

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### High Schools Try Out RTI



Mr. Koselak retrieves a calculator to help a student visiting the tutoring center. —Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

**Using the framework with older students poses challenges, but shows promise, educators say.**

By **Christina A. Samuels**

*Colorado Springs, Colo.*

“Response to intervention” as a model for boosting student achievement has taken off like wildfire.

When it comes to research on how best to implement the process for students in middle and high school, though, the flame abruptly fizzles out. There’s little RTI research that is specific to secondary schools, although it has been well studied at the elementary level.

But many schools are forging ahead. In Colorado, spurred by a state law that promotes RTI—an instructional model that links lessons, or “interventions,” of increasing intensity with frequent monitoring of student progress—they’re taking on the challenge of making RTI work

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for older students.

At the 1,800-student Palmer High School in Colorado Springs' District 11, teachers started three years ago by pulling together all the resources that existed in the school. The math department already had a program for students who were slipping. Literacy programs were in place for students who had reached high school with poor reading skills.

The school organized those resources into tiers of increasing intensity, while adding other types of interventions for students. To fit everything into the school day, Palmer High started a tutoring center that is open and staffed during all periods.

Students are able to go to a regular class, then to the center for more instruction and reinforcement in a particular subject. Even students who are doing fine in their classes, such as those enrolled in the school's thriving International Baccalaureate program, have started coming to the tutoring center for extra help.

To screen for students who might need interventions, instructors use results from Measures of Academic Progress, a computerized assessment program aligned to state standards and administered to middle school students in the district. Results on tests like the Colorado State Assessment Program are also used as a diagnostic tool, as are teacher and parent recommendations.

This school year, Palmer High is trying out a new project: Teachers have each been asked to identify and track the progress of 10 low-performing students, so that they can pay close attention to the interventions those students receive, and then determine whether those steps are ultimately resulting in better grades.

"I think we're still in the beginning phases of it. We still have a ways to go, but we're doing some stuff that we think is pretty good," said Tom Kelly, the principal of the high school, whose enrollment is 70 percent white, 16 percent Hispanic, and eight percent black. Palmer High is one of five high schools in the 28,000-student District 11. In all, six school districts serve this city, located near Pikes Peak.

RTI is a model of instruction promoted in the regulations that accompanied the 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It is often represented by three tiers, which include different levels of instruction by intensity. Progress monitoring, usually with short assessments, is used to determine whether a student is responding to the interventions, or lessons.

The first, or "universal" tier, is intended to represent instruction and services available to all students. The second tier represents targeted, short-term instruction for students who need more help to master a subject. The third tier represents the most intensive level of



Cjay Olson, a 9th grader at Palmer High School, works on a math worksheet with Jeremy Koselak at the school's tutoring center this month. Mr. Koselak coordinates the school's "response to intervention" program.

—Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

instruction. A student who needs that level of help is considered to possibly need special education services.

This method of identifying children for special education differs from models that rely on students' performance on an IQ test. (Colorado plans to drop IQ tests as a method of determining learning disabilities by August.)

However, identifying Colorado children for special education still will be a task primarily borne by elementary schools, said Ed Steinberg, the state's director of special education.

"We don't have the authority to mandate the systemic RTI efforts that you see in high schools," he said. "That, in some ways, has taken on a life of its own."

RTI has been promoted heavily at the state level, particularly by Commissioner of Education Dwight D. Jones, he said.

"He's been using his bully pulpit when he talks to superintendents, saying this is what's best for kids," Mr. Steinberg said. He added that the changes schools are making are gratifying to see. "It's the power of a good idea," Mr. Steinberg said.

Indeed, educators at Palmer High are beginning to see some promising results, although they are very preliminary. For example, an examination of grades for students in Integrated Algebra and Geometry shows that students who received intervention through the tutoring center were earning better grades after several weeks, compared with peers in the same course who didn't use the center.

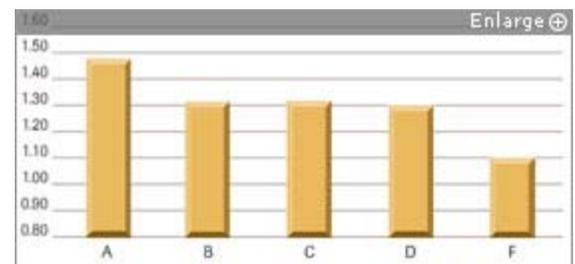
No one at the school downplays the continuing struggles with fitting RTI into the sometimes-inflexible world of high school. In fact, Palmer High educators are able to offer a comprehensive list of challenges. Mr. Kelly said there's still a need to find appropriate interventions for students who continue to struggle even after receiving tutoring.

For high school students, social and behavioral concerns play a large role in the success of any given intervention. Monitoring the progress of students is another hurdle, said Margaret Chumbley, a literacy-resource teacher at Palmer. With the number and frequency of some tests given to students, "I do wonder if they're getting better at the test, or if they're actually getting better at reading," she said.

Integrating science and social studies into an RTI

### Tutoring and Grades

Students at Palmer High School who were identified as at risk of failing algebra were offered help in its tutoring center. More frequent visits to the center were associated with better grades.



SOURCE: Palmer High School



Austin Chmill, a 9th grader at Palmer High School in Colorado Springs, Colo., works on a math problem at

framework has been harder than working with language arts and mathematics. And making time for teachers to get together to talk about individual students is difficult.

the school's tutoring center. Some secondary schools are now using "response to intervention," an educational framework designed to help struggling students that is often associated with younger children, to raise achievement for teenagers.  
—Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

Despite the list of concerns, response to intervention offers clear positives, said Jeremy Koselak, one of the leaders of the RTI effort at the high school. The lines between regular education and special education have been blurred, so that any student who needs extra help can get it, without needing to carry a specific label.

Palmer's focus on 9th graders helps ease the transition to high school for students who need just a little extra boost. The process is also helping the school take the first steps to examine its overall academic program. When large numbers of students need intervention in a particular subject, the school is starting to look at whether the problem lies with the students, or poor instruction.

"We have to make sure that these kids have instructional problems, and they aren't just suffering from instructional lapses," Mr. Koselak said.

Are Palmer High School's efforts what response to intervention in high schools looks like?

Without scientific literature outlining an overall method for applying RTI to secondary schools, educators only have "best guesses" for what components a program should have to be successful, said Daryl F. Mellard, the director of the University of Kansas Center for Research in Learning, in Lawrence, Kan.

Others suggest that the best model of RTI is going to vary among schools, simply because high school is so complex. What's most important is focusing on the effectiveness of the intervention measures, they say.

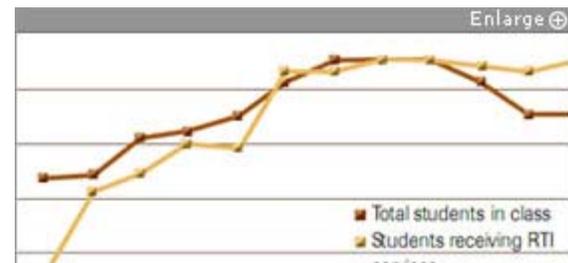
Judy L. Elliott, the chief academic officer for the 708,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District and a longtime proponent of RTI, acknowledges the structural challenges. But philosophically, "it's no different in high school than it is in the early grades," she said. "It's very hard, but it's not rocket science. The bottom line is, what works?"

In fact, researchers are beginning to pay attention to what high schools are doing.

"Everyone is starting to ask questions," said Joseph Harris, the director of the National High School Center, a federally funded technical-assistance center in Washington. "There's just a lot of interest in what [secondary-level RTI] looks like, how should it be defined, how do you implement it."

### Comparison Group

Students receiving assistance under the school's RTI effort earned better grades in Integrated Algebra/Geometry for the first semester of this school year than other students in the same class who did not take part in the program.



SOURCE: Palmer High School

The center, along with other organizations, is looking more closely at middle and high schools that are using RTI, in the hope of promoting some exemplary models.

"The question for us is, when is something RTI or when is something not RTI? It's something we're trying to tease out," said Helen M. Duffy, a research analyst for the Washington-based American Institutes for Research and the author of a [paper](#) titled "Meeting the Needs of Significantly Struggling Learners in High School: A Look at Tiered Intervention."

Among the questions researchers would like to see answered are: What tools are best for screening students? How should the success of a given intervention be evaluated? How can RTI be adjusted to work under the constraints of a semester system? What about the need for students to earn a certain number of credits to graduate?

Tiered instruction has teachers thinking about the full range of programs that exist in the school, said Charmyn Neumeyer, a literacy coach at Doherty High School, a 2,000-student high school in Colorado Springs' District 11.

Many secondary schools seem to have launched RTI programs by telling teachers that they're not much different than some of the programs already in place, which is a smart move, said Mr. Harris of the National High School Center. Introducing RTI as an entirely new concept that means more work would not go over well with most teachers, he said.

Jill Martin, the principal of another school that serves Colorado Springs, says leadership is a key ingredient—not just from the principal, but from teachers, who must support the concept.

"It doesn't feel brand-new to me," Ms. Martin, who leads Pine Creek High School in Academy District 20, a district of 20,000 students in the northern part of Colorado Springs, says of RTI. "It feels like how I've always thought about teaching kids. It's the same good instincts that you use as a teacher, you use with RTI."

Pine Creek High has already embraced teacher collaboration through "professional learning communities," a concept promoted by former principal Richard DuFour.

"So those questions, what do we want kids to learn, and how do we know that they've learned it, were questions we were asking teachers to do every day," said Ms. Martin, who was the 2007 National Principal of the Year.

"To me, at the high school level, this can't work if there's only a small group of people who are invested in it," Ms. Martin said. People have to see, she said, that "it's not an imposition, it's a solution."

Response to intervention has fit into her school in a way similar to its implementation at Palmer High School. The school is using many of the interventions for students that it always had and has created an "opportunity center" as a place for students to get specific interventions as needed.

Kim Elliott, a Pine Creek High math teacher who works with students in the opportunity center, noted one quirk of teenagers that teachers of younger students may not have to deal

with: When students were getting extra help in the library, they “were turning off the computers when people walked through. They said, ‘We don’t want kids to see we’re in the dummy math class.’” The school worked out a way to give the students more privacy, she said.

Having several interventions to choose from can make it hard to know exactly what’s working, said Toria McGill, an assistant principal at Pine Creek.

“We can’t withhold something we think might be helpful in order to get good data. We’re not in the research business,” Ms. McGill said.

Colorado principals say they don’t have all the answers. But instructors do say what they’re doing now seems better than letting a youngster with academic problems slip through the cracks.

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