Using RtII for SLD Determination in Pennsylvania

Question and Answer

Question: Is RtII required in Pennsylvania?

Pennsylvania Answer: No. In fact, school districts are required to apply to the state Dept. of Education, Bureau of Special Education, for permission to use RtII as part of its eligibility determination process for SLD.

Question: Our district has not attempted to involve parents in RTI; any suggestions to help get that dialogue started?

Pennsylvania Answer: One of the most significant components of PA's RtII framework is parent involvement. Districts and their constituent schools are strongly encouraged to systematically and strategically educate and involve parents in the RtII model - from the intent of RtII to actual participation in monitoring their child's response to instruction and intervention. In an effort to get the dialogue started, parents in PA developed a comprehensive set of parent training materials that may be accessed at www.pattan.com.

Question: What is the length of time to close the gap between actual and observed skills that is reflective of special education eligibility under a LD?

Pennsylvania Answer: There is no standardized or recommended amount of time during which interventions occur. We strongly advise our schools to strike a balance between giving an intervention enough time to work and unduly keeping student "stuck" in an intervention. We also provide extensive training in progress monitoring, including the calculation of rate of improvement, so that we have hard data on the student's progress, so that we can tell if the student is making meaningful gains toward proficiency or not.

Question: I am wondering how RtII is looking at the middle school level. How are you getting general education teachers involved? Are small groups able to be established at the middle school level?
Pennsylvania Answer: In Pennsylvania we are slowly scaling RtII up to the secondary level. For the past three years we have had 5 middle school "learning sites" across the state and there are 6 additional middle schools in the south central region intensely studying and implementing RtII frameworks. General education teachers are involved at the ground level as part of building level core teams and providing leadership by department and grade level. Initially they are engaged in data analysis and problem-solving for Tier I and from this analysis small groups are identified. Providing the infrastructure for the small groups is more complicated and requires the core team to study school scheduling and other resource allocation to further establish intervention programming.

Question: One of our district administrators is looking to building level personnel to come up with methodology for the various interventions at tier I and tier II. Shouldn't those interventions be systemic and systematic so that all of the district's children are being assessed consistently? This can't be an 'organic' building specific process, can it?

Pennsylvania Answer: We agree. We provide extensive training on research-based, standards-aligned instruction for all students at tier I. We think that a strong tier I is absolutely critical to the success of RtII. At tier II, we use a standard protocol approach because there are identifiable robust interventions that have been demonstrated through research to facilitate student gains. We don't recommend particular commercial packages, but require our schools to demonstrate that they are using research-based practices. This approach continues in tier III, with teams adding some additional individualization for specific students' needs. Throughout the process we advocate for universal screening and close progress monitoring (twice a month at tier II and weekly at tier III) so that we have good data on which to make decisions.

Question: Are you familiar with any districts using a blended or hybrid approach that includes tiered interventions along with more traditional diagnostic methods of determining SLD?

Pennsylvania Answer: At the elementary level we have had districts establish a highly proficient RtII framework that would meet Bureau of Special Education approval but then they decide to use RtII methodology for instructional decision-making but use traditional diagnostic methods of determining SLD. The reasoning they give for using this approach is due to fear of litigation without traditional diagnostics. Districts need to choose between using RtII and ability-achievement discrepancy in the second component of the four-part criteria for SLD. That said, districts approved to use RtII are allowed to use other measures as appropriate, and districts that
use ability-achievement discrepancy often harvest RtII data that are useful for IEP development. Please access PA's RtII/SLD Guidelines for more information at www.pattan.net.

**Question:** Who is responsible for monitoring the application process at the State Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education? Is it the person in the IDEA funded position that was mentioned in the webinar only or are there others? Does that same person provide technical assistance to districts that apply for approval or are there others as well?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** The Bureau of Special Education receives completed applications from interested schools. The Bureau works with technical assistant and special education advisers to review and score the applications. Pennsylvania has layers of technical assistance that exist apart from the Bureau of Special Education. These educational consultants are assigned to districts/schools and are trained to assist with RtII implementation.

**Question:** How are teacher education programs being prepared to teach the data-driven decision-making required for new teachers to understand the RtII process in PA?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** One of the off-shoots to PA's RtII Initiative has included targeted outreach to university and college stakeholders in the form of RtII Forums. A series of forums have been held across PA and attracted interdisciplinary university personnel. The forums were designed to foster conversation and showcase high-quality RtII resources for embedding within existing courses. Follow-up surveys indicated that the majority of university/college attendees made changes to existing courses as a function of these forums. In addition, PA is working to re-align its teacher evaluation system and educators across the commonwealth will be engaged in discourse regarding the aforementioned topics and skills.

**Question:** How many schools are currently approved to use RtII for SLD determination in Pennsylvania?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** There are currently 25 elementary schools that are approved to use RtII for SLD Determination. According to the results of a recent survey, PA may expect that an additional 60 schools are currently preparing to apply within the next 1-3 years.
**Question:** What resources exist to help PA schools move forward with RtII implementation?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** Our statewide technical assistance organization, the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), has developed extensive resources for RtII. Go to [www.pattan.net](http://www.pattan.net) and access RtII under the Educational Initiatives drop down menu. Among other materials, take a look at some very strong materials regarding secondary RtII, use of RtII with English Language Learners (ELLs), and the calculation of rate of improvement.

**Question:** How are parents in PA reacting to RtII?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** Parents in Pennsylvania who have children receiving RtII are supportive of the process, particularly the demonstration and progress monitoring for their child. There continues to be concern by some parents of the giving up of rights, which has been addressed by the Bureau of Special Education, the Department of Education and many disability groups, particularly the State Learning Disability Association of Pennsylvania disseminating and the OSEP Memorandum, "A Response to Intervention (RTI) Process Cannot Be Used to Delay-Deny an Evaluation for Eligibility under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)." Most parents being presented with the information regarding RtII are encouraged regarding the possibility of receiving early and effective instruction for their child.

**Question:** What interventions are being used in your middle schools that are implementing RtII?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** Our middle schools are adopting our standards aligned system and implementing high-quality core instruction with an emphasis on research-based, robust literacy and mathematics strategies. Middle schools are adopting a continuum of assessment measures (formative, summative, diagnostic and benchmark) and matching instructional strategies with student needs. Infrastructure changes have been made to accommodate co-teaching, school-wide positive behavior support, multi-dimensional vocabulary instruction, active student engagement, and tier time to deliver more intensive instruction with an appropriate instructional focus. Some of our schools have reported positive response to intervention with strategies such as Read 180, SIM, Word Generation, Step Up to Writing, etc.

**Question:** Given the applications that have been received, what trends do you see in the areas in need of improvement for those schools that are not eligible for approval?
Pennsylvania Answer: In using the previous version of the PA application for approval to use RtII for SLD determination, there were trends identified that represented areas frequently in need of further development. In general, schools need to increase the depth of their fidelity of implementation. More specifically, schools had difficulty identifying decision rules needed to allocate more intervention support or move to referral or identifying systematic processes used to provide layers of differentiated instruction and intervention. Hopefully the new application process' focus on providing evidence in each key area will support earlier self-assessment, needs identification and deeper fidelity of implementation prior to application for approval.

Question: One of our district administrators is looking to building level personnel to come up with methodology for the various interventions at tier I and tier II. Shouldn't those interventions be systemic and systematic so that all of the district's children are being assessed consistently? This can't be an 'organic' building specific process, can it?

Pennsylvania Answer: We agree. We provide extensive training on research-based, standards-aligned instruction for all students at tier I. We think that a strong tier I is absolutely critical to the success of RtII. At tier II, we use a standard protocol approach because there are identifiable robust interventions that have been demonstrated through research to facilitate student gains. We don't recommend particular commercial packages, but require our schools to demonstrate that they are using research-based practices. This approach continues in tier III, with teams adding some additional individualization for specific students' needs. Throughout the process we advocate for universal screening and close progress monitoring (twice a month at tier II and weekly at tier III) so that we have good data on which to make decisions.

Question: What support do the school's special ed assistants receive?

Pennsylvania Answer: Many of our schools are using instructional assistants as part of the intervention teams. We are aware of this trend and make it clear in our training that the intensive, standard-protocol types of interventions that we use in RtII require highly trained personnel. In situations where instructional assistants are doing interventions, they should be extensively trained and work under the supervision of one of the professional staff that has expertise in the intervention. In PA, paraprofessionals are required to earn 20 hours of instruction in order to assist in the classroom.
**Question:** Are the actual application process and scoring guidelines made public? Where could I access the application and scoring guidelines?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** The application tool and scoring guidelines are made public via the PaTTAN website (www.pattan.net) under the RtII content page - RtII/SLD. We are strongly encouraging all schools to review the tool and the scoring guidelines for implementation guidance, evidentiary look for's and technical assistance guidance. The intent is to use these tools in a multi-faceted way. We think that the RtII approval process is very helpful to schools in their overall efforts at school improvement.

**Question:** When a new teacher is hired in a school district which is approved for using RtII for SLD identification, what training and professional development or support is provided to that new teacher so the system continues to run smoothly?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** All schools that are vested in RtII implementation have established a core building team. One of this team's responsibilities is to build capacity of all stakeholders toward the end of fidelity of implementation and improved student outcomes. Professional learning for all staff is encouraged through structures such as PLC's that are guided by the use of school, grade level and individual data trends in order to customize ongoing, context embedded professional learning and differentiated coaching as part of the ongoing process of enhancing instruction and intervention across all classrooms.

**Question:** How do sites ensure that there are enough "highly trained" staff members to provide timely interventions throughout the school day in Tiers II and III?

**Pennsylvania Answer:** In Pennsylvania we are able to deploy reading specialists, instructional coaches, special educators, and other specialists to provide intensive intervention programming. However, due to fiscal limitations, these resources are declining and schools need to innovate in this area. Through the provision of on-site job-embedded professional development, other specialists such as librarians, counselors, physical education teachers and others are becoming trained to provide some levels of intervention. Additionally, in a rapidly growing number of cases, classroom teachers are becoming trained to provide tier II intervention in addition to tier I. This has been a challenging learning curve, but has benefitted the alignment between tier I and tier II programming.
Question: What progress monitoring tools/strategies can you recommend?

Pennsylvania Answer: At this point there are a number of valid and reliable progress-monitoring measures. I'm sure you're aware of the list of universal screening instruments along with ratings of their psychometric characteristics that is maintained by the National Center on Response to Intervention [www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org). We refer our trainees to this resource. The decision as to what measures to use is theirs. I would say most of our districts use measures based on curriculum-based measurement, such as AIMSweb, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS), and Easy CBM. These instruments have been used in PA for many years, and continue to work well. Other schools, especially secondary schools, have begun using computer-based formats, such as STAR Reading; results with those instruments have been positive so far.

Question: You've mentioned sites implementing RtII in reading. Are many implementing in math as well?

Pennsylvania Answer: The majority of sites have moved forward with a focus on literacy and positive behavior support. A growing number have also shifted toward tiered systems of support for mathematics as well. Note that these are areas in which the districts are providing multi-tiered supports. For SLD identification, districts are only approved for elementary literacy at this point.

Question: How are you addressing areas of listening comprehension and oral expression?

Pennsylvania Answer: Currently, PA approves RtII plans for elementary reading, but is working toward procedures to approve other domains that have an adequate research base in terms of assessment and progress monitoring procedures (e.g., math calculations). We are not approving proposals for using RtII for other domains that do not have a robust research base at the current time. Assessing RtII for listening comprehension and oral expression has not been sufficiently studied to warrant statewide implementation in our opinion. We hope to see more research along these lines in the future.