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Supporting Advanced Learners in an RtI System: Developing a Continuum of Supports

By Heidi Erstad, Wisconsin RtI Center Technical Assistance Coordinator and WATG Board member

An effective, culturally responsive multi-level system of support begins at the universal level, with high quality core instruction aligned to the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts for all learners. Schools can expand the reach of their universal level through collaboratively supported use of formative assessment, differentiation, Universal Design for Learning, and culturally responsive practices.

> "Thinking about how gifted education fits within an RtI framework provides an opportunity to reexamine what we believe about meeting the needs of children."
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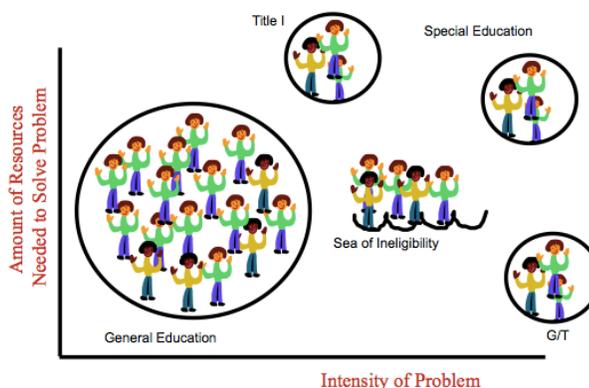> -Mary Ruth Coleman and Claire Hughes, 2009

And yet, each learner enters our schools with different background experiences and opportunities to learn. And throughout their school years, students encounter obstacles and inspiration, struggle, and growth. For these reasons, a strong universal level alone is not typically sufficient to meet the range of learner needs in a school. Developing a healthy multi-level system of supports in advance helps schools respond systematically and quickly when learners' needs fall outside the reach of the universal level.

From Fragmented Services...

Without a doubt, schools and districts have historically worked hard to meet the needs of all learners: creating and purchasing resources, providing professional development, and connecting with outside agencies.

While these efforts may have been effective in solving short-term and immediate problems, over time, these supports and skill sets have evolved in isolated pockets of practices and as fragmented services (*as illustrated to the right*).

In this structure, students may or may not have access to the supports they need

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based on the idiosyncrasies of how different individual educators/school teams function or identify students for support.

Students may also be left in a gray area where their needs are not yet to a point where they "qualify" for support. Ininst these cases, schools wait for the student to lose ground in order for a support process to kick in. What's more, the substantial effort schools put toward supporting struggling learners can leave the needs of students working above benchmark unattended.

In these schools/districts, staff delivering support to students may or may not be providing interventions and additional challenges, or using language and strategies that contribute to the success of the student at the universal level. Stakeholder alliances within the school/district may be competing for limited funding, staffing, and resources. Over time, these pockets of isolated practice accumulate into gaps and inefficiencies in supports, untapped strengths and resources, and staff working at cross-purposes. These systems may see short-term successes with individual students, but typically not ongoing and sustainable improvement for all learners.

…to a Coordinated System of Support

Conversely, schools/districts with effective and sustainable multi-level systems of support leverage all of the strengths, strategies, and resources they have available into a coordinated system of response to support learners (*as illustrated to the right*). Establishing this coordinated continuum of supports is the first critical step in creating a system that responds quickly and effectively to student needs beyond the reach of the universal level of support. When schools have

developed an articulated continuum of supports, collaborative teams are able to match students to supports sooner and with the confidence that their decisions are sound. With a defined continuum of supports, schools and districts are better positioned to provide targeted professional development and support to staff delivering interventions and additional challenges. And, schools can more readily and efficiently create student and staff schedules to deliver interventions and challenges.

Establishing this system-wide continuum of supports is a new way of doing business for many schools. To assure success and sustainability, schools will want to identify a team to oversee implementation and monitor the results of their newly developed selected and intensive levels of support. Optimally, this team meets on a scheduled basis during the school year to review intervention/additional challenges data across grade levels, analyze the effectiveness of the supports, and make adjustments based on data rather than conjecture or emotion.
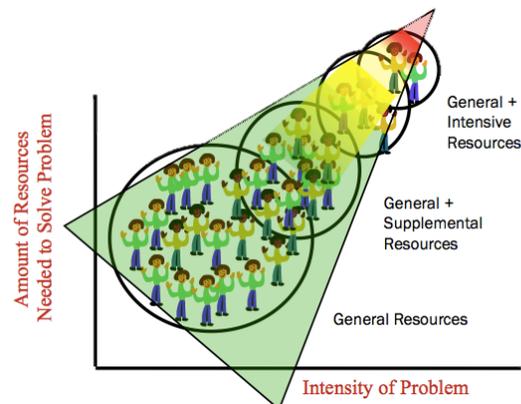
The following resources can be used to guide schools seeking to establish a continuum of evidence-based supports to meet the needs of the students served while addressing the unique features of the school and strengths of the staff.

The Hexagon Tool - Exploring Context

http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/resources/hexagon-tool-exploring-context

The Hexagon Tool, from the *Active Implementation Hub*, helps schools assess the fit of an "intervention" with the goals and needs of an organization. (Note that the term "intervention" here is broad, intended to encompass any new evidence-based instructional/programming practice).

Guidance for Selecting Interventions and Additional Challenges

http://tinyurl.com/myad3kn

This Wisconsin DPI/RtI Center-developed resource is intended to help school and district teams select the most appropriate interventions and additional challenges for their unique school system of support. The document provides guiding questions around considerations regarding the system, the student, the interventions/additional challenges, and the supporting research.

Wisconsin Additional Challenges Selection Tool

http://www.wirticenter.com/additionalchallenges

The purpose of this tool is to assist school and district teams in identifying research- and evidence-based practices and programs as a part of their multi-level system of support for reading and mathematics for learners above and well-above benchmark. Users can search the database with multiple filters (e.g., grade level, level of support) and locate the type of research that supports the effectiveness of each additional challenge listed.

Wisconsin DPI Gifted and Talented: Responding to Student Needs

This page includes a model of research-based strategies along a *Continuum of Services* for students with gifts and talents. Strategies are organized from least to most intensive, in terms of student need, setting, and coordination required. Each strategy includes implementation ideas and the supporting research behind it.

http://cal.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/cal/pdf/continuum-of-services.pdf

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