Questions from the Get Ready for RtI Webinar, September 21, 2010

Response to Intervention (RtI) – Using the Interactive Strategies Approach to Prevent Reading Difficulties in the Primary Grades
Presenter: Donna Scanlon

Responses to Questions Prepared by Kim Anderson and Donna Scanlon

1. How frequent should assessment be made, either formal or informal?

To date, research has not offered a definitive answer here, but we do have some general recommendations. In both kindergarten and first grade, we would suggest a comprehensive early literacy assessment be conducted at the beginning of the year, to identify students at-risk for early literacy learning (and therefore in need of intervention). Those children for whom intervention is provided should be closely monitored, with periodic assessment to facilitate decision-making regarding grouping and/or adjustments in instruction. Informal assessment (see question 2 below) should be ongoing, as having up-to-date information on what the child knows and is able to do is a critical component of responsive instruction. For children who are not identified as at risk at the beginning of the year, we would recommend comprehensive assessment two to three more times throughout the year, to be sure that they are meeting grade level expectations.

2. What would your recommendation be on a valid RTI benchmark/assessment and progress monitoring?

There are a number of measures of early literacy skill that provide benchmarks or norms that can be used within an RtI context. Assessments commonly used at this time include the Diagnostic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), AIMSweb, the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), and the Benchmark Assessment System. With respect to identifying which children are at risk for early literacy difficulties, these measures are likely to provide similar results. However, in considering which assessments to adopt, it is important to consider not only their ability to identify children who are not meeting, or are at risk of not meeting grade level expectations, but also to consider their potential to provide information that will inform instruction. Many commonly used instruments, such as the DIBELS and AIMSweb only provide information about students’ fluency on isolated skills and/or on their fluency in oral reading. They provide no information about why a student may be struggling nor about what the instructional priorities should be for that student. Further, the use of fluency-based measures runs the risk of conveying to both students and teachers that fluency is valued over the most important outcome of reading instruction – comprehension.

For these reasons, in the primary grades, we recommend the use of measures that have the potential to provide more comprehensive information, including information about the students’ foundational literacy skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, high frequency words) and about their ability to read and understand texts. Measures such as the TPRI, the PALS, and the Benchmark Assessment System have the potential to provide this kind of information.
Computer-adapted assessments, such as the STAR Early Literacy Assessment, are beginning to be used more regularly and appear to show some promise, particularly for progress monitoring, but we do not yet have enough information about this to make a confident recommendation.

Further, we encourage the use of a combination of formal and informal assessment methods, with the important stipulation that the assessments and the instruction which is provided should be integrally related. Formal measures of foundational literacy skills such as letter-name and letter-sound knowledge and phonemic analysis are important in kindergarten and for older children with limited skills. More informal assessment can be conducted on a regular basis, through observation, as teachers work with the students. We encourage teachers to use checklists and anecdotal notes, in combination with the more formal, less frequent measures, to document growth in specific early literacy skills and strategies, and to use these data to inform their instruction as well as decision-making regarding changes in groupings and/or tiers of intervention.

3. What if students don't make phonological progress and are now in higher grades? Should they go back to the basics or skip it altogether?

For older as well as younger students, skill in identifying words, which is dependent upon phonological skills, is necessary, although not sufficient, for facilitating comprehension. As with younger students, therefore, intervention for older students must be both comprehensive and responsive, emphasizing word reading skills on an as needed basis and comprehension for all students. Differentiated and targeted phonics instruction, accompanied by opportunities to apply developing phonics knowledge in the context of authentic reading and writing, is as important for older students as it is for those in the primary grades and should be an integral part of an intervention program for those students who continue to need it.

4. Were the students in this study from an ELL's and/or Economically Disadvantaged categories? (Slides 15-19.)

There were few English Language Learners in the studies we conducted. The most recent study, (Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider and Sweeney, 2008) was conducted in schools and districts serving a fairly high proportion of low income children (e.g., more than 50%).

5. What time of the year do you suggest we begin RTI instruction for each grade level?

We would suggest beginning as early in the year as possible although, again, this is not a point on which there is definitive research. Certainly differentiated and intensified instruction at Tier 1 should begin as soon as the teacher is aware of individual students’ needs. In our kindergarten
research, we have begun small group intervention about 6 weeks into the school year and have continued into May. While some have advocated for a longer period of time in Tier 1 only, we have taken a somewhat more conservative approach, with the thinking that the earlier we step in, the more likely it is that we can prevent students from falling significantly behind and from coming to avoid engagement in reading and writing because it is too challenging for them.

In first grade, we would again recommend starting as early in the year as is feasible, but would also need to take into account the child’s instructional history. Children who participated in Tiers 1 and 2 with limited progress in kindergarten should be considered for Tier 3 right from the beginning of the year. Children who did make progress with the combination of Tiers 1 and 2 in kindergarten, but are not quite at the level of their same-grade peers, might be included in the same tiers at the beginning of Grade 1, with close monitoring and a change to Tier 3 if needed. Children identified as at-risk at the beginning of Grade 1 who were not identified as at-risk in kindergarten should be immediately targeted for Tier 1 intervention or a combination of Tiers 1 and 2, depending on their particular needs.

In grade 2 and beyond, children who qualify as being at risk at the beginning of the year should be offered multi-tiered intervention (Tier 1 plus either Tier 2 or Tier 3 depending on degree of need and instructional history) as soon as possible.

6. What measures were used for the pre and post test for Kindergarten students? (Slide #9)

The data for this particular graph was derived from results on the PALS (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening), published by the University of Virginia.

7. What is your thinking on Intervention Blocks? My concern is that classroom teachers may rely heavily on the additional support provided by reading specialists, and fail to fully implement Tier 1 interventions.

We’re not exactly sure what you mean by Intervention Blocks, but if you mean that the students who are struggling leave the room to receive their literacy instruction from a specialist while, at the same time, the classroom teacher provides instruction for the remainder of the students, then yes, there is definitely cause for concern. If RtI is to be successful, classroom and intervention teachers must take a collaborative approach in working with their shared students, with students at-risk for or already experiencing difficulty receiving more early literacy instruction than their same-grade peers. Ideally, the classroom teacher is providing small-group, differentiated instruction for all of his/her students. Students who leave the room to meet with a literacy specialist would meet with the classroom teacher either before or after their intervention session, and would be out of the room while the teacher is working with other small groups.
8. Do students ever go from tier 3 to tier 2 before going back to the regular classroom?

Yes, some children who experience accelerated growth at Tier 3 might benefit from a period of less intensive, Tier 2 intervention, in combination with Tier 1, before transitioning to Tier 1 only. The need for continued support will depend both on the child’s strengths and needs and on the quality of instruction and level of differentiation provided in the classroom.