
Ninety-Five Percent of Students at Benchmark Is Achievable

A District Example

As stated in the introduction, this book has a different view of response to intervention (RTI). It looks at RTI as an opportunity to introduce a paradigm shift to a school or district. It's so much more than procedures for special education qualification. RTI can bring increased collaboration among teachers within a building and break down silos between general education and special education. It can change how teachers view students in buildings from "my students" to "our students." RTI is an opportunity to set in place the structures for teachers to talk about students in entirely new ways. It can help teachers put processes in place to implement data-differentiated layers of instruction. The purpose of this chapter is to give readers a peek into the changed place a school building can become. Let's start with the end in mind—a vision for what a district and a school can look like after RTI is fully implemented. Complete definitions of RTI, curriculum-based measurement (CBM), and other terms will be provided in later chapters.

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Fifteen years ago in many U.S. elementary schools, classroom teachers were functioning like they existed on their own separate islands. They each prepared and taught their lessons alone, based on their own knowledge and using whatever materials they could access. Teachers held themselves personally responsible for the success of the students assigned to them for the year. There were no reading coaches or professional learning communities to provide the support of colleagues. If one student struggled in learning to read, the teacher could advocate having the child placed in one of the limited number of spots in the one-on-one tutoring program, if offered. If the school received Title I funding, some students were pulled out of the classroom for extra support. Other than these limited forms of support, which were available only in some schools, teachers were on their own to help all students make a year's progress in reading, math, science, and social studies.

Does this sound familiar? The school you taught in at the beginning of your career may not have done it just exactly like this, but most likely you've seen at least some of these practices. A major issue with this approach is that the classroom teacher finds it very hard to address the many different skill needs of the 20 to 30 students in class. Effective intervention groups for most deficit students have only 4 to 5 students at a time. In Grade 1 and above, there are 5 to 10 different types of skill deficits that can hold a student back from proficiently reading grade-level text with comprehension. The teacher can work with only one group at a time and often feels that some of the students are treading water while others are getting instruction.

NEW APPROACH

Given that one of the major problems of past practices is providing small-group instruction that is differentiated by need, let's envision a different approach. What if time is designated in the school's master schedule so that the entire grade-level team provides differentiated instruction for 30 minutes at the same time? Imagine, during a 30-minute block, all students at a grade level go to a small group for differentiated instruction based on deficit skills. This approach, which we've named *walk-to intervention*, is where students walk to where the group is located. The group may meet in the students' own classroom if they have been placed in their classroom teacher's group; however, it's more likely that students will be in a group taught by one of the other classroom teachers or another staff member, such as a reading specialist or teaching assistant. Decisions about the placement of students into groups are based on assessment data, which clearly identifies any skill deficits. The entire grade-level team meets to place students across

numerous groups—many more groups than an individual teacher can meet with in a given day. Not only will each teacher at the grade level instruct a group, but each instructional assistant will be trained and supervised to effectively use materials to instruct small intervention groups. This approach is powerful because the number of staff members enables smaller group sizes, instruction is focused on a specific skill, and students can be placed in any of the groups to receive instruction in their skill of greatest need.

Although this model sounds intuitive and logical, there is one cultural issue that stands in the way: This approach involves trust between teachers to “share” students with one another, at least for this half hour daily. For many teachers, sharing their students is not an issue; for others, it poses a problem. Teachers who view themselves as stronger than their colleagues may be hesitant to release students to those they perceive to be weaker in instruction. In addition, educators who feel personally responsible and accountable for their students’ achievement may hesitate to give up control. Maybe the approach of the past has caused teachers to feel this way.

One of the most frequent comments I’ve heard hundreds of schools report is that the language of teachers has changed. It’s no longer “my kids”; it’s “our kids.”

When schools use the walk-to-intervention model, teachers are forced to collaborate because they are placing all their own students across the full range of groups and they are teaching a small group that contains students from any of the classrooms. There is a team effort with this approach, and camaraderie develops. Teachers won’t let another teacher skip a day of intervention because it takes all of them to make it happen. One of the most frequent comments I’ve heard hundreds of schools report is that the language of teachers has changed. It’s no longer “my kids”; it’s “our kids.” This is a very powerful statement because it means that the grade level shares responsibility for all the students.

The walk-to-intervention model solves another issue. One teacher is no longer expected to single-handedly meet all the needs of every one of the students in the classroom. Some teachers are better at teaching phonics, and others are experts in comprehension. Each teacher can elect to teach the skill that takes advantage of personal expertise, and all students can benefit from having access to the expert in that area.

One requirement is that the groups must be different in size. For example, third-grade groups working on multisyllable words may be 14 to 18 students. At the same time, the third-grade students working on short vowels (a skill that should have been mastered by the end of first grade) will be in groups of no more than 5 students, and preferably only 3. Groups working on skills closest to benchmark are larger. Teachers taking the enrichment or acceleration groups must be comfortable having

very large groups of 25 to 30 students, which may be larger than a typical classroom. The variability in group size is critical in order to allow the groups working on the lowest skills to be the smallest.

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communities, the practice of reading coaches facilitating curriculum discussions with grade-level teams, and the encouragement of sharing lesson plans, elementary schools have changed dramatically in the past 10 years.

In grade-level collaboration meetings, teachers analyze the lessons and see the bigger picture of how the curriculum progresses throughout the year. Use of skill continuums clarify what students should master by the end of each grade. For example, in kindergarten, students need to master all levels of the phonological awareness continuum. That includes not only working with syllables and onset-rimes but also isolating, segmenting, blending, and manipulating phonemes. If a student hasn't mastered the skills through the core program, then placement in an intervention group provides access to more-explicit instruction on a

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deficit skill that should have already been mastered. Teachers use CBMs as well as diagnostic assessments to determine whether a student has mastered or is deficient in each skill.

By having a system of expected skill mastery, the school can be preventive and intervene as soon as a student begins to fall behind. First-grade teachers can rely on the kindergarten teachers to have been proactive in intervening to address any phonological awareness skill deficits. In schools in which students move between schools within the district, teachers can count on students arriving with mastery of particular skills. When there is a districtwide adoption of a common set of assessments and data-management systems, teachers can instantly access a student's data without waiting to receive a paper file from the student's previous teacher.

Data is used not only to initially identify any skill deficits and place students in a group for intervention but also to track whether instruction is working. Periodic, scheduled progress monitoring enables teachers to track a student's gains. If the instruction is not producing measurable results, teachers have to change course and try something else. A prevention approach with periodic progress monitoring communicates urgency. The entire staff understands the importance of moving students through the skills continuum on time and not allowing any extra time to go by.

WHAT LEVEL OF SUCCESS IS POSSIBLE?

Having read this “new approach,” educators should ask for evidence that the effort required to put these RTI practices in place will be worth it. Nearly all states recommend or require that schools use RTI data when determining which students qualify for special education services. The objective behind this is to replace or enhance the previous qualification procedure; IQ-achievement discrepancies were used to show that a student has the capability to learn yet has not been successful in learning—and the reason for the lack of success is a specific learning disability.

While nearly all states recommend implementation of RTI, most have provided districts very limited guidance or specificity on *how* to implement it. We believe that schools should implement RTI because it’s the right thing to do for students, not just the required thing to do. And while you’re doing it, you might as well proceed in a manner that puts collaboration in place, something that many principals are trying to embed in their school’s culture.

As stated previously, it’s important to start with the end in mind. What should we be striving for? Let’s look at an example of a medium-sized U.S. school district and what it did to implement RTI. This is a story about taking an RTI implementation to scale in a reasonably sized district. RTI created a new paradigm that will continue long after individual champions are gone; this district built capacity of its staff so that differentiated instruction will be sustained.

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As a quick overview of the district’s results (more details will be provided later in this chapter), I’ll outline the achievements during five years focused on raising reading-achievement scores districtwide. The district’s investment paid off as evident by these key indicators in the fall of 2009:

1. Because of interventions with kindergarten students, 94% of the district’s 4,300 Grade 1 students entered at benchmark as measured by *DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, Good & Kaminski, 2002b)*, which is up from 84% five years ago.
2. Because of interventions with Grade 1 students, 88% of the district’s students entered Grade 2 at *DIBELS* benchmark, which is up from 79% five years earlier.
3. On the spring 2009 state assessment, the district was first in Grade 3 reading scores among the 17 largest districts in the state.

Description of Example District

The elementary curriculum coordinator describes her district as “a data-driven district where reading is Goal Number 1 in our strategic plan.” The district is located in a community about 30 minutes outside of a major city. Because districts in this particular state are county-wide, this district’s 38 elementary schools serve both high and low SES (socioeconomic status) schools. Eight of the elementary schools received Reading First funding, and currently fourteen receive Title I schoolwide funds. (Both Reading First and Title I are U.S. Department of Education programs designed to provide funding for improving achievement of students from lower-income families.) Although 34% of the students districtwide receive free and reduced lunch, that population tends to be concentrated primarily in about a dozen schools in which 90% of students receive free lunch. In spite of the fact that students are from 148 countries and speak 108 languages, the percentage of students considered ELL (English language learners) is smaller than in many U.S. districts. The teachers’ union is very active in the district. Fifteen of the buildings aren’t eligible for either Reading First or Title I funds, so they don’t receive the money and materials that the other buildings do.

How Did the District Do It?

This district implemented a multitiered model of reading intervention districtwide for kindergarten through Grade 2 starting in 2004. As of early 2010, 30 of 38 elementary buildings have participated in on-site implementation and coaching to aid implementation of RTI. The district wants all schools to provide high-quality instruction and to achieve high reading levels. The district partnered with my consulting company, 95 Percent Group, to provide job-embedded, sustained professional development rich in coaching and support. Instead of the one-shot workshop model, the district knew that to make gains it would need a site-based approach where teachers were taught to analyze student data at a level far deeper than just the score, place students in groups focused by skill deficits, and practice effective small-group instructional strategies. Teachers were provided time to absorb the true meaning of data-differentiated instruction under the guidance of experts.

The district’s K–12 Reading Plan, required by the state department of education, provided the structure for this process. According to one of

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the staff members, the state is “requesting and highly encouraging us to assess with *DIBELS*. We are not going to give the *DIBELS* three times a year to all students and not

know what the red, yellow, and green colors mean.” The mantra was that if we are going to gather all this assessment data, then we need to know what it means.

The district’s K–12 Reading Plan articulates a set of decision rules that guide assessment and data-analysis practices in schools. Teachers were taught not to assume that all skills are mastered just because the child’s *DIBELS* instructional recommendation level is benchmark; only after looking at the probes to confirm that accuracy is above 95% do teachers place students in an acceleration or enrichment group. If accuracy is below 95%, teachers dig deeper into the data to determine whether to assess with our phonological awareness or phonics diagnostic screener.

As the elementary curriculum coordinator said, “One of the main principles that drove the district’s RTI implementation was a goal to level the playing field across our schools.” One of my strongest memories when I first started working with this district five years ago was listening to the elementary curriculum coordinator say at an administrators’ meeting that “we are all reading *first* schools.” In spite of the fact that only a small percentage of the schools qualified and received federal Reading First funds, the view was that there were children not reading well in *all* the schools, including the high-performing schools—just not as many. Therefore, good reading practices needed to be in place uniformly throughout all the district’s schools. The goal was that, as much as possible, all teachers receive the training that the reading coaches and teachers got; the district committed professional development funds to cover training to the extent possible. Although a reading coach position wasn’t funded in every building, a “literacy team member” was designated, who attended monthly full-day trainings.

Phase-In: How the District Moved Across the Buildings

The district made an important strategic decision that contributed to its success—it would go slow and get it right. It didn’t try to implement RTI at all buildings in the first year; it didn’t even implement it at all grade levels in the selected buildings in the first year. Instead, four years have been spent providing professional development and assistance to 30 of the 38 elementary buildings in this gradual phase-in process. When supporting a new cadre of schools, professional development was provided in strands according to role. Administrators met quarterly during all four years, and monthly meetings were held with one designated reading specialist from each building throughout the first three years of RTI implementation. This one

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designated literacy team member from each building was, in some cases, a full-time reading coach and, in other cases, a person who taught small groups of struggling readers.

Knowing that the one-shot workshop approach doesn't result in implementation with something this complex, the district used a sustained job-embedded approach to professional development. It worked through cadres of four to eight schools a year to provide yearlong assistance for the kindergarten and first-grade staff the initial year. All kindergarten through Grade 1 classroom teachers attended a full-day workshop, plus the grade-level teams met in school-based modeling and coaching sessions with a 95 Percent Group consultant several times during the year. The on-site sessions with the consultant focused on making sure that the assessment data were used: Students below benchmark on their *DIBELS* scores got 30 minutes daily in a targeted skills group where effective instructional strategies were employed.

Funding provided through Reading First actually provided the start to this implementation even before it was referred to as RTI. Some schools took full advantage of this opportunity and others didn't. When the elementary curriculum coordinator observed the professional development and listened to the positive feedback, she realized the potential of this approach for the entire district. She recommended allocating district professional development (PD) funds to make this same approach available to other schools but knew that to be successful the plan would have to get the attention and commitment of a school team. After several hours of strategizing, we created a plan that would use an application process to select schools that seemed committed to implementation. The district decided that the only schools that were eligible to apply the first year were those that didn't receive either Reading First or Title I funding.

In March 2006, the elementary curriculum coordinator went to a principals' meeting to present this opportunity. Eligible schools could return to their buildings and work with their literacy teams to prepare a submission. Interested schools would complete applications to participate in district-funded PD as a demonstration site (demo site). The selected sites would receive a year of "free" (district-funded), sustained professional development, a few extra materials, and attention from the district office. The application was simple and included only three questions about the school's commitment to use data to inform decisions, and responses were limited to three pages plus a graph of the school's data. There was enough funding to select four schools to participate as demo sites in the initial year. In return, the schools would be asked to allow staff from other schools to observe.

Yet perhaps the most important thing the demo sites received was less tangible; embracing this initiative gave the staff a focus and vision,

and the collaboration time with staff from the other demo sites provided a professional learning community with access to models from other buildings. During the year, consultants instructed, observed, coached, and mentored the teachers. The result was that the teachers and reading specialists in the demo sites improved their decision-making capabilities. They developed skills in interpreting their students' data, making informed grouping decisions, and teaching small intervention groups using more-effective strategies. They came to student study teams with individual progress-monitoring folders.

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One of the four demo site principals reported, "In 2006, when I became principal, 64% of kindergarten students met *DIBELS* benchmark levels. Two years later, 88% of this same group of students started second grade at grade level in reading."

Going to Scale: Offering Similar Support to *All* Schools

The district's goal was for all 38 buildings to use the processes and practices so that all students reached reading goals and 95% or more of students would reach benchmark reading levels. In order to go to scale with all 38 elementary buildings, the plan was to provide assistance to each school to the degree needed to achieve implementation. Because of success during the first year, the district decided to provide some support, albeit more limited than the previous year, so the demo sites could not only deepen implementation at kindergarten through Grade 1 but also expand the intervention groups to Grades 2 and 3. In addition, the program was expanded to take on another cadre of five schools named Spotlight I schools. They received the same type of professional development, including the teacher workshop and on-site data analysis and instructional coaching. The third year, the demo sites had embedded practices in kindergarten through Grade 3 and, therefore, the only support they needed was literacy-team and administrator support to sustain the implementation. Next, a third cadre of six schools was accepted through applications again, this time called Spotlight II schools (see Table 1.1).

There are several benefits of the district's use of phasing in groups of schools for the intensive professional development. This enabled the district to concentrate funds to provide extensive support for kindergarten and first-grade teachers to learn new data-analysis and instructional techniques. It also allowed schools to learn from their mistakes. One of the Spotlight I schools tried to implement across kindergarten through Grade 5 in its first year even though the district PD

Table 1.1 Schools in the District

Site-Based Coaching	2005–2006	2006–2007	2007–2008	2008–2009	2009–2010
Reading First Schools	Eight schools in their fourth year of Reading First funding in 2005–2006				
Grades K–1	X	X			
Grades 2–3	X	X			
Demo Sites	Four schools selected by application process				
Grades K–1		X	X limited		
Grades 2–3			X		
Spotlight I	Five schools selected by application process				
Grades K–1			X	X limited	
Grades 2–3				X	
Spotlight II	Six schools selected by application process				
Grades K–1				X	X limited
Grades 2–3					X
Title I Schools	Twelve of the fourteen schools that are receiving Title I funding, not selected by application process				
Grades K–1					X
Grades 2–3					

was for kindergarten and Grade 1 only. That turned out to be a mistake as later reported by both the principal and the reading coach. The stress in the building reached a very high level; it was just too much to take on in a single year. At administrator meetings in later years, the principal shared that she would not encourage anyone to do what she tried to do.

All buildings sent a representative to attend the administrators' and coaches' training, and some of the schools took advantage of the offers to observe at the demo sites and spotlight schools. Most of the teams who visited took the assessment practices, data-analysis and grouping procedures, and intervention instructional practices to their buildings. One of the Spotlight I reading coaches remarked, "Everyone would come and watch the process—board members, district office staff, other teachers, and coaches from other schools." Visitors came to see key activities, such

as grade-level meetings to regroup students with fresh progress-monitoring data. They would observe teachers at a grade level bringing filled-out sticky notes to designate the next skill needed for each student. Using a science project board, teachers placed sticky notes under skill categories and then arranged the names in groups once they could see how many students needed each skill. The final step was to assign teachers to groups, and by the conclusion of the 40-minute meeting, the grouping and staffing were done.

Many of the Spotlight I and II school staff members had visited the demo sites, so they were much more informed about the commitment involved. As a result, their readiness to implement was much higher than the demo sites. A reading specialist at one of the Spotlight I schools said that when she went to visit a demo site, she had been doing pull-out groups and seeing more than 100 students daily. However, that wasn't enough. She just couldn't reach all the students that needed small-group intervention instruction. After the two years of PD provided to her school as a Spotlight II school, a major shift occurred; the classroom teachers are now providing small-group intervention instruction. Although the reading specialist still sees students, she is no longer the only one working with students who are below benchmark. Her school calls the differentiation time "surf time" to give it a more neutral name than "intervention time," because students who are at benchmark level are receiving acceleration instruction while students who are below benchmark focus on addressing skill deficits. Now that the teachers understand the process and have bought into it with the support of a committed principal, the reading specialist updates groups after each progress-monitoring period via spreadsheets posted on the school's server. One impact that this reading specialist commented on recently is that now teachers are saying, "It's not your kids and my kids, it's our kids. This works—my kids are moving." In the spring of 2009, her school was the leader in third-grade reading scores for the district on the state assessment.

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District Role in Implementation

After the success of the demo sites, the district office mandated several critical things. First, the elementary schools were required to add a 30-minute intervention block outside of the 90-minute reading block. In addition, the district recommended that schools use the walk-to-intervention approach, in which students are grouped across grade levels. Principals were encouraged to realign instructional personnel to increase

the number of staff members available to provide differentiated group instruction. Schedules were carefully examined to free up assistants who were doing bus and lunch duty so that they now could be available during differentiation block times. These assistants were critical to making group sizes smaller.

In addition to mandating that elementary schools add intervention blocks to their master schedules, the district office specified the assessments that would be used for elementary students. All K–5 students were assessed with *DIBELS* (this was before the state’s early literacy assessment was available). The district provided training on how to give the assessment, as well as how to use the data-management system for collecting and reporting the data. To standardize diagnostic assessments, the district acquired licenses for 95 Percent Group’s diagnostic screeners (*PSI*, or *Phonics Screener for Intervention*, and *PASI*, or *Phonological Awareness Screener for Intervention*) for all elementary buildings. It also developed a process where every student who scores below benchmark now has an intervention folder that accompanies the student when moving to another district school. This solved the issue of having to wait for a cumulative folder to be sent when a student transferred from one school to another. These intervention folders hold the scoring forms for the phonological awareness and phonics diagnostic screeners, so the receiving teacher can see the most recent progress-monitoring scores and place the student in an intervention group immediately.

Data to Validate Success

After five years, this district has 95% of students at benchmark in kindergarten and Grade 1 and is approaching 95% at Grade 2. Improvement during the last five years, districtwide, in *DIBELS* scores (18,000 K–3 students) is shown in Table 1.2.

As Table 1.2 shows, in five years, this district has made tremendous progress. Because of the excellent interventions in kindergarten, the first-grade students are entering the year with much stronger skills; the

Table 1.2 Districtwide *DIBELS* Data: Five-Year Change Based on Beginning-of-Year Measurements

Grade	Five-Year Change Students at Benchmark	Five-Year Change Students at Intensive
Grade 1	84% to 94%	4% to 1%
Grade 2	74% to 88%	8% to 4%
Grade 3	46% to 75%	26% to 9%

beginning-of-year first-grade scores have gone from 84% to 94% of students at benchmark in *DIBELS*. This figure includes data from all 38 elementary schools and represents approximately 4,000 students at each grade level. This is clearly a model of “going to scale.”

In addition, in the past, there used to be discussions about a “second-grade slump” in the district. Staff believed that students would finish a wonderful first-grade year and then slump in second grade. Many reasons were offered to explain this decline in reading scores, including that the assessment passages were too hard, that the passages were too focused on expository to the exclusion of narrative, and even that second grade is where principals place the weakest teachers. The results in Table 1.2 show that the second-grade slump had actually been a first-grade hang-over. Students didn’t get caught up in first grade, and their deficits just became more obvious in second grade.

Tier I Core-Program Implementation

The district uses one of the big Tier I basal reading programs; however, it is now about seven years old. The district has done as much as any other reasonably sized district to implement the core program with fidelity. One of the critical things the district did to assure that Tier I would be as effective as possible was to align the core with the continuum of skills for phonological awareness and phonics used in the RTI implementation. The phonological awareness (PA) continuum represents a progression approach to articulating a student’s development of PA skills from simple to complex. Therefore, the skill continuums for Tiers I, II, and III are the same, which provides a consistent learning-to-read continuum across grade levels. The district believes that this gave them one solidified approach to instruction. In kindergarten, for example, a committee of teachers and reading specialists examined all the lessons in the core basal reading program and made charts to show whether there are lessons on each skill in the phonological awareness continuum.

In addition to the curriculum mapping of the core program to the skills continuums, the committee also created a kindergarten toolbox. Each kindergarten teacher received a box with materials to use when teaching the skills so that the core was supplemented to address identified weaknesses.

Some RTI advisers recommend taking a full year to study the Tier I core program to understand the degree to which it meets the needs of the district’s student population and identify any supplemental materials needed. This step is critical—if the core is failing to meet the needs of too many students, then too many students will need Tier II intervention instruction. Within this particular state, the RTI training recommends this step. However, the district launched its RTI effort before the state released its training. The approach the district took was that it couldn’t

afford to spend an entire year studying the Tier I core first; it would implement Tier II and study Tier I simultaneously. As stated by one of the administrators, “Frankly, we don’t have time to do that.”

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We recommend to all our clients this process of evaluating and addressing the shortcomings of Tier I curriculum while simultaneously initiating Tier II small groups. Implementing the data-analysis and grouping techniques discussed in Chapter 3 of this

book equips the staff to better analyze why Tier I is not effective and determine beneficial supplements or strategies to address the deficits.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many times when district reading scores demonstrate huge gains, one of the first questions neighboring districts ask is “What program are you using?” This is the wrong question to ask. Scientifically based research studies using random assignment of students to different published programs have demonstrated that there is nearly no difference in student results among several of the major published basal reading programs.

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Success is not about which program you buy; it’s about how you train your teachers to deliver excellent instruction using the materials available. So the question that the neighboring districts should ask is “What was your professional development model?”

The district’s approach to professional development provided different training for principals, APs (assistant principals), coaches, teachers, and so on. Implementing data-driven differentiated instruction in an elementary school is very hard without the support of the principal. Since the principal needs to be on board, it’s wise to start the implementation by planning a principals’ meeting. But it doesn’t stop there. We recommend continuing to meet with principals regularly, especially during the first year of an implementation. Principals benefit from having their own meetings where they not only receive information but also share challenges and advice with one another. In addition, in districts where most of the elementary buildings have assistant principals, we plan morning meetings with principals and a repeat of the same content with APs in the afternoon. Although principals don’t need to analyze data at the student level, they need to know what teachers are supposed to be looking at when forming their groups effectively and how to read the data reports. The district provided training with a consultant quarterly for the first two years, and then, as each cadre went through on-site intensive coaching, that smaller group of principals met regularly as well.

Reading coaches or RTI coordinators also need training focused on their needs. Their role positions them as the local expert in the building, so they need to be able to advise the principal as well as support teachers. Many principals meet weekly with the RTI coordinator to discuss implementation, talk about processes, problem solve issues within grade-level teams, and generally keep the implementation going. In the 70% of schools in the district that didn't have a full-time reading coach, a reading expert, who was referred to as the literacy team member, was designated. The literacy team member met for one full day a month the first year the district launched RTI, and a consultant was there about half of those times while the elementary curriculum coordinator facilitated discussion and sharing during the other meetings. These schools also received more summer training for several days during the first two summers. As each building went through its two-year cycle of site-based modeling and coaching, the literacy team members had sustained training not only by attending each grade level's meeting with the consultant but also by attending a separate strand of meetings designed to pretrain them in the instructional strategies that would be provided to teachers.

Administrator Training

The district's view was that to be effective at leading the RTI implementation in their building, principals needed several different types of information. The professional development provided to all administrators included how to

- schedule time for differentiated instruction;
- allocate staff resources to enable appropriate-sized groups;
- use the PA and phonics continuums to consider student-skill mastery;
- discuss data and review reports from *DIBELS* and diagnostic screeners; and
- observe intervention group instruction and identify when teacher support is needed.

Principals make several key structural decisions mostly in the area of scheduling and staffing. These decisions are important because they have a direct effect on the number of minutes of instruction students receive in their differentiated groups.

In April 2006, at the end of the first year of the demo sites implementation, the district held an important meeting with the principals of all 38 elementary schools. The purpose of this meeting was to communicate a recommendation that each building add to its master schedule a designated 30-minute differentiation block outside of the core reading-block

time. Demo site schools had done this and had learned that it was a critical component of their implementation. During this spring meeting, principals heard about the advantages the demo sites had because of their common grade-level intervention blocks for kindergarten and first grade. The intervention blocks enabled the demo sites to group across classrooms and “flood” all available staff to join teachers in teaching intervention groups at those two grade levels to reduce group sizes. After this spring meeting, approximately half of the schools voluntarily added the intervention blocks for the next fall. In later years, the district added this to its K–12 Reading Plan, making the intervention block a requirement for all schools.

In the educational community, there is much discussion about the role of the principal as an instructional leader. Overseeing an elementary building is very difficult if a principal doesn’t have a basic understanding of reading instruction. Therefore, one of the most important yet difficult skills for principals to acquire is the ability to walk through classrooms and recognize whether the instruction is effective or needs improvement. The district’s professional development plan addressed this in a powerful way. While a school participated in the site-based implementation support, the principal received training in how to use a “walk-through observation” form to identify whether characteristics of effective intervention instruction were present or absent. During the walk-through training, which occurred at one of the buildings, the group of principals all observed the same instruction, took notes on their observation forms, and then debriefed on which aspects of instruction were excellent and which needed coaching.

Although this training was focused on intervention instruction, much of the discussion applied to delivering effective reading instruction during the core as well.

As the elementary curriculum coordinator said, “It’s hard for building administrators to inspect what they don’t know.” Principals need to trust their reading coaches, but it’s tempting to defer too much to the judgment of the coach rather than to judge instruction themselves. While it’s beneficial to have coaches play a key role in identifying good and poor examples of instruction, principals who know what to look for are better instructional leaders. I recall one conversation that happened after such training. At the conclusion of a walk-through observation training, the principal of the host school lingered in the conference room. After everyone else left, she looked at me and said,

While it’s beneficial to have coaches play a key role in identifying good and poor examples of instruction, principals who know what to look for are better instructional leaders.

“I learned so much today. I didn’t know what to look for. I also realized that my reading coach knows a lot. She leaned over while we were watching a teacher and told me what was wrong, and it was exactly what you said later in the debriefing.”

Principals were also trained on how to track student progress. Not only did they use *DIBELS* reports, but also they were given reports that show indicators to track data monthly using consolidated diagnostic screener progress-monitoring data. They were provided with reports to track the rate of movement of students up either the phonological awareness or the phonics continuum, depending on the grade level.

Reading Coach and Reading Specialist Training

All the literacy team representatives participated in monthly meetings for several years, as well as in two summer institutes. Some of the meetings focused on foundational knowledge about reading development. The topics at the meetings included information about how to

- analyze *DIBELS* data to determine which students needed further diagnostic assessment to pinpoint skill deficits;
- administer and score PA and phonics diagnostic screeners;
- place students who score below benchmark in small groups based on skill deficits identified by the diagnostic screeners;
- help teachers plan and deliver effective intervention instruction; and
- watch the progress of individual students monthly and move students up the continuum in groups once they show mastery through assessment with alternate forms of the diagnostic screener.

Teacher Training

When a school entered a cadre, classroom teachers of the designated grade levels (usually only kindergarten and Grade 1 in the first year) were provided with special training for two years. The first step of this training is for teachers to attend one full-day workshop by grade level followed by four grade-level meetings in each school, typically a half day each. Throughout the year, teachers were taught how to

- analyze *DIBELS* data to determine which students needed further diagnostic assessment to pinpoint skill deficits;
- administer and score PA and phonics screeners;
- place students who score below benchmark in small groups based on skill deficits identified by the diagnostic screeners;
- watch the progress of individual students monthly and move students up the continuum in groups once they show mastery through assessment with alternate forms of the diagnostic screener; and
- teach using routines for phonological awareness and phonics instruction.

The district provided some intervention materials, but the focus was much more about learning the format of an intervention lesson and how to incorporate instructional strategies and routines that are powerful for struggling readers. Teachers were given support in learning the look and feel of effective intervention instruction and given Routine Cards¹ to assist them in learning the foundational strategies such as “move it and say it” to teach phoneme segmentation. Before this professional development, teachers had been using activities they had downloaded from a reading-research website as the core of their lesson. What changed is that the teachers’ lessons incorporated routines to provide good explicit instruction in the target skill, and the focus of the activities shifted to providing practice on what was previously taught.

Teachers mastered the routines by not only watching the consultant model “live” with their students during visits to the school but also by viewing online videos of each routine “just in time”—right before they taught it.

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NEXT STEPS

Having achieved substantial progress in the kindergarten through Grade 3 reading scores during the past five years, the district’s next step is to move on to Grades 4 and 5. There are many students currently in fourth and fifth grade who didn’t get the benefit of early identification and immediate intervention when they were in kindergarten through third grade. In addition, the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers haven’t received the same model of professional development. Addressing reading deficits is much more challenging at these grade levels. The district is aware that while some students have decoding deficits, others will need intervention in comprehension. The district has already begun using the phonics screener to identify and sort students based on whether they have decoding issues versus whether they decode well but have vocabulary and comprehension deficits that suppress their ability to process what they are reading. Through assessing a sample of fourth-grade students with the *PSI*, the district found a significant percentage of struggling readers cannot differentiate words with long vowel silent-*e* versus the consonant-vowel-consonant pattern.

While presenting at a conference in November 2009, the district’s elementary curriculum coordinator stated, “It’s our commitment to

¹*Blueprint for Intervention: Routine Cards and Guide*, published by 95 Percent Group Inc. (2008).

bring fourth grade to 90%.” This district will face what others we’ve worked with in the past have experienced: The challenge at these grade levels is much greater than in the earlier grade levels. It’s not just that the students didn’t get the benefit of early intervention. It’s also because the intermediate elementary teachers believe they teach content not phonics or phonological awareness. Unless teachers taught a lower grade level earlier in their career, many later grade teachers don’t know how to teach reading. Many have never been trained in the syllable types and how to teach students to use them to break apart words they can’t read by sight.

Reflection on Successes

The district office is driven for student results and continuous improvements. Although already viewed as high performing, the district recognized that there were pockets of low achievement when it started this process. As the assistant superintendent said, “Are we proud of where we are? Yes. Are we where we want to be? No.” The district is very excited about its progress, and it should be. What’s great about working with this district is that it is committed to sticking with the plan. The district also is receptive to suggestions and stays focused on what the data shows is working.

Several key messages from this district’s story follow:

- Be true to the data. Make decisions about schools and students based on data.
- Maintain fidelity to the model. Find a model of implementation that works and stick with it. If a school wants district support, it needs to implement the model with fidelity.
- Go slow to go fast. Support buildings to get it right at kindergarten and Grade 1 before moving up the grade levels in a building.
- Standardize assessment and structural components across a district:
 - Designate assessment instruments for the entire district.
 - Use diagnostic screeners in concert with the CBM.
 - Require schools to have 30-minute intervention blocks.
 - Use the walk-to-intervention model for the collaboration benefits it brings.
- Expect high results.

Having watched this implementation for five years, I saw many benefits of what the district achieved beyond the success in the numbers. It’s clear that the district has built teacher capacity on how to look at student data, pinpoint deficit skills, and monitor students’ acquisition of deficit skills along continuums. More significantly, the district has built this

capacity across nearly all of the 38 buildings. But what's perhaps most striking is what's been accomplished on other dimensions. Teachers talk about "our kids" instead of "my kids." The grade-level teams collaborate in ways that they didn't before RTI. This shared dialogue about students and teaching is the end goal of what's embodied in the popular term *professional learning communities*. The district knows more about reading development than it did five years ago and understands how to look at a student and figure out *why* he can't read on grade level. Teachers have a path to follow when a student is not where she should be. There's no more guessing; teachers are confident about what to do. As the director of reading said at a conference presentation, "We've changed so much in the last four years, we hardly recognize ourselves." This is the potential of effective school improvement under the umbrella of response to intervention.

CONCLUSION

Chapter 1 focused on starting with the end in mind and provided a description of a district that is five years into their RTI implementation. Not only have they reached 95% of students at benchmark in single schools, but they have successfully reached this student-achievement goal on average across the district's 38 elementary schools at several grade levels. The district's story provides not only tips for implementing but also motivation for those who are newer to the process.



Additional materials and resources related to
Jumpstart RTI: Using RTI in Your Elementary School
Right Now can be found at
<http://my.95percentgroup.com/Jumpstart>.