



Frequently Asked Questions About...RTI Problem-Solving Teams

Students at any grade level can sometimes experience significant problems that threaten to derail their progress and even lead to their eventual dropping out of school. Students in crisis are not an anomaly: It is estimated that—in a typical school—perhaps as many as 5% of individuals in a general school population may require intensive RTI intervention supports each year (Christ, 2008). A school's RTI Problem-Solving Team (or 'RTI Team') is the vehicle for assembling customized intervention plans for those students who display the most intensive and serious problems.

The RTI Team is composed of a multidisciplinary group of educators and follows a research-validated structured approach known as the 'problem-solving model' (Bergan, 1995) to understand and analyze student challenges. Distilled to its essence, the problem-solving model requires that a consultant (in this case, the entire RTI Team) and referring teacher(s) work together to (1) identify the student problem in specific, measureable, observable terms; (2) analyze the student problem to uncover underlying functions or reasons to explain why the problem is occurring; (3) implement an evidence-based intervention plan whose elements are logically selected to assist the student; and (4) evaluate the plan on an ongoing basis to determine if it does in fact help the student to reach academic or behavioral goals.

Below are answers to 10 questions frequently asked about RTI Problem-Solving Teams.

1. **How often should the RTI Team meet?** It is recommended that the RTI Team reserve a standing block of time each week for student problem-solving meetings. Many schools set aside 2-3 hours per week, although the amount of time scheduled for meetings will depend on the number of students typically referred in a week to the RTI Team.
2. **Who should serve on the RTI Team?** RTI Teams can be flexible in their membership but should be multidisciplinary (e.g., school counselor, special or general education teachers, etc.). RTI Teams should make a special effort to recruit teachers to increase the team's credibility with classroom personnel. One useful idea is for teams to enlist a larger number of teachers and support staff and to rotate the members who sit on the team each week. By rotating its members, the RTI Team can reduce the weekly commitment required of any single member and thus increase the willingness of teachers and support staff to serve on the team.
3. **How much RTI Team time should be set aside for a student RTI case?** An initial student RTI case should typically not exceed 30 minutes. Follow-up RTI Team meetings often do not exceed 20 minutes. Streamlined, efficient RTI Team meetings are possible provided that the teams have done their necessary advance work to prepare for the actual meetings (e.g., communicating with the classroom teacher(s) to clarify referral concerns; ensuring that important data on the student is collected and brought to the RTI Team meeting).
4. **What is a reasonable number of student RTI cases that can be handled by an RTI Team in a school year?** Experience suggests that a single RTI Team can efficiently manage between 25 and 40 Tier 3 cases in the course of a typical school year. There are several



factors that influence the actual numbers of students referred to the team, including the overall success of core instruction in the school and expectations for what Tier 1 (classroom) interventions should be done prior to an RTI Team referral.

Schools can estimate the number of students likely to be referred to the team in one of two ways. First, the school can simply look at past rates of referral to the RTI Team in its own building. For example, if 29 students were referred to the RTI Team in a grade 7-8 middle school in the previous year, it is likely that a similar number of students will be referred in the present school year. Second, the school can look at RTI research, which suggests that as much as 5 percent of a building's student population may require a Tier 3 (RTI Team) intervention plan in a given school year. In a grade 7-8 middle school with 1000 students, for example, this prevalence rate of Tier 3 cases predicts that as many as 50 students may be referred to the RTI Team across the academic year—indicating that the school should consider fielding at least two separate RTI Teams (e.g., one at each grade level) to manage the referral load.

5. **When should the RTI Team decide to accept student referrals from classroom teachers?**

One important source of referrals to the RTI Team is the general-education teacher. A basic expectation of RTI is that classroom/content-area teachers will serve as RTI 'first responders' who can proactively identify students with emerging academic or behavioral concerns, provide reasonable individualized (Tier 1) intervention support, and document those classroom intervention efforts. The RTI Team should develop guidelines for classroom teachers about when a struggling student who has not responded to Tier 1 instruction/interventions should be considered for referral to the RTI Team. Such guidelines would include a standard form that teachers would use to document their Tier 1 intervention efforts, as well as a minimum timespan that Tier 1 interventions would first be tried (e.g., 4 to 6 instructional weeks) before an RTI Team referral is considered. RTI Teams should also ensure that teachers receive the support necessary to implement Tier 1 interventions, including having access to a range of evidence-based intervention ideas, as well as coaches and consultants on staff that can help teachers to select appropriate interventions and use them correctly.

6. **Should an administrator sit on the RTI Team?**

A school can run an effective RTI Team with or without administrators serving on the team. Advantages of the administrator serving on the RTI Team are both that the team has the high-profile backing and support of building leadership and that the team can get quick clarification at meetings about whether they can access any school intervention resources that are controlled by administration. A possible disadvantage of the administrator sitting on the RTI Team is that the leader's presence at meetings might reduce the comfort level of referring teachers and make them reluctant in the presence of their supervisor to speak candidly about their inability to address the needs of a struggling student. Even if an administrator does not sit on the team, the RTI Team should keep building leadership regularly updated on upcoming and current RTI cases and be able to



count on administrators to enforce teacher expectations for compliance with the building's RTI guidelines.

7. **Once an intervention plan has been designed by the RTI Team, how long should that intervention last before the team meets again to evaluate its effectiveness?** An intervention plan should be in place long enough to judge with confidence whether that plan is working. It is recommended that RTI Teams set a reasonable default length of time that intervention plans will be in effect (e.g., 6 to 8 instructional weeks). However, teams should also have the latitude to set longer or shorter intervention timespans based on the facts of the specific student case. For example, a high school may allow 6 instructional weeks to pass before holding a follow-up RTI Team meeting on a student whose intervention targets content-area vocabulary but may schedule a follow-up meeting in only 3 weeks for a student whose intervention addresses disruptive classroom behaviors.
8. **How many intervention plans should the RTI Team implement before deciding that a student has failed to adequately respond to general-education interventions?** Each school district must develop its own decision rules for judging when a series of general-education intervention plans have failed to work and for deciding that a student is not responding adequately to intervention. The foundation assumption of RTI is that students in general education who begin to experience academic or behavioral problems are typical learners and that it is the school's responsibility to find strategies will allow those students to experience success. A district's RTI decision rules for a referral to special education should require evidence beyond a reasonable doubt that a student is not responding to general-education interventions. For many districts, these decision rules require that a minimum of 3 separate intervention plans be attempted—with each intervention plan being tried for at least 6 to 8 instructional weeks—before the school can adequately judge whether a given student has or has not responded to intervention.
9. **How can the RTI Team find the resources necessary to implement intensive student intervention plans?** It is a reality that most schools will need to rechannel existing resources to support RTI. The RTI Team should inventory all resources in the building or district that can be used to support student interventions and assessment. Resources to be canvassed include any staff whose schedule permits them to assist with student interventions or assessment (e.g., reading teacher, school psychologist, paraprofessionals); staff with specialized expertise in such areas as reading instruction or behavior management who can serve as consultants or intervention coaches; commercial materials for academic instruction or intervention; commercial professional development materials for academic or behavioral intervention or assessment, etc. RTI Teams should consult this inventory of intervention and assessment resources at problem-solving meetings when putting together plans for student intervention and assessment.



10. **How can the RTI Team convey the message to faculty and parents that it is not simply a preliminary step to a special education referral?** As schools make the transition to the RTI model, teachers and parents may at first be reluctant to embrace the focus of RTI on supporting struggling students in the general-education setting. The most effective means for the RTI Team to convince teachers and parents that it is not a conduit for special education referrals is by creating strong and useful intervention plans that are effective in general education classrooms. Schools may also consider requiring that any student who is referred for a special education evaluation based on a parent request is simultaneously referred to the building's RTI Team. This 'fast track' RTI Team referral process for any parent-initiated referrals to special education reinforces the message that information about students' response to intervention in the general-education setting is critical in determining their possible special education status.

References

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Christ, T. (2008). Best practices in problem analysis. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 159-176). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.