ON THE COVER

Stevensville (Montana) Elementary teacher Valerie Pateman conducts a brief, timed assessment of a student’s fluency skills. Frequent progress monitoring is an essential component of the response to intervention (RTI) process. Although still often associated with special education, RTI’s approach to tiered instruction and intervention is gaining ground in the general education classroom.

Photo by Pam Voth
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Statement of Purpose
Northwest Education aims to promote a regional dialogue and to elevate teaching and learning by giving readers the best information, ideas, and personal stories from practitioners, researchers, and other experts.

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Nurturing Student Engagement

The theme of your spring-summer 2008 issue of Northwest Education (Student Engagement Takes Center Stage) is excellent. The need for schools and districts to engage students in their education is critical to the success of our public schools as we strive to develop critically thinking, compassionate, and involved citizens. The articles you used demonstrated a wide variety of methods that are proving to be successful engaging students and are to be lauded.

The only exception I bring to your attention is the noticeable omission of Dr. Philip Schlechty as a reference on the meaning and use of engagement as the centerpiece for school improvement. Since 1988 Dr. Schlechty and his Center for Leadership in School Reform have worked with school districts and school leaders across the country to transform schools from organizations that produce compliance and attendance to organizations that nurture attention and commitment at all levels of the system. Two of Dr. Schlechty’s books worthy of citing in any discussion of student engagement are Shaking Up the Schoolhouse (2001) and Working on the Work: An Action Plan for Teachers, Principals, and Superintendents (2002), both published by Jossey-Bass. I think you will find his definition of student engagement and the process for a system to become engagement-focused very insightful.

Thanks, and keep up the good work!

Dr. Frank Hewins
Superintendent
Franklin Pierce Schools
Tacoma, Washington
This issue of Northwest Education was supposed to be about special education. In researching the topic, however, we found that the special education–related subject most on educators’ minds was an instructional framework called response to intervention (RTI).

As we dug deeper, we found that many educators did not consider RTI to be a special education issue. In fact, some people we spoke to were vehement in their opinion that RTI was a general education—not a special education—initiative, and should be viewed in that context. Those same people often suggested that RTI should stand for response to instruction, to emphasize its general education focus.

How can a subject be both the most important thing happening in special education and yet, to many, not a special education initiative at all? That paradox, it turns out, is at the heart of the matter. As some view it, there is a struggle going on for the soul of special education, and perhaps the soul of public education itself.

For the record, this issue of Northwest Education is solely about RTI in the general education classroom. You will find very little in it that refers specifically to special education or, for that matter, to a struggle for the soul of public education—at least not on the surface. Read closely and you may catch a glimpse.

In our Q&A interview with Dean Fixsen (page 12), a well-known research scientist who specializes in getting research into practice, he refers to RTI as part of “a huge change in philosophy for the education system.”

It’s a point echoed by Gary Germann, the codeveloper of the AIMSWeb progress monitoring system often used in RTI programs. “What a shame it will be, and what an opportunity lost,” Germann said in a 2007 interview with EdNews.org, “if RTI becomes another way to define LD [learning disabled] or a ‘pre-referral’ intervention strategy … RTI is a new way of doing business, not a new way of identifying LD.”

For now, RTI remains linked to special education due to its endorsement in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the fact that the new National Center on Response to Intervention is funded by a $14.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s office of special education programs. RTI’s biggest supporters—those, such as Germann, making the case that RTI is about improving instruction for all students, rather than a way to identify interventions for a few—tend to come from a background in special education.

How is RTI a huge paradigm shift for public education? Germann put the new philosophy succinctly in the EdNews interview: “The responsibility for student learning rests with the people responsible for instruction. It serves little purpose to put the responsibility for lack of learning on the home, readiness, economic disadvantages, the child, or the disability. All problems of learning require instructional solutions.”

In the stories offered here, you’ll find examples of RTI at the elementary level and at the high school level; as part of a comprehensive reading program and as part of a math program. You’ll read about the Tigard-Tualatin district in Oregon, which has been a national leader in the use of RTI in a general education environment; and about the White River School District in Washington, which is just beginning to test the waters.

In every one of these stories you’ll find teachers and administrators addressing—even embracing—what Germann has called “the natural diversity of the classroom” by using RTI to meet the instructional needs of every student, and doing so almost entirely in the general education classroom. In the Northwest, RTI is indeed moving into the mainstream. We’ll have to wait and see if it wins the struggle for the soul of public education.

—Bracken Reed, reedb@nwrel.org
RTI: TIERED INSTRUCTION GOES MAINSTREAM

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Response to Intervention (RTI) is a framework for improving educational outcomes that focuses on monitoring student learning so as to modify instruction and provide interventions that are matched to students’ needs. Interest in RTI is growing in the Northwest region and the nation because it is emerging as a promising approach to ensuring effective instruction for all students.

Schools have typically approached the problems of struggling students by identifying students with learning disabilities and determining their eligibility for special education services. In such a system, students are required to show a deficit before they are eligible to receive specialized services. Until there is enough evidence of this deficit, students usually continue to fall further and further behind.

This system has been widely characterized as a “wait to fail” model. Many schools do not assess children for specific learning or behavior problems until the third grade. At this point, it is too late to make use of early intervention strategies, which have demonstrated a reduction in the incidence of learning disabilities.

Using RTI means that schools look for solutions to academic and behavioral problems by making adjustments to the learning environment. Instead of focusing their attention on identifying deficiencies within students who are struggling, teachers focus first on creating classrooms and implementing practices that will accelerate learning.

The central practice of RTI is measuring how students respond to instruction and adjusting as needed. This may sound straightforward, and many teachers may feel that this doesn’t appear to be an innovation. But RTI is an effort to make the measurements more systematic and accurate, and the adjustments more precise. For example, teachers are able to use assessments to find out both how well students are performing and the rate at which they are making gains. The results of the assessments provide data that are used to identify research-based interventions.

RTI is typically implemented as a three-tiered system. The first tier is the core curriculum and general classroom instruction. Assessments are used to identify students who are not learning at the expected rate for their grade level. These students receive more specialized interventions in the second tier. The services they receive are designed to improve their performance and prevent them from falling farther behind.

Progress monitoring is used to make sure that the interventions are having the intended impact on student learning, with increasingly intensive strategies used for students who do not show progress. If the tier two interventions are not successful, students receive more intensive individualized interventions in tier three. Students who do not demonstrate improvements typically undergo a multidisciplinary evaluation to identify specific learning disabilities. While a three-tiered model is the most common, some sites use models that have additional tiers.

There are many components that are necessary to support the three tiers of RTI. One aspect of RTI that makes it challenging to implement is that the framework does not involve one practice or strategy but multiple processes. The following are some of the components that must be in place for RTI to be effective:
Research-based core curriculum and instruction. In a tiered system that works as intended, the first tier must be effective for a majority of students. Some models have imposed a baseline that the core program should be effective for at least 80 percent of students. When a larger proportion of students is struggling, there is evidence that the core program needs to be improved.

Assessment tools. Universal screening tools are used to identify student learning needs. Progress monitoring tools are needed to track both the amount and the rate of growth in each student’s performance. In addition to the assessments, schools need to have a data management system in place that allows them to analyze test data and produce reports that are meaningful and useful for school staff members.

Research-based interventions. To support students in tiers two and three, teachers must have a variety of interventions that can be targeted to students’ needs. Typical tier two interventions include supplemental instruction and small-group tutoring. Tier three interventions might involve more modeling and corrective feedback or providing incentives. Assessment data from progress monitoring help teachers track the success of the different interventions and to make adjustments in the services for students.

Fidelity measures. To ensure that the data reflect the success of the interventions, schools also need tools to measure the fidelity of implementation. These tools make certain that any lack of progress that students may demonstrate is the result of a mismatch with the intervention rather than ineffective implementation of the intervention by the teacher or service provider.

Teaming. A collaborative approach among school personnel is another important component of implementing RTI. Teachers, school psychologists, administrators, and other specialists work together to make decisions about how best to serve students. They analyze and interpret student data, develop and identify interventions, and monitor implementation and student progress.

Parent involvement. Parents are key members of the school-based teams and are included in the decision-making progress. Teachers are able to share the results of progress monitoring with parents and keep them informed about their children’s performance and how any challenges are being addressed.

The number and complexity of these components are a reason to be cautious but optimistic about response to intervention. While it may be a complex system, it is also one that many districts have been able to implement with success. The research base for RTI is accumulating evidence of the positive outcomes that these schools have achieved. (More information about research related to RTI is provided in the Research Brief, page 35.) There is reason to believe that with administrators and teachers who are willing to put in the time and the hard work, RTI has the potential to change schools for the better and improve outcomes for all students.
Teaching to the CHILD

In a district in improvement status, RTI helps some schools achieve AYP.

Story by RHONDA BARTON
Photos by DARIN OSWALD

CALDWELL, Idaho—When LaVaun Dennett took over as principal of Van Buren Elementary School four years ago she knew she faced a tough challenge. The high-poverty school in an aging building had a reputation for being “difficult.” Dennett admits, “People said the kids were difficult, the staff was difficult, and there was an attitude that ‘we’re teaching the best we can, so it must be the fault of the kids that we’re not doing well.’” Van Buren had never made adequate yearly progress (AYP) and the conventional wisdom was that it never would.

Today, Dennett can boast that her school met AYP last year. In fact, five of the district’s 10 schools earned that distinction for the first time in two years. Included in that group were three elementary schools—Van Buren, Washington, and Sacajawea—that pioneered response to intervention (RTI) in this rural-suburban district about 30 miles east of Boise. Dennett and others say they can’t give RTI total credit for the turnaround, but it definitely played a role. That’s especially true at Van Buren, historically the district’s lowest performing school and one that made twice the growth of any other school last year.

A Push for Improvement

In the past, Caldwell School District #132 has struggled with high staff turnover and burgeoning student enrollment. In the last six years the district saw three superintendents come and go, and had more than three principals at half the schools. The district also had difficulty retaining its best teachers. Since the early 1990s, the student population almost doubled to 6,400—with almost three-quarters of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. In addition, about one in five students have limited English proficiency.

The district was placed in improvement status in 2006–2007, when Idaho changed its state assessment and increased its proficiency goals. Clearly, it was time to shake things up. The new superintendent, Roger Quarles, set about doing just that.

The district was placed in improvement status in 2006–2007, when Idaho changed its state assessment and increased its proficiency goals. Clearly, it was time to shake things up. The new superintendent, Roger Quarles, set about doing just that.

More than 80 teachers, staff, parents, and community members helped craft a strategic plan that focused on creating a “wave of success” that would pull along all students. As part of the improvement efforts of the new central office team, 75 teachers left and were replaced with new staff considered to be more in tune with districtwide priorities. To allow for collaborative teacher time, the district shortened the school year but added 30 minutes to the school day. The district placed instructional coaches in each school. And, Ila Cockrum, the director of special services, floated the idea of using RTI as a way to improve student achievement with the district allowing each school to mold the program to its own personality.

Together, all those steps have produced results. But, says Director of Elementary Schools Jonathan Cline, RTI has dramatically shifted Caldwell’s focus. “It’s helped us step away from teaching to the masses toward teaching to the child,” says Cline. “We’ve really changed and gotten away from the old ‘just keep teaching them and they’ll learn.’”
“A Different Way To Operate”

Van Buren, Washington, and Sacajawea volunteered to become Caldwell’s first cohort of RTI schools, freeing teams to immerse themselves in the RTI process. Washington Principal Sherawn Reberry stepped up because “I liked the idea that we might be able to do better with students early on: looking at the students, prescribing what they need, and giving it to them immediately rather than having to wait.” In addition to Reberry, the initial Washington RTI team included an instructional coach, four grade-level teachers, a counselor, the special education teacher, and the school psychologist. The group spent a year in state-sponsored trainings before fully implementing RTI last year. This year, the school is continuing the process with a little fine tuning.

Less than a week into the 2008–2009 school year, paraeducators, the Title I teacher, and the English language learner teacher are in the midst of benchmarking all of Washington’s 515 students. Depending on the results, the bottom quartile of students will undergo interventions in the classroom and weekly progress monitoring. If students do not make adequate progress, they’ll receive additional “pull-out” or “push-in” instruction from the Title I or ELL teacher. “The interventions are fluid and will change each week based on the assessments,” remarks Reberry, who meets with the schoolwide RTI team three times a month to review individual students’ progress. “We don’t operate the way we used to, waiting to see if this child is behind and then getting him into special ed.” Of the 20 students who received intensive interventions last year, only two were ultimately referred to special education.

Even though Washington is not officially a Reading First school, many of the literacy techniques and curricula are borrowed from that program. In Mrs. Taggart’s fifth-grade classroom, for example, students start the day with a 90-minute whole group reading block using the Open Court curriculum. The class reads aloud in unison, stopping to respond to comprehension strategies—such as predicting and summing up—that are prominently displayed on the blackboard. Later in the day, an hour is devoted to differentiated literacy workshops. Two paraprofessionals work with the “mid-” to “high-level” students, while Taggart concentrates on the lowest performers. The same pattern is followed throughout the school.

Reberry is a constant visitor in the classroom. “I need to make sure, as the principal, that the teachers are doing what’s prescribed for those students: that they’re working with them during at least part of that workshop intervention; that the Title I and ELL teachers are doing what they need to be doing; and that the instructional coach is in and out of the classrooms, making sure everyone is using the programs with fidelity,” she says. Predictably, that doesn’t leave a lot of time for everything else required of a principal. Reberry laughingly admits her administrative work gets done “from 4:30 to 6 p.m.”

PROMOTING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

RTI isn’t just about academics, but behavioral issues as well. As Idaho RTI Coordinator Nancy Thomas Price points out, “Learning and desirable behavior go hand in hand. In Caldwell, as in many districts, [paying] attention to early intervention and addressing academic needs can ward off behavior that may be caused by academic frustration.”

At Caldwell’s Washington Elementary School, a Positive School Climate Program operates alongside tiered instruction. It involves teaching expected behaviors, rewarding students who adhere to the rules, and holding offenders accountable.

In a letter sent home at the beginning of the school year, Principal Sherawn Reberry alerts parents that they may hear their children use the word “refocus.” The school uses refocus time “when a student’s behavior interferes with his or her learning or the learning of others.” When a child is given a refocus time, she’s placed in a quiet area in her classroom, another classroom, or the office. She’s then asked to think about the inappropriate behavior and suggest an alternative, either orally or in writing.

If a child has been “refocused” three times for inappropriate behavior, the teacher will call the student’s parents. If a fourth refocus occurs, the student will be assigned time to make up missed assignments and will be reinstated in the class when that work is completed.

Using parent input, school staff developed a list of “absolutes” or behaviors that will not be tolerated under any circumstances and are cause for suspension, either in-school or at home. These include fighting, harassment, and weapons. Teachers are devoting time to a discussion of the absolutes with students, along with an explanation of the refocus process. At the same time, staff members will emphasize specific lessons on learning desirable behaviors.

Finding Time To Collaborate

At Washington, teachers meet in grade-level teams for one hour each week with the instructional coach and a second hour a week with just their grade-level team members. At Van Buren, Principal Dennett has arranged the school day to allow for even more collaborative time. Pulling out a master schedule with a rainbow of colored squares, Dennett explains that she uses “specials” such as physical education, computer, library, and music to create a daily 45-minute period for all teachers to meet and talk about improving instruction in their grade levels. Twice a month, the teachers gather in cross-level teams, either with the grade above or below their own.

An occasional staff meeting focuses on “nuts and bolts,” but typically Dennett handles routine business with
messages printed on the teachers’ daily check-in sheet. Using team meetings to focus on curriculum and instructional strategies “is the best staff development I’ve found,” says Dennett. “[There’s] time to just sit down and talk specifically about what kids need and where do we get the help.” Sometimes that help is easily within reach: Dennett will frequently suggest that a teacher observe in a colleague’s classroom or she’ll ask district or school staff to share their expertise in a specific area.

Like Washington, most of the tiered instruction at Van Buren focuses on reading. However, in response to what Dennett calls “horrible” writing scores, a half-hour per day of differentiated writing instruction was added to the schedule. Tiered math instruction is also offered, especially in the upper grades. “[With RTI] we look at everything—their reading, their math, their social skills: We’re really trying to get a complete picture,” Dennett points out. “They may just need help with reading or math, but nine times out of 10, they need help with everything.”

Providing help as early as possible is a priority at Van Buren. One way that’s accomplished is by using title money to create two all-day kindergarten classes, in addition to the three half-day classes funded by the district.

Every kindergarten student is tested each week with skill levels noted in a number of areas. If a child in the half-day kindergarten needs more help, he or she may be moved to the full-day class. “We call the parents and say, ‘Guess what? We have a wonderful resource for you. Your kid is going to do so well, he’s going to get to come to school all day.’ If a kid in the all-day class has a breakthrough, then we call the parent and say, ‘Time to celebrate! Your child did so well he only needs to be here half-day!’”

Dennett concedes that she’d rather provide all-day kindergarten for all students. But, given the scarce resources, this has proved to be the next best thing. “At the start of school, hardly any of our kids are proficient at beginning kindergarten skills. By the end of the year, pretty much 100 percent are. That gives our first-grade team a start to build on,” she notes.

Making RTI Fit

Three more Caldwell elementary schools have adopted RTI this year and the district is looking at how to extend the process to the secondary level. The fact that RTI varies slightly from school to school is one of the hallmarks of the process. “The neat thing about Caldwell is that different schools use their resources differently,” remarks Idaho RTI Coordinator Nancy Thomas Price. “They adhere to the essential components of RTI, but put their individual stamp on it based on their staff and demographics.”

Thomas Price worked in Caldwell as a consulting teacher and supported the schools in their RTI implementation. This fall she’s taken on that task at the state level. Thomas Price will work with the 210 Idaho schools using RTI to ensure that they’re implementing it with fidelity. She’ll also help schools that haven’t yet jumped on the RTI bandwagon to get started.

Perhaps some will be encouraged by the example of Van Buren Elementary: a school that ultimately proved the naysayers wrong. “Van Buren has continued to refine its program, and here they are making AYP,” says Thomas Price. “They persevere, make good use of their resources, collaborate, and have good assessment in place for all students.”

Taking a page from the RTI playbook, the Caldwell schools are identifying their strengths, shoring up their weaknesses, and building on success.
Dean Fixsen is a senior scientist at the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is also the codirector of the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN), which recently received a five-year, nearly $5 million federal grant to establish a State Implementation and Scaling-Up of Evidence-Based Practices Center. His work at NIRN has made him a key figure in the national expansion of RTI. He spoke with Northwest Education from his office in Carrboro, North Carolina.

A lot of your work focuses on how to close the “implementation gap”—the gap between what research has shown to be effective and what actually gets put into practice. That work looks at many different fields, but does it translate easily to education?

The good news is that across widely disparate domains—from engineering to mental health to education—there are many, many commonalities. This gives us real hope that we can actually come up with a science and a set of practices that are unique to implementation—that is, practices that can help us close this gap between research and practice no matter what the field. At the level of implementation science and practice, there is great generality. And on the plus side, in public education there is some regularity to most of the K–12 system. The structure of schools tends to be more alike than different as you go from one place to another. Once we’re able to discover better ways of doing things in a set of schools, for example, the chance of being able to generalize that goes up dramatically.

The idea of an implementation gap implies that the research exists. Some of the criticism about the No Child Left Behind Act and its requirement to choose research-based programs and practices, is that the research really isn’t there—that you have a What Works Clearinghouse, for example, with very little in it. What’s your perspective on the amount of available education-related research?

For an education system that consumes billions of dollars a year and has an impact on every child in the United States, we know—in an experimental sense—very little about it. We do know a lot more than we used to, but I think the people who are saying that there is precious little out there—they’re correct, relatively speaking. I don’t come from an education background, but when I began taking a careful look at the field I was very surprised to see how little experimentation had been done. We really do not have a sound experimental base for the education system that we have in place right now, nor do we have a very good base for making the changes that we are about to make. In that sense, it’s more about flying by the seat of our pants rather than being directed by the data.

Is the research base for a particular program—for example, response to intervention (RTI)—the most important consideration for a school or district that is trying to implement it?

Well, that’s an interesting question, and my view is almost heresy within the current evidence-based program movement. From an implementation point of view, it doesn’t really matter whether or not there are a whole lot of data to support the change that we’re contemplating. We could have 20 or 30 randomized control trials to draw on or we could have none—from an implementation point of view, I really don’t care. I do for other reasons, but in this context I really don’t. What I do care about is: For an intervention that we intend to try, how clearly has this intervention been described? Do we really know what “it” is? In my view, we need to know what the critical features of the intervention are, because those critical features are what we want to see every teacher doing in every classroom. And then those critical features have to be operationalized. We have to know how we’re going to put them into action. We have to be able to teach the teachers and staff and principals how to use those critical features effectively to benefit students. So, from an implementation perspective, those things are way more important to me than having existing randomized control trials. And I think we do have a very good understanding of what RTI is about, what its critical features are. In terms of implementation, it’s a work in progress.
The benefit of having the research, of course, is that you have a better sense that if we do these things—if we understand the critical features, we know how to teach it, we know how to monitor it, we implement it with fidelity—then we are very likely going to get a positive outcome for kids. That is obviously good to know. But without it, all is not lost.

In the area of implementation, the idea of readiness—a school or district’s readiness for the proposed change—is often mentioned. What kind of readiness is necessary to implement RTI?

RTI will not work under just any circumstance. People have to understand it on two levels, and the second is where things often go off track. They have to understand not only what RTI is, but also the changes that have to be made in order to implement it effectively. And implementation is the part that most people don’t include in their planning or their thinking. They focus on the intervention, and they don’t even think about whether they have the capacity to actually do it. There are a lot of things involved in making good use of RTI, from the classroom level to the state level. For instance, a school has got to have a strong core curriculum in place. If they don’t, RTI won’t help them.

In your experience, what is the most difficult part of implementing RTI successfully?

A big factor with RTI is that, as you head toward the top of the pyramid, toward the students that need very intensive interventions, you increasingly have to interact with external systems such as the child welfare system, children’s mental health, or the housing department. There are a lot of people that end up getting involved in school-related activities. And you run into the exact same problem all over again: Do you want to use just any child welfare program, any mental health program, any day care or whatever? Or are we looking for effective, evidence-based programs for those service organizations as well? Are we going to hold those people accountable for helping our kids? It’s a whole new set of responsibilities for a school to take on. There’s nothing simple about the top of the pyramid, believe me.

A lot of the focus on RTI right now is about defining it as a general education initiative, not just a special education initiative. Do you see RTI as a process that is effective for all students, not just special education students?

Absolutely. RTI is a huge change in philosophy for the education system, and one that is extremely important. The prevailing philosophy in education has been that it’s up to parents and society to deliver a teachable child to the school. And if that child is not teachable in my classroom, given the way I teach, then there must be something wrong with that student, and therefore that student needs to be excluded in some way—needs to be put in some form of special education. That fundamental philosophy is firmly ingrained, and it has major implications for all students, not just those who might unnecessarily end up in special education.

RTI represents a real shift in thinking. RTI asks teachers to take responsibility. They have to say, “If this student is not learning, then I need to change my behavior. I need to change my approach to educating that child. I need to change my curriculum. I need to break this class into smaller groups. I need to find the right intervention for this student. I am accountable.” RTI is all about holding the teacher accountable for teaching every student in that classroom. That is huge. But we cannot expect teachers to be accountable for educating children without also giving them the tools and the training and the help to do that. Making full use of the science and best practices of implementation will be very important for RTI or any other intervention designed to benefit students.
Tigard, Oregon—Since 2006, Erin Lolich and other Tigard-Tualatin School District (TTSD) staff members have been meeting with district teams from around the state of Oregon to help them achieve large-scale instructional change. Through a unique agreement with the Oregon Department of Education, TTSD trains these districts to implement response to intervention, or RTI. TTSD is well-suited to its leadership role in the Oregon Response to Intervention Project (OrRTI), as the state’s program is called, having implemented RTI since 2001, three years before the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act included the approach as an option for identifying students with learning disabilities.

Lolich, TTSD’s associate director of student services for RTI, says OrRTI provides services to more than just students with learning disabilities. “RTI is really a systems approach to instruction,” she explains. “You can’t make it work without including general and special education. Yet legally, RTI applies only to the criterion for identifying students for special education.”

Cited recently on the front page of Education Week for its collaborative effort with the state department, the 12,000-student district finds itself flooded with visitor requests to observe RTI in action. In fact, the district created a video with classroom footage and school and district staff interviews. To date, 29 Oregon district teams have received tools, training, and ongoing support from TTSD, with the state eager to see more schools in the state’s 197 districts given the same opportunity.

Becoming an RTI Leader
In the early 1990s, a team of school psychology and special education staff members, led by then-school psychologist Carol Sadler, did some pioneering work. Collaborating with researchers from the University of Oregon, they piloted the use of curriculum-based measurement as a central component in the evaluation, identification, and monitoring process for special education. A few years later, special education director Petrea Hagen-Gilden and Sadler contributed to a book on the use of locally normed curriculum-based measures as an alternative to the IQ/achievement discrepancy model for identification. When the more generalizable Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) came out in 1999, the district quickly signed on to pilot the measures, seeing them as a potentially valuable tool to better identify and serve the youngest students struggling to learn reading skills (see sidebar, p. 18).

“Finally, we had a way to see what’s really going on with young children before third grade,” says Sadler, now an educational consultant. In spring 2000, based on the district’s experience with DIBELS and nearly five years of implementing positive behavior support, TTSD was awarded U.S. Department of Education funding to develop and implement a unique approach to reading and behavior instruction, called Effective Behavioral and Instructional Support. This award from the Office of Special Education Programs was one of only six similar projects funded nationally that year. There was little talk of RTI at the time, but essentially, this program represents the district’s rendering of RTI.
Tigard-Tualatin Sets the Standard for Oregon RTI Program

Video and trainings help an Oregon district spread its RTI experience.

Story by JACQUELINE RAPHAEL
Images by OREGON STREET STUDIOS
Initial work starting in 2001 focused on expanding the school’s existing RTI team membership to include all K–3 teachers and specialists from Title I, special education, and English language learner programs. Special education and RTI project staff and school representatives met to formalize policies and procedures, including selecting both core and supplemental instructional programs (called “interventions”) and screening tests, team methods, and rules for placing students into three instructional levels, or tiers. Sadler and Pamela Zinn, a district literacy coordinator, special education teacher, and counselor, worked closely to provide technical assistance to the school teams.

This early RTI effort was very much a work in progress, says Sadler, and the schools were equal partners in the learning. By then the district had developed significant capacity for making change. The district had implemented a comprehensive data collection system (including positive behavior support and DIBELS, as noted) and had adopted the strongest research-based core reading programs available at the time. The district had also established half-time curriculum and instruction specialists at each school. With this program, Zinn helped these specialists revise their job descriptions to focus exclusively on reading and to review and train in new, more promising interventions. During the first year of OrRTI, Zinn served as the project’s coordinator and colead trainer, with Joyce Woods, then associate director of special education.

**How It Works**

“If we really want no child to be left behind, we must look at every child’s progress frequently,” says Hagen-Gildden. In TTSD, as in other RTI districts, this means every student’s progress.

With some exceptions, the district’s procedures remained largely unchanged as OrRTI was developed. Three times a year, every student in the district’s 10 elementary schools is tested with DIBELS. Currently the district dispatches a team to administer the test, but in the past, each school had to come up with its own team. The district’s five secondary schools screen using a test called Maze-CBM, developed by AIMSweb, and soon some will begin screening in mathematics.

Each school’s results, including behavioral and other data, are reviewed by its RTI team, including the principal, representative classroom teachers, the school counselor, and specialists in literacy, Title I, special education, and the English language learner program. One purpose of the teams’ review is to assess the effectiveness of the core instructional program, including the daily 90-minute reading block as well as behavior, mathematics, and writing programs. If at least 80 percent of the students do not meet grade-level benchmarks, the team assumes the problem is with curriculum or instruction, not students, and the team develops a plan to enhance the core program.

The data review also determines which students need additional targeted instructional interventions. These are provided by trained instructors during the school day to small groups of elementary school students with similar learning needs. The lowest performing 20 percent of students receive these interventions, typically for 20 to 30 minutes a day. These students’ progress is monitored using DIBELS or other reliable curriculum-based measures. The gap between each struggling student’s performance and the grade-level benchmark is plotted on a graph, and an “aim line” is drawn connecting the two. Progress monitoring data are analyzed monthly by the RTI team to determine if the student is on target for meeting the benchmark by a specified time, such as the end of the quarter. If not, the team must decide if a change in intervention is needed.

OrRTI uses clearly defined, district-established criteria and guidelines to guide these instructional decisions. For example: “Students who are in the lowest 20 percent of the class according to DIBELS and state assessment data will be selected for interventions.” Additional guidelines help determine which interventions should be used and for how long. For example: “Change the intervention when the student does not meet the aim line for four consecutive data points.” The district also uses guidelines for behavior.

Key to the program’s evolution has been the development of guidelines for checking the accuracy with which
instructor interventions and decision-making processes are implemented at the schools, critical if RTI is to be a valid and reliable “test” of special education eligibility and need. Results have included marked decreases in the percentage of discipline referrals since 1999, with a steady downward trend since 2002-2003. From 2001-2002 to 2005-2006, the rate of third-graders meeting and exceeding Oregon state benchmarks increased from 88 to 95 percent. After the state test was revised to be more rigorous in 2006 the rate decreased, but by 2007-2008 even more dramatic increases resulted. The percent of 10th-graders has also shown improvement in meeting state benchmarks.

State Involvement
Nancy Latini, state assistant superintendent for student learning and partnerships, is committed to helping schools implement best practices. As special education director, she has actively supported the Oregon Positive Behavior Support Network, a grassroots organization for trainers, coaches, and teams throughout the state. She was familiar with TTSD’s federal grant, and when the reauthorized IDEA included the RTI option, she started thinking about how to help other Oregon districts make the shift.

“The state department didn’t have the capacity to do this work, but I began to realize Tigard-Tualatin could. I asked Petrea [Hagen-Gilden] if the district would consider a contract to train and support other districts.” Upon mutual agreement in 2005, Latini’s office developed a collaborative agreement with the district to provide RTI training. This became OrRTI. At the same time, Latini created a similar agreement with the Linn Benton Lincoln Education Service District to support districts in implementing positive behavior support.

“I didn’t create all of this on my own,” says Latini. “As special education director, I met regularly with a diverse group of special education stakeholders, including parents and representatives from advocacy groups and teachers’ unions. They were the first group to hear about the proposed plans. I got a lot of input and support from them.”

Like the federal government, the state does not require use of RTI but supports districts in implementing this option. Participation in OrRTI is based on a competitive application process. High-level district leaders are involved in the training, including the superintendent, representative school principals, and the directors of special education, Title I, curriculum and instruction, and the English language learner programs. The five districts in the first RTI cadre started in 2006: Sheridan, Corvallis, Roseburg, Pendleton, and Ontario. Each year thereafter, another cadre of up to nine schools has participated, for a total of 29 districts, as well as nine more trained in RTI through another state initiative. The state provides small planning grants to participating districts. Additionally, districts receive tools, training, and ongoing support from TTSD. At least 99 elementary schools are implementing RTI at varying levels.

“We want to support any district interested in RTI,” says Kimberly Ingram, Oregon Department of Education professional development coordinator, “but it’s not a mandate. With OrRTI, districts get planning money and expert technical assistance. We offer other opportunities around the state to learn about RTI. Our goal is to build a state infrastructure that supports districts in developing sustainable RTI models.”

Perspectives From Schools
Durham Elementary
Joyce Woods, principal of Durham Elementary in TTSD, has been a general and special education teacher. She also served as lead trainer during the OrRTI program’s first year, along with Pamela Zinn. Woods remembers that when the district received the federal grant to implement its version of RTI, it decided not to make the program voluntary in the schools.

WHAT IS DIBELS?
In elementary schools, you might hear teachers talking about students getting “dibeled.” Staff are referring to the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, a set of measures given to K-6 students to assess their progress in learning the skills needed to become successful readers. Developed in the late 1980s by Roland Good, Ruth Kaminski, and other researchers at the University of Oregon, DIBELS is based on curriculum-based measurement (CBM) procedures used by Stanley Deno and colleagues through the Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities at the University of Minnesota. All the measures are timed, most taken only a minute, and are designed to be administered to individual students by trained teachers.

DIBELS results help staff determine whether students have acquired basic reading skills at an automatic level, which allows young readers to focus on comprehension. The full set of DIBELS measures encompasses the five essential components of early literacy skill: phonological awareness, alphabetic principle and phonics, accuracy and fluency with connected text, comprehension, and vocabulary. The measures—such as oral reading fluency and word use fluency—serve as indicators, meaning they predict later reading proficiency but do not cover all the skills used in reading. Unlike other formative assessments, which measure whether students have learned the content taught, indicators such as DIBELS tell us whether students are making progress toward established long-term goals.

Each measure is accompanied by a benchmark goal used by educators to gauge student progress. The research-based, criterion-referenced benchmark goals represent minimum levels of performance students must achieve to be considered on track to becoming a successful reader.
“The district studied the research and decided this was the right way to approach special and general education,” says Woods. All teachers received training on tiered instructional interventions and RTI. The district emphasized how RTI changed student identification for special education, but in retrospect, Woods thinks that focus may have made people think the program was only for special education students.

“This program means all students get a much more equivalent educational experience. No matter which second-grade class a student is in, he or she now gets the same well-delivered instruction,” says Woods. “Most of all, as a teacher, if my student doesn’t succeed in my regular class, I no longer assume something’s wrong with the student. My team at the school asks what else we need to do beyond core instruction to help this student.”

Woods remembers advising schools to start small and implement only what they could do well. To succeed, she says a school needs at least one team member who is adept with handling data. “If one of our teachers came to a team meeting without organizing and displaying the large amount of data we needed to review, it would be a disaster.” Additionally, to implement RTI, school staff should be flexible: Reading will become a true priority, which means that for students in interventions, some instructional time in another subject will be forfeited. At Durham, students in interventions might miss some social studies, science, or health. Teachers must be flexible about their own instruction, too:

“Any student who is failing any class is a problem we must look at. If they’re not showing signs of struggle, we probably didn’t look closely enough,” says Woods, who is now the administrator for special education. “We need to have an RTI team, or at least a team within the school. We need someone who can come to team meetings and ask, ‘What’s going on with this student?’ We need someone who can look at that data and tell us what intervention, if any, is needed.”

A school must implement a research-based core reading program, which in some cases means giving up previous instructional approaches.

Woods says RTI helped to explain what she had already experienced as a special education teacher. “I used to work on phonics with some of my students, and they would make this miraculous recovery. RTI taught me that I’m not a miracle worker—the kids just needed some additional instruction.”

**Tigard High School**

“Last year is when we really got the teams working the way we wanted,” says Leslie Van Kleek, a special education teacher at Tigard High School. This is the third year that the school has used RTI. “In the past we had student support team meetings, where we talked about students who exhibited behavioral issues. Quite a few special education referrals came out of that. But now, through our team meetings, we find these students before they find us.”

In TTSD’s middle and high schools the RTI program is less intensive. At Tigard High School, all ninth- and 10th-graders are screened in reading. The most challenged students are assigned to intensive English classes that focus on developing reading skills. Progress monitoring data are collected monthly and reviewed by the school’s RTI team. Students at risk of dropping out participate in a behavior program called Reconnecting Youth, and students who are struggling in mathematics participate in a special algebra-prep class. Each week the school team reviews the progress of a different group of students, as well as schoolwide progress. Additionally, classroom teachers can request that the progress of any student who is struggling or simply showing signs of distress be reviewed by the team.

“This is how we ensure all students, not just those in our special programs, are served,” says Van Kleek.

Implementing RTI in a high school can be especially challenging. One obstacle is how to provide extra instruction in core subject areas such as reading and math within high school schedules. At Tigard High School, which operates on a block schedule, students attending the special English/reading and math classes attend daily, whereas students in standard English and math sections go to class every other day. Yet, these students still get core subject credit, which doesn’t put them behind in earning graduation credit.

**Another District’s Experience**

Three years ago North Clackamas Schools joined the second cadre of OrRTI schools and received training from TTSD.

“We were dissatisfied with the ‘wait to fail’ discrepancy model,” says Dean Richards, then a literacy specialist. “We’d tell parents, ‘Your child is struggling and may have a learning disability,’ but then we often didn’t do anything until third grade, when the discrepancy could be established.’”

What Richards appreciates about RTI is that it facilitates instructional intervention as soon as a student shows signs of struggle. ‘Any student,’ he emphasizes. “RTI assists schools with the goal we’re all pursuing: to meet our kids where they are and move them forward.” It also requires a change in mind-set. In the past, when he was an elementary general education teacher, Richards admits he didn’t worry as much as he might have about his special education students. “They left my classroom and went off to do something I didn’t have to know about. Now, I am critically involved with all of them.”

Getting RTI going in his school was a lot like building an airplane while it was in the air, Richards remembers.
But similar to Tigard-Tualatin, the district built the plane one component at a time. In their first year the Treasures reading curriculum was adopted for K–6 classrooms and universal screening was implemented. In the second year, the district leadership team trained all elementary school teachers in RTI. The district also established its multitiered intervention framework and data-based team protocols at all the elementary schools. TTSD trainers observed instruction and team meetings at the schools and provided valuable feedback. Additionally, as with other participating districts, OrRTI staff reviewed North Clackamas’s protocols and decision-making guidelines before approving them.

“The plane isn’t built yet. Our schools are still learning,” says Richards, who recently joined the OrRTI team as a trainer.

Lessons Learned

Trainers and other staff involved in OrRTI have learned to go slowly while laying the groundwork for the large-scale changes involved in RTI. Especially in the first year, Lolich and her trainers spend more time talking about general education than special education, which comes as a surprise for some participants.

RTI’s emphasis on accurate implementation of interventions also means a district cannot rush putting the whole framework into place. When Woods worked with schools that weren’t able to implement instructional interventions at all grade levels, she told them to start with the grade levels they could handle, even if that meant just one grade level. To reinforce high levels of implementation of instructional interventions, OrRTI trains both school principals and literacy specialists to regularly observe in classrooms.

Sadler, who made regular visits to the schools she coached in RTI, says districts that succeed with these models need to have strong leadership and school-level teamwork, high-quality data processes, and efficient methods for organizing work. In her current consulting work she focuses on the district leadership team’s role. “District leaders have an important responsibility in figuring out how to support all this work at their schools,” she says.

Lolich says it has been especially helpful to visit participating districts. “Staff share a lot with us. They see us as a peer more than as a state program manager.” TTSD superintendent Robert Saxton, a strong supporter of RTI, talks to other districts about the costs. He doesn’t believe districts need a lot more money to implement RTI. “They do have to get through the shift, though, to appreciate how the resources work to do all this.”

Most everyone sees TTSD’s role as the lead trainer as especially helpful for the participating districts. As Richards says, “We can go to the districts and say, ‘We’ve done it. Learn from both our mistakes and our successes.’”

Indeed, guidance documents and the new video describing TTSD’s program will be posted on the new Web site OrRTI plans to develop, which will allow participating districts to share their experiences with one another.

Ingram says the next step for the OrRTI program is a formal evaluation, to be conducted next year. It will look at student learning outcomes and implementation data and will incorporate lessons TTSD has learned about supporting districts implementing RTI.

“I see RTI as a highly efficient and effective method for getting the right services to the right students,” says Latini. “I have a lot of hope for what it can do for English language learners, and for how it supports the goals of our classroom teachers.”

(Above) Erin Lolich, TTSD’s associate director of student services for RTI; (below) Joyce Woods, Durham Elementary School principal
Sherry McConn teaches Junior/Senior Basic English and Guided Study—Tier II courses that build skills and self-confidence in struggling students.
WALLA WALLA, Washington—Sherry McConn strides from one end of her classroom to the other like a Broadway actress claiming the stage. In turn she tiptoes and prances, whispers and raises her voice, and fluidly extends an arm to draw in her “audience” of upperclassmen. A supporting cast of two paraeducators prowl the perimeters, leaning over individual students to answer questions or to keep squirming teenagers focused.

With students arranged in four pods around a central space, there’s no place to hide—not that McConn would let anyone slip by her notice. The stakes are simply too high. These students were handpicked for Junior/Senior Basic English because they need intensive skill development in reading. This class will help them to prepare for retaking Washington’s state achievement reading test or to develop the alternative Collection of Evidence portfolio needed for graduation.

“Interact with the text,” McConn directs her class. She reads aloud from the real-life account of a teenage boy who became a star athlete despite severe birth defects that left him without arms or legs. What questions would students have if they were the boy’s parents? Why do they think the family placed so much importance on having a sense of humor? What do they think is going to happen as the story progresses? Answers ping-pong around the room and a lively discussion erupts over how someone with stumps can bench press up to 420 pounds. The debate continues as the bell rings and students reluctantly shuffle off to their next class.

**Defining Core Elements**

McConn’s Basic English course is one of several “Tier II” classes that target struggling learners at Walla Walla High. The shift to a three-tiered model started about six years ago in this 6,000-student district in rural Eastern Washington. Laura Droke, the special programs director, recalls that her office studied the data and concluded they weren’t getting the results they wanted even though they had a strong remedial program in general and special education. “Our philosophy was to work with the kids until fourth or fifth grade and then teach them to compensate for their disabilities. We were seeing a lot of kids referred to special ed at the middle and high schools,” according to Droke.

Another big push for change came from the movement toward standards-based teaching. “When you teach to the standards, you look at whether students are meeting those standards—and if not, what do we do? I think the three-tiered model is about that,” says Mira Gobel, associate principal for curriculum, instruction, and assessment at Walla Walla High, the district’s only comprehensive high school. “Before, I don’t know if high school teachers looked that closely at whether kids were meeting standards. They looked at the failure rate and whether the student had passed the class or not.”

Building on the work of consultants Jack Fletcher of the University of Texas and David Chard of the University of Oregon, the district developed differentiated instructional programs or pathways that focused on early intervention. The...
goal was to meet 80 percent of students’ needs in Tier I classes, serve an additional 10–15 percent of students in Tier II, and reduce the number of students receiving Tier III or special education services. At the heart of the model was a framework of seven core elements:

1. A set of strategic, research-validated measurable goals to guide instruction and learning
2. A valid and reliable formative assessment system to monitor progress
3. Adoption and implementation of research-validated programs that support the full range of learners
4. Adequate, prioritized, and protected time for core instruction and practice
5. Differentiated instruction, grouping, and scheduling that optimizes learning
6. Strong and informed instructional leaders [who] maintain focus and establish mechanisms to support reading progress
7. An integrated system of research-based professional development and resource allocation

The district set to work fleshing out those elements through a four-year pilot project funded by the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Teachers and administrators pored over a variety of data sources—DIBELs, DRA, San Diego Quick—to screen students and identify those needing academic assistance; determine what services would be most appropriate; conduct ongoing progress monitoring while the instructional plan was implemented; and finally, make outcomes decisions based on whether the student was reaching learning benchmarks.

In 2007, at the end of the project, Walla Walla was able to report significant progress: The number of students referred to special education dropped by 13.6 percent; the number of special education students served in all schools declined by 10.4 percent; and the number of students enrolled in Tier I classes rose by 19.5 percent during the five-year period. At the same time, the district saw steady gains in the percentage of students passing the reading and writing portions of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASl) test at both the elementary and secondary school levels. The district concluded, “Tiered early and intensive literacy interventions have resulted in 79.5 percent of all fourth-graders, 63.8 percent of all seventh-graders, and 78.9 percent of all 10th-graders passing the WASL.”

**Homing in on Freshmen**

Today, the seven core elements continue to steer the district’s efforts and serve as a guidepost for expanding the tiered program at the high school. Because freshman year is viewed as a critical juncture, special care goes into ensuring that incoming students are placed appropriately within the three tiers. About 45 percent of the freshman class ends up receiving some type of intervention.

The process starts in the spring, when the high school hosts eighth-graders and their parents. “We talk about not just the registration process, but about graduation requirements and college planning. We always want them to consider both,” says Associate Principal Gobel. “The message we try to send is don’t decide now that college is not for you because you never know. You can choose not to go, [but] if you don’t take certain courses, it’s not a choice anymore.”

While Gobel talks up the importance of course selections with eighth-graders, she gives their teachers a rubric on how to advise students on placement. Gobel doesn’t mince words in the directions, telling teachers “this is not about your gut feelings.” She continues, “We want them to look at the MAP scores, the WASL, past performance, attendance—all those things go into consideration when you’re recommending a kid for basic, core, or honors classes. There’s nowhere that lists behavior, which is a huge paradigm shift since it used to be that the basic kids were the behavior problems. If there is a behavior problem we need to think about other accommodations, but it’s not a determining factor in going into a leveled class.”

Gobel and her staff help the eighth-graders sign up online for classes, reviewing the choices. Once registration is complete, Gobel examines the roster for Basic English to make sure every child who’s listed belongs there. “I have a database of every incoming eighth-grader and all their test scores, so I can see if any kids have been missed,” she notes. “It’s not foolproof but it’s as close as we can get, double- and triple-checking to make sure there’s appropriate placement.”

**INVOLVING PARENTS AT WALLA WALLA HIGH**

Associate Principal Mira Gobel confesses that Walla Walla High School needs to beef up its parent involvement program. But, the school has hit on a novel way to reach out to parents prior to parent/teacher conference dates.

All teachers submit a “top 10” list of the students they’re most concerned about. “Some may not even be kids who are failing,” says Gobel. “It could be a kid who’s getting a C, but used to be an A student.” Gobel then sends a letter to the parents informing them that their student has been identified by one or more teachers as a student of concern. She strongly suggests they come to the conference. That tactic has boosted attendance along with a second, more direct approach.

Rather than hold two arena-style conferences as in the past, last year Gobel asked teachers to spend the first night calling parents from their classrooms. Again, each teacher targeted a top 10 list, telling parents “I’m concerned about your child and would like you to come to the conference tomorrow.” Teachers kept a log of their calls, and most managed to make more than 10 contacts during the 4:30–8:00 p.m. period set aside for calling. Translators were available in the office to assist with phone calls to Spanish-speaking parents. “What was neat,” says Gobel, “is that some parents got calls from three different teachers the same night. By the time the third call came during dinner, they were asking their kids, ‘what’s going on that three teachers are calling me?’” As a result of the phone campaign, attendance at parent conferences dramatically increased and—given the fact that 100 teachers made at least 10 calls each—parents got a clear message that the school cared about their child.
Freshmen enrolled in Basic English find themselves in Casey Monahan's capable hands. Monahan, who chairs the English Department, teaches two sections of Advanced Placement Language and Composition in addition to two basic courses. She sought the challenge and “new frontier” of teaching Tier II this year and prepared herself by attending GLAD training during the summer. GLAD, which stands for Guided Language Acquisition Design, is an instructional model designed for English language learner (ELL) students. Up to half of the students in Monahan’s basic classes are ELL students, but she says that GLAD techniques are good teaching strategies that can work for everyone. That includes the students with individualized education plans (IEPs), who are transitioning out of Tier III instruction.

In her morning basic class, Monahan blends writing practice with frequent praise for positive behavior. She asks students to point out classmates who are listening respectfully. Two paraeducators acknowledge pupils who are making good choices by staying on task. After class, Monahan shares that a priority will be building relationships with these students. “Relationships are important for everyone, but even more so at this level,” she says. “The AP kids are in my classes because they absolutely want to learn. Some of these kids may decide they want to learn for me or for one of the paraprofessionals.”

To further that connection, Monahan asks students to keep an interactive journal. Unlike the black and white composition notebooks where students record their daily writing assignments, the journals hold weekly musings on a topic of the student’s choice. Monahan comments on the entries, answers questions, and shares her feelings. Although the semester has barely started, one student already was moved to write about her boyfriend and pose the question, “What is love?”

Moving Between Levels
In addition to Basic English, ninth-graders who need extra support are offered a double dose of algebra. Peder Fretheim preteaches algebraic concepts and vocabulary to freshmen in the morning and then meets with the class again in the afternoon for a regular period of Algebra I. Today Fretheim lays the groundwork for solving complex equations by doing what he calls a “build-up activity” with individual whiteboards. “The biggest thing these kids have a problem with is following multiple steps and putting things together,” he comments. To address that, he has the whole class solve the first part of
the equation and then tackle combining like terms. Then he splits up the class and asks alternate rows to work on the different steps.

“This is the second year I’ve taught this class, and I was dubious at first about the intervention curriculum,” Fretheim admits. He was converted, though, when 90 percent of last year’s Tier II class was able to progress to Tier I geometry this year. “The two things that are working,” he says, “are more time and a different approach.”

The goal of exiting students from Tier II to Tier I is always a top priority, as is pushing kids from mainstream to more rigorous AP courses. “We’ve even made those movements at semester time because [Tier II] is not a holding place,” Gobel says. “Once students have grown and met the benchmark, we do want them to move out.”

Throughout the year, Gobel and her team evaluate student performance through a variety of assessments. “The teachers meet in horizontal teams to identify what the kids need to know and be able to do by the first quarter. What are the big ideas? Then, we assess that,” she explains. “For example, right about now the ninth-grade English teachers are doing a common writing assessment, which they’ll score together. Last year they looked at weaknesses and strengths [of all freshmen] and found that conventions or grammar was a weakness. So, they studied the research and best practices on how to teach conventions. They taught it, and then did another assessment in winter. We want assessment to be for learning—not just for the students, but to inform teachers’ practice.”

Director of Assessment Ron Higgins confirms that everyone at Walla Walla is looking at data in increasingly sophisticated ways. “It used to be that I was surrounded by data and I enjoyed playing around with it, so to speak, but I didn’t have anyone who desired to share in that,” he says. “Now, the challenge is the variety of requests that come in: Somebody wants to look at the math history of this sixth-grader from kindergarten on. Or, maybe they want to know not just how he’s doing in reading but what the comprehension level is throughout the years and if there’s a correlation between the DIBELS scores and what we’re finding out in math, and how that data can be used to predict how he’ll do on the WASL.”

Meeting a Range of Needs

While the WASL looms large, interventions also focus on helping students stay in school and experience postsecondary success. For instance, the AVID or Advancement Via Individual Determination elective prepares selected students for entrance into four-year colleges. The class is geared toward Tier I students who may be the first in their family to aim for college. It combines tutor-led inquiry study groups with motivational activities and academic survival skills such as note-taking and time management. This year, 58 freshmen—or roughly 10 to 12 percent of ninth-graders—were chosen for the program based on applications, interviews, academic records, and teacher recommendations.

McConn, who constantly checks in with her students’ other teachers about course content and grades, believes the class fills an important need. “We’ve certainly seen kids who had not experienced success in middle school passing their classes—maybe for the first time,” she says. “Their confidence level grows and they believe in themselves again.” For 14-year-old Nancy, Guided Study “helps me get my assignments done.” The freshman says it’s eased her adjustment to a big high school “with longer classes and a lot more walking.”

### BY THE NUMBERS: WALLA WALLA SCHOOL DISTRICT

| Enrollment (all programs) | 5,995 students |
| Walla Walla High School | 1,723 students |
| Ethnic population |  |
| Caucasian | 64% |
| Hispanic | 31% |
| African American | 2% |
| Asian | 2% |
| Free and reduced-price lunch | 48% |
| Average expenditure per pupil | $9,570 |

Source: District Fact Sheet, 2008
For students at greater risk of failure, Walla Walla High mobilizes the Student Support Team. Currently, 60 students are served by the team, which is made up of an administrator, the director of campus security, the school’s drug and alcohol counselor, a teacher, the school psychologist, and a guidance counselor. Each member of the team serves as a case manager and mentor for 8–10 students, meeting with them individually at least once a week. “If a kid is experiencing consistent behavioral problems, they’re referred to the team. We go from there and try to find out the root of the problem,” explains Matt Bona, the assistant principal for grades 9–10. If the problem requires additional resources, the team pulls in community partners in mental health and juvenile justice.

Like Monahan, McConn and Bona stress the critical role of personal connections in helping students navigate the rocky shoals of high school. “If you don’t have significant relationships, you won’t have significant learning going on,” Bona asserts. “A lot of these classes and programs are able to establish relationships with kids when they first step on this campus. It gets them hooked into the Wa-High way of doing things. That’s the key to keeping kids here and being successful while they’re here.”

Parents such as Lupe Cerda and Jean Colombo can testify to the difference that caring staff and strategic interventions made for their children. Cerda’s daughter was in Basic English last year but enrolled in a senior college prep class this term—an accomplishment she credits to “Mrs. McConn taking the extra steps to work with her.” Seventeen-year-old Olivia has applied to community college with a goal of being a teacher, inspired by McConn’s example. Colombo’s son, Brian, is already a sophomore in college. Diagnosed with dyslexia, he didn’t learn to read until he was in middle school, where Special Education Coordinator Cindy Nass worked with him an hour a day on the Lindamood-Bell learning process. Benefiting from special services through an IEP, Brian finished eighth in his graduating class with a 3.97 grade point average.

Developing the RTI Framework

Although a tiered model is the bedrock of Walla Walla’s instructional program, teachers and administrators throughout the district would be hard-pressed to call it “response to intervention.” That’s one of the challenges that Maria Garcia, the district’s new RTI coordinator, faces. Funded by a three-year state grant, Garcia has been handed the task of coordinating the intervention efforts currently underway. “My position will allow us to better understand all the programs across the district and help everyone understand the three-tiered model and use common language,” she says. “I’m making every effort possible to let people know I’m not coming in and saying we’re going to do something totally different. Instead, I’m trying to help buildings see where what they’re already doing fits into the RTI framework.”

The former school psychologist says Walla Walla was chosen for an RTI personnel development grant because it already has the infrastructure in place for curricular pathways, teacher teaming, and data analysis. The district is poised to take the next jump, building a three-tiered pyramid with an ever-widening base.

What does it take to keep moving forward? A group of administrators who’ve been in the trenches offer this advice: Work together as a team to teach all kids; make sure one person has her eye on the ball all the time, looking after the Tier II staff; have a vision of where you want to be in five years and then work backward; and know that you’re not dealing with percentages or averages, but rather with individual students who all have names. “It’s not easy work,” concedes Deputy Superintendent Linda Boggs. “It’s messy and it can hurt. But, you have to stay the course.”

As part of its three-tier program, Walla Walla High expanded its Advanced Placement offerings—including Julie Laufenburg’s AP Art class.
BUCKLEY, Washington—The small town of Buckley lies between the White River and the north slope of Mount Rainier, which is less than 20 miles away. For nearly a century life in Buckley revolved around those two natural resources, but the past decade has brought unprecedented change. As the Seattle and Tacoma suburbs sprawl deeper into the Cascade Mountain foothills, some urban commuters have been willing to trade long drives for a small piece of the country. Only 25 miles from Tacoma, Buckley’s mountain views, glacier-fed river, and abundant wildlife have made it irresistible. It’s a community in transition, and the public schools have been one of the first to feel the impact.

The White River School District, which serves Buckley and several smaller communities nearby, has been playing catch-up for most of the past decade. A new high school opened in 2004, but the district is still working to update curriculum materials, provide more staff development, and raise student achievement. In the past three years they’ve made significant progress in all three areas, and response to intervention (RTI) has been a big part of the mix.

For Foothills Elementary, one of the district’s five elementary schools, that improvement effort reached new heights in the 2007–2008 school year. In a single year Foothills implemented the district’s new K–5 math curriculum, provided intensive staff development in that curriculum, significantly altered its schedule, began a new professional learning community process, and created a more structured, general education approach to RTI. It could have been overwhelming. Instead, it resulted in a boost in student achievement, a state RTI grant, and new momentum for the current year.

Finding the Resources
One of the best places to see the district’s progress in action is in Foothills’ three third-grade classrooms. “These are three people who just have it together,” Principal Mark Cushman says of the third-grade team. “They know what they’re doing. They make no excuses. They’re a very high-performing group.”

Sarah Hintz, Denise Shaleen, and Amanda Smith differ in age and teaching experience, but each is highly qualified, dedicated, and resourceful. That last quality has sometimes been the most important.

“Districts always have to make hard choices about where they’re going to focus,” says Director of Assessment and Curriculum Mike Jacobsen. “In tough budget times, when you’re looking at $300,000 for a major curriculum adoption, it’s difficult for a district our size to do.”

For now, that continues to mean a K–5 reading curriculum that is more than a decade old. It would not meet current standards, Jacobsen says, and it does not align with the state’s grade-level expectations (GLEs).
The Foothills’ third-grade team admits, unapologetically, that they barely use it. Instead, they have spent countless hours of their own time collecting curriculum materials, aligning them to the GLEs, and creating lesson plans. “We really do our own thing,” says Hintz. “We pull things together from books, the Internet, whatever it takes. We have a job to do, and if we aren’t given the right materials, we’ll find them.”

Other elementary teachers in the district have done the same thing, and for the most part the system is working. “Our reading data actually look pretty good at the elementary level,” says Jacobsen. “But the problem is that the implementation is variable from one classroom to the next. We know from research that the fidelity of implementation is critical, and that’s hard to get when you don’t have a strong core curriculum in place.”

Until recently, the situation was the same for K–5 mathematics—an outdated curriculum, lack of consistent implementation, and a lot of hard work for teachers. “We didn’t complain,” says Shaleen, “but there was definitely some frustration with the weak curriculum we’d been given. Just like reading, we were constantly searching for other materials and trying to match them to our GLEs.”

The district was committed to improving the situation, but couldn’t afford a new K–5 curriculum for both math and reading. Based on achievement data on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) and on results from an in-house universal math screening tool, the district decided that math was the most pressing need.

In the spring of 2007 the school board made the commitment to pay for the new math curriculum and the staff development to go with it. Teachers unanimously chose the Bridges in Mathematics curriculum, a product of the nonprofit Math Learning Center. The district hired a private consultant, Janis Heigl, to conduct extensive staff development throughout the following school year. Hintz, Shaleen, and Smith looked forward to it.

A Commitment to Intervention
When the three teachers came back to school that fall there were several surprises. “When we first saw ‘intervention’ on our schedules we thought: What’s that?” says Smith. “I was hesitant. I didn’t know how it was going to work.”

According to Jacobsen there had been interest, discussion, and a few limited efforts to implement portions of RTI at some buildings in the past several years, but a more comprehensive, general education approach had yet to gain ground. Jacobsen and others in the district were strong advocates of the RTI framework, but the funding was not there. In 2007, a minigrant from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Puget Sound Educational Service District helped put the effort in motion.

Foothills Elementary signed on as one of two RTI pilot schools, and Cushman decided to link the effort to the new math curriculum by dedicating one hour a day to math intervention.

For those familiar with walk-to-read programs and the idea of instructional grouping based on student performance levels, the school’s math intervention block is easy to grasp. Title I teacher Nancy Loy even refers to the strategy as “walk-to-math.” Each K–5 grade has its own intervention period and its own team. For example, the third-grade team is joined by Loy, another Title I staff person, and a special education paraeducator to form six separate instructional groups. Each group has an average of five students or fewer, and the students literally walk from their regular classroom to the appropriate instructor during the intervention period.

As before, all students are assessed at the beginning of the school year. Now, however, those data are used to find the appropriate instructional group for each student and to identify necessary interventions, rather than simply to recommend some students for special education.

After the initial grouping, frequent progress monitoring allows for flexible movement from one group to the next and for the adjustment of individual student interventions. This is another area in which the school has gone deeper into an RTI process it was already using. “We did some progress monitoring, or at least pretesting and posttesting, before this,” says Smith, “but we didn’t really do anything with the data. It was kind of like, ‘Oh, that’s nice to know,’ and then we moved on. Now we actually use it to help students get what they need.”

As Loy is quick to point out, the new intervention period is not about core replacement. All students continue to
receive the core curriculum in the regular classroom, and all students participate in the intervention period, which is perhaps the biggest difference from previous practice. Rather than conducting interventions for only a few students during “pull-out” sessions, the common intervention period gives all students extra time by using the three-tiered approach—benchmark, strategic, and intensive. Those students already at benchmark get “enhancement” (the opportunity to move on to more challenging material) during the intervention period. Meanwhile, the small groups allow for very specific, targeted interventions. Teachers are able to pinpoint the exact skill a student needs help with, get them up to speed, and move them on to another group.

With the frequent progress monitoring, gaps in understanding are caught and addressed immediately.

As Shaleen puts it, “RTI makes sure that all kids are learning what they need to learn and learning how they learn best. If they’ve got it, they can move on during the intervention period and stay motivated. If they only need a very strategic intervention on one skill they can get it. If they need a lot, we can accommodate that but in most cases still keep them in the core. Parents feel really good about it because they see that their kid’s needs are being met, no matter what those needs are."

The staff had some obvious questions when starting out. For instance, doesn’t the intervention period widen the gap between those getting intervention and those getting enhancement? Don’t the advanced students get bored and the struggling students get confused when they’re back in the regular classroom?

“Part of that works itself out because not all students are deficient in the same skills,” says Loy. “We had that discussion during our training with Janis Heigl, and she really encouraged us to keep everyone in the core.”

In some classrooms a little adjustment was necessary. If students didn’t keep up, behavior problems sometimes followed, distracting other students. The solution was to have a paraeducator in the room during core time. “She could work with those few struggling students in the back of the room,” says Loy. “She doesn’t teach them a separate lesson, she just tutors them and focuses them when they need it.”

The third-grade team’s initial hesitation about RTI quickly dissolved. “We love it because it meets all kids right where they are,” says Hintz. “It’s flexible and it gives you the confidence that they’re getting it. You have the time to reteach the targeted skill if you need to, or for the kids that are getting everything you can move on.”

**Knocking Down Walls**

To implement RTI with fidelity, the district felt that one other critical feature needed to be in place. “We really see professional learning communities and RTI as joined,” says Jacobsen. “Frankly, I don’t think you can do one without the other.”

The professional learning communities (PLCs) process typically involves grade-level or content area teams meeting to discuss and analyze a specific issue or agenda using four essential questions. White River’s PLC is based on the work of Rick and Rebecca Dufour and uses the following questions: What is it we expect students to learn? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when they do not learn? How will we respond when they already know it?

“Where PLCs and RTI really come together is on that third question,” says Jacobsen. “What are we going to do for those students who need extra time and support? How do we identify them? How do we intervene? What rules do we have to determine when to change our instruction? How do we monitor progress? What the PLCs have done is create a specific way for teachers to collaborate together, using student data to address those questions.”

To accommodate PLCs, Foothills went to a late-start Monday schedule. Teams meet for one hour before school in what Cushman calls “very focused, even prescriptive sessions.”

According to Jacobsen that tight focus is absolutely necessary. “It’s focused on data so that we don’t waste time talking about things we can’t change,” he says. “What we’re after is a collective responsibility for student learning.”

For the third-grade team the PLC process has been nothing short of transformative. Rather than three separate classrooms with closed doors and little collaboration, the PLC has created a single, interrelated group focused on student learning. “We joke that we should just knock down the walls between our classrooms,” says Shaleen.

The result has been that barriers are falling for their students. Last year, 90 percent of Foothills’ third-graders were proficient on the statewide assessment in math and 85 percent were proficient in reading—a significant increase from the previous year. Meanwhile, other grade levels also saw increases and avoided a statewide dip in math scores in the later elementary grades.

According to Jacobsen, it’s only the beginning. Partly because of its combination of RTI and PLCs, the district was chosen as one of six to take part in a new statewide RTI project, which means more training, more resources, and, yes, more change. “We’ve got a long way to go,” Jacobsen says, “but we’re very excited about the direction we’re headed.”
HELENA AND STEVENSVILLE, Montana—As the coordinator of the Montana Office of Public Instruction’s (OPI) Response to Intervention (RTI) Project, Tara Ferriter-Smith walks a fine line. On a scorching August morning in Helena, her presentation at the state’s annual summer reading institute is one part overview of the topic, one part sales pitch, and one part reassurance that RTI isn’t just the latest federally supported fad to come down the pike.

Most of the teachers in attendance are from rural communities—places like Ennis, Belt, and Roundup—where budgets are small, change comes slowly, and programs promoted by the government are often viewed with skepticism.

As a native Montanan and former teacher, some of which was in a one-room schoolhouse, Ferriter-Smith is well aware of that cautious attitude, and she takes subtle steps to address it. Her presentation begins with a personal story about her own school-age boys—one an advanced learner while the other has faced many struggles learning to read. As a copresenter, she has chosen Gwen Poole, an elementary teacher from Colstrip, a small Eastern Montana town that mirrors many of the participants’ own communities. Together, Ferriter-Smith and Poole put a Montana-friendly spin on RTI, while still making a strong case for its critical features and the necessity for rigorous implementation.

“One of the great things about RTI is that it’s very much about local control,” Ferriter-Smith says only a few minutes into the presentation. “There are essential components that do not change, but a lot of the details will be decided at the local level. You can really make it your own.”
When a veteran teacher from Belt expresses concern that RTI might be a “hard sell” to her fellow staff members who may view it as just another flash-in-the-pan program, Poole takes the issue head on.

“No one’s claiming that RTI is a miracle cure or a quick fix,” she says. “You can’t go out and buy it. You can’t pick it up in a box. It’s not something that you’re going to do in a year or two years. This is going to take time.”

Ferriter-Smith nods in agreement. “This is a huge paradigm shift,” she says, “and that kind of change can be painful. But if you implement it with fidelity, it’s something that can really transform your school.”

Throughout the morning Ferriter-Smith and Poole find this delicate balance—peppering their presentation with phrases like “fundamental change,” “tearing down walls,” and “dismantling the old system,” but delivering them in the calm, encouraging tone of elementary teachers. As they outline the essential “nonnegotiable” components of RTI, they also emphasize the “many elements around those basic components that should be decided locally.” It’s a message that somehow combines strict program fidelity with local flexibility, and it seems to be working.

For the past several years a steady stream of Montana schools has been turning to the RTI process.

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

The official Montana RTI Project, backed by a federal grant, began in 2005–2006 with four elementary pilot schools. In the current school year the project is scaling up to 40 more schools across the state, including several at the middle and high school level. Meanwhile, many more schools and districts are cutting their own path, finding the money for RTI training without being part of the state grant project.

Stevensville Elementary is one of those trailblazers. A K–6 school located in the beautiful Bitterroot Valley, they began implementing RTI at the K–3 level in 2006–2007. True to OPI’s “make it your own” philosophy, Stevensville has found success by seamlessly integrating the essential components of RTI with other efforts already under way, in particular a Reading First grant, and by tweaking the details to fit its own needs and resources.

Stevensville received a three-year Reading First grant for the fall of 2005, one year prior to its RTI training. According to Principal Jackie Mavencamp, without that year of Reading First under its belt the RTI process would have been much harder to implement. “Reading First helped build a base, a foundation system where everyone was on the same page, using the same curriculum, and talking the same language,” she says. “Before that we didn’t have any of that in place.”

OPI’s Ferriter-Smith also points to the importance of a strong core program. “Whether it comes about as part of a Reading First grant or in some other way, and whether it happens prior to implementing RTI or in conjunction with it, that’s one of the pieces that really needs to be in place for RTI to work,” she says. “A strong core curriculum and the professional development to go with it are absolutely essential.”

At Stevensville, Reading First and RTI are now “so hand in glove that it’s kind of hard to tease out which has had what effect,” says Mavencamp. “The way I explain it to those who aren’t familiar with either one is: Reading First is a compilation of the best practices, from the available research, about how to teach kids reading and RTI is a compilation of the best practices, from the available research, about how to meet the needs of students who are not making sufficient progress in the core curriculum.”

A closer look at some of RTI’s essential components, as identified in Montana RTI Project training materials, and how they are reflected in Stevensville’s Reading First program, makes the connection explicit:

- A strong research-based curriculum and instruction in place—Stevensville has implemented a research-based core reading program that includes direct and explicit instruction in the five essential reading components as identified by the National Reading Panel.
- An uninterrupted instructional block—Stevensville
has a 90-minute uninterrupted reading block for grades K–3 every morning, as well as an additional “targeted” 30-minute block in the afternoon for both intervention and enhancement.

- **Instructional groups based on performance levels**—Stevensville uses a walk-to-read model to provide differentiated instruction to small groups of students. These groups are formed using frequent progress monitoring.
- **Flexible reorganization of instructional groups based on data**—Stevensville administers frequent reading assessments, typically once or twice a month, and these data can be used to reorganize instructional groups at any time.
- **Progress monitoring measures in place and scheduled according to the intensity of the curriculum and instruction**—Stevensville uses DIBELS to monitor progress—twice a month for all students who are currently receiving “intensive” interventions and once a month for those receiving “strategic” interventions. All students are tested for “benchmark” three times a year, in the fall, winter, and spring.

Other common features of Reading First and RTI include embedded professional development, scheduled time for weekly team meetings, and a collaborative staff model that requires Title I staff, special education teachers, and regular classroom teachers to work together for all students.

Beyond these similarities, however, there are a few finer points. While Reading First is narrowly focused on reading at the K–3 level, RTI is a process that can be applied to any subject area at any grade level. That makes RTI essentially a schoolwide process for differentiating instruction for all students, rather than a narrowly defined process for identifying appropriate interventions. According to the available research, schoolwide implementation with fidelity can take as long as six years.

“We feel like we’ve pretty fully implemented RTI in terms of reading and also using a three-tiered behavior model,” says Mavencamp. “We started scaling up the reading program and RTI training in grades 4–6 last year. This year we’re starting to work on our math curriculum and to develop a three-tiered system that’s very similar to our reading system.”

**LOCAL DETAILS**

Besides combining RTI with its existing Reading First program, Stevensville has made a few other local decisions so the process is more fully its own. One important area is the use of a problem-solving model as part of its RTI process.

As defined by the National Association of School Psychologists, a problem-solving model is “a systematic approach that reviews student strengths and weaknesses, identifies evidence-based instructional interventions, frequently collects data to monitor student progress, and evaluates the effectiveness of interventions implemented with the student.” This model, like Reading First, is a natural fit with RTI and is sometimes identified as an essential component. Many

schools, however, do not make the commitment to implementing a problem-solving method in conjunction with RTI. In Montana, it is highly encouraged, but is a local choice. Stevensville made the decision that a problem-solving model was indeed essential.

The formation of an RTI team is another essential component, but also one in which the details are often left up to the school. These details can include which staff members are on the team, how often they meet, and what their official role is in determining individual student interventions. At Stevensville the RTI team consists of Mavencamp, K–3 special education teacher Kristen Bogan, the reading coach, the school psychologist, and—unlike many schools—one teacher representative from each K–3 grade level. This is currently being scaled up to include teacher representatives from grades 4–6.

It has also had an enormous impact on the school. Before implementing RTI, decisions about interventions for a given student were either made by the classroom teacher or the special education teacher. Even the dialogue between those two was often perfunctory and not data-based.

Now, says special education teacher Kristen Bogan, “We make all of those decisions, for each student, as a team. If a student isn’t responding to a certain intervention then I bring it to the RTI team and we look at the data and use the problem-solving model to make a decision. It’s never just one person deciding and it’s never pull it out of your hat day. It’s always, this is what the team has decided, based on these data. It takes a lot of pressure off me and off the classroom teacher.”

**GREAT RESULTS**

Together, Reading First and RTI have completely changed the way Stevensville Elementary does business and the results are undeniable. “We have definitely seen the number of students needing intensive interventions decrease,” says Mavencamp. In addition, the number of students identified as
learning disabled and/or qualifying for special education has been reduced so much that Bogan is now the lone special education teacher for grades K–3. With nearly 300 students in that grade span, fewer than 30 are currently identified for special education.

“We rarely identify students as learning disabled now,” says Mavencamp. “Nine times out of 10, when we put students through the problem-solving process we are able to figure out what that kid needs and we’re able to provide it so that they move from intensive to strategic or even into benchmark.”

The impact has also been felt by the school’s speech therapist, whose case load has been cut “at least in half” because of the focused, personalized interventions that all intensive-level kindergartners get on phonemic awareness and phonics.

Perhaps the most important change has been the way the school deals with the large number of students who previously fell through the cracks. “Before we implemented these programs we had a whole group of kids who weren’t identified as special education but who weren’t keeping up,” says Mavencamp. “We’d end up keeping them a half-year or three-quarters of a year behind their grade level while we tried to catch them up. Now, they’re all using grade-level materials the entire year. The instructional strategies vary, the amount of practice they get on a particular skill varies, but they’re not being kept behind grade level.”

As Ferriter-Smith warned her audience in Helena, this kind of change can be painful. Both Reading First and RTI have required major shifts in daily practice and teaching philosophy for the entire Stevensville staff. The switch to a heavily data-based approach, for example, can be especially difficult for teachers who’ve spent the last two decades relying on experience and intuition. Third-grade teacher and RTI team member Valerie Pateman, in her sixth year of teaching, recalls how different things were when she first arrived. “I remember going to meetings with some of the veteran teachers and realizing that they really did have a good handle on who their students were, but it was more of a gut feeling. And then we started Reading First and RTI and we all started looking at the data and the data did not lie. I think some of the veteran teachers struggled, at first, with how data-driven things have become and how different the profession of teaching is now. But it was undeniable, and they’ve adapted. It might seem ironic, but you actually get to know a student a lot more in-depth now than in the past.”

At Stevensville Elementary that willingness to adapt is making all the difference. The entire staff has worked together to find the right balance between old ways and new, federally backed programs and local flexibility, personal responsibility and teamwork. They’ve done it for the good of the students, but it’s had a side benefit as well. “It has been an absolutely exciting and phenomenal process to watch as an administrator,” says Mavencamp. “We already had excellent teachers, but they are truly outstanding professionals now. I just can’t praise them enough.”

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**RAISING PROFICIENCY**

Prior to implementing Reading First and RTI, Stevensville Elementary was not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the statewide criterion-referenced test. Reading scores for special education students were a particular concern, hovering below 40 percent proficiency. In 2006–2007 those scores rose to 48 percent, and the school made AYP for the first time in several years. In 2007–2008 special education reading scores rose to 61 percent and the school again made AYP. Reading scores for all students last year were at 86 percent proficient, while math scores were 71 percent proficient.
RTI Practices Seen as More Accurate Than Referrals  By Jennifer Stepanek

There has been great national interest in response to intervention (RTI) as many districts and schools look for ways to improve outcomes and meet the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. One source of the momentum behind RTI is the need for more accurate and effective methods of serving struggling students.

Because it drew attention during the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), the process is often associated with special education. It is more accurate to characterize RTI as a change in how services and resources are organized for general education, yet some of the important benefits of using RTI are demonstrated in special education services.

Initially, the recommendations for using RTI came from evidence that traditional practices are inadequate rather than evidence that RTI is effective (Griffiths, Parson, Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Tilly, 2007). Research reveals that teacher referrals can be unreliable at identifying students who have specific learning disabilities. The tests on which referrals are based do not provide information that can be used to identify strategies to address students’ learning needs. The tests are also unreliable because they fail to distinguish students with learning disabilities from low-achieving students. Inaccurate identification procedures are also linked to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

RTI practices have been demonstrated to be more accurate and efficient than teacher referral—a greater percentage of students who are referred to special education based on RTI data end up being eligible for services (Burns & Senesac, 2005; Case, Speece, & Molloy, 2003; McNamara & Hollinger, 2003; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Naquin, 2003). RTI has been effective in reducing the number of referrals and placements in special education (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005).

RTI is also a means of adjusting what some see as an overreliance on special education services. Many teachers have tended to see special education as the answer for their struggling students. They believe that once students are identified and can begin receiving services, their problems will be addressed. People who subscribe to this view are usually unaware of the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of special education (Bolt, 2005). Teachers need to realize that their own efforts may be more effective.

In order to use RTI effectively, schools must step away from the belief system that looks for answers for academic and behavioral problems by identifying a deficiency within the student. Instead, the staff of the school focuses on maximizing the ability of general education classrooms to meet the needs of individual students. Special education services are put off until the impact of instructional adaptations have been explored (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998).

As the implementation becomes more widespread, evidence about the impact of RTI on both school-level and student-level outcomes is beginning to accumulate. The results of research and evaluation studies have been compiled in several different articles, and RTI has demonstrated the following results (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2007):

- Improvements in student academic performance, including greater numbers of students demonstrating proficiency on state tests
- Decreased rates of grade retentions
- School-based teams serve more students without increasing special education referral rates
- Students who are identified as unresponsive through an RTI process go on to experience positive outcomes

Many schools are using RTI to address behavioral issues in addition to academic ones. This grows out of the recognition that social-emotional learning is related to academic outcomes—poor performance may be the result of behavioral problems rather than learning disabilities or ineffective instruction. The focus is on using proactive strategies to prevent behavior problems throughout the school and then applying strategic interventions to address issues in the classroom and with individual students (Griffiths et al., 2007). This use of RTI has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing problem behaviors schoolwide and reducing disruptive behavior in the classroom (Oswald, Safran, & Johanson, 2005; Skinner, Williams, & Neddenriep, 2004).

English language learners (ELLs) are sometimes overrepresented in special education. It can be challenging to separate ELL challenges in language acquisition from other learning issues. Most of the research conducted to date has focused on using RTI with monolingual students, but there are a few studies that focus on interventions for ELL students. Reading interventions, including those that have demonstrated positive results for native English speakers, have led to positive outcomes for ELL students in gaining academic skills and closing performance gaps (Healy, Vanderwood, & Edelston, 2005; Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, & Francis, 2005).

While the research base for RTI is growing, it is probably not possible for it to keep pace with the rapidly increasing...
interest in the field. There are a number of important questions about RTI where there is scant evidence available. In particular, little is known about the use of RTI in subject areas other than reading and how the RTI model works at the secondary level. More time is needed before we will have the full picture, but the evidence so far suggests that it will be worth the wait.

REFERENCES


Photo by Pam Voth
If Jim Russo had one piece of advice for parents of children needing special interventions, it would be “don’t be afraid to ask and ask and ask again.” Russo and his wife Ruth have three boys and one girl in the Walla Walla (WA) School District. During the past dozen years, they’ve sampled a wide range of educational services from mainstream classes to special education. Russo, an associate professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at Whitman College, says clear communication and continuity are two things that have mattered most in helping his kids thrive academically.

We have kids in 11th, ninth, sixth, and second grade, so we’re involved at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Two of our children have had IEPs (individualized education plans) while two have been in general education. So, we’ve experienced both mainstream classrooms as well as special education. One of our children—a sixth-grader—had an IEP but just came off it last year; our oldest son [a junior who has had an IEP throughout his school career] has remained on an IEP for math but has come off the plan for other areas.

I think the reason they’ve been able to achieve that is a combination of their own learning progress and having the high-attention, one-on-one, or small-group environment that the IEPs have provided. In both cases, they were with special education teachers in small classrooms with just a few students per teacher, and that type of intensive interaction is what has been successful in helping them catch up.

When the school district was making the transition to a tiered system, the language they were using wasn’t clearly communicated to parents and it didn’t seem to be clearly known to teachers either. With our first son, it was very confusing because the language describing what kind of class the child was in was so different, especially moving from elementary to middle school. Now that the tiers are firmly in place, it’s much clearer what those different levels are, in terms of general education versus the strategic interventions of Tier II versus the more intensive special education.

It would be easier for parents if the district had given out printed materials ahead of time that simply explained what tiered instruction was—here’s what it means to have Tier I, Tier II, Tier III; this is what we’re trying to do. I realize that’s probably not easy to do because of changing facets, but for me it would have been useful to have a programmatic booklet or brochure.

Our greatest challenge has been when teachers cycle in and out: They come in and are involved in a particular intervention and then move to another school the next year. You say, “Gosh, is that really good for these kids overall?” because you see how much gain is made when teachers work with the same child for several years. So, I think districts need to think ahead and work for continuity because that’s critical to making it succeed.

For us, the key has been not being afraid to continue to ask questions of the people who have the opportunity to create the best environment for our kids. In some ways it may be easier for us because my wife and I are educators at the college level: We’re comfortable asking questions. We will keep asking if something isn’t clear to us, especially when the vocabulary is hard to understand.

As for the future, like any parent you hope [your kids] can pursue that which they’re capable of doing. I think our children will go down very different paths, appropriate to what their interests and abilities are. I think our oldest son, who is someone who’s had an IEP since elementary school, has learned to become a strong advocate for himself and to articulate what strategies he’s needed to succeed in general education classes.
Alaska is using the term “response to instruction/intervention” to emphasize that both general and special education are included in the framework. The Department of Education & Early Development (EED) is working with a statewide RTI leadership team to build a shared understanding of RTI and to provide support for implementation throughout the state. They are developing guidance to describe the model, including definitions, key components, and procedures. EED will also undertake a survey of school districts to identify how RTI is being implemented.

The Idaho State Department of Education is working with schools and districts that are in different places in their RTI efforts. One aspect of the state’s work will be helping new sites that are just getting started with RTI. Another focus for Idaho is on ensuring fidelity of implementation in the 210 schools that have adopted RTI.

Beginning this fall, Montana’s Office of Public Instruction will be working with 44 schools throughout the state to support implementation of RTI. Through this effort, OPI will provide training for school teams throughout the year. The state is also offering technical assistance to the schools with a team of consultants who will be on site one day per month. Finally, OPI is providing funding to regional service areas to hold introductory RTI trainings.

The Oregon Department of Education is in the fourth year of the state’s RTI initiative. The project has added districts every year, with a total of 38 districts now involved. The state contracts with the Tigard-Tualatin School District to provide technical assistance to other districts. This year, the initiative has added an RTI center in Southern Oregon located at the Roseburg School District. In addition to the RTI initiative, ODE was recently awarded a five-year federal grant to support seven districts in implementing Effective Behavioral and Instructional Support Systems (EBISS), a combined model of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) and RTI.

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in Washington is working with the state’s educational service districts (ESDs) to scale up RTI by creating “innovation zones.” The project is now in its third year and currently involves 55 pilot sites in 23 districts across the state. The ESDs are charged with providing technical assistance to the sites within their service areas. OSPI also supports implementation of RTI through its reading initiatives, including Reading First, and is expanding into other subject areas.
Back to School: Five-Year Trends in the Northwest

Overall Northwest region public school enrollment is flat—barely growing from 2.10 million in fall 2002 to 2.14 million in fall 2007. That’s an increase of less than half a percentage point per year.

However, there are great shifts in enrollment among racial/ethnic groups. White enrollment is down 6 percent over the five years while Asian/Pacific Islander enrollment is up 14 percent and Hispanic enrollment is up 35 percent. American Indian/Alaska Native and black enrollments are nearly unchanged with the former down 2 percent and the latter up 1 percent.
NWRCC Helps States Build, Support, and Sustain RTI Systems

The U.S. Department of Education’s national network of comprehensive centers helps states adopt proven school improvement practices. One promising approach Northwest states are embracing to assist struggling students is the integrated system of support known as response to intervention (RTI)—a multitiered process for coordinating efforts across general, remedial, and special education to address a child’s particular needs. Headquartered at NWREL, the Northwest Regional Comprehensive Center (NWRCC) has been working closely with state education agencies (SEAs) in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming to guide district and school efforts in implementing effective and sustainable models of RTI.

ANNUAL SYMPOSIA
Since 2006, NWRCC has convened an annual symposium for approximately 60 Northwest state-level representatives to further their understanding of RTI. According to coordinator Melinda Leong, “We want to help SEA leaders consider the essential components of RTI, identify strategies for successful implementation, and explore critical elements of RTI evaluation.” Symposia thus far have covered strategies for using RTI as a framework for improving student learning; matching instruction to the needs of all students; and meeting the needs of significantly struggling learners in high schools. This summer’s event built on previous meetings to focus on evaluating RTI initiatives at the state, district, and school levels.

STATE PROJECTS
NWRCC also provides technical assistance to SEAs in the development of individual RTI projects. NWREL’s Lynette Thompson and Melinda Leong, who coordinate NWRCC’s RTI activities, outlined states’ current initiatives.

Montana: NWRCC is working with a steering committee on a guidance document for districts that will suggest various combinations of funding sources for RTI. Many people assume that RTI funding can only come from special education, but money from other initiatives, such as Title I, can also be used.

Idaho: NWRCC is assisting in the development of a leadership team on statewide implementation of RTI. Team members include content-area specialists, parents, superintendents, special and general education teachers, university representatives, and others. Involving multiple stakeholders is intended to improve sustainability of RTI projects.

Oregon: This state is one of six selected to participate in a national effort coordinated by the State Implementation of Scaling-up Evidence-based Practices (SISEP) Center. According to a June 20, 2008, press release from the U.S. Department of Education, “The purpose of SISEP is to promote student academic achievement and behavioral health by supporting implementation and scaling-up of evidence-based practices in education settings.” Oregon chose an integrated RTI approach known as EBISS (Effective Behavioral and Instructional Support Systems) for its scale-up project. Oregon now has 99 elementary schools implementing EBISS and Thompson says this effort may eventually result in statewide implementation of this framework.

Wyoming: NWRCC is helping administer a needs assessment survey to be completed by all elementary school administration and staff. The survey is intended to define schools’ RTI needs, as well as their current practices. The state will use the survey data to guide projects and activities, and get a sense of what schools are already doing. Thompson explained that schools may launch an RTI system without state agency knowledge or resource support. States want to understand who’s using RTI and to what degree so that they can design supports to best meet school needs.

WEBINARS
Additional assistance from NWRCC includes a series of Webinars for the 2008–2009 school year. These Webinars are a practical, cost-effective way for NWRCC to share RTI best practices and lessons learned from around the country. Topics will include:

• National guidance regarding RTI funding sources
• Sharing Wyoming’s needs assessment survey data (as a way to help other states replicate the model)
• Presenting different ways to analyze data for evaluation (follow-up from this summer’s evaluation symposium)
• Helping states develop fidelity of implementation tools

While NWRCC is under contract to provide assistance specifically to state education agencies, its Web site links to RTI resources and implementation research, in addition to RTI information from all Northwest SEAs. To see the list, visit www.nwrel.org/nwrcc/rti/.
NWREL Well-Equipped To Evaluate RTI Programs

The response to intervention (RTI) framework has become a widespread method for differentiating instruction for all students and identifying appropriate interventions for children requiring extra academic and behavioral support. As more schools and districts implement RTI, it is important to evaluate program effectiveness. The Center for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (CREA) at NWREL has the capacity and expertise to perform high-quality evaluations that comply with federal or state mandates for program accountability.

Under the direction of Theresa Deussen, CREA’s Language and Literacy Unit has served as the external evaluator of federal Reading First grants for six western states since 2004. As a three-tiered intervention program focused on K–3 reading instruction, Reading First is among the most prevalent examples of RTI implementation in the country. To date, Reading First is described by the federal government as “the largest and most focused early reading initiative ever undertaken in this country.”

CREA evaluators have worked with more than 300 schools that received Reading First grants, analyzing quantitative and qualitative data. These data are derived from student assessments; surveys of principals, teachers, and reading coaches; interviews with reading coaches, principals, and teachers; classroom observations; and focus groups with reading leadership teams. CREA recently published the study Does Reading First Work? Data Trends From Evaluations in Five Western States (www.nwrel.org/crea/pdf/rtf-trends.pdf) and has collected information that can help states and districts learn from each other’s best practices. With this experience, the Language and Literacy Unit is well-equipped to assess how well RTI models are working to support struggling learners, and what schools can do to achieve better results.

RTI requires the coordination of special and general education services. Two of CREA’s evaluators are experienced in this kind of service coordination. Caitlin Scott—an Ed.D. who holds a master’s degree in special education and taught in that field—is conducting a study of the challenges associated with implementing intervention models. Richard Smiley has extensive experience in evaluating district programs for compliance with state and federal regulations in special education and assessment. Before joining NWREL, Smiley worked at the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, with 14 years in special education and four years as the state director of the Office of Assessment and Data Management.

Each state or district will have a unique set of concerns related to its RTI program, but questions may include:

- Is the RTI model being implemented as designed at the district, school, and classroom levels?
- How has RTI impacted student achievement?
- How have special education referrals been affected by RTI?
- What are the perceived obstacles to full implementation of the model?
- What sustainability challenges might participating schools prepare for and what is the state’s potential ability to scale up its RTI model (i.e., spread RTI to additional schools/districts)?

A comprehensive RTI evaluation by CREA can provide answers to these questions, as well as other issues the client and evaluator identify as important.

According to Scott, evaluations can be used for multiple purposes. “Information can be used to make formative decisions, such as changing some aspect of implementation, professional development for staff, methods of communicating among staff members, or ways of storing data,” she explains. “Clients also often use our evaluations summatively to report to stakeholders on the success of their program.”

Learn more about CREA’s full scope of evaluation services by visiting www.nwrel.org/evaluation/. To discuss bringing CREA to your state or district for third-party evaluation of your RTI program, contact Theresa Deussen at 800-547-6339, ext. 685, or deussen@nwrel.org.

(From left to right) Caitlin Scott, Theresa Deussen, and Richard Smiley of NWREL’s Center for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment
School support teams and SEA representatives from each of the Northwest states met at NWREL July 1 to share information and identify regional needs. The forum, led by the Center for School and District Improvement’s Deborah Davis, looked at challenges and support systems for the teams. Under No Child Left Behind, states are required to provide teams or distinguished educators to assist schools or districts in need of improvement. The forum featured a panel of SEA leaders on how school support teams are recruited and assigned; how schools are matched with them; and how the state supervises and evaluates the work.

In cross-state groups, participants discussed challenges they’ve overcome, how they’ve been supported in their role, and what they need to do their work better.

“The forum brought people together for cross-pollination and helped us determine how we can best support this work,” says Davis. NWREL has trained school coaches in Montana and also helped develop and train school improvement coordinators in Oregon.

The one-day meeting was intended to build on that work. Davis says one expansion in the works is modifying the Web site designed for Oregon coaches, so it can be used by other states and can link to IES materials on turning around chronically low-performing schools.

FIRST SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITY CONFERENCE A SUCCESS

More than 500 high school leaders from Hawaii to Massachusetts and 24 other states convened in Las Vegas in June for the first annual conference, From Structure to Instruction: Sharing Best Practices and Lessons Learned in Small Learning Communities and Small Schools.

During the first two days of the conference, participants chose from nearly 50 sessions presented by practitioners with frontline experience leading their high school’s restructuring efforts. Closing the achievement gap, interdisciplinary collaboration, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and instructional program coherence were some of the issues addressed.

The final day of the conference was dedicated to personalized coaching sessions. Coaches shared strategies they’ve found successful in bringing their small learning communities to full implementation. Participants left with plans to bring back to their schools incorporating information gathered during the sessions and steps to apply that information in developing or strengthening their small learning community structures.

DEUSSEN HONORED AT NWREL’S ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

In June, NWREL celebrated 42 years of linking research to practices that benefit schools and communities in the Northwest region and beyond. Staff and board members were recognized for their hard work in developing creative and practical solutions to a broad spectrum of educational challenges during the year.

Theresa Deussen, head of NWREL’s Language and Literacy Unit, was presented the 2008 Jerry Kirkpatrick Award for Special Achievement. Deussen directs the statewide evaluations of federal Reading First grants in six western states. Her unit is also responsible for evaluating Washington state’s Secondary English Language Learner Demonstration sites and summarizing the research on effective classroom practices with English language learners. Deussen was recognized for her exemplary leadership. She, in turn, credited her success as a manager to her collaborative, dedicated, and talented staff.

SUMMER MATH INSTITUTES CONDUCTED IN MONTANA AND WASHINGTON

NWREL’s Mathematics Education Unit held five-day institutes for elementary teachers in two Northwest locales this summer. During these institutes, teachers of grades K–2 explore a variety of activities to expand their knowledge of number sense and algebraic reasoning. Participants learn how children develop these foundational concepts and what instructional strategies help students grasp them. Teachers of grades 3–5 delve into the integration of arithmetic and algebra in the elementary classroom. Topics such as using relational thinking, understanding
equality, and representing conjectures are covered.

An institute for K–2 teachers was sponsored by ESD 101 in Spokane. Separate institutes for the two grade clusters were held for 55 elementary teachers and their principals for the Helena School District.

6+1 Trait® Writing Institutes Reach Far and Wide This Summer

Grand Rapids, Michigan, was the venue for an introductory institute in the traits in early August. Participants from across the globe learned how to implement trait-based instruction and evaluate student writing across “6+1” dimensions of performance.

NWREL’s Center for Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (CREA) conducts several introductory and training of trainer institutes throughout the year. The July trainers institute on the Oregon coast sold out to an assembly of educators from 18 states plus Canada, Korea, Kuwait, Panama, and Thailand. CREA had 27 contracted workshops in August, for districts from Virginia to California-reaching approximately 1,000 teachers that month alone. The annual October introductory institute took place in Cannon Beach, Oregon. Upcoming events include a trainers institute in San Antonio, Texas, December 2–4, and an introductory institute December 9–12 in Portland, Oregon.

Visit www.nwrel.org/events/ for details on this upcoming event. Contact Mark Workman (800-547-6339, ext. 572) to set up an on-site workshop for your school or district.

ELL Advisory Panel Provides Invaluable Expertise

The Washington state Legislature has charged NWREL with summarizing existing research and consulting with nationally recognized experts to address two questions:

- What foundational competencies should regular classroom teachers have in order to work effectively with English language learners (ELLs)?
- How should ESL teachers and regular classroom teachers work together for the benefit of their English language learners?

Accordingly, NWREL invited a group of nationally recognized scholars and researchers of ELL instruction to sit on an advisory panel to guide NWREL in accomplishing this work. Panelists are:

- Rain Bongolan, Program Director, ELL and Adolescent Literacy Instruction, University of California, Santa Cruz
- Penny Collins, Assistant Professor of Education, University of California, Irvine
- Russell Gersten, Executive Director, IRG Research Group
- Claude Goldenberg, Professor of Education, Stanford University
- Okhee Lee, Professor of Education, University of Miami
- Deborah J. Short, Senior Research Associate, Center for Applied Linguistics

The panel’s first meeting in April 2008 acquainted members with the project scope and intended use of the report, solicited input on the direction of the literature search, and asked panelists for feedback on an early draft. The second meeting in August focused on panelist feedback on a second draft of the report, with particular attention to the importance and order of principles and instructional implications derived from the research base.
Improving Adolescent Mathematics Learning

Through customized training and ongoing support, middle and high school teachers examine and apply research on adolescent mathematics in sessions tailored to meet the needs of individual schools and districts. Teachers explore answers to questions such as:

- What does mathematical literacy for secondary students look like today?
- What building and district support does research suggest for struggling learners?
- What research-based practices promote the development of mathematical skills?
- What assessment practices can identify students’ mathematical needs?
- What professional development practices are associated with improving mathematical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning?
- How can teachers work collaboratively to improve student learning?

This professional development may consist of a combination of the following components, depending on your school or district’s needs:

- A series of workshops on research-based best practices for mathematics
- Ongoing coaching focused on implementing workshop strategies
- Video Study Groups, facilitated by NWREL, in which teachers examine and discuss videotapes of their own classroom instruction
- Online discussions and assignments (Participants will be given access to a Web site providing assignments, discussion forums on topics related to the readings, and Web-based resources.)

Contact Linda Griffin, 800-547-6339, ext. 169, griffinl@nwrel.org; www.nwrel.org/math/.

Lenses on Learning: Mathematics Professional Development for Administrators

These courses address issues important to school administrators and instructional leaders seeking to support standards-based mathematics instruction in their schools and districts. Through a variety of activities, participants will delve into these issues during a series of three modules:

1. Instructional Leadership in Mathematics: What are the new understandings about the nature of mathematics learning and teaching that underlie standards-based instruction? Explore fundamental issues and implications for school leadership.

2. Teacher Learning for Mathematics Instruction: What do teachers need to learn and how can they succeed? Focus on issues teachers grapple with in learning to teach according to the new standards and study criteria for effective professional development across the school community.

3. Observing Today’s Mathematics Classroom: How can we tell what is going on in standards-based mathematics classrooms, and how can we tell when instruction is working? Learn what to look for when conducting classroom observations and what to discuss when meeting with the teacher about those observations.

Participants will carry out guided assignments in their schools and form an intellectual community as they reflect on new ideas and consider their implications for best practice as administrators and instructional leaders.

Each module consists of four or five sessions that can be facilitated during consecutive days or scheduled over the course of the school year.

Contact Melinda Leong, 800-547-6339, ext. 172, leongm@nwrel.org; www.nwrel.org/math/.
Listening to Student Voices Tools

Listening to Student Voices is a set of tools for K–12 educational leaders and school-based teams interested in including students in continuous school improvement. These tools:

- Allow schools to listen to students’ ideas for improving their school
- Promote student leadership
- Develop students’ critical thinking skills
- Encourage relationships within a school
- Are research based and field tested

With a wide range of applicability, most schools need some level of support in using these adaptable tools. To this end, NWREL offers services in which participants will learn to:

- Use a set of tools that maximizes student involvement in a school improvement process
- Examine student data as a basis for school change
- Build a more collaborative culture, particularly among students and between students and adults

Services can be customized for all teachers and administrators; for a school leadership team or site council; or for students who will lead the school improvement activities. Services ranging from planning advice, a short training, or a full-scale facilitation of the Listening to Student Voices process are available.

Participating schools will receive copies of the Listening to Student Voices tools and an individualized final report on any process that NWREL facilitates.

Contact Jacqueline Raphael, 800-547-6339, ext. 616, or raphaelj@nwrel.org; www.nwrel.org/csd/services/lsv/

From High School to Learning Communities—Five Domains of Best Practice

Research demonstrates that small learning communities (SLCs) can have positive effects on student achievement and attendance. This set offers a knowledge base, tools, and resources for implementing and deepening SLC practice and guides readers through the domains required to transform a 20th century comprehensive high school into a 21st century learning organization: (1) Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Teams, (2) Rigorous, Relevant Curriculum and Instruction, (3) Inclusive Program and Instructional Practices, (4) SLC-Based Continuous Program Improvement, and (5) Building and District Support for SLCs.

This set contains tools designed to help educators pursue a cyclical process of planning and improving SLC practice. The user-friendly, reproducible set of tools and templates are for assessing one’s practice in each of the five SLC domains, including instructions for conducting a gap analysis between existing and desired practice and creating implementation plans. (2008; 2 booklets of 162 pp. total and one CD)

Member price: $30 + shipping
Nonmember price: $33 + shipping

The writing process and traits poster

The 6+1 Trait® model and the writing process complement each other perfectly when it comes to teaching writing—the process provides the structure while the traits provide the content. Post this big, bright poster in your classroom to show your students precisely where the traits align with the writing process. (36 by 24 inches)

Member price: $9.75 + shipping
Nonmember price: $10.75 + shipping
nwrel.org/nwedu/

Northwest Education is available online in both PDF and HTML versions. Look for Web exclusives.

Up next in the winter issue:
Civic engagement