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RESEARCH BRIEF

Principals' Perceptions of the Importance and Availability of Response to Intervention Practices Within High School Settings

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Abstract. Although many educational practices are being modified to meet the needs of all learners within elementary schools, there is a paucity of research and resources that explore the essential knowledge base and application of response to intervention within secondary settings. The purpose of this investigation was to explore (a) how important high school principals perceived response to intervention practices to be within secondary settings, and (b) if such practices currently were available within their respective school. Although exploratory in nature, the results of a nationally distributed survey indicated that high school principals perceive response to intervention to be important within their schools, but would require significant and complex change. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

In recent years, proponents of educational reform have called for the use of systemic educational practices that make better use of instructional time by providing multiple levels of high-quality instruction and intervention to struggling learners, a practice known as response to intervention (RTI). RTI currently is recognized as an alternative and promising systems change initiative that can comprehensively address the diverse academic and be-

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havioral needs of all students and achieve the stated goals of both the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004; Batsche et al., 2006). Generally, RTI methodologies encompass high-quality, research-based classroom instruction; continuous and frequent progress monitoring; implementation of research-based academic and behavioral interventions at multiple levels; and assessment of intervention integrity (Batsche et al.). Essentially, this approach uses ongoing progress monitoring data to make decisions about the effectiveness of instruction within a multitiered system of support. Recent data have suggested that RTI approaches not only prevent academic failure, but also improve academic outcomes for students (e.g., Ardoin, Witt, Connell, & Koenig, 2005).

Moreover, RTI has been implemented in several states (e.g., Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania) as part of state improvement grants aimed at providing proactive education that is responsive to individual student needs. Because of demonstrated improvements in increasing student outcomes combined with legislative support, RTI has potential for broad-based change at the school level and is receiving significant national attention.

Although RTI seeks to meet the needs of *all* students, extant practices have occurred largely within primary grades, and typically in the area of reading (Bender & Shores, 2007). As such, there appears to be a general lack of field-based applications of RTI in secondary settings. One exception is Windram, Scierka, and Silberglitt's (2007) examination of RTI implementation in two secondary schools in Minnesota. Results of their study suggest that a tiered model of intervention support can be successful at the secondary level to address reading and math concerns. However, the researchers discovered that certain "building adjustments" (e.g., scheduling, adjustments to interventions) were necessary for such a model to be sustainable. Despite the findings of Windram et al., other research regarding implementation of RTI at the secondary level has identified potential barriers to sustainability. For example, Johnson and Smith (2008) identified several barriers to RTI implementation in middle school settings, including a lack of differentiated instruction in the general education classroom and limited numbers of evidence-based interventions (especially to support writing and mathematics). However, Johnson and Smith found that the greatest barrier to RTI implementation within middle schools was the lack of a systemic process that uses progress-monitoring data to make important educational decisions. Moreover, in a study examining the facilitators and barriers of RTI in secondary schools, Sansosti, Telzrow, and Noltemeyer (2010) demonstrated that school psychologists had numerous questions regarding the type of progress monitoring tools available; the need for evidence-based interventions within secondary settings; and decision rules of how systems could be modified (e.g., scheduling, students earning credits toward graduation) to ensure sustainability of RTI approaches. Participants in their study indicated that although high-quality teaching, tiers of interventions, and progress monitoring tools were indispensable for the successful implementation of RTI, systematic and experimental application of these approaches was missing at the practice level. Taken together, questions regarding implementation of RTI at the secondary level remain.

It appears that particular research attention is needed to elucidate the processes and supports needed at administrative levels in order for RTI to be successful. Although RTI differs from previous attempts at educational reform, its success hinges on the support it receives from school leaders. In fact, research has suggested that even when supported by legislation, most educational change efforts result in limited implementation success because school leaders are not knowledgeable about nor fully supportive of the change (e.g., Fullan, 2007). Of those change efforts that succeed, a common facilitative variable appears to be leadership by principals. Leading education experts and researchers assert that education reform efforts not only rely on the support of principals, but also their actions (Boscardin, 2005). For example, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2004) concluded that

principals who were knowledgeable of contemporary curricula and instructional approaches, provided resources and supports to teachers, and challenged the status quo of school-based practices, functioned as effective change agents and had demonstrable improvements in the outcomes of the students within their schools. Moreover, findings from other systemic educational change initiatives such as the School-wide Positive Behavior Support suggest that principals who take an active role by making commitments to organizational restructuring and participating in ongoing professional development with their staff not only promote buy-in for change, but also increase the likelihood of sustaining systems change (e.g., Kincaid, Childs, Blase, & Wallace, 2007). Clearly, principals are a major catalyst for change within school buildings and the success of RTI depends, in part, on the processes such leaders put in place within their respective schools. In fact, Lau et al. (2005) suggest that successful implementation of RTI will require principals who provide more than professional development opportunities. Instead, the principal must demonstrate his or her own active involvement in the process by participating on team meetings, allocating significant resources to identify and obtain research-based interventions at all levels of instruction, adopt data-based progress monitoring practices within the building, and reorganize staff time to permit problem-solving meetings. Taken together, extant literature does not address how secondary principals may perceive RTI and if they believe such a system can be extended into high school settings.

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of high school principals regarding RTI implementation. Specifically, the researchers were interested in exploring (a) how important principals believed RTI practices to be within secondary settings, and (b) if such practices currently were implemented within their respective school. Although a variety of administrators could contribute to such an exploration, principals were chosen because of their essential leadership within the school necessary for successful educational change and the effect their leadership has on student achievement. Considering these factors, combined with the extensive visibility of RTI within current educational reform literature, it was anticipated that principals would provide a unique and informed perspective on the systemic issues influencing RTI implementation at the secondary level. It was hypothesized that principals would perceive RTI practices as valuable and important within their schools, but they would have limited availability and/or implementation of such practices.

Method

Participants and Procedures

An e-mail distribution list representing secondary school principals from across the United States was created using a company specializing in educational database management. Specifically, this company managed an e-mail database representing members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The lead author consulted with one of the list managers to send an informational e-mail containing a link to the online survey to a random sample of 2,000 of National Association of Secondary School Principals members. The e-mail briefly explained the purpose of the study and the methodology, provided informed consent information, and included an electronic link to the online survey. Participants were informed that no prior knowledge of RTI was needed to participate in the study and that their responses would be kept confidential. Two weeks following distribution of the initial e-mail, all participants received a follow-up e-mail prompting them to complete the survey.

Of the 2,000 e-mails, only 1,049 were deliverable. That is, 1,049 high school administrators received the e-mail regarding information about the study and a link for completing the online survey. Reasons for the limited deliverability of the initial e-mail include inactive e-mail addresses and the use of spam filters by districts. Despite the low deliverability, usable responses were received from 482 participants (46% response rate). Of these 482 participants who completed the survey, 467

were secondary principals (97%), 9 were assistant/vice principals (1.9%), 2 were district-level administrators (0.4%), and 4 were categorized as "other" (0.8%). Because the nature of this study was to investigate the perceptions of high school principals, only those responses from principals and assistant/vice principals were analyzed. This resulted in a total sample size of 476 participants (45% response rate) used for analysis purposes. The majority of participants served as principals for less than 5 years (61%), with the remainder of respondents having 6–10 years of experience (39%). Predominantly, respondents served Grades 9–12 (80%). Participants were required to provide an answer to each item in order to submit the survey. If one or more item was unanswered, the participant received a message that the survey could not be submitted until the item was completed. To minimize the likelihood that the same participant submitted more than one survey, second attempts to complete the survey from the same computer were denied.

Instrument

An instrument designed to assess the importance and availability of RTI-related practices and beliefs was created for the current investigation (available from first author by request). In developing the instrument, the authors first identified two major dimensions of interest: (a) Perceived Importance and (b) Actual Availability. These two dimensions were selected based on a synthesis of Fullan's (2007) model of educational change, which is widely espoused throughout the educational research community. Specifically, Fullan indicates that successful implementation requires knowledge for a new practice and available skills to implement the new practice. As such, the Perceived Importance dimension was designed to assess the degree to which participants viewed a practice or belief as critical to RTI implementation. The Actual Availability dimension was intended to assess the degree to which the practice was currently implemented in the participant's secondary school.

Within these two dimensions, the authors collaboratively identified eight scales representing domains viewed as critical to RTI implementation: (1) beliefs of key stakeholders, (2) knowledge/skill of key stakeholders, (3) scheduling/structural factors, (4) availability of intervention programs, (5) district policy/factors, (6) accountability methods, (7) existence of collaborative teams, and (8) communication (see Appendix A for a description of each scale). These domains were identified by expert-based opinion and literature-based recommendations regarding essential RTI components (e.g., Batsche et al., 2006; Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007; National Center for Learning Disabilities; National Reading Panel, n.d.). Although these domains were not exhaustive, they were viewed as foundational for RTI in secondary settings.

Within each of the eight scales, 3–6 items were created using a 5-point Likert scale. Each item elicited two responses, one on the Perceived Importance dimension and one on the Actual Availability dimension. For example, for the item "Availability of financial resources to support RTI," participants rated the degree to which this was viewed as an important factor in RTI implementation (Perceived Importance dimension) as well as the degree to which it was currently available or implemented in their school setting (Actual Availability dimension). For each item, principals selected from *very unimportant* (1), *somewhat unimportant* (2), *neutral* (3), *somewhat important* (4), or *very important* (5) on the Perceived Importance dimension and *well below average* (1), *below average* (2), *average* (3), *above average* (4), or *highly developed* (5) on the Actual Availability dimension.

An introductory paragraph describing RTI was provided at the beginning of the survey. Because it was assumed that not all secondary school principals would be knowledgeable about RTI, this paragraph allowed the researchers to obtain the opinions of all secondary school principals on the basic components of RTI. Information contained within this paragraph included a description of using tiers of intervention and data collection to inform educational decision making. Follow-

ing this paragraph, four introductory questions also were included to evaluate participants' previous knowledge and attitudes regarding RTI. For example, one question asked, "Prior to reading the above paragraph about RTI, how familiar were you with the basic concepts of RTI?"

Multiple iterations of collaborative decision making were used to discard, add, and alter items prior to dissemination of the survey. In addition, three nationally recognized experts in RTI reviewed the survey and provided feedback on the appropriateness of the instrument and clarity of items. Finally, a pilot survey was distributed to 30 randomly selected Ohio secondary school principals who completed the survey and provided feedback regarding layout of the survey, readability of items, and usefulness for informing practice. Resultant feedback from these various sources was used to improve the survey. For example, two of the three national experts recommended that more specific interventions be provided within questions pertaining to interventions. As such, items were changed or added to reflect specific intervention strategies that may exist within secondary settings (e.g., "peer-tutoring programs"). Moreover, feedback from principals indicated a few misunderstandings with terminology commonly used within the field of school psychology. That is, 8 principals indicated that they were unfamiliar with or confused by the terms *core curriculum*, *progress monitoring tools*, and *evidence-based*. Given the apparent ambiguity, these and several other terms were highlighted on the electronic survey; when a participant moved his or her cursor to the word, a definition box automatically appeared. This box included a brief definition of the term and provided an applied example.

Data Analyses

First, Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency of the instrument. Second, descriptive statistics were computed on all scales and dimensions. Finally, because data were deemed to be ordinal, nonparametric analyses were run to examine differences in responding. Specifically, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test was used to examine overall differences in responding between the two dimensions, as well as differences within each scale on the two dimensions. In addition, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to examine differences in responding on the two dimensions based on (a) professional group, (b) age range served, and (c) initial understanding of RTI.

Results

Internal consistency was high on the Perceived Importance dimension (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .97) and the Actual Availability dimension (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .90). Internal consistency across the scales also was adequate overall (*M* Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .76). However, the Existence of Collaborative Teams scale demonstrated weak internal consistency on both the Perceived Importance dimension (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .60) and the Actual Availability dimension (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .42). When this scale was removed, overall internal consistency was enhanced (*M* Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .79). Information regarding the internal consistency of the scale is provided in Table 1.

Percentages of responses for each of the introductory items were calculated, as were the means and standard deviations for each of the scales and dimensions (see Table 2). Regarding the introductory items, results suggested that participants generally reported average knowledge of RTI, believed that RTI implementation in their schools would be difficult and require many changes, and perceived RTI implementation in secondary schools as being more difficult than in elementary schools.

Significant differences were found between the Perceived Importance and Actual Availability dimensions using the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test, $Z = -9.634$, $p < .001$. Specifically, participants reported a greater Perceived Importance than actual implementation of the RTI-related components. Statisti-

Table 1
Internal Consistency of Scale

Subscale/Composite	α	Subscale/Composite	α
Beliefs	.82	Collaborative Teams	.56
Perceived Importance	.86	Perceived Importance	.60
Availability	.76	Availability	.42
Knowledge	.82	District Policy	.76
Perceived Importance	.84	Perceived Importance	.83
Availability	.78	Availability	.71
Structure	.80	Accountability	.82
Perceived Importance	.89	Perceived Importance	.92
Availability	.62	Availability	.72
Intervention	.83	Communication	.80
Perceived Importance	.93	Perceived Importance	.95
Availability	.65	Availability	.66

cally significant differences between dimensions were replicated on each of the eight scales as well as each individual item on the instrument.

Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test suggested no significant differences in responding on the Perceived Importance or Actual Availability dimension based on the grade level that the participants served, $H(6) = 9.280$, $p = .158$, $H(6) = 9.954$, $p = .13$. In addition, no significant differences on the Perceived Importance scale were found based on knowledge level of the participants, $H(4) = 2.506$, $p = .64$. However, significant differences were found in Actual Availability scores based on self-reported knowledge level, $H(4) = 16.060$, $p = .003$. Specifically, participants with higher levels of knowledge tended to report higher implementation of the RTI-related components in their secondary schools.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Scale Items

	Perceived Importance Scales		Actual Availability Scales	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Knowledge	3.90	.944	2.92	.971
Beliefs	4.04	1.04	2.80	.896
Structure	3.87	.867	2.72	.624
Intervention	4.14	.954	2.76	.686
District factors	3.98	1.03	3.02	1.08
Accountability	4.08	1.08	2.74	.859
Teams	3.79	1.05	2.38	.832
Communication	4.15	1.08	2.79	.725
Overall average	3.99	.846	2.77	.567

Note: $n = 476$.

Discussion

The results of this preliminary investigation suggest that secondary school principals perceive a discrepancy between the importance and implementation of several critical components of RTI in their schools. Specifically, all of the eight scales assessed were reported to be more important than they were available (see Table 2). From this it can be interpreted that principals in this study perceived RTI as important but difficult to put into practice within the high school setting. Such a finding is significant, as prior research investigating educational reform has indicated that successful implementation requires knowledge of a new practice and available skills to implement the new practice (e.g., Fullan, 2007). When examining responses to each of the eight scales, several additional findings of interest emerged. For example, intervention and accountability were viewed as two of the most significantly important scales, yet were two of the more unavailable components within raters' schools. Reflective analysis of these findings suggests that there currently are too few evidence-based interventions for students within secondary schools and a lack of systematic data collection systems—findings that are in accordance with the extant literature (e.g., Paige, 2006; Papalewis, 2004). Given the critical importance of a tiered system of intervention and data systems demonstrating student accountability in RTI implementation, these appear to be areas of urgent need.

Results of this investigation also provide support for previous findings reported by Windram et al. (2007) and Sansosti et al. (2010). As was the case in these two studies, the current study verifies that scheduling and structural factors are major obstacles to the application of RTI within secondary settings. For example, results of this investigation indicated that participants perceived "time for teachers to attend problem-solving meetings," "time for teachers to conduct interventions," and "block scheduling" as very important to the implementation of RTI, but unavailable. Furthermore, results of this study confirmed Sansosti et al.'s notion that limited interventions for secondary students and a lack of evidence-based accountability or data-based systems are significant barriers to RTI implementation within secondary settings. For example, participants in the study indicated that "standardized progress monitoring tools for secondary students" and "content specific classroom assessment materials" are very important but not available or implemented within their respective school.

Limitations

Results of the study should be interpreted cautiously as there are several limitations. First, the results of the current investigation may be limited by the respondents who completed the survey. It is possible that the respondents who completed the survey were not representative of the entire sample to whom the survey was sent. In fact, the majority of the respondents had less than 10 years experience working as a principal, with 60% having 5 years or less. It is possible that the respondents had a limited perspective on the significant cultural shifts and challenges related to implementation of RTI at a systemic level. However, the respondents' knowledge level regarding RTI, based on questions in the introduction to the survey, minimizes the likelihood that selection bias influenced the results in that those principals who were highly knowledgeable about RTI were not the only participants to respond. Second, the use of an electronic survey used for data collection may have limited the results obtained. Although an electronic survey is a low-cost method for gathering data, such a method may limit the amount of responders (Punch, 2003). Third, it is not known whether the responses obtained in the survey reflect actual practices within secondary schools. As with any self-report measure, the degree to which reported perceptions match the actual availability of each component in the schools is unknown. Fourth, the adequacy of the instrument for assessing perceived importance and actual availability of RTI-related components could be questioned. Although internal consistency was ad-

equate and pilot data were collected, additional procedures consistent with instrument development were not completed nor did the instrument assess all components relevant to RTI implementation (e.g., treatment integrity).

Future Research

Several promising lines of future research emerge from the results of this preliminary investigation. First, using external observers to actually assess the degree to which each component of RTI is currently available in secondary schools would address the limitations of self-report data. Second, the research could be extended to include the perceptions of other stakeholders within the secondary setting regarding RTI. Although principals were targeted for this study as a result of their significant influence in leading and managing school-wide change, change is unlikely to be wholly successful without the corroboration of teachers, support staff, and special services personnel (e.g., Kincaid et al., 2007). By better identifying the perceptions of these key personnel, other systems factors acting as facilitators or barriers to RTI implementation would be revealed. Third, future research needs to examine *why* there is a discrepancy between the perceived importance of various RTI-related components and their actual implementation within secondary schools. By identifying the factors that are contributing to difficulty adopting RTI-related components, or those that maintain the status quo, systems-level intervention can be created to address these specific issues. Fourth, analyses of secondary schools that are implementing RTI will need to be conducted. Rigorous research exploring the factors that differentiate these schools from their counterparts is warranted. For example, multivariate statistics could be used to explore the variables that predict high implementation of RTI components within a secondary setting. Fifth, results of this analysis indicate a need for further research pertaining to the application of techniques for implementing evidence-based interventions at the secondary level, as well as techniques for measuring student progress.

Conclusions

The continued push for ensuring positive educational outcomes for all students has intensified the need for secondary schools to begin examining how RTI methodologies can be implemented within these settings. Given their leadership role, secondary school principals have the unique potential to effectively lead and manage the change processes needed to implement and institutionalize RTI. The current study marks a first attempt at evaluating the perceptions of secondary school principals regarding RTI implementation at the secondary level. Given the limited attention to this topic in the extant literature, future research should aim to verify and extend these preliminary results as well as examine the unique factors associated with successful implementation of RTI in secondary settings. Although secondary schools face unique challenges in RTI implementation, these challenges should not be perceived as insurmountable. Rather, a careful analysis of needs, resources, and systems—via research, creative thinking, and careful planning—can inform systems interventions needed to facilitate RTI.

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Appendix A
Scale Descriptions

Scale	Designed to Assess the Perceived Importance and Actual Availability of. . .
Beliefs of Key Stakeholders	Parent, teacher, building administrator, and district administrator support for RTI
Knowledge of Key Stakeholders	(a) Parent, teacher, building administrator, and district administrator knowledge of RTI (b) RTI-related professional development opportunities
Scheduling/Structural Factors	Block scheduling, common planning time, time for interventions, time for problem-solving meetings, small school framework, school size, staff turnover
Availability of Intervention Programs	Peer tutoring programs, adult-led tutoring programs, progress monitoring tools, evidence-based literacy and math interventions for at-risk students
Existence of Collaborative Teams	Problem-solving teams, grade-level teams
District Policy/Factors	Financial resources and district policies that support RTI
Accountability Methods	Progress monitoring tools, classroom-based assessment that informs instruction, tools for evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum
Communication	Parent–teacher, teacher–administrator, and teacher–teacher communication

Note. RTI = response to intervention.

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