." but in reality these settings have achieved compliance in using RtI tools and routines, but the culture and beliefs have not changed. These are systems that find many staff continuing to focus on the process of identification and classification of students into different silos for "services" and not on the quality or impact of the services that are being delivered.

Staff Recruitment and Selection

The topic of staff recruitment is another often overlooked function that can play a substantial role in the establishment of effective and sustainable RtI systems. Clearly, no school or district can effectively implement RtI systems unless staff have the background knowledge and skills needed for these efforts. Successful organizations in any industry place heavy emphasis on selecting staff that possess the necessary skills and attitudes to perform at a high level (Collins, 2001). However, in many education settings, it is startling to observe that staff recruitment and selection procedures very often continue to follow routines that do not emphasize the selection of staff with the skills necessary for working in an RtI system. In addition, many of the pre-service programs where educators receive training have not incorporated instruction of RtI concepts and skills into their curricula. As a result, schools attempting to scale up RtI initiatives find themselves having to invest a great deal of time and money in providing staff with the essential knowledge and skills to be effective in these systems.

Although individual building administrators may have some autonomy in developing the procedures for staff recruitment and selection, district-driven guidelines about these procedures can have a substantial impact on improving these routines. Districts demonstrating the most effective application of RtI systems have established clear and deliberate priorities for the recruitment and selection of new staff (Ikeda et. al., 2007). In these systems, there is an awareness of the training programs and experiences that promote the knowledge and skills necessary for participating in RtI systems. Often, there is also a deliberate attempt made to develop relationships with these programs to facilitate recruitment of students with these skills.

In addition to recruitment practices, districts with effective RtI systems tend to have embedded in their selection process clear and specific profiles of the skills they are looking for in potential candidates for hire. Further, the interview processes in these districts contain very specific questions and performance tasks that target specific knowledge and skills that have been identified as priorities for the particular RtI system. Although there are some schools that have unintentionally assembled highly skilled and well-trained staff, these happenstance occurrences are rare. For districts with a true desire to build effective and sustainable models, deliberate and specific routines for staff recruitment and selection will need to be developed and deployed.

Resource Allocation

Many districts overlook policies and procedures related to resource allocation when evaluating district supports for RtI implementation. Issues of resource allocation for this discussion are not only about the distribution of financial resources, but RtI systems additionally require careful consideration of how time and staff resources are arranged. For RtI initiatives to be sustained over time, mechanisms to ensure adequate resource support from the district are needed. This is especially true in circumstances where resources are limited and new practices may be seen as unnecessary.

With the recent economic slowdown in the United States, the allocation of financial resources has received a great deal of attention. As budgets have become increasingly tight for most districts, the need for deliberate consideration of the impact of resource allocation decisions has become even more important to consider. In response to financial challenges, we have observed many districts struggle to determine how to make decisions regarding the distribution of reduced financial resources and ultimately what programs or services to cut to balance budgets.

As discussed earlier, many districts have evolved RtI practices from the building-level without much coordination or even awareness at the district level. As a result, there is a tendency to perceive staffing allocations or training resources associated with RtI implementation as good candidates for reduction. These recommendations surface because there is little broad awareness of the purpose and impact of RtI initiatives. To avoid this circumstance, RtI implementers need to establish clear

and explicit links between RtI actions and district strategic plans or goals. In addition, frequent and specific communication with decision makers regarding outcomes associated with RtI practices needs to occur. Truly, a fully realized RtI framework of service delivery has personnel that are integrated into the system and are therefore indispensable.

To promote sustainability, district procedures for making decisions regarding resource allocation must include careful evaluation of impacts of resource decisions on student outcomes. All too often, when reductions in programs or services are necessary, the process for determining what to cut and what to sustain becomes disconnected from information available regarding how initiatives like RtI impact student outcomes. In these situations, it is common for the determination to be made that budgets will be cut equally across programs or departments. In contrast, districts that have recognized the impact of RtI structures and practices prioritize continued support for RtI actions that have explicitly demonstrated positive impacts on student outcomes (Holliday & Clarke, 2010). Thus, the impact of budget reductions on RtI implementation is often minimized.

Additionally, data that are collected as part of the RtI system allows for more informed decisions about which instruction and intervention programs to continue versus which to discontinue. This is especially helpful during budget cuts, as more informed decisions can be made to maintain programs that have actual or greater impact on students.

Another resource allocation issue that often arises has to do with the allocation of time or staff to RtI activities. The implementation of RtI frameworks often requires substantial adjustments in schedules and sometimes requires that students participating in intervention activities will not be able to participate in other instructional activities. Staff may also have to spend time in intervention delivery that would traditionally been spent doing other things. This reallocation of schedule time and staff time can be difficult for some staff and some stakeholders. Therefore, questions will arise regarding the rationale for these decisions. It will often be necessary for district-level support to be provided for these resource allocations in the face of resistance and concerns about doing things differently. In districts that have established a focus on student outcomes with a well-communicated and coordinated process for resource allocation, these issues do not become obstacles. In districts without these decision-making mechanisms, resource allocation challenges can limit or completely inhibit the effective implementation of these RtI structures.

Summary and Implications for School Psychologists

This article provides information to those leading RtI efforts in schools, districts, state departments, and universities. It is essential that the aforementioned district-level factors be considered to promote more effective RtI implementation and sustainability into the future. It is hoped that the content provided here will provide a basis for further discussion and analysis of these district-level support factors for those wanting to enhance or re-energize their RtI efforts.

Regardless of their role in a particular district, school psychologists are critical in furthering RtI effectiveness by engaging at the district level. They possess critical knowledge regarding measurement, data interpretation, and data management. This knowledge places school psychologists in a position to influence the development of these district-level structures through education, modeling, and advocacy with those in leadership positions at the district level.

Frequently, school psychologists will be tapped to fill district-level roles responsible for developing assessment frameworks, coordinating the delivery of assessments, and managing data to be used for RtI. Often, these activities must be demonstrated as useful before administrators will be willing to make the investments that are required to support these positions. Therefore, school psychologists should be prepared to structure their activities to include time for assisting district-level staff in developing the structures that are needed to support effective RtI implementation.

Through careful consideration at the district level, one can ensure that RtI efforts can be maintained in years to come. By weaving the tenets of RtI into the philosophy, mission, and goals of a district, consensus is created, and the operating culture of the district will sustain practices aligned with RtI. Through systematic critique and revision of district policy, procedures, and practices, the probability that the system will continue to make data-based decisions that improve outcomes for all students, regardless of the individuals in leadership roles, is substantially improved.

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