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RTI-Based SLD Identification TOOLKIT

Case Study: Pennsylvania



by *Deborah Telfer, Ph.D.*

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Response to Instruction and Intervention

A Cornerstone for Supporting Continuous Learning as Part of Pennsylvania's Standards-Aligned System

In colonial times, Pennsylvania was the middle colony of the original 13 colonies, serving as the keystone—or the “stone in the middle that holds up the others” (see Thesaurus.com). Today, Response to Intervention (RtI) has the distinction of serving as the cornerstone of the Commonwealth’s efforts to improve results for all children, including students with disabilities.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII) refers to the use of a comprehensive framework of school improvement and/or a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) that is aligned with Pennsylvania’s core academic standards. “I see the RtII as an umbrella initiative that encompasses all of our initiatives, including but not limited to, our positive behavior support, mathematics, literacy, and educator effectiveness initiatives,” explained Dr. Jennifer Lillenstein, MTSS/RtII Lead Educational Consultant with Pennsylvania’s Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN).¹

Initiated in 2006, PDE’s work in the area of RtII was branded as an “*Every Ed*” initiative with the intent of improving academic and behavioral outcomes for all children, including students with disabilities, as “efficiently, effectively, and equitably as possible” (PDE, 2014, p. 1). “What we did to establish RtII as a general education initiative, before we talked about it for the purposes of SLD identification, really paid off,” said Dr. Joseph Kovaleski, Professor of Educational and School Psychology at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania and university consultant to PDE/PaTTAN.

Pennsylvania’s approach to defining RtII in a multifaceted way — as a comprehensive school improvement initiative and as a methodology for determining specific learning disabilities (SLD) — was endorsed by PDE’s Bureau of Teaching and Learning and Bureau of Special Education in 2006. Both bureaus are housed within PDE’s Office of Elementary/Secondary Education.

In 2005–2006, an RtII Statewide Task Force, a diverse stakeholder group of 40 members, was convened to guide the development of PDE’s RtII initiative, with the expressed goal of helping schools use the RtII framework as a roadmap

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PENNSYLVANIA QUICK FACTS (2012-2013)

Total School-age Student Population: 1,760,233

Total School-age Special Education Student Population: 368,640

Total SLD School-age Student Population: 121,962

Percentage of Students with Disabilities Identified as SLD: About 45%

Number of Local Education Agencies: 501

SOURCE: Pennsylvania Department of Education

for initiating and sustaining improvements via data-based decision-making, fidelity of implementation of evidence-based instructional methodologies, and shared leadership. In addition, Pennsylvania formed an RtII Parent Work Group, a subgroup of the RtII Statewide Task Force, which provided guidance to schools regarding the meaningful engagement of students and their families within the RtII process. A continuum of family-friendly resources was developed, including

- *A Parent's Guide to Response to Instruction and Intervention in PA;*
- *Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII) Instructional Framework: A Parent's Quick Reference Guide;*
- *Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII): A Factsheet for Parents;* and
- *Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII): A Glossary.*

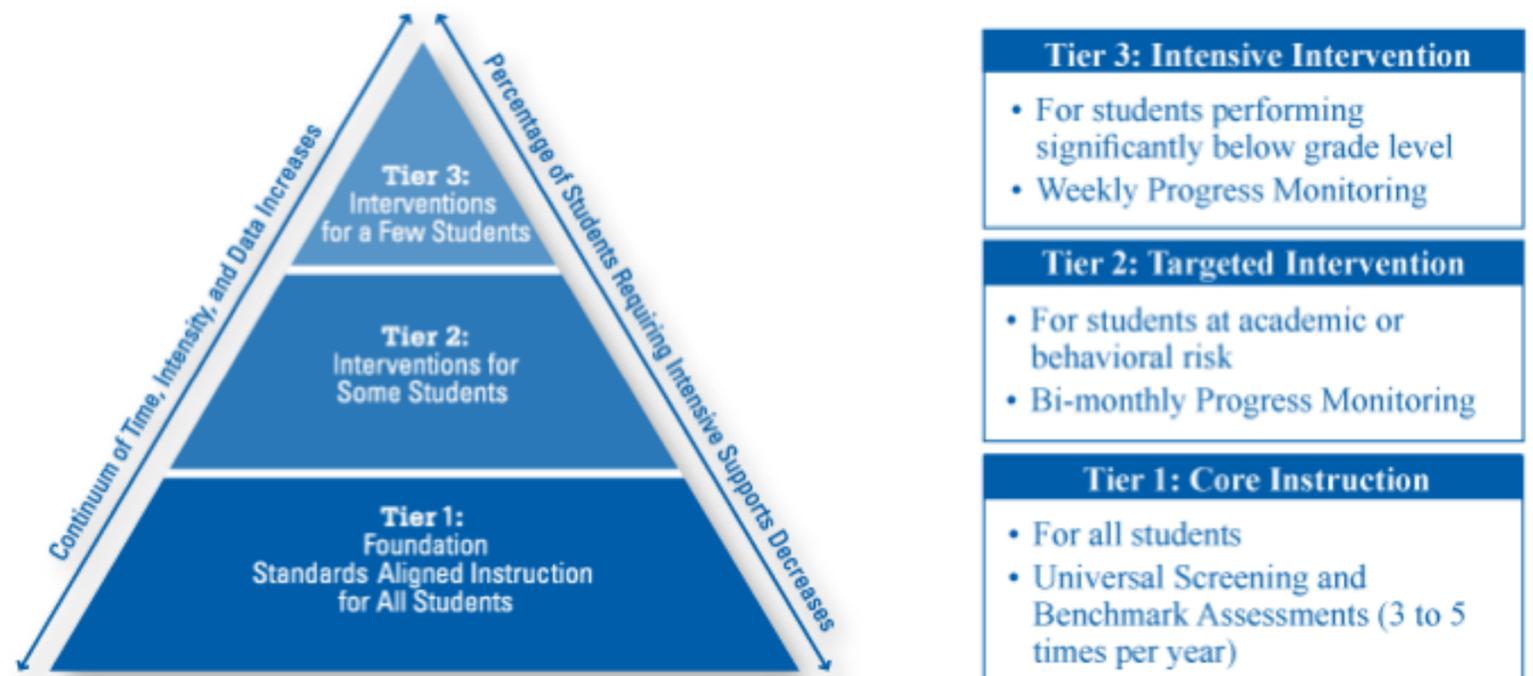
In fact, the PA-RtII Parent Work Group was instrumental in helping to ensure that accurate and timely information about RtII was provided to families, allaying any fears that schools would use RtII to delay a multidisciplinary evaluation.



Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII): A Fact Sheet for Parents

RtII is (1) a **general education effort for ALL students** to identify and help those students who need academic or behavioral help long before they fail, and (2) one of two ways to identify students with learning disabilities. RtII includes these features:

- **Standards Aligned Instruction:** High quality instruction for ALL students based on research (what we know to work) and aligned to Pennsylvania standards (matched to what students must know and be able to do)
- **Universal Screening:** A quick check of students' current level of performance in a content or skill area
- **Tiered Interventions:** Provides some students with increasing levels of instructional help based on their specific needs in the general education curriculum (See Pennsylvania's Three-Tier Model below for details)



Today, PaTTAN educational consultants work hand-in-hand with colleagues from the Commonwealth's 29 Intermediate Units (i.e., regional educational service agencies) to support fidelity of implementation of an MTSS across the Commonwealth's 501 regular public school districts and numerous charters and non-public and private schools. The Parent Education Network (PEN), the Parent and Education Advocacy Leadership (PEAL) Center, and the Philadelphia HUNE, Inc. (Hispanos Unidos para Ninos Excepcionales) work with PDE, PaTTAN, and the Intermediate Units (IUs) to facilitate meaningful parent/family engagement and involvement within the educational process. "With the advent of RtII, parents are more meaningfully involved, and they're involved earlier in the process via progress-monitoring reviews and implementation of effective strategies at home with their child; it's much more inclusive and parents are well-positioned, empowered members of school-based teams," said Lillenstein. "Districts that really have a core team working together are finding ways to engage parents; they're not just providing information to parents. They're engaging them and working together on a whole different level," added Ann Hinkson-Herrmann, Educational

Using an RtII-based SLD Identification Process

In Pennsylvania, RtII serves as an alternate method to the traditional ability–achievement discrepancy model for identifying students with learning disabilities. PA Chapter 14 regulations provide two options for making SLD determinations: (a) the continued use of an ability–achievement discrepancy model or (b) the use of RtII methodologies.

| RtII Indicators and Descriptors | Evidence of Fidelity Implementation | | |
|--|--|------------------------|----------------------------|
| <p>7. RtII/SLD Eligibility Determination</p> <p>Implementation</p> <p>Recommendations and Resources:</p> | <p>Please provide detailed evidence and/or examples for items as specified below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> With the assistance of an Intermediate Unit or PaTTAN consultant, teams should engage in an in-depth discussion of each bulleted item. This discussion should include evidence of implementation fidelity which is described in the RtII/SLD Application Scoring Guide. Select and respond to the 6 numbered items below. Numbered items are required responses and must be successfully documented for approval to be received. One point is awarded for each item that you answer and provide sufficient evidence. | | |
| <p>Fidelity of RtII/SLD Determination is associated with policies and processes that ensure that a school is in compliance with federal and state regulations.</p> <p>A system is in place to use RtII methodology for SLD determination as one component of a comprehensive SLD evaluation.</p> <p>Members of the assessment team use a dual discrepancy approach, calculating students' academic level and rate of improvement (slope).</p> <p>Members of the assessment team rule out lack of instruction by assessing fidelity of core and supplemental instruction/intervention.</p> <p>Members of the assessment team rule out other conditions or disabilities as the cause of the student's academic concerns.</p> | <p>Required Items:</p> <p>7a. Describe the local guidelines that are used to characterize a student's response to core and supplemental instruction as "inadequate".</p> <p>7b. Identify the measures and methods that are used to rule out other disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance) and other factors (e.g., limited English proficiency) on student learning and growth and other conditions.</p> <p>7c. Describe how students suspected of having SLD are observed as part of the multi-disciplinary evaluation process.</p> <p>7d. Indicate how the student's academic level is assessed and what benchmarks are used as indicative of a deficiency in relation to age or grade-level standards.</p> <p>7e. Identify the procedures used to rule out lack of instruction as the reason for the student's academic concerns, including an assessment of the fidelity of core instruction and supplemental interventions.</p> <p>7f. Identify the procedures used to inform parents of the results of repeated assessments of the student's academic skills.</p> | <p>Evident*</p> | <p>Not Evident*</p> |

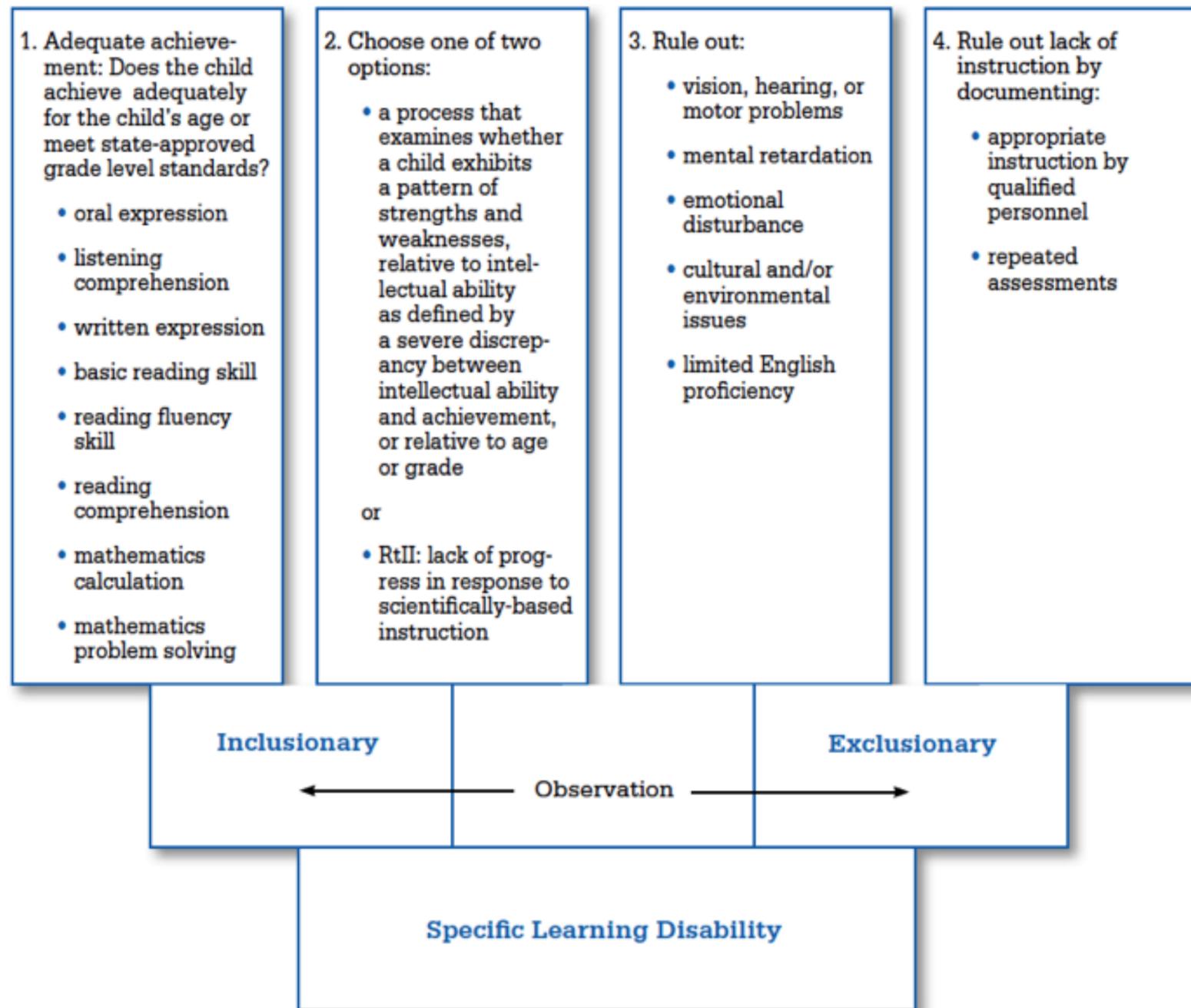
*For review purposes only

Before a school can use RtII for SLD determination, a building-level team must apply for and receive approval through the Bureau of Special Education. As part of the RtII/SLD application process, schools must submit evidence that is aligned with fidelity of RtII implementation across the key components of PA's MTSS/RtII Framework. Once approved, the bureau then monitors a school's use of RtII for SLD determination through its regular cyclical monitoring process.

Currently, the bureau has restricted the use of RtII for SLD determination to elementary reading, and 33 schools have received approval. Scoring guidelines associated with each item on the application and technical assistance are afforded to every school that is interested in seeking approval. PDE will be expanding its RtII/SLD approval process to include writing and mathematics K–12 in the near future.

Identification of students as students with SLD. In making SLD determinations, the evaluation team must determine whether a student meets two inclusionary criteria (i.e., is deficient in level of achievement and does not make adequate progress) and rule out several exclusionary factors, including the presence of other disabilities or conditions (e.g., hearing or vision loss, limited English proficiency, cognitive disability), and lack of appropriate instruction.

Eligibility Criteria for Specific Learning Disability (SLD)



Using an RtII model, the team evaluates data gathered through the RtII process and determines if the student is performing significantly below the level or standard of his or her peers. PDE notes “contemporary research has indicated that a score at the 30th percentile on nationally normed benchmark tests or individual tests of academic achievement is equivalent to a proficient score on most statewide tests. Therefore, to demonstrate inadequate achievement relative to this standard, a student should be significantly below this level (e.g., the 10th percentile) to meet the SLD qualification under this component” (PDE, 2008, p. 6). Individual school districts, however, have discretion in determining what level of performance constitutes *inadequate performance*. The evaluation team must also collect data on the student’s rate of improvement in response to evidence-based intervention. Kovaleski notes, “We provide general parameters for calculating rate of improvement (ROI), but in no case have we said, ‘This is the number you have to hit to identify a student as a student with SLD.’”

Schools approved to use RtII for SLD determination do not use the student’s IQ level as the criterion against which academic performance is compared. Instead, multiple data sources, including progress-monitoring data, are used to determine a student’s rate of improvement, as well as the effectiveness of interventions over time. According to PDE, rigorous assessment through progress-monitoring measures that meet criteria set forth by the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring¹ should be used as part of the process to inform eligibility determination (PDE, 2008, p. 10).

PDE (2008, pp. 10–11) offers the following:

As a general guide, researchers in CBM recommend a discrepancy that is two times greater between a target student’s ROI and that of his/her age group as being indicative of a significantly deficient RtI. For example, in oral reading fluency, a fifth grade student identified with SLD would have a ROI of greater than 0.3 words per minute learned per week in comparison to the rate of 0.6 of the norm group. Most commercially available progress monitoring measures (e.g., DIBELS, AIMSweb) provide expected rates of progress for students in different grades against which an individual student’s slope can be compared.

“The progress-monitoring measures that are curriculum-based or emanate from computer-adapted testing, are examples of data that we would encourage school teams to consider within the eligibility decision-making process,” explained John Machella, former advisor for the RtII/SLD Application process, from PDE’s Bureau of Special Education. “Using measures that are more homegrown or closer to the classroom makes a lot of sense for instructional decision-making, but when we’re making eligibility decisions, we have to be tighter,” he added. “We advocate generally for the use of multiple measures, such as CBM measures that are sensitive to incremental growth, and measures that are more closely linked to the common core standards,” said Lillenstein.

“Rather than seeing pockets of excellence, we hope to see that teachers in the system are able to provide high-quality instruction for all students on a more uniform basis, and that the quality of instruction that is provided across and within tiers is strengthened.”

Jennifer Lillenstein
Educational Consultant and RtII Lead (Central Region) PaTTAN-Harrisburg

Rate of identification. Over the past 6 years, from 2006–2007 to 2011–2012, the number of school-age students identified as students with SLD in Pennsylvania has decreased from 143,318 to 125,624, representing a decrease of about 12% (www.IDEAdata.org). PA officials interpret the declining SLD numbers as indicative of the state’s progress in supporting districts and schools to improve differentiated instructional practices so that children receive the amount and intensity of instruction they need to make adequate progress in general education. “We want to give all students equitable access to high-quality core and supplemental instruction and intervention, identify children with bona-fide disabilities and use the RtII process, which is a self-correcting, problem-solving process, to inform special education programming, pedagogy, and outcomes for students with disabilities,” commented Lillenstein.



However, PDE is quick to point out that more information is needed before it can be concluded that RtII/MTSS adoption and implementation results in a reduction of special education referrals and lower identification rates. “We’d really like to look at referral numbers and outcomes in schools that have sustained RtII implementation. But, even without those data, I think a reasonable extrapolation to make is that on the whole, we’re doing a better job in general education of eliminating curriculum casualties and really identifying more of the kids who have true disabilities. In contrast to what we tried to do 20 years ago when we looked at decreasing numbers in special education as a target, that’s not our focus now. Our focus is getting kids proficient,” said Kovaleski.

RtII as Part of a System of Supports

RtII in PA is not viewed as a standalone strategy, product, or program; rather, it is a part of the state’s comprehensive system of continuous school improvement and provides a roadmap for schools to arrange and implement standards-aligned instruction, core strategies, and interventions in the building to meet the academic and relational support needs of all students (PDE, 2009).



A representative group of principals in PA indicated that forming a core building and district-level RtII team should be an initial step for districts and schools interested in using RtII to support instructional improvements and better outcomes. They said that their primary role, as building administrators, was to set expectations for implementation, consistently communicate those expectations, and follow up on student response to the interventions as evidenced by the data (PDE, 2010). Each principal reported similar priorities, such as honing data-analysis and instructional matching skills, holding regular data team meetings, and using universal screening and progress monitoring. Further, each principal reported that RtII involved a reallocation of personnel and/or fiscal resources—not the hiring of additional staff members—and included modifying existing roles to deliver instruction and reallocate time for the delivery of tiered support. Staff buy-in, central office administrative support, fidelity of implementation, teachers’ use of effective instructional practices, and fidelity of implementation were among the greatest challenges reported by principals.

While PDE doesn’t mandate the use of any particular team structure, Lillenstein and her colleagues agree that the RtII core team should be interdisciplinary in nature and have members who possess a variety of knowledge and skills, such as expertise in psychometrics as well as instructional and content area expertise. The principal is typically part of the

team. “We’ve used the concept of collaborative, data-based teaming, rather than prescribe a team with a capital T,” said Machella. “Teaming is happening in many different ways and we see this expanded role and function of personnel in the schools. For example, the Title I reading teacher doesn’t hold all the data anymore; instead, she’s teaming with grade-level teachers in a much more collaborative atmosphere,” explained Hinkson-Herrmann.

More recently, principals were surveyed about the use of RtII for SLD determination. Of the 723 respondents, 336 did not respond to a question asking them if they were likely to seek approval for the use of RtII for SLD determination. Of those who did respond, 71% indicated that they had no plan to apply. In contrast, the vast majority of respondents indicated support for using RtII as an instructional model and stated that they were implementing the model (PDE, 2013). “Using RtII for SLD determination was overwhelmingly the strongest professional learning need noted in the survey” (PDE, 2013, p. 4). The apparently high level of support for RtII as an instructional framework, and the relatively low level of understanding of RtII for SLD determination, may be explained by PDE’s strong instructional focus over the past 7 years and its much more recent emphasis on the use of RtII for determining SLD.

System-level indicators of improvement: A focus on strengthening instruction. PDE encourages districts to monitor system-level indicators for determining whether their RtII models are effective. Such indicators include the (1) Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS) data to calculate and predict student academic growth over time, (2) the movement from more intensive to less intensive intervention (i.e., the movement of children from Tier 3 supports to Tier 2 supports to Tier 1 supports only), and (3) schools that do not have disproportionate representation of certain subgroups or populations within special education. “We want to see annual and catch-up growth, and an increase in the number of students who reach benchmarks,” said Lillenstein. “Looking at the data, and the increase in proficiency rates, has been our touchstone from the beginning,” added Kovaleski. “Rather than seeing pockets of excellence, we hope to see that all educators are working together to ensure that all students have equitable access to high-quality instruction and that the quality of instruction, collaboration and implementation becomes more consistent with practice and targeted professional learning over time,” observed Lillenstein.

Machella and Hinkson-Herrmann agree that RtII in Pennsylvania is perceived as a general education initiative rather than a special education initiative. “Most people in the field see RtII as their instructional model for all kids. That has evolved over the 6 or 7 years that we’ve had the model,” explained Hinkson-Herrmann. Machella concurs: “Districts see it as a regular education initiative; now, with districts starting to apply for SLD eligibility approval through the Bureau of Special Education, folks are kind of connecting it back to special education.”

Challenges, Accomplishments, and Next Steps

“The biggest challenge we have is in scaling the model, and extending our RtII application process to include middle through high school and additional content areas like math and writing,” said Lillenstein. PA officials agree that the number of districts—and schools within those districts—approved to implement an RtII-based SLD process is too small. “The people applying understand instructional improvement and the nexus between general and special education, but they’re a rather small number. We almost need to have some sort of external motivation to extend this thinking to others,” added Machella.

Supporting districts to use RtII to fully implement effective practices, and to improve the sustainability of improvements made through the use of the model, is a major focus of PDE’s work.¹ Not surprisingly, according to Kovaleski, “PA has 501 districts in various stages of RtII implementation.” “We’re looking for alignment, we’re looking for intensity, we’re looking for consistency, and we’re looking for full implementation of effective practices and methodologies,” commented Lillenstein.

One strategy for expanding the use of RtII to support the full implementation of effective practices may be to link RtII to the state’s school improvement planning process in a more explicit way. As noted by Hinkson-Herrmann, “Key components of RtII, such as universal screening, are being put in place without it being called RtII or multi-tiered system of supports, but the connection to RtII as an instructional framework is not as explicit as it could be.” Moving to the systemic use of MTSS to address the connection between academics and behavior, as well as the seamless continuum from core instruction to core instruction with interventions is something the PDE team supports. “It’s always been a challenge to get coherence across initiatives,” said Kovaleski.

Upcoming priorities for the PDE include (1) revising the application process for districts interested in using an RtII-based SLD determination process, (2) expanding the process to include secondary schools and additional content areas, (3) continuing to improve the reach of statewide training and technical assistance through the addition of a virtual coaching component, and (4) encouraging wider district use of RtII/MTSS to support higher levels of learning for all students, including English language learners (ELLs).

PDE advises other states to avoid a piecemeal approach to “rolling out” MTSS, and to connect the work to other related general education initiatives such as common core standards and educator effectiveness. “If you don’t create opportunities for educators to collaborate, align their instructional practices, and ensure that those practices are implemented with integrity, my observation is that a school’s RtII model won’t likely evolve or sustain itself,” said Lillenstein.

“It’s not about the technical aspects of RtII per se,” said Lillenstein. “It’s about facilitating collective skill and will through continuous and dynamic problem-solving at the system, grade, and student level.”



Additional Resources

For additional information about Pennsylvania’s RtI/MTSS framework, contact Dr. Jennifer Lillenstein (RtII Lead Central Region) or Ann Hinkson-Herrmann (RtII Lead West), educational consultants with the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), at jlillenstein@pattan.net or ahinkson-herrmann@pattan.net.

For more information about Pennsylvania’s RtII/SLD approval process, contact Lynn Dell, Assistant Director, Bureau of Special Education, PDE via e-mail at lydell@pa.gov.

Endnotes

¹ PaTTAN is an initiative of PDE’s Bureau of Special Education and provides training, technical assistance, and resources to support intermediate unit personnel and school personnel in improving student achievement. It comprises three regional offices, which are located in Harrisburg, King of Prussia, and Pittsburgh.s

¹ Although the funding cycle for the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring has ended, resources can still be accessed at <http://www.studentprogress.org/>.

¹ Additional information on stages of implementation can be accessed through the Active Implementation Hub at <http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu>, which is maintained by the [State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center \(SISEP\)](#) and the [National Implementation Research Network \(NIRN\)](#).

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