The decision to implement a complex school-wide process such as Response to Intervention (RTI) can be a daunting task. Implementation of any new procedure or process is bound to involve challenges, regardless of how well teams have planned. Pilot sites can provide RTI implementation teams an opportunity to develop and implement an RTI model on a small scale while identifying potential challenges for large-scale implementation. Using pilot sites for initial implementation (1) provides data that can be used to justify more funding or support; (2) builds knowledge of RTI and its implementation; (3) helps teams determine the efficacy of RTI under certain conditions; and (4) allows for the refinement of plans for large-scale implementation.

Because of the great importance of pilot sites in effective RTI implementation, teams must take great care in selecting pilot sites that will lead to the desired goals and outcomes of the pilot project. The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) developed this resource to assist state, district, and school teams in developing a process for selecting pilot sites for initial RTI implementation. This facilitator resource, RTI Pilot Site Selection: Things to Consider, reviews considerations for selecting sites and provides recommended questions for teams to discuss.

For this resource, a pilot site is defined as a small-scale implementation of RTI initiated to check the conditions and operational details before full-scale launch or a site serving as a tentative model for future experiment or development. Pilot sites are often associated with initial implementation of RTI, or beginning implementation, and differ from demonstration sites. The latter are those sites that have fully implemented RTI successfully and have agreed to serve as model sites for future implementers.

**Things to Consider**

The following section provides information about issues to consider when developing a process for selecting pilot sites. It is divided into four areas: priorities, evaluation, resources, and the site selection process.
Priorities

Understanding your priorities is a critical step in the pilot site selection process. State and/or district teams must come to a consensus on what exactly is being piloted (e.g., a school-wide reform model, a new way to identify students with learning disabilities), the purpose of the pilot sites, the desired outcomes, the time frame for the pilot process, and the alignment of RTI with other initiatives and activities. This information will enable teams to determine the purpose and intended outcomes of pilot site selection. It can also be critical in attracting potential sites, keeping stakeholders informed, developing an evaluation process, providing a rationale for the project, and developing an effective selection process.

When looking at their priorities and goals, teams should clarify the following before engaging in the development and implementation of the pilot site process.

What are you piloting?

The first step in selecting pilot sites is for teams to come to a consensus on what is being piloted. This information is critical for evaluating and clarifying implementation requirements for potential pilot sites. Teams should clarify which components of RTI are being piloted and the evidence base and rationale for each component. Examples of possible RTI pilot activities include the following:

- An individual model of RTI based on defined framework components
- A component or several components of an RTI framework model (e.g., screening, progress monitoring)
- A specific tool or intervention within an existing RTI framework
- An RTI professional development or technical assistance approach
- District-level RTI teams that evaluate and support implementation across schools

Discussion questions

- What are we piloting? Be as specific as possible.
- Have we sufficiently defined the components being implemented?
- Why do we need to pilot this?
- What is our rationale?
- What is the evidence base for what we are considering piloting?
- Is the focus at the district, school, or class level?
- On what content areas (e.g., reading, mathematics) will the pilot study focus?

What is the purpose of the pilot sites?

The next step is for teams to come to a consensus on the purpose of the pilot site project and provide a written rationale. This is essential in justifying the need to others (e.g., potential pilot sites, funding sources), developing common language, designing an evaluation plan, and selecting appropriate sites. The team should demonstrate that the use of pilot sites is the most efficient and effective method for obtaining the outcome. Examples of how some states, districts, and schools have used pilot sites are as follows:

- Developing sites that can serve as future model demonstration sites
- Assessing the feasibility of large-scale implementation under certain conditions
- Evaluating the impact of a particular RTI model on student achievement
- Determining the resources needed to effectively scale up RTI
Learning from pilot sites in order to develop a scalable RTI model
- Developing or refining a large-scale implementation plan
- Promoting consensus by showing how implementation can work
- Demonstrating that RTI can be implemented with existing resources.

If teams decide that the pilot sites will have multiple purposes, they must ensure that all purposes are compatible and feasible for the sites to achieve.

Discussion questions
- What is the purpose of the pilot sites? How will we use the pilot sites?
- Do data already exist that provide answers to the questions we want to answer by implementing pilot sites? If yes, would pilot sites provide additional information?
- Has this approach already been piloted? If yes, do we need more information?
- Are there more efficient ways than pilot sites to address our purpose?

What are the goals or desired outcomes?

Once the purpose of the pilot sites is clarified, teams should specify the desired outcomes for the pilot sites. Teams should be as specific as possible about the expected outcomes so that pilot sites and stakeholders can assess whether the available resources are sufficient for them to reach those outcomes. Not only will this help potential pilot sites understand the expectations, it will also determine how the pilot site project should be evaluated.

The following are examples of measurable outcomes of RTI pilot projects:

Example 1. By the end of Year 3, six pilot sites implementing the district model with a high degree of fidelity, as demonstrated by the NCRTI Integrity Rubric, will become district-approved demonstration sites.

Example 2. Upon completion of pilot site implementation, the team will use lessons learned from the RTI pilot project to develop a comprehensive implementation plan for district-wide implementation of RTI.

Teams should consider including a time frame, a description of the outcome (e.g., demonstration site, report, plan), and an explanation of the assessment method (e.g., specific tool, product) to increase the clarity of the goals and outcomes.

Discussion questions
- What are the goals or outcomes of the pilot process?
- At the end of the pilot process, what do we hope to achieve?
- Are the written desired outcomes both measurable and reasonable?
- What evidence will indicate our desired outcome (e.g., higher test scores, implementation rubric scores)?
- Are there any interim benchmarks or short-term outcomes?

What is the anticipated timeline for implementation?

The expected time frame for completion of the pilot site project is important to know before implementation begins. Current implementation research suggests that full implementation may take up to 3 years (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Bringing a single screening tool to scale will probably occur faster.
than school-wide implementation of an RTI model. Also, changes in implementation are likely to occur before changes in student achievement. Thus, teams may set different timelines for implementation and expected impact on student achievement. Setting realistic timelines can prevent frustration among pilot sites and allow teams to implement an effective evaluation and technical support system.

**Discussion questions**

- What is the anticipated timeline for completion?
- When is implementation by pilot sites expected to begin and end?
- Is an extension possible? Under what circumstances?
- Does evidence suggest that the time frame is realistic for meeting the desired outcomes?
- Do we need different time frames for different pilot activities?

**How do pilot site activities align with other initiatives or activities?**

Understanding what will be implemented at the same time as the potential pilot site implementation can help teams draw connections between the two initiatives to create efficiencies and reduce burden on staff. For example, if sites are focusing on implementing a new core curriculum, it will be important to show the alignment of RTI and the new core so that staff will not be overwhelmed. If components of RTI are replacing existing processes, this should be clarified for potential pilot sites as well. For example, if a new screening process is being piloted, staff should understand that this potentially more efficient process may eventually replace the current, more cumbersome process. This is very important in situations where pilot sites are expected to implement both new and existing processes. For this reason, it may also be worth considering the feasibility of exempting pilot sites from certain requirements during the evaluation period.

**In summary,** it is important to determine what is being piloted, the expected outcomes of the pilot site process, the expected time frame, and alignment with other activities before selecting pilot sites. Having made these decisions, teams can begin to identify the best approach for evaluating the effectiveness of the pilot process and the most appropriate method for selecting pilot sites.

**Evaluation**

Creating an evaluation plan is a critical process, not only for determining whether desired outcomes are achieved, but also in the selection of pilot sites. If pilot sites are required to participate in data collection as part of implementation, this may affect their willingness to participate. At the same time, data for evaluation are important to accomplishing the purpose of a pilot site. Furthermore, the evaluation plan can help teams determine the number of pilot sites and selection criteria needed to achieve the desired outcome.

The purpose and desired outcomes of the pilot sites will determine which aspects selection teams may be interested in evaluating. These may include a combination of some or all of the following:

1. The degree to which the RTI model or its components are implemented with integrity.
2. The impact of the implementation of the RTI model or its components on student achievement.
3. The impact of the scale-up process on integrity of implementation of the RTI model or its components.

Teams should ensure that their desired outcomes can be evaluated and achieved in the given time frame and with the available resources without placing unrealistic burdens on pilot sites.

**How will the pilot process be evaluated?**

Teams should outline the evaluation process as much as possible before selecting pilot sites. By doing so, teams can begin to address essential decisions in the pilot site selection process. These may include the number of sites needed, the location of sites, the level of site readiness needed to achieve the expected outcome, any specific site demographics, and the school type or site context. As mentioned earlier, these decisions can help determine the extent of the data burden on sites. If the burden is heavy, it may be necessary to offer incentives or additional support to attract potential pilot sites. Stakeholders and potential pilot sites need to understand the evaluation process in order to make informed decisions.

**Discussion questions**

- How will the pilot process be evaluated?
- Who will conduct the evaluation?
- How frequently will formative and summative data be collected?
- What evaluation tools will we use? Do we need to create additional tools?
- How will the results be reported? To whom will they be reported?
- How will progress of pilot site implementation be monitored?
- How many and what types of resources will be devoted to the evaluation?
- What are the minimum data collection requirements for pilot sites?

**What will happen to pilot sites at the end of the project?**

In addition to knowing the expectations of the pilot site project, potential sites need to know from the beginning what is expected of them once the project ends. Will they be expected to continue implementing it? Will they become demonstration sites, and if so, what does that mean? This is extremely important for sites piloting externally funded processes, such as free access to a Web-based program or “free” site-based coaches. If the plan is to cease funding, sites should receive technical assistance on how to build their capacity so that they can continue implementing beyond project completion. Teams may also consider fading financial support over time to allow pilot sites time to reallocate existing resources to support sustainable implementation.

**Discussion questions**

- What will happen to pilot sites at the end of the project?
- What will happen to sites if the outcome is achieved? If it is not achieved?
- Will sites lose access to tools used during the pilot?
- Will sites become demonstration sites after the project ends? If so, what does being a demonstration site entail?
- Will sites receive recognition for their participation?
- How will we ensure effective practices will continue after the pilot period ends?

**What actions will be taken if sites fail to meet the requirements or expectations?**

It is important to clarify up front with potential pilot sites what the expectations are and what happens if they are not met. Some state and local education agencies have elected to use signed assurances; others
have a renewal process each year. Assurances or “nonnegotiables” outlined as part of the site selection process can provide teams with the authority to end support for sites that fail to meet expectations. As the goals of the project may dictate, teams also may decide to provide additional support to struggling pilot sites or alter unrealistic expectations.

**Discussion questions**
- What actions will be taken if sites fail to meet the requirements or expectations?
- What ongoing criteria and expectations will we have for pilot sites?
- How will we know that sites are meeting expectations?
- When will decisions about continued participation occur? Who will make these decisions?
- Will these sites be dropped from the process or will we provide additional support? Will sites be given a warning before action is taken?
- Will assurances be used to clarify implementation and data expectations? Who will be required to sign the assurances?

In summary, developing an evaluation plan before site selection can assist teams in selecting pilot sites with the potential for success. The evaluation plan not only provides information about the number and location of pilot sites but it offers essential information for the development of selection criteria and expectations for pilot site participation.

**Resources**

This section presents a brief discussion about some of the resources teams may consider as incentives and part of the pilot process. Some potential pilot sites choose to participate because of the added benefits of participation, such as access to additional funds, tools, or professional development. By understanding who will oversee this process, what resources are available, and under what conditions sites will be expected to implement RTI, teams can better select pilot sites that will be successful in the project.

**Who will oversee the pilot process?**

It is important to clarify who will oversee the pilot process. In addition to serving as the contact for pilot sites, this person(s) may ensure sites have access to available resources, keep other staff informed about progress, coordinate or conduct professional development, and conduct check-in meetings.

**Discussion questions**
- Who will oversee the pilot process?
- What will his/her responsibilities be?
- What expertise should he/she have?
- How much time will be devoted to overseeing the pilot sites?

**What resources are available for pilot sites?**

It is recommended that the resources provided to pilot sites be sustainable and likely to be available to future nonpilot sites. For example, although providing four externally funded staff for data entry and intervention delivery may show a positive impact on student achievement, the impact is unlikely to be sustained once the project ends, and the sites will most likely return to their original structure.

In some cases, providing an externally funded resource for pilot sites might be appropriate if that is the resource being piloted for scale-up. In other instances, providing additional resources or funds may be necessary as an incentive or to build the capacity of staff members. Even in these cases, teams should consider fading out the incentivized support to resource levels that would be realistic for sustained implementation.
Discussion questions

- What resources are available for pilot sites?
- Are the available resources appropriate to meet the goals of the project?
- Will pilot sites be provided any funding? Will this be restricted or unrestricted?
- Will sites be provided additional staff? What will their roles be?
- Will RTI tools be provided to pilot sites?
- Can these resources be sustained after implementation?
- Are the resources used in the pilot implementation comparable to those that would be used in nonpilot schools?
- Will resources be used as incentives? How?

What technical assistance or professional development is available for pilot sites?

For successful implementation of any innovative practice to occur, sites will need ongoing technical assistance and professional development (Fixsen et al., 2005). For cases in which there is a clear understanding of what is being piloted or how implementation will occur, pilot sites may be expected to participate in the same professional development and technical assistance. For other cases in which there is more flexibility about how RTI model components are implemented, pilot sites are at various levels of readiness, or the level of professional development need is unknown, teams may wish to provide pilot sites with funds to choose their own professional development.

The following are some examples of support that can be provided to pilot sites:

1. On-site and Web-based trainings for all or select staff
2. Communities of practice, for either specific or general topics
3. Technical assistance tools (e.g., implementation guides, fidelity tools)
4. Toolkits or compilations of relevant resources and tools
5. Web-based support or website
6. Access to regional and on-site RTI coaches
7. Access to national or regional experts

Discussion questions

- What technical assistance or professional development is available for pilot sites?
- What knowledge and skills are necessary in order to implement the project?
- What expertise is available to support the pilot sites?
- Who is available to provide professional development and technical assistance?
- What training materials are available? Do we need to develop training materials?
- How will ongoing coaching and implementation support be delivered?
- Will sites have opportunities to learn from each other, such as through a community of practice or Web support?

In summary, teams should identify what resources are available for use as incentives and as part of the pilot site project. Potential pilot sites can use this information to evaluate whether they can realistically meet the expectations and achieve the outcomes with the available resources.

Site Selection Process

Once teams have clearly articulated priorities, evaluation procedures, and available resources, they are ready to begin to develop the site selection process. Teams should confer to refine their priorities, resources, and evaluation system often during the development process to ensure alignment. If
refinement is necessary, teams will need to clarify the revision in writing and ensure that previous decisions align with the refinement. Teams should consider the number of pilot sites needed, selection criteria, incentives for sites, and the selection process, as described below.

**How many pilot sites are needed to achieve the outcome?**

A team’s priorities and evaluation procedures often dictate how many pilot sites are needed. It is recommended that teams take into account possible attrition of sites when determining the minimum number of pilot sites. Teams should not, however, select more sites than can adequately be supported with the available resources.

**Discussion questions**

- How many pilot sites are needed to achieve the outcome?
- What are the minimum and maximum number of pilot sites needed?
- How many sites can realistically be supported with the available resources?
- Are pilot sites needed in each region? Each grade? Each type of school?

**What selection criteria will ensure the outcome is achieved in the time frame?**

By creating clear criteria for pilot site selection, teams will more easily be able to identify sites. The criteria should include factors that will increase the likelihood that the pilot sites will achieve the purpose and outcomes. Below is a sampling of selection criteria used by various teams:

1. Site consensus or buy-in from the majority of staff
2. Agreement with pilot site requirements
3. Strong leadership
4. School test scores
5. Any specific context desired (e.g., high poverty, rural, urban)
6. Willingness to serve as a future demonstration site
7. Readiness to benefit
8. Implementation teams with specified membership
9. Evidence of ability to implement
10. Willingness and ability to match grant money

Teams may consider developing two separate sets of selection criteria. The first would include the minimum selection criteria, those that are essential for achieving the desired outcomes. The second set would include preferred criteria, those that are not required but would give sites an edge over others during the selection process.

**Discussion questions**

- What selection criteria will ensure the outcomes are achieved in the time frame?
- What criteria will increase the likelihood of achieving the goals and outcomes?
- What are the minimum criteria for selection? How flexible are they?
- What are some potential preferred criteria?
- Is there a sufficient sample population that can meet these criteria?
- Why are these criteria important?

**What are the benefits and potential issues for pilot sites?**

It is important that potential pilot sites understand the costs and benefits of serving as a pilot site. When potential pilot sites understand the possible burdens and challenges before implementation begins, they can plan accordingly. Further, knowing the benefits can make sites more willing to take on the challenges. Teams should brainstorm all of the potential benefits...
and challenges for sites. If the challenges outweigh the benefits, teams may consider providing additional incentives to pilot sites or reducing the scope or requirements of the project.

Table 1 describes common processes for selected pilot sites along with some pros and cons for each method. Regardless of the process selected, teams should anticipate potential challenges and brainstorm solutions ahead of time.

Discussion questions
- What are the benefits and potential issues for pilot sites?
- Do the benefits outweigh the potential issues or disincentives?
- Are additional incentives needed?
- What additional information is needed to weigh the benefits and challenges?

What process will be used to identify pilot sites?

There are numerous methods for identifying potential pilot sites, such as an application process, a call for nominations, or a selection process. Sometimes, a method may be selected on the basis of efficiency. For example, if pilot sites are expected to begin implementation in three months, a lengthy application process may not be the best approach. For teams using pilot sites to develop future demonstration sites, it may be more appropriate to hand-pick sites or accept nominations for those who are furthest along in implementation.

Discussion questions
- What process will be used to identify pilot sites? Brainstorm possible options and evaluate the pros and cons of each.
- What approaches match our desired outcomes and needs?
- Which approach appears to be the most feasible?
- What are the pros and cons of the approach we selected?

In summary, the process for selecting potential pilot sites can occur only after teams have clearly identified their priorities and the selection criteria. Although pros and cons were addressed for three popular approaches to identifying sites, teams may consider a combination of several or an adaptation of one of them. Teams should create selection processes that allow them to effectively and efficiently identify the most appropriate RTI pilot sites.
### Table 1. Pilot Site Selection Processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection Process</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Steps</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Applications:</strong> Teams solicit applications to select sites using predetermined criteria.</td>
<td>• Unbiased approach to selecting pilot sites • May identify potential sites unknown to the team • Effective way to involve various stakeholders in the process • Demonstrates sites that are likely to invest the time to follow through with pilot site implementation</td>
<td>• Application process typically takes 4–6 weeks after the selection criteria have been finalized • Requires that several staff people adequately review applications • Well-written applications may not necessarily indicate the commitment of staff or its readiness • Teams may find that they do not receive enough applications or receive only poor-quality applications</td>
<td>1. Develop minimum and preferred selection criteria. 2. Create an application process and letter that reflect selection criteria. Provide applicants with sufficient information to determine whether they should submit an application. 3. Disseminate the call for applications to potential sites through e-mail, website posting, newsletters, staff meetings, and so on. 4. Screen applicants on the basis of minimum selection criteria. 5. Review applications against preferred criteria. 6. Rank applicants in a preestablished rating process. 7. Optional: Conduct interviews or site visits to verify applicants’ ranking. 8. Select and inform pilot sites.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nominations:</strong> Teams select from nominated sites using predetermined criteria.</td>
<td>• Teams may have familiarity with potential pilot sites • Site selection may occur quickly • There may be a better understanding of expectations and higher interest among self-nominated sites • There may be a sense of reward among sites nominated by outside sources</td>
<td>• If nominated by outside sources, nominated sites may not be interested in participating • Selection pool is limited to those known by nominators • Not enough sites may be nominated • Vague criteria may lead to inappropriate nominations</td>
<td>1. Develop minimum and preferred criteria for nomination. 2. Identify who can nominate potential sites (e.g., regional directors, potential sites themselves). 3. Accept nominations. 4. If unlimited nominations are taken, screen nominees against preestablished criteria and rank the sites. 5. Optional: Conduct interviews or site visits to verify interest and understanding of expectations. 6. Select and inform pilot sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection:</strong> Teams select sites that meet criteria from the entire pool of possible sites.</td>
<td>• Useful in situations when pilot sites are part of broad-scale implementation • Useful when teams are interested in studying the efficacy of implementation under various conditions and have clear ideas of the type of sites needed</td>
<td>• Differences in readiness and buy-in across sites can create challenges in providing standardized professional development and technical assistance • Delay or ineffective implementation due to lack of buy-in or interest in sites selected involuntarily • Appearance of not being fair or equal in pilot site selection.</td>
<td>1. Develop minimum and preferred criteria for site selection. 2. Identify sites that meet the selection criteria. 3. Optional: Conduct interviews or site visits to verify interest and understanding of expectations. 4. Select and inform pilot sites.</td>
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Additional Resources

For more information about RTI and the pilot site selection process, check out these resources:

1. NCRTI website (www.rti4success.org)
2. NCRTI State Database (http://state.rti4success.org/)
3. NCRTI Integrity Rubric and Worksheet (http://www.rti4success.org/resourcetype/rti-integrity-rubric-and-worksheet/)
5. RTI Action Network (http://www.rtinetwork.org/)

Reference

RTI Pilot Site Selection: Things to Consider

About the National Center on Response to Intervention

Through funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs, the American Institutes for Research and researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas have established the National Center on Response to Intervention. The Center provides technical assistance to states and districts and builds the capacity of states to assist districts in implementing proven response to intervention frameworks.

National Center on Response to Intervention

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