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Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

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RtI: Strong results guaranteed

You don't have to convince Laura Kacer that Response to Intervention, or RtI, is the way to go for screening student performance. She knows it works.

Consider: In the time this principal at Hoyt Middle School in Des Moines rolled out RtI building wide last fall, proficiencies have soared. Whereas only 33 percent of the sixth-through-eighth graders were considered proficient last fall, this winter's testing revealed that a full 49 percent are proficient. And they expect those percentages will continue to get better.

There's no question it was a labor of love and necessity. Proficiency scores at this school in which nearly 9 out of 10 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches were abysmally low. And unacceptable to Laura.

"We needed to be diagnostic and break down the complex reading skills," she said. "We needed to determine what components were missing from each individual child."

Enter RtI, which focuses on individuals.

"This year is different than before because our work has been specifically targeted at individual needs of students," Laura said. "We care very little about the age, but focus on their needs. It made for a messy schedule for adults but it's great for kids."

RtI is considered a general education tool, meaning that is for all students, including those with IEPs.

Liz Griesel, the academic achievement coach, said the frequency of progress monitoring depends upon the individual student. Some receive it more than weekly, while others are monitored every other week.

Heartland Area Education Agency's Sue Severson, who has worked closely with the school on implementation with fidelity, says it has been interesting watching the school transform.

"Everybody is looking at each kid and asking 'what is happening here?' and 'what do we need to do differently.' These students are lucky."

"What's going on here is not so much about materials, it's about routine," Sue said. "How do we develop routine to ensure the effort becomes self-sustaining. It is very explicit in nature."

"Teachers are really talking about what's happening," Sue said. "I have seen teachers become truly effective teachers."

"It's no longer guesswork," Laura said. "No time is wasted. We take into consideration each student. If the intervention isn't working, we adjust. It is not an option for it not to work. Each student will succeed."

When a student is determined to need interventions, the information is shared with student and parent alike, outlining the student's deficit and the trajectory of improvement that is expected.

“Teachers are feeling more empowered,” Laura said.

With the elaborate screening under way, students’ deficiencies are readily spotted.

“Especially in middle school, if you can’t read by then, the student has developed coping skills to get by,” Liz said. “With diagnostics, they can no longer fool us.”

Today, the students at Hoyt are much more engaged – particularly noteworthy since they middle-school age.

“Students are looking at their (trajectory) graphs and watching their progress,” Liz said. “We also share with the parents and make suggestions on what they can do at home to help reinforce classroom work.” For Laura, this approach is about dignity.

“I talk with the students, saying ‘this is where you are, and this is where we are going with you.’ Students know you have a plan for them.”

There’s no question in Liz’s mind that other schools will soon be scrambling to launch RtI.

“When other schools see the incredible growth, they will to do this, too.”

Liz previously taught social studies, and remembers well the challenging behaviors of some of her middle school students.

“But I understand that when there are behavior issues, oftentimes it’s because the student feels frustrated when you ask him to do something he cannot do.”

Sue says that without Laura’s leadership, the plan would have never taken off.

“Laura’s leadership makes a huge difference,” she said.

Laura hastened to add, “You’re only as strong as the teachers who are around you.”

When Teacher Kristi Brown came to Hoyt, she became concerned.

“I have a special education background, and I’m used to using data,” Kristi said. “But when I started, I didn’t feel like everyone knew the children. There were a lot of assumptions.”

The implementation of RtI makes all the difference, Kristi said. But does RtI take up more time?

“At first, yes, while you are setting up the routine,” Kristi said. “Now that we’re on the routine and the kids know the routine, it just flows.”

Formative: Another kind of assessment

By Dr. John Hosp

When most of us hear the word “assessment” we think of tests—spelling tests, the ACT, the Iowa Assessments, etc. Tests are important because they help us evaluate if instruction was effective and students learned the material taught. This is why tests help make summative decisions – they let teachers and parents “sum up” the learning that has occurred. However, they are only one part of a broader assessment system.

Other types of assessment include reviewing prior materials or work samples; interviewing teachers, parents, or students; and observing instruction or student performance. These can provide additional information that often cannot be gained from tests to make summative decisions. They also can be used to

provide information of a different type of decision – formative.

Formative decisions are about planning instruction in order to improve student learning. In previous issues of Each and Every Child, Dr. Sharon Vaughn wrote about differentiating and intensifying instruction. This is crucial to meeting the needs of each student. Formative decisions involve how to differentiate or intensify instruction and what to focus on when teaching. So how can reviewing, interviewing, observing, and testing help us make formative decisions?

- Reviewing prior information about the instruction a student has received can help us to decide what has worked or not in the past. If a student has clearly responded better to small group work rather than one-on-one, it would be a better option for that student.
- Interviewing the student to find out his perception of his learning and learning preferences might help us make decisions about motivation or how well he understands what he does and does not yet know how to do. A student who feels he is an excellent reader when performing below grade level may have good motivation to read. That can be useful in providing the student extra instruction to accelerate his learning.
- Observing students interact with the teacher and each other can provide information on what types of grouping (small group or whole class) might be best for some students to help keep them on task and engaged. Observing a student interact with the instructional materials can also help determine interest and motivation. Often observing and interviewing work well together to compare what a student says and what he does.
- Tests can provide information on what a student has learned. Tests that are specific to a unit or lesson can provide evidence of what a student knew before the lesson and then what they gained from it. Tests that are designed to determine the level of mastery can be used to determine if a student is accurate at a task (such as reading or math computation), but slow to perform it or both accurate and fluent.

Before, during, and after instruction, teachers must make a lot of decisions. Good teachers base these decisions on assessment information. Because a lot of information is already available or can be collected in different ways, having a clear plan of how to collect what information can eliminate a few of those decisions so there is more time to teach.

About the author

Dr. John Hosp is chair of the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Iowa. His teaching and research involve using assessment data for decision making and planning effective instruction. He is a co-author of The ABCs of CBM: A practical guide to Curriculum-Based Measurement. His wife, Michelle Hosp, is a consultant with the Iowa Department of Education.

Educators, teachers working together

Establishing a good rapport will benefit the student

I read Each and Every Child today, and decided to respond to your query about engaging with parents. As much as possible, we try to encourage parents to feel they are a part of the team. While we have certain deadlines we must meet, I would never call a parent and say "We need to have a meeting on this day, at this time..." It would be more like, "We need to have a meeting by the end of the month. What works for you?" And I know this does not sound like a big deal, but parents have work schedules and lives, just like we do. Showing them up front that we acknowledge that, and are even honoring that by getting their input first, tells them we care about them. That sets the stage for ongoing engagement.

I have also found it very helpful to call a parent (or in some cases e-mail or text) when their child did something well, or was having an exceptional day. We would be more likely to call if something went wrong, so I think those occasional calls when things are going well for their child are a breath of fresh air. Also, I believe meeting parents on their "turf" has been effective. I know teachers cannot do this all the time, but meeting a parent at the local restaurant after school, or making the occasional home visit if there

are several children in the household goes a long way in building relationships, and likewise, parent engagement.

Finally, every district has those parents who are on top of their game- those parents who could lead a support group or mentor another parent because of the experiences they have had with their own child. I have a couple parents I call on (with permission, of course!) when I meet a parent who is just starting on their journey with their child. The message is: "Here is someone who has walked in your shoes. Call them if you think it might help. It's up to you." Our parents are an incredible resource. We only need to give them the opportunity to step-up, and they rise to the occasion every time!

Kristine Oswald is a school social worker for the Mississippi Bend AEA, and works primarily in the North Scott School District.

Short video touts parent/teacher collaboration

A video shows how parents and teachers can work together for positive change.

Created by Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform – which is a national policy research and reform organization – the video shows a real-life situation in which parents and teachers in Minneapolis got together to save the closure of a school. The video also works to rid the blame-and-shame mindset so prevalent in today's American education system.

The video can be seen at http://vimeo.com/57541641.