Chapter 2

Implementing Secondary RTI Models:
Leadership Challenges (and Some Solutions)

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the critical role that superintendents, principals, and other school leaders play in the effective implementation of secondary Response to Intervention (RTI) models in schools and school districts. This chapter also outlines the unique challenges that school leaders often encounter in their efforts to implement RTI reforms in secondary schools, including the unique culture and structure of secondary schools, the mindset and perspectives of secondary teachers, and the complexity of secondary students and their academic challenges. Finally, through research-supported frameworks (e.g., teacher efficacy, distributed leadership models, and educational change process models), this chapter offers tools and strategies for educational leaders who are undergoing RTI reforms in their secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

As discussed in Chapter 1, districts originally adopted Response to Intervention (RTI) models that focused exclusively on elementary-age students since it was assumed that early intervention during primary grades would help students catch up to their peers and prevent them from being referred for special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). However, district leaders came to recognize the need to extend RTI models through middle school and even into high school. With a high school dropout rate of 20% nationwide and a nearly 50% dropout rate among students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014), schools and districts are looking to RTI to help increase their high school graduation rates. For this reason (and many others), over half of the U.S. public school district respondents to the RTI Adoption Survey reported having implemented some form of RTI models in their secondary schools (Spectrum K12 School Solutions, 2010).

Despite the great need to implement RTI at the secondary level, there are many challenges and obstacles to successfully doing so. These challenges are most likely to be experienced at the highest level by school and district administrators, who are instrumental in implementing this educational initiative. Unfortunately, while there are a number of templates and guidelines for RTI models in elementary schools, there is a lack of research and resources to inform administrators of effective models for secondary RTI (Hale et al., 2009), and even less information about effective RTI models for older English learners (Vaughn, 2008). Fortunately, concerted and organized efforts are underway that will advance shared knowledge and skills in the area of enhancing and improving RTI models for secondary students. For example, the High School Tiered Intervention Initiative (HSTII), a collaboration of three agencies—the Center on Instruction, the National Center on Response to Intervention, and the National High School Center (Center on Instruction, n.d.)—has developed resources to assist secondary schools and districts in addressing logistical and systemic issues such as those related to scheduling (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2011). Other resources provide assistance and support for districts that face additional challenges unique to secondary schools, including evidence-based practices for Positive Behavior Support Intervention Systems (see http://www.pbis.org) as well as blueprints for secondary schools transitioning to RTI models and assessments (RTI Action Network, n.d.). Despite these efforts, the absence of any formal direction from the research or from state guidelines has caused many district leaders to develop their own RTI procedures, intervention materials, and assessment tools for their secondary school sites (Shanklin, 2008).

Because the success of RTI implementation at the secondary level depends on adequate administrative support, this chapter outlines some of the specific challenges administrators face when implementing RTI models in secondary schools and provides some possible solutions.

POLICY TO PRACTICE: THE CHALLENGE OF IMPLEMENTING RTI MODELS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Administrators will likely encounter several barriers and challenges in their attempt to implement RTI at the secondary level. Some of the major challenges that must be overcome are teacher resistance, secondary school culture and organization, and student-learning heterogeneity.

Teacher Resistance

According to Fullan (1993), every participant—from federal policymakers to individual students—is a change agent in the educational reform process, and active support of all stakeholders is needed to initiate and maintain educational reform efforts at the school and district levels. While external factors (state and federal policies, for example) can mandate reforms, real change can be impeded by passive or active opposition at the school and district levels, and teacher support for reform efforts is especially critical if reforms are to be sustained over time.

Research shows that Fullan was right. Sarason (1990) found that teacher resistance can effectively thwart district-adopted mandates to change school practices. Although the success of RTI is dependent upon teachers, they are often not ready to be change agents and lead the charge to implement a reform like RTI. This reluctance typically stems from at least one of three underlying perceptions that prevent them from being willing and eager participants.

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