1 A Powerful Writing Classroom

*Three Tiers, Three Facets
of Teaching Writing*

"If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange apples, then you and I still have one apple. But, if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange ideas, then each of us has two ideas."

—Anonymous

When you hear the term Response to Intervention, or RTI, it's a bit clinical, isn't it? When I first heard of it, I assumed it applied strictly to special education and that it is a sweeping, multifaceted initiative that addresses reading instruction, writing instruction, math instruction, you name it. And it is.

But what I hope to show you in this book is that RTI is also in the small moments of our teaching. At the end of the chapter I show you a snapshot view of how blending a writing workshop, best practices, and RTI will create a classroom in which the most struggling writer can persevere. RTI is a multitiered approach to early literacy intervention, and it is also a mindset. It's a way of being in the classroom with children that communicates to each and every child that they are in a learning environment where everyone's talents and needs will be noticed and nurtured. The best teachers respond and intervene continually, each and every school day.

Just as a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching doesn't work, a one professional book covering all topics approach isn't effective either. So in this book I am going to put aside the superwoman tendencies and refrain from covering everything about RTI and focus on RTI in a single curriculum area: writing. And I will zoom in farther and look at RTI within a writing workshop environment.

This is the book I searched for more than four years ago, when I was trying to find guidance on implementing RTI in the writer's workshop. I attended workshops, read up a storm on teaching writing, RTI, differentiation, you name it. What I learned filtered into my teaching. I kept what worked, jettisoned what didn't, and was amazed by how much better my students became as writers and especially those students for whom writing was hard.

I will share with you the step-by-step path of implementing RTI in a writer's workshop.

In each chapter, you'll find practices that work. Here is a break-down of the information available in each chapter.

- In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of RTI and how it looks in its broadest outlines within a writer's workshop.
- In Chapter 2, I address three assessments that will guide your instruction: preassessment, formative, and summative assessment.
- In Chapter 3, I provide strategies for making students independent, including checklists and action plans.
- In Chapter 4, I introduce strategies for monitoring students' progress. This is a critical component to RTI.
- In Chapter 5, I focus primarily on the struggling writer and how to differentiate instruction to meet diverse needs.
- In Chapter 6, I examine strategies and techniques that I have found beneficial to all students engaged in the process of writing. The information in this chapter can be used in whole group, small group, or individual instruction.

To some degree, this book assumes a familiarity with the writer's workshop and all the practices that fall under its wing, including minilessons, the writing process, conferring, using writer's notebooks, and so on. It also assumes familiarity with the traits of writing. I provide overviews in Chapters 2 and 6, but I encourage you to check out the following favorite resources in the box below.

TERRIFIC RESOURCES ON TEACHING WRITING

Professional Books

- Culham, R. (2001). *6+1 Traits of writing.* Portland, OR: Scholastic.
- Freeman, M. (1995). *Building a community of writers.* Gainesville, FL: Maupin House.
- Graham, S., MacArthur, C., & Fitzgerald, J. (2013). *Best practices in writing instruction.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hale, E. (2008). *Crafting writers.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Morris, L. (2012). *Awakening brilliance in the writer's workshop.* Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Oczkus, L. (2007). *Guided writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Overmmeyer, M. (2009). *What student writing teaches us.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Routman, R. (2005). *Writing essentials.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

The "1–2-3" of Best Practices

When I was a kid, 1-2-3 Jell-O was all the rage. It was beyond cool how one could pour and blend a few ingredients in a bowl, chill, and within a few hours have a dazzling three-layered dessert of bright strawberry Jell-O and pink pudding. It makes an apt metaphor here as I think about how teachers expertly fold in best practices and new research into their teaching to create layered, nuanced instruction.

The 1-2-3 layers in this book are RTI, writing process, and the traits of writing—with writing workshop holding the layers in place. I will show you how you can pour all three best practices into your writing curriculum and be richer for it. Before I provide more detail about these three, I think it's good to take a moment to define best practices. For me, best practices are those that research has shown to be effective in a wide swath of educational settings, with a wide array of students. For example, the 6 traits of writing has a solid research underpinning as an assessment that informs writing; the explicit demonstration of writing for real purposes and audiences that is at the heart of writing workshop is also proven by ample research. But beyond the research—and more informally—best practices are the teaching and learning strategies that move the needle on my students' writing achievement. For example, if I can look at a piece of student's writing in February, compare it to a sample from September and can see noteworthy improvement, then best practices have been at work. I like to say they are

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Think About It

In my own professional development, I would sometimes rush into learning something new without taking the time to think about the beliefs and practices that I had going in to the learning curve. I found that if I take 15 minutes to think about, and maybe jot down, my thoughts on teaching or a particular curriculum area, or how children best learn, it helps me bring new ideas into a defined system of thinking as a practitioner. Ideally, I also have conversations about practice with colleagues. As you think about your current writing curriculum, consider these questions:

- What is good teaching?
- What does good teaching of writing *look* like?
- What does an engaged, effective student writer look like in terms of behavior, participation in the writing time, written work, reading habits?

For me, the concepts that surfaced when I thought about excellent writing instruction were:

- **Rigor:** Is what I am planning to teach sufficiently challenging for all my students?
- **Relevance:** Will my students find what I model or invite them to try something that relates to their lives in a deep way? (Gone are the days of busywork photocopied and pulled from a file); and
- **Relationships:** How does my writing instruction enhance each student's sense of being a part of a writing community in the classroom?

Once I defined these for myself, they became a helpful rubric in my head I used as I planned and taught.

90 percent research based and 10 percent teacher made. That is, as any experienced teacher knows, each teacher is engaged in a continuous action research study: the rich laboratory of his or her own classroom each year.

In this book, I want to encourage you to use your expertise to go on the same journey I did several years ago, when I learned how to fold in widely recognized writing pedagogy with my own teaching.

WHAT IS RTI?

RTI is a multifaceted early intervention approach. In its beginning, it focused on K-2, and particularly on reading, but it also was designed to be used for math and writing, the last of which is the focus of this book. RTI is intended to bring about schoolwide differentiation of instruction with the goal of catching struggling learners before they falter and get left behind.

In writing, RTI incorporates data-based decision making and ongoing progress monitoring into the equation of writing success. It is also about alleviating labels for those students that do struggle. An additional goal of RTI is to reduce the number of unnecessary referrals to Special Education.
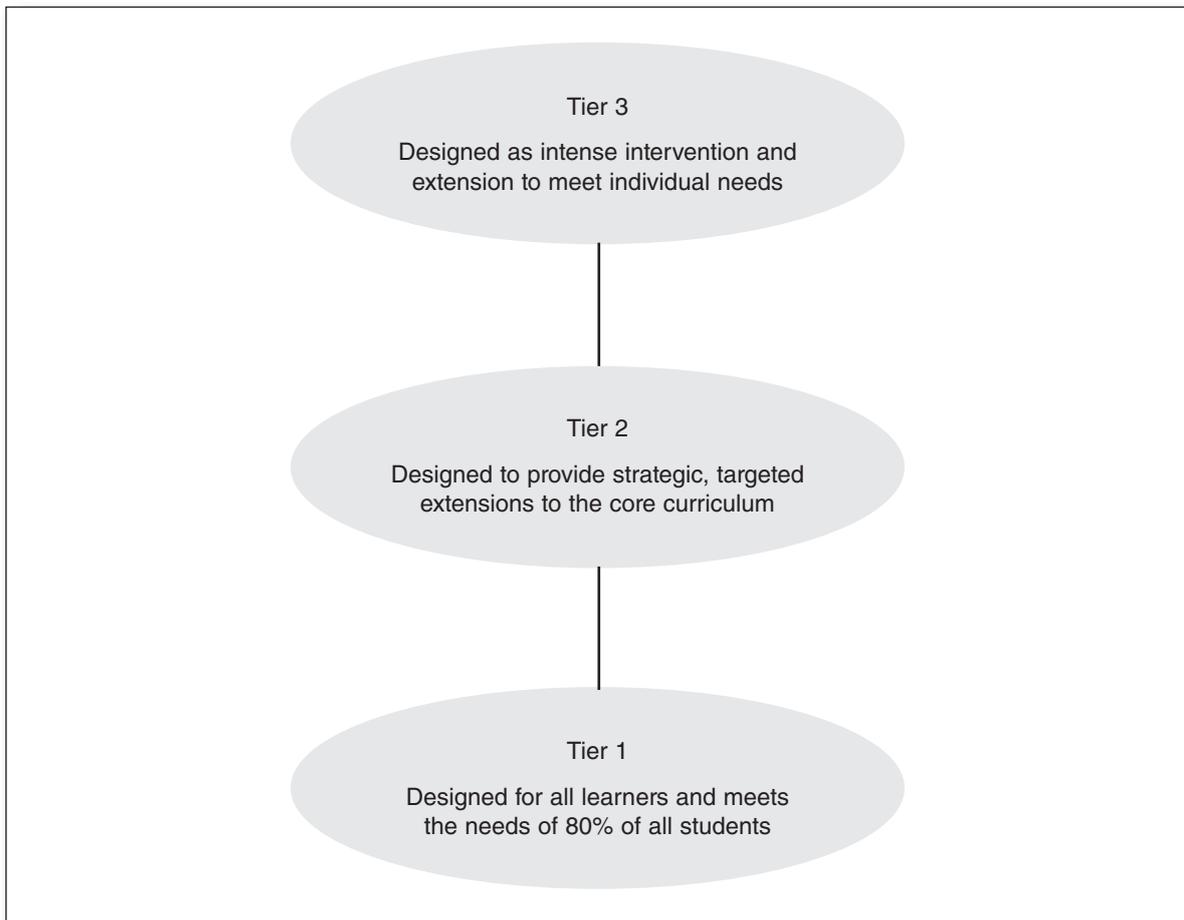
According to James B. Hale, PhD (as cited in Gudwin, 2010), the basic ideas of RTI were developed over a century ago. The ideas are relatively simple:

1. The teacher collects data over time and adjusts instruction until the student achieves success.

2. The teacher modifies and differentiates the instruction (intervention) to help a struggling student and then checks regularly (progress monitoring) to see if the intervention is working. If it isn't, the teacher needs to change the intervention and continue progress monitoring. This process continues until the student improves.

3. RTI is what good teachers have always done to help struggling students.

For years, teachers have worked solo in their classrooms with little sharing of data and difficulties. In my opinion, RTI helps teachers unify and work together to meet the needs of all students, not just the ones we personally teach. I look at RTI as not just another program or an added amount of responsibility but as a means to an end . . . ending the labeling and promoting success.

The Tiers

RTI is based on a three-tiered approach to early intervention. These tiers are designed to match each student's needs with layered instruction, immediate feedback, progress monitoring, and ongoing assessment.

A Model of the Tiers

Tier 3

Designed as intense intervention and extension to meet individual needs

Tier 2

Designed to provide strategic, targeted extensions to the core curriculum

Tier 1

Designed for all learners and meets the needs of 80% of all students

Assessment Frequency

- Tier 3: Twice a month to once a week
- Tier 2: Monthly to twice a month
- Tier 1: 2–3 times a year (quarterly)

Tier 1: General Education

Who: 80 to 85 percent of students

Time: Majority of each day

Format: Whole-group instruction

Let's take a closer look at the three tiers and how they work with our writing instruction.

This is the least intensive of the three tiers. Interventions at this level are provided in addition to general instruction. All students begin in Tier 1 with differentiation included in the instruction. This tier is also referred to as the universal level. In the writing workshop, this would be when the daily minilesson is taught. This lesson is taught to the whole group and is designed to meet the needs of all students. The planning and delivering of minilessons is based on careful formative

assessment during small group work, reading through students' writing, and conferring. All students are present for the lesson, hear feedback from other students, and have the opportunity to ask questions and try out the new strategy that was taught. I look at this tier as my *whole group instruction.* As with any instruction, one-on-one assistance is provided to students who need it. This assistance is usually 5 minutes, provided on a needs basis. The assistance provided in this tier can be as simple as answering questions or having an individual writing conference.

Examples of Differentiation within Tier 1:

- I answer individual questions or concerns about the lesson.
- I provide feedback in a conference.
- I redirect any students who seem to be having trouble applying the lesson to their writing.
- I allow another student to work with a student who seems to be struggling.
- I conduct writing notebook checks with feedback for accountability.
- I use the fist of five method after a lesson. Students are asked to respond to questions by showing the number of fingers that represent their level of understanding. A quick glance at the one and two fingers lets me know who I need to assist during conferencing. *One finger shows the lowest level of understanding while five fingers show the highest.*
- I use the thumbs up/thumbs down/thumbs sideways technique that is similar to the "fist of five." If a student understands the minilesson of the day and is having success trying it out in their notebooks or drafts, then a "thumbs up" is given. If a student needs assistance, he or she signals with a "thumbs down." Finally, to signal the student is unsure, a sideways thumb is given. I simply jot down the names of students who show me the thumbs down or sideways signs, and as I walk around during independent writing time, I pay close attention to those names on my list. Sometimes students think they do not understand the concept, but I find that actually they do. And of course the opposite can be true as well.

Tier 2: Targeted Group

Who: 10 to 15 percent of students

Time: 3 to 5 times per week for 15 to 20 minutes

Format: Small group instruction

This is supplemental intervention provided to a small group of students, above and beyond the basic instruction, who have the same or similar difficulties with a particular writing skill or stage of the process. These students are basically performing below the expected levels of accomplishment (called benchmarks). The students in Tier 2 are at some risk of academic failure. It is this tier that a large portion of this book focuses on. The duration of the intervention is 15 to 20 minutes 3 to 5 times per week, depending on the need. Remember that this instruction is in addition to the core instruction. I consider Tier 2 my flexible grouping format. This group frequently changes in a writing workshop. It changes as the curricular needs of the students change. Typically, the interventions are implemented for 2 to 3 weeks and progress monitoring is conducted on a monthly or bimonthly schedule. Students who do not respond need an alternate strategy and additional progress monitoring. If, however, the student fails to make gains and the gap between the student and

the achievements of the other students widens, the possibility of testing for special services and intensive instruction available in Tier 3 may need to be considered. This final step, into Tier 3, takes time, a good bit of time. The move from Tier 2 to Tier 3 occurs only after several rounds of supplemental intervention have proven unsuccessful.

Examples of Differentiation within Tier 2

- I use strong or weak student models to emphasize a teaching point.
- I use conversation to spark ideas. (See example below)
- I use peer tutors to reinforce skills and strategies.
- I break down their writing into smaller chunks. (See example on next page)
- I provide effective feedback, focusing on the strengths of the writers as well as the weaknesses.
- I use graphic organizers to help organize thoughts.
- I use mentor texts to provide concrete examples for writing craft or skills.
- I use mnemonic devices such as W5 + H1 (who, what, where, when, why + how) to self-check pieces of writing.
- I schedule group sharing or publishing. *Group sharing and publishing is important because it gives writers the chance to learn from one another. The more feedback a struggling writer receives, the more confidence is built.*
- I provide additional time for any assessments or daily writing requirements

Two Strategies in Action In later chapters I share more strategies in action. Here are two that work with any tier of instruction.

Using Conversation to Spark Ideas

Many of my students who struggle with writing need additional time to talk through their writing. Here is an example of a conversation between myself and Ronnie, one of my students in a Tier 2 small group. The other three students in the group have the opportunity to verbally share as well, but it is my conversation with Ronnie that I will highlight.

Me: Ok, Ronnie, I see that you have used our laminated storyboard to plan this personal narrative. I would like you to tell me your story and use some of the details from the organizer to help you. I may stop you periodically to ask questions that will help you add details and specific point to your writing.

Ronnie: Well, my story began when I was about six years old. I wanted a puppy really bad and I kept begging my parents to buy me one. I gave them lots of good reasons why I needed one. They weren't sure that I was responsible enough but I kept on begging. Finally, my begging paid off.

Me: Oh, I love dogs and you know this. So your topic has my attention. Can you elaborate on a few examples that you gave your parents as to why you needed the puppy?

Ronnie: Sure, I told my parents that I would have a best friend and that I would walk the puppy every day. I also promised really good grades in school.

Me: Let's add those details to your storyboard. This is a great beginning to your story and readers like knowing specifics. Keep going with your narrative.

Ronnie: (After he adds the details) Well, we decided to rescue a puppy. We went to the pound because you (pointing to me) always tell us in class that it's special to rescue an unwanted animal. We loaded up the car and took off. I was very nervous on the way to the pound.

Me: I love that you thought of me when deciding where to get the puppy. I also noted that you were nervous. This is a wonderful place to show the reader what you looked like nervous. Can you describe that to me?

Ronnie: Sure. I was biting my fingernails and kept looking out the window of the car to see where we were. Do you think I should add that to my story map?

Me: Absolutely. That is the strategy of "show, don't tell" and it's important to include this in your writing.

Ronnie went on to finish his story and tell the group all about his new Labrador Retriever with white spots on her ears. They named her Nala, and he has loved her for the last 4 years. The whole conversation took roughly 8 minutes and then it was the next student's turn. It sometimes just takes a little extra support to help struggling writers realize that they have a voice and a story to share.

Breaking the Writing Into Manageable Chunks

To many writers, the task of writing a story from beginning to end seems daunting. For my struggling writers, it seems impossible. I assure them that it is not. Let's look at an expository essay that has five paragraphs. The introduction and conclusion should state the thesis statement (or rewording the prompt in younger grades) and the three reasons of support for the thesis statement. The three middle paragraphs are the meat of the essay. This is where all of the *why* and *how* takes place. I have found that if I take the essay one paragraph at a time, my struggling writers appreciate the manageable chunks and their essays become focused and detailed. Our first step is to plan. All writers must plan. Then I have my Tier 2 students draft their introduction, or the first paragraph. After that initial draft, we revise and edit that introduction. The same process happens with the first point paragraph (or second paragraph of the essay). We continue this method one paragraph at a time. It usually takes 2 to 3 days. The rest of the students work through the process at their own pace. My Tier 2 group is never too far away from the others because I monitor the status of the class and keep everyone focused on the deadline that we have set for the published piece.

Tier 3: Intensive Instruction

Who: 1 to 5 percent of students

Time: 4 to 5 days a week for a minimum of 30 minutes

Format: Small group instruction or pull out

This is the most intensive of the interventions. Individualized instruction takes place, in my classroom or the special education teacher's classroom 4 to 5 days per week for a minimum of 30 minutes of intensive instruction. Ideally, interventions should take place on a daily basis, but my school does not have the supplemental staff, for the area of writing, to support this. It is estimated that 1 to 5

percent of all students need Tier 3 interventions to show a positive response to instruction (Bender and Shores, 2007). The interventions for this level are supplemental to Tier 1 and 2; students still benefit from the Tier 1 instruction. The interventions should be administered in a one-on-one or small group (2 to 3 students) setting with inclusion of special education services. The students who are placed in Tier 3 are at a high risk for failure. If not responsive, these students may be candidates for special education. In my classroom, the students in Tier 3 are served by the speech teacher. While my focus remains on the heart of the instruction, as well as Tier 1 and 2 assistance, a supplemental teacher focuses on the students in Tier 3. We share a common planning period and meet weekly to re-evaluate and plan for additional instruction. If the interventions are working, the supplemental teacher continues to use them, but if the students do not respond a new plan must be created. I am still the teacher on record and I am accountable for the adequate yearly progress these students make, but with a class of 23 (a total of 86) students it is advantageous to have some assistance with the 2 to 3 students who need the extra small group assistance. Typically, the supplemental teacher comes into the classroom on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Progress monitoring is administered and evaluated on a weekly or bimonthly basis to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. Interventions are implemented for a minimum of 6 weeks.

Examples of Differentiation within Tier 3:

- I instruct individuals or use small group guided writing.
- I provide additional time.
- I allow students to dictate their stories.
- I allow the use of a computer or Alphasmart—I have several students every year who have been diagnosed with Dysgraphia. *Dysgraphia is a specific learning disability in the area of writing in which students struggle to get their thoughts written down on paper. These students typically have poor handwriting and spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to write simple things.*
- I modify assignments—this may include reducing the amount of writing required or modifying an assignment into smaller chunks.
- I allow the use of tape recording devices to record stories.
- I allow the use of computer programs to help students generate ideas or assist with structure. (Several websites are provided at the end of this chapter.)
- I use strong or weak student models to emphasize a teaching point.
- I demonstrate how to break down writing into smaller chunks.
- I provide effective feedback, focusing on the strengths of the writers as well as the areas of concern.
- I model how to use graphic organizers to help organize thoughts.
- I develop individual spelling lists with the help of my students. I simplify the language of writing prompts when writing on demand (State testing preparation).
- I highlight or color code key words or phrases in anchor papers or individual writing.
- I use mentor texts to provide additional examples for ways to correct an area of weakness.
- I provide examples of mnemonic devices such as W5 + H1 (who, what, where, when, why + how) to self-check pieces of writing.

- I schedule group sharing or publishing.
- I provide additional time for any assessments or daily writing requirements.

Notice how all of the examples of assistance from Tier 1 and Tier 2 are also incorporated into the Tier 3 list. I know that, especially with my struggling writers, the more choices of assistance I have the better chance I have for serving individual needs. The main difference between the assistance of Tier 2 and Tier 3 is the amount of time within the tiered instruction (frequency). The assistance may be the same, but the duration of the assistance will differ.

Keeping it Simple

I have to keep things simple. It is the only way I can keep my sanity with the increase in academic requirements set for our students and ourselves as educators. While looking at interventions and strategies that can help my students, I consider the following questions:

- 1. What is the problem? (DEFINE/PRE-ASSESS)
- 2. Why is this problem taking place? (ANALYZE DATA)
- 3. What strategy/plan can I use that may help solve this problem? (IMPLEMENT)
- 4. Is the strategy/plan working? (EVALUATE/MONITOR)

I know that as long as I keep my focus on the writer—the living breathing component in the classroom—and allow assessment to guide my instruction, then I am much closer to ensuring the success of my students with the difficult task of writing. But I can't do it alone. I understand that parents provide a critical perspective of their child and traditional methods of communication (parent-teacher conferences, meetings, phone calls) are critical to bridge any gaps that may arise between home and school. I often share the quote found at the beginning of the chapter with the parents I come in contact with. To me, it shows that by working and sharing together, teachers, parents, and students, we can make a difference. In Chapter 5, I have included more ways to get parents involved.

I close this chapter one with a snapshot into a classroom where RTI and best practices for teaching writing come together to create an environment conducive to all students.

Welcome to Mrs. A's room. Look around and you will see that there is an abundance of writing material conducive to learning. The bulletin boards are lovingly filled with children's work and displayed with pride. The classroom library is filled with basket after basket of quality books and student-created texts. The students in Mrs. A's classroom are engaged in their writing and there is a sense of accomplishment in the air. Mrs. A is excited about learning and the students are excited too.

   During each minilesson, Mrs. A encourages participation, questions, and suggestions. The lessons are focused and created strictly based on the needs of her students. The writers in this room write every day. They understand, because Mrs. A has shown them through her own writing examples, that writing is hard work, but hard work pays off and high expectations

can be and are met. Each minilesson is paired with a mentor text that has quality examples of craft specific to the objective of the lesson. These lessons are differentiated based on the interests of her students and she provides depth, not just coverage, within these lessons. Mrs. A knows which mentor texts work best with each lesson because she has studied these books and cherishes them.

The students in this classroom are given time to write. At least 50 percent of their writer's workshop is reserved for writing. Mrs. A also believes in allowing her students' choices about their writing and prompts are rarely used. When you look around you can see that 95 percent of the students are engaged. There is good teaching going on in whole group, small group, and individual settings. Groups are carefully selected based on formative and summative assessments, as well as anecdotal notes. Students are placed into tiers based on thorough evaluations and analysis of any information gathered from assessment and notes.

Mrs. A knows that she is not alone . . . that her RTI team of experts will assist her in her curricular decisions.

The students are taught using the process-oriented instructional model and within that model are opportunities to share. The students in Mrs. A's room share often and freely. No one is afraid of becoming a target; they are all writing partners in this room—partners that belong to a writing community led by a teacher with a passion for teaching and continued learning.

To top it off, the school where Mrs. A teaches is also mindful of the best practices for teaching writing. There is a sense of schoolwide determination that is led by a principal with high expectations and fellow teachers dedicated to their craft. This is a place where all students should be so fortunate to attend. This is an environment and a teacher that gets results and where students thrive. Much of this success is due to the writing workshop atmosphere and the teacher's dedication and desire to reach all students, but there is an added component that is ensuring the success of even the most deficient writers . . . RTI.

Informational Resources

There is a wealth of information on all facets of RTI, not just in the area of writing. What follows are a handful of resources I like.

Professional Books on RTI:

- Allington, R. (2008). *What really matters in Response to Intervention.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Applebaum, M. (2009). *The one-stop guide to implementing RTI.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Drapeau, P. (2004). *Differentiated instruction: Making it work.* New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2010). *Enhancing RTI.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Howard, M. (2009). *RTI from all sides.* Portsmouth, NH: Hrinemann.
- Strickland, D., Ganske, K., & Monroe, J. (2002). *Supporting struggling readers and writers.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Websites

- *www.studentprogress.org* is sponsored through the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring. The website is a national technical assistance and dissemination center for implementation of evidence-based student progress monitoring. Under the "Tools" section, there is a list of eight available tools for progress monitoring that were reviewed by a technical review committee in regard to cost, implementation, and support from the vendor.

- *www.progressmonitoring.net* is sponsored by the Research Institute on Progress Monitoring (RIPM) at the University of Minnesota in collaboration with Iowa State University. The website provides an overview of progress monitoring and, specifically, curriculum-based measurement. The purpose of the RIPM is to conduct research on curriculum-based measurement (CBM) and other related aspects of progress monitoring.

- *www.education.umn.edu/nceo* is sponsored by the National Center on Educational Outcomes at the University of Minnesota. The website is a national resource center for building and designing educational assessment and accountability systems for monitoring results for all students.

- *www.osepideasthatwork.org* is sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs. The website provides a toolkit on teaching and assessing students with disabilities including current information that will move teachers, educators, and schools forward in improving results for students with disabilities.

- *www.interventioncentral.com* was developed by school psychologist, Jim Wright, and provides many educational resources for both academic instruction and behavior management. Under the "CBM Warehouse" link there are several resources for implementing a progress monitoring system, specifically CBM, including training materials on implementation, CBM probes, research norms for setting student goals, and graphing formats.

- *www.aimsweb.com* is a comprehensive formative assessment system using CBM in reading, early literacy, early numeracy, math, spelling, and written expression. AIMSWEB provides a total package that uses a RTI format for universal screening and ongoing progress monitoring.

- *www.texasreading.org* provides information on scientifically based reading research, research-related information on Vaughn's 3Tier Model of RTI, and materials for all grade levels in the area of reading and language arts.

- *www.readingrockets.org* is a national multimedia project offering information and resources on how young children learn to read. The site is comprised of Public Broadcasting System (PBS) TV programs (video and DVD).

Computer-Based Resources for All Tiers

- Step Up to Writing (www.sopriswest.com)
- Expressive Writing (www.sra4kids.com)
- Reasoning and Writing (www.sra4kids.com)
- REWARDS Writing: Sentence Refinement (www.sopriswest.com)
- Write . . . from the Beginning (www.thinkingmaps.com)
- Co: Writer (www.donjohnston.com/products/cowriter)
- Handwriting Without Tears (www.hwtears.com)
- Spelling Mastery (www.sra4kids.com)