

# An Initial Exploratory Analysis of RTI Implementation in Rural Schools

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**Abstract:** *This exploratory study investigated how rural schools in Montana implement RTI's four essential components. The purpose was to begin to fill the existing gap in research about implementation of RTI in rural schools as well as identify variables that districts and schools believe support or inhibit effective implementation.*

**Keywords:** *RTI, rural schools, progress monitoring*

Response to Intervention (RTI) was formally recognized in the most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as an approach for identifying students with specific learning disabilities (IDEA, 2010). The National Center for Response to Intervention (NCRTI; NCRTI, 2010) clarified that while RTI was included in special education legislation, it was envisioned as schoolwide framework for preventing poor academic and behavioral outcomes all students, not just those with disabilities. NCRTI and OSEP Policy Letters (see 47 IDELR ¶ 196) further defined RTI through four essential components: screening, progress monitoring, multi-level prevention system, and data-based decision making.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As a general framework, RTI is intended to be implemented in all types of educational settings. However, much of the focus on RTI implementation involves average size schools (O'Connor, Harty, & Fulmer, 2005), medium and large school districts (Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2008; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Prentice, 2004) and urban settings (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus & Noguera, n. d.). Some have provided guidance on implementing one of the essential components, like progress monitoring (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008), in rural schools. However, few empirically-based studies have investigated RTI implementation in rural settings (Douglas, Hughes, & Farmer, 2008). Of the limited studies, most use case study analysis to investigate a specific RTI essential component, such as interventions in rural schools (Pearce, 2009) or implementation issues, such as professional development (Bergstrom, 2008; Shepherd & Salembier, 2011). With limitations in existing research and guidance, rural schools are often on their own to translate existing traditional school RTI models for their unique settings.

The purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) fill an existing gap in research on the RTI implementation practices of rural schools and 2) identify factors rural schools believe support or inhibit effective implementation. Understanding the implementation challenges faced by rural schools is essential for institutions of higher education, state departments of education, and professional development entities to develop effective and sustainable RTI implementation supports and technical assistance for rural schools.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study took place in Montana, a rural state with 620 of its 823 school units identified as rural. Data were collected in two phases. In Phase I, regional service providers assisted in identifying 36 individual state-recognized school units: 18 elementary schools (ES), 4 middle schools (MS), 6 junior high (JH) schools, and 8 high schools (HS). Several of these schools considered themselves a multi-unit school. As a result, 23 schools, including six K-12 and one 7-12 school, participated in Phase I and complete a 30-minute structured interview (Appendix A). All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. A summary of the interview was sent to the school for verification.

In Phase II, seven schools – representing a variety of RTI implementation approaches, regions in the state and types of school structures--were selected from the initial interview pool. Table 1 provides a summary of the site visit schools' characteristics. The author and a research assistant conducted 1-2 site visits per school. The NCRTI Integrity Rubric and Worksheet (2011) served as a guide for observing team meetings, tiered-instructional delivery, and RTI assessment. It was also used as a format for semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators. Similar to the phone interviews, a summary of the visit was sent to the school team for verification.

*Table 1. Summary of characteristics selected for site visits.*

School	Grades	Population	Title Status	# of Years	2012-13 AYP Status*
A	K-6	179	Targeted	8	Did Not Meet
B	K-12	240	School	2	ES = Met MS = Did not Meet HS = Met
C	7-8	183	Targeted	3	Did Not Meet
D	K-6	428	School	5	Did Not Meet
E	9-12	270	School	3	Met
F	6-8	153	School	4	Did Not Meet
G	K-6	550	none	7	Did Not Meet

\*Based on 2012-2013 data (Office of Public Instruction, 2013)

This exploratory study used analysis of structured interviews, semi-structured site visits, and documents to answer the research questions. As data were collected, they were analyzed and organized into six themes representing the essential components of RTI and implementation factors: screening, progress monitoring, multi-level prevention system, data decision making, implementation challenges and implementation supports. Others have utilized similar methods to collect and analyze data on new implementation processes in education (see NHSC, NCRTI, & COI, 2010). Statements from the initial themes were summarized in the initial phase of analysis.

## RESULTS

Only results from initial data analysis are reported. Most schools focused on reading and early literacy (96%), followed by math (67%), behavior (26%), and spelling/writing (8%). Schools reported they had implemented RTI for an average of 3.7 years, with a range of 1 to 8

years. All but three schools received professional development through the state RTI project at some point during the last eight years. Most of the schools received Title support ( $n = 18$ ). Results are summarized by the four essential components and the implementation challenges and supports.

### **SCREENING**

With screening, schools use brief, valid assessments at least two times a year to identify students at risk for poor learning and behavioral outcomes (NCRTI, 2010). All schools in this study implemented some type of screening process at least two times per year. Most elementary schools reported conducting screening three times a year using AIMSweb (see Pearson, 2012) or Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; see University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2014) measures. These one to three minute curriculum based measures of early literacy, reading or math fluency are required assessment tools for participants in the state RTI project. Secondary schools were more likely to use Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) Reading and Math, a computer based assessment that is highly correlated with the state test (see Northwest Evaluation Association, 2014). Some schools reported using teacher made tests or other published screening tools. While all schools reported that they collected screening data, several schools noted that they did not use the data to identify students for supplemental support. These schools continued to depend on traditional pre-referral, not prevention, approaches, like teacher referrals of failing students.

### **PROGRESS MONITORING**

Progress monitoring is repeated assessment of students' performance over time to determine their response to instruction (NCRTI, 2010). Only 17 of the 23 schools reported implementing a formal progress monitoring system. Of those, AIMSweb or DIBELS measures were used most frequently followed by teacher made measures, intervention dependent assessments, and class grades. Most schools reported collecting data weekly or bi-weekly. Two schools reported monitoring students who were advanced. Only nine schools reported using systematic data decision rules to analyze progress monitoring data.

### **MULTI-LEVEL PREVENTION SYSTEM**

A multi-level prevention system includes three levels of instructional intensity: core instruction or Tier I, supplemental targeted instruction or Tier II, and supplemental intensive instruction or Tier III (NCRTI, 2010). The majority of schools felt their Tier I instruction was appropriate and, thus, focused their efforts on providing Tier II supports. All but two schools used published interventions to provide supplemental support. Only one school believed they provided effective researched-based Tier III supports.

### **DATA-BASED DECISION MAKING**

In an effective RTI model, school and grade level teams use screening and progress monitoring data to make decisions about instruction (NCRTI, 2010). Most schools reported data-based decision making as the most difficult component to implement. Schools reported a lack of knowledge and skills in analyzing collected data as a major challenge in RTI implementation. While about half of schools said their teams met regularly, either weekly or monthly, the remaining struggling to find time to collaborate with other team members. As a result, decisions about student response to instruction were often left to individual teachers or other informal processes.

### IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS

Reported challenges and supports fell under several general domains: 1) cost, 2) time, 3) professional development (PD) and resources, 4) administrative support, 5) student and family involvement, 6) teachers and staff, and 7) rural community. Initial analysis revealed that rural schools face general implementations challenges identified by Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005): time for interventions and teaming, costs of interventions and professional development, limited staff buy-in, limited access to relevant professional development, lack of skills in data analysis and intervention development, implementing too much too quickly, and competing programs and activities. Several schools expressed concerns about the perceived competing educational initiatives (e.g., Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, Common Core, College and Career Readiness) and their impact on teacher motivation and commitment.

Several reported challenges appeared unique to rural schools. Schools noted that many common RTI interventions required costly initial startup fees and minimum purchases which were infeasible in small schools. Collaborative grade level teaming, essential to effective data decision making at Tier I, was viewed as impossible where there was only one teacher per grade or for multiple grades. Participating in professional development opportunities was also hampered by lack of substitutes in rural areas, travel time required to access training (up to 6 hours), and poor infrastructure for participating in web-based trainings. Staffing also presented its own unique challenges, especially in schools where a single staff member held multiple positions. For example, in one school, the K-8 principal was also the K-12 special education teacher. Staff turnover appeared to have a significant impact on the success of implementation. Several schools reported losing momentum and their focus completely after a key staff member left. Another unique challenge schools reported was a reluctance to share data, especially when it indicated an issue, within a close knit community. In fact, some schools reported failing to refer a child for further testing out of respect for a well-known community member.

While rural schools faced unique challenges in RTI implementation, they also benefitted from their rural setting and small size. The small staff and school size made it easier to collaborate with and align the RTI model across the K-12 system. Teachers reported that the small class sizes and the intimate nature of the rural educational settings allowed them to identify and meet the needs of struggling students without depending on the RTI data. In addition, teachers felt formal team meetings were not critical because they could informally talk with parents or other teachers to address students' needs. As a result, teachers in smaller schools appeared less likely to use formal data and depended more on teacher input for decision making. Several schools reported working on RTI implementation through a co-op with other local schools as a strategy to address some of the identified challenges.

### DISCUSSION

While NCRTI and state education agencies (SEA) provide guidance and training to support implementation, they rarely provide specificity or clear direction for implementation in rural schools. Thus, rural districts and schools interpret and implement each component differently and with varied intensity or, in some cases, not at all. Initial findings from this study reveal that lack of clear direction, inadequate or limited support, and limited buy-in can lead to implementation challenges for rural schools found in other types of settings (Fixsen et al., 2005). While the majority of schools in this study received the same standard training, there did not appear to a consistent approach to RTI implementation beyond the use of either AIMSweb or DIBELS. Further research is needed to determine what implementation factors lead to increased outcomes for students. For example, why did six of the seven site visit schools fail to meet AYP

despite implementing RTI for several years? Perhaps too much focus has been placed on how to implement the RTI components as opposed to how to use them to improve student outcomes. While the findings reveal valuable information about unique challenges faced by rural schools implementing RTI, it led to more questions. Further research is needed to identify how institutions of higher education and technical assistance providers help rural schools address these challenges.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Investigation of RTI Implementation in Montana Schools: Phone Interview Protocol**

**Please read.** Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am from the \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The interview will last approximately 20-30 minutes. We are not evaluating your program or school, we are trying to learn more about how you support struggling students. I will be recording the call and taking notes as we talk. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

(Query about purpose of data?) The purpose of this study is to begin to fill the existing gap in data about implementation of RTI in Montana schools as well as identify variables that districts and schools believe supports or inhibits effective implementation. The data are expected to be used by institutions of higher education, OPI, and other professional development providers to develop effective and sustainable RTI implementation supports and technical assistance.

**Please read each question and allow participants sufficient time to respond.**

1. Describe your school's system for identifying students who are at risk or may be struggling. What tools are used? Who is involved in the process? How frequently do you assess? What areas are you assessing (e.g., academic, drop out, behavioral)?
2. Describe why types of supports are available for at-risk or struggling students and how those supports are scheduled. For example, what types of supports/interventions are used, who implements the interventions, what is the frequency, how does it fit into the regular school schedule, how do you select interventions?
3. Describe how you assess the effectiveness of the interventions/support and make instructional decisions for an individual student. In other words, how do teachers know if it is working and what happened if it is not working? What is the decision making criteria and process (e.g., certain number of data points, steps in process, time in intervention)?
4. What factors do you believe hinder or support your school's ability to implement additional interventions or supports for struggling students or students at risk?
5. Describe how your school began implementing supplemental supports for struggling students. When and why did you begin? What professional development was provided for teachers and administrators? What was the principal's role?
6. Is there anything else you believe would like us know? Any questions?

**Please read when interview is completed.** Thank you again for participating in this phone interview. Once we summarize the data, we will send you a copy to review for accuracy and completeness. This way you can ensure that we have accurately represented your school's implementation of supports for struggling learners.