



# Supporting Advanced Learners in an RtI System: Establishing Collaborative Structures

*By Heidi Erstad, Technical Assistance Coordinator*

Collaboration is a systematic process of collective problem solving about and planning for teaching and learning. As an essential element within Wisconsin's RtI framework, regular and ongoing collaboration is key to establishing, providing, and sustaining a systemic and systematic approach to supporting the needs of ALL learners.

## **Collaborative structures needed to support advanced learners**

Schools and districts with well-established systems of support for advanced learners have teams in place that attend to different aspects of support, including:

1. Planning and providing differentiation and advanced learning strategies at the universal level of support
2. Problem-solving for groups and individual students whose needs extend beyond the universal level
3. Reviewing the effectiveness of the school/district's system of support for advanced learners

These functions are often embedded within existing team structures so that they are seen as a part of the school's regular processes for supporting all learners, not an add-on or afterthought.

Let's look at each of these collaborative team functions in more detail here.

1. **Planning and providing differentiation and advanced learning strategies at the universal level of support.** Meeting this first function often occurs as a part of existing grade level/content area collaborative teams. These teams use unit pre-assessment, common benchmark and screening assessments, portfolio, and observational data to address the Professional Learning Community (PLC) question: *How will we respond when students have exceeded grade-level standards and benchmarks?* Building and district G/T specialists can support teachers within these PLC meetings with resources and strategies for differentiation and extending learning within the regular classroom. Ideally, specialists or coaches can also make arrangements with teachers at these meetings to co-plan, model, co-teach, and/or provide coaching to support implementation of new strategies within the classroom.



2. **Problem-solving for groups and individual students whose needs extend beyond the universal level.** Establishing a robust, differentiated universal level of support is a critical, but typically insufficient means of addressing the needs of students whose learning/achievement extends well beyond grade-level benchmarks. Many schools already have existing teams in place to problem solve in order to help meet the needs of students whose achievement is moderately or significantly below grade level. The purpose of these teams - that is, to problem-solve to better meet student needs - can be extended to include meeting the needs of advanced learners as well. Team membership is necessarily fluid, depending upon the expertise needed and who will be involved in implementing plans of support (e.g., G/T support, classroom teacher, math specialist, school counselor, principal). These teams are responsible for digging deeper into student needs, setting goals for growth, matching supports to needs, and monitoring the progress of students to gauge whether the plans of support are working for groups and individuals.

The following sections and accompanying questions help to illustrate the responsibilities of this team throughout the course of the school year:

- *Digging deeper and setting goals*
  - What data does the team need in order to learn more about the student's precise level of performance and learning needs?
  - What learning goals would provide the appropriate level of challenge for this student(s)?
- *Creating a plan of support*
  - Which evidence-based practices or programs would best meet the student's needs? At what level of intensity?
  - What other types of supports will this student need to be successful (e.g., time management strategies)? How will this be built into the plan?
  - Who will implement the practices or programs? How often? When?
  - What support/professional development does the person delivering practices or programs need to be successful?
  - How will the student/family be a part of developing the plan?
  - How will progress be monitored? How often? By whom? How will the student be involved in this process? In what way(s) and how often will parents be informed of progress?
  - How often and when will the team meet to check on student progress?



- *Monitoring progress and making adjustments*
  - Is the student making expected/sufficient progress toward her/his goal?
  - What needs to happen in response?
    - Should the evidence-based practices or programs be continued, changed, or implemented with greater intensity?
    - Do we need to monitor the fidelity of implementing the evidence-based practices or programs?
    - Do we need to set a more ambitious goal?

*(Want to see an example of a problem-solving team in action, supporting the goals and needs of an advanced learner? The Educational Communications Board's "RtI Stories: Collaboration" bonus video shows a Beloit School District student support team meeting at [http://wimedialab.org/rti/collaboration\\_bonus.htm](http://wimedialab.org/rti/collaboration_bonus.htm). Note that while the quality of this bonus video makes viewing challenging, the content is worth the watch!)*

3. **Reviewing the effectiveness of the school's system of support for advanced learners.** This final team function is frequently the responsibility of the school or district's G/T Committee or Curriculum and Instruction team. To serve this function, this team reviews both student outcome data and implementation data at the systems level, asking whether each level of support the school has established is indeed meeting the needs of the students it is intended to serve. For example, this team may disaggregate screening data for its advanced learners to gauge whether they are making adequate growth across the school. This team may also look at progress monitoring data as a whole to gauge the effectiveness of the programs and practices they have in place to meet the needs of students beyond the reach of the universal. Critically, this team may also consider whether the school is disproportionately under identifying or under serving populations of its students (e.g., by gender, by economic status, by race/ethnicity, by English proficiency level). This team can then create hypotheses and develop plans of action based on a thorough analysis of the data.

### **Critical considerations for collaborative structures**

Schools and districts seeking to create or strengthen collaborative structures to support advanced (and all) learners will want to focus attention on the following:

- To be effective, regular collaboration around student data and instruction must be built into staff expectations, schedules, and the calendar. This time should be considered sacred.
- Meaningful involvement of families and students is critical throughout the collaborative process.
- Representation by multiple stakeholders in collaborative teams can provide unique and balanced perspectives to fully and accurately analyze data, dig deeper, create hypotheses, and develop solutions



- The frequency and intensity of collaborative teaming increases with the intensity of student need. This includes the degree of expertise in the areas of need that team members bring to the table.
- Team norms and protocols are valuable tools to systematize and focus collaborative discussions. User-friendly data reports are equally as critical to the process.
- Culture plays into every aspect of schooling, especially when the culture and background of the student differ from that of mainstream school culture. Collaborative teams demonstrate cultural competence by recognizing the critical role of culture in learning, including understanding their own culture first. They maintain high beliefs for all learners from all backgrounds. Teams actively consider whether cultural mismatches in systems, structures, policies, and practices inhibit student success, no matter how well intentioned. They willingly place the locus of responsibility for change on professionals and the school.

### Questions to get you started

Use these reflective questions at your school to help start the conversation around supporting advanced learners in your RtI system:

- How much time is scheduled for teams to collaborate around data and instruction for advanced learners?
- What existing teams do you have to discuss the needs of advanced learners? Who sits/should sit at the table? What questions do they address? What data do/should they review?
- What strategies (e.g., roles and protocols) are in place to support teams in analyzing data and making data-based instructional decisions?

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