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Abstract: Building Professional Learning and Collaboration within Response to Intervention

Good instruction flourishes when teachers collaborate. Students benefit academically when their teachers share ideas, cooperate in activities, and assist one another's intellectual growth.

Building professional and collegial conversations that focus on enhancing multi-tiered lessons set a cornerstone for continuous improvement. The following article details the key components necessary for continued professional learning and collaboration among multiple educators within the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework, a multi-tiered support system.

Building Professional Learning and Collaboration within RTI

Teacher's Voice

“Ms. Kirby, can you add these meetings to your calendar please?” Sounds familiar doesn't it? I am already involved in weekly meetings including those with the principal, grade level team, parents, and the school district. During the grade level planning meetings we discuss how to collect multiple types of assessment data from different students. Here my colleagues and I voice student concerns, curricular needs, and ways to improve students' mathematical performance. I must attend school improvement committee meetings and RTI team meetings and mandated lesson study sessions to improve student achievement. During lesson study each grade level team must work to develop a set of procedures based upon the school district guidance. I am committed to improving my students learning. I want to make a difference, and I want to learn, but where will I find the time to develop and implement one more thing in the current schedule? How can I learn and implement all the new information to make a difference in my students? How can I connect to other colleagues as part of an ongoing learning community? Even though adding more to my schedule was a bit overwhelming, I quickly discovered that team meetings provided support and helped me throughout the school year. The professional learning and collaboration proved to be an invaluable connection within the RtI in mathematics process.”

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a multi-tiered support system designed for improving instruction and providing academic and social-behavioral support to all students. It should be implemented to ensure success for every student in every classroom. RtI is a systematic method of identifying, defining, and resolving students' academic and social-behavior difficulties using school-wide, problem solving approaches (Gresham & Little, 2013). A key component necessary

for implementing RtI is continued professional learning and collaboration among multiple educators (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Good instruction flourishes when teachers collaborate, and students' benefit academically when their teachers share ideas, cooperate in activities, and assist one another's intellectual growth (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Building professional and collegial conversations centered on enhancing our multi-tiered lessons sets a cornerstone for continuous improvement (AuthorGresham & Little, 2012). Specific strategies for school reform and renewal based on continuous learning serve as the catalyst for maximizing the potential for student improvement in mathematics within Response to Intervention. RtI requires professionals that are highly knowledgeable in evidence-based instructional practices, as well as intervention materials, multiple types of assessments, and data collection methods. In addition to content expertise, we must also possess skills in differentiating and intensifying instruction, data interpretation, problem solving, and collaboration (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). As we continuously learn, our students continuously improve as student improvement and achievement are linked in our learning as professionals (Gresham & Little, 2013).

Implementing RtI within districts, schools, and classrooms requires comprehensive support for students through our collaboration with colleagues. Successful implementation requires coordination and communication to ensure that a clear vision is articulated, sufficient resources are dedicated, necessary skills are supported, and incentives are identified within a clear action plan. No two schools are ever identical in staff, curriculum organization, teacher involvement, requirements, students, and so on. School change is a complex process that requires the active involvement of everyone through explicit and thoughtful coordination of activities and procedures. This can be difficult to do, because we are often asked or required to do more with less. As Ms. Kirby mentioned when describing her school, the meetings and responsibilities

continue to be added. Sometimes there seems to be too much to do each day. However, if we look at the purpose of the activity, we can align and meet the goal by enhancing something we are already doing within our school. Most schools are already participating in school improvement processes that include many tasks for everyone in the school. Therefore the questions remain, how does RtI *fit* with the other professional learning and responsibilities already in place at your school? What is currently in place in your school to *support* professional learning and RtI implementation? Where do we find the time to *collaborate* with other educators?

Getting Connected with Colleagues

Connecting with colleagues can take on many forms. There are professional development structures that enhance the knowledge and use necessary skills and competencies of mathematics teachers to implement RtI in classrooms and schools. Ways to connect can be through the building of professional and collegial learning communities, action research, lesson study, and professional portfolios. The use of these skills and competencies are keys to continued student learning and improvement within mathematics classrooms.

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

A professional learning community (PLC) is described as a model of professional development that focuses on student learning rather than teaching, collaborative work, and accountability for results for more than a decade (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010). The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of schools is not simply to ensure that students are taught, but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift (from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning) has profound implications within schools.

Educators within PLCs recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose by promoting a collaborative school culture. With allocated time, resources, and collaboration, every professional in the school engages in the continuous exploration of three critical questions that drive the work within a professional learning community. What do we want students to learn? How will we know that each student has learned the content? And, how will we respond when a student experiences difficulty during the learning process? Educators should work together in teams to analyze and improve classroom instructional practices and engage in a cycle of continuous improvement based on student learning (DuFour, 2004). All the professionals involved, including mathematics teachers, enhance the learning process through their PLCs when they engage in collaborative conversations that delve into educational goals, strategies, resources, and results. RtI works in tandem with PLCs to give a way to structure for instruction and interventions. As teachers collaborate, team members look at evidence-based instructional strategies that differentiate and intensify interventions to determine which approaches fit the needs of various students. Discussion among school-based members of the PLC about procedures, skills, and resources related to RtI needs to occur before RtI implementation in the schools. Colleagues of teachers within PLCs support one another as they try new ideas, materials, and strategies to meet needs of their struggling mathematics students. PLCs model sustained, job-embedded professional development for teachers that address the learning needs of their students and improve results. PLCs focus on students' learning, work collaboratively to enhance teaching techniques and implementation, and account for improved results for all students. Through continued conversations about new learning and approaches, PLCs offer an ongoing professional development structure to ensure continued learning for teachers and other school educators in meeting these goals.

Action Research

Another way to connect with colleagues is through action research (also known as teacher inquiry or data-based instructional decision making). Action research is a process of describing and testing theories through which student learning is studied, defined, analyzed, implemented, and evaluated (Glanz, 2003). This cyclical problem solving approach is central to the RtI process when determining instruction and intervention supports for students within the RtI tiers. This model of professional development and teacher learning requires knowledge about data collection, evidence-based instructional practices and resources, and assessments used in classrooms (Gresham & Little, 2013). The process of action research provides opportunities to discuss instructional practices findings, develop actions plans, and identify and address students' mathematical needs, problems, or concerns. With that knowledge, teachers can systematically reflect on teaching practices and make changes to instruction based on careful analysis of the current classroom performance of students (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003; Little, 2009; Sagor, 2005). Conducting action research can empower teachers and give them opportunities to grow within their professional roles and responsibilities (Glanz, 2003; Little & Houston, 2003).

Lesson Study

Lesson study is a cycle of instructional improvements focused on planning, observing, and discussing lessons and drawing on implications for teaching and learning. The focus is on classroom lessons that provide opportunities for the implementation of new ideas, strategies, and/or evidence-based instructional resources and practices to address student learning needs in mathematics while carefully recording student learning and behaviors *during* the lessons. Within this process, colleagues observe one another while teaching a designated lesson. The collection of teacher and student behaviors, engagement, and learning is recorded and later shared with

other teachers after the lesson has concluded. The purpose is to work together to form both immediate and long-term goals for student learning and long-term development; to study existing curricula, standards, and resources; to relate them to the student results; and to provide discussion of possible adaptations and enhancements. Teachers use the gathered information to improve the lesson, unit, and overall instruction including specific instructions for students who are struggling with the content of the lesson (Lewis, 2002).

Likewise, the RtI progress of monitoring assessment data provides important information about how to intensify instruction and make decisions about evidence-based interventions.. Teachers and instructional coaches within the lesson study team, meet continuously and use observational data to improve teaching practices within the classroom. Teachers focus on the goal of enhancing instructional practices to ensure the most effective and skilled teaching. Within RtI, this goal is referred to as *fidelity of implementation* (using the teaching techniques and/or the instructional resources as they were designed). Teaching is continually improved through this process as the resources and evidence-based instructional methods and intervention practices are used.

Professional Portfolios

The last idea for building professional learning and collaboration within RtI is through the use of professional portfolios. Professional portfolios showcase the learning and results of both teachers and students. A teacher's portfolio can serve many different purposes, depending on the teacher's professional goals and the mandates of the school and district. As RtI is implemented in conjunction with other school improvement initiatives and ongoing professional development structures, contents of a teacher's professional portfolio document the journey of

change and professional learning. At any time, particularly when changes are implemented, it is very important to document and collect items that account for the effects of the actions, especially as related to student learning. Reflecting on student learning is one of the greatest incentives and motivators as an educator. As it serves to document the attainment of goals, both personal and professional, and to stimulate professional discussions and action planning (Danielson, 1996).

Assembling items for a portfolio is a powerful vehicle for professional reflection and analysis. Various documents (e.g., videos from lessons, lesson study planning documents, assessment results for mathematics units, individual student learning graphs, student work samples and other resources, instructional artifacts of in-class assignments, homework, and written reflections) provide evidence of impact and effectiveness and also assessment data for professional growth and development (Danielson, 1996). Specifically, the portfolio contents serve as the “data” for the continued professional development of the mathematics teachers. Logs of implementation, lesson planning documents, and videotapes of lessons provide current and accurate information to extend and enhance professional discussions covering all aspects of teaching.

Professional portfolios are used not only formatively with colleagues, but are also used with continued professional learning for the development of teacher knowledge, skills, and competencies. Additionally, professional portfolios can be used as summative evaluations by principals and for professional advancements, such as when applying for National Board Certification or another professional position. Professional portfolios provide artifacts and data related to professional teaching and learning such as evidence of planning for instruction and interventions, interactions with students, feedback to students, student learning, and contributions

to the school, district, and profession. When developing a professional portfolio, it is important to remember that all included materials should reflect the professional standards and requirements of the school district. .

Final Thoughts

With implementation of RtI, school districts and mathematics teachers have a personal and professional responsibility to engage in professional development. Professional development and sustained support is a two-way street. Schools and districts need to offer supportive, collaborative, and sustained professional development structures to learn about, implement, refine, and polish the necessary skills to implement RtI in mathematics classrooms. Alignment of available resources to the established curricular objectives and benchmarks is critical for students to be able to master the curriculum. There is a responsibility to take full advantage of the opportunities offered, as well as share the results of the professional development. Thought should be given on how existing personnel, materials, and resources can be used in more coherent and interrelated ways to improve instruction for *all* students, and to reduce the numbers of students struggling to learn mathematics. Collaboration among professionals is needed when planning, gathering resources, and delivering the multiple tiers of support across grade levels in mathematics. Teaching mathematics is not easy. However, with the skills, knowledge, and commitment of classroom teachers, and other educators, instructional concerns can be addressed through continued discourse and collaborative professional learning.

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