

The Concept Of RTI: Billion-Dollar Boondoggle

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The Concept of RTI: Billion-Dollar Boondoggle

“We have no tradition of insisting on anything approaching reasonable validation of proposed reforms before we rush to implementation.” (Pogrow, 1996).

by

Beverley Holden Johns, James M. Kauffman, & Edwin W. Martin

Our concern is that RTI, although seemingly a rational framework in many ways for dealing with all students and the failure of some to meet expectations, not only did not have any proof of its general applicability before we rush to implementation, it does not beat the next best thing. The older framework, known first as Public Law 94-142 when it was enacted in 1975 (see Martin, 2013), is better known today as IDEIA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, more commonly called simply IDEA or IDEA, 2004).

We acknowledge the careful early work on RTI, and the researchers who spent thoughtful time and effort in its development. Our concern is not that research of alternative service delivery frameworks is stopped but that widespread implementation of a new framework is delayed until research clearly and consistently indicates its superiority compared to what exists. We write as individuals concerned not only about implementation of the most effective special education possible for students with disabilities, but their education in the context of public schooling more generally. Disappointment does not justify change, as Pogrow (1996) noted decades ago.

Furthermore, we are concerned that we are observing another boondoggle in education, a politically motivated, government-supported innovative (but foundering) project that not only wastes public money but ultimately works to the disadvantage of those it is said to help.

The foundering innovation about which we write has been called many things, but it was first known in the states of Iowa and Illinois as Flexible Service Delivery, perhaps more accurately described as attempting to deliver services to children with disabilities outside the more demanding IDEA framework. Later, as opposition grew to that concept, it was called Problem Solving, and then Response to Intervention or RTI, sometimes abbreviated as RtI. Note that the names became more generic, as *any* teaching could be called a response to academic intervention. In the just passed Every Student Succeeds Act, another name change has taken place, with RTI being replaced completely by MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support).

RTI became part of the process of identifying a student as having a Learning Disability (technically a Specific Learning Disability—SLD, commonly called simply LD) in IDEA 2004.

Nevertheless, the *only* purpose mentioned for RTI in this latest reauthorization of IDEA (2004) is its possible use in identifying LD. More specifically, the law states that “In determining

whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency *may* [emphasis added] use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures described in paragraphs (2) and (3).”

Therefore, according to the law each local school district *may* choose to use or *not* choose to use RTI only as part of the process of identifying only LD.

How did the federal government, state education agencies, and particularly local school districts come to spend massive amounts of money on RTI when Federal law clearly stated it was just an *option* for each local school district? Now a large federal study has indicated its failure to provide the benefits it was claimed to have (Balu et al., 2015), and little research was found to support its claims of benefits for students having emotional and behavioral disorders (e.g., Kauffman, Bruce, & Lloyd, 2012). We might consider the following:

1. RTI was not defined in the law or in Federal regulations. It could be and is almost anything. Its proponents stated that it would be different in each school district or in each school because it is only a framework, not an intervention. Indeed, it is a framework, but one only described in very general terms, allowing much interpretation.
2. RTI promised to vastly reduce the number of students identified for special education by “preventing disability” through effective teaching and early intervention.
3. RTI was defined by the commercial products, books, and articles produced by its advocates, not by research or proven efficacy.
4. Some States mandated the use of RTI rather than making it an option for identifying students with LD. In many places RTI was used for all disabilities, although such use is not authorized in law, as promoted by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE).
5. USDOE first tried to say in proposed regulations for IDEA 2004 that states must require RTI, and after massive opposition settled on saying States must *allow* the use of RTI in identification.
6. The USDOE’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provided large grants to fund RTI projects and informal guidance actively promoting RTI.
7. Any evaluation of RTI was extremely difficult, as it varied so much from school to school, was changing all the time, and was supported so strongly by OSEP and commercial companies (e.g., Pearson purchased AIMSWEB, the computerized tracking system for a form of RTI, and, just lately, when opposition arose, began marketing RTI under the name “Reach, Teach, Inspire”).

8. School psychologists often embraced the concept of RTI as a reaction against the use of intelligence tests in identifying LD, as a reaction against the very concept of LD, and as a way to change what school psychologists do day-to-day.
9. While a student is included in RTI, that student does *not* have to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), so is *not* included in special education. This means neither the student nor the parents have any of the legal rights provided by IDEA.

Eventually, things became so chaotic in some states and school districts, with RTI being used as a direct substitute for special education, that OSEP issued a memorandum on January 21, 2011, stating that RTI could not be used to delay or deny an evaluation for eligibility under IDEA. In other words, schools could not use RTI to avoid evaluating a student for special education. Perhaps the critical sentence is on page 3 of that memo, the last sentence in paragraph 2: “It would be inconsistent with the evaluation provisions at 34 CFR 300.301 through 300.311 for an LEA [local school district] to reject a referral and delay provision of an initial evaluation on the basis that a child has *not* participated in an RTI framework” (emphasis added). That is, a local school district *cannot* require a student to go through RTI before it starts an initial evaluation of that student for special education. If you are in a State that requires RTI, that RTI must be *completed* within the 60 days [exact length varies by State] that the local school district has to complete the initial evaluation, and it would be a violation of the regulations to continue RTI for that student beyond that time without completing that evaluation.

In general, RTI received extremely positive press coverage. For example, *Education Week* published a favorable report on RTI as part of an article on the 40th anniversary of IDEA. However, on the same front page, November 11, 2015, *Education Week* also published the article “RTI Practice Falls Short of Promise: First Graders Who Were Identified for More Help Fell Further Behind.” The article states, “the most comprehensive Federal evaluation of the approach finds that it may hold back some of the children it was originally designed to support.” A co-author of the Federal study of 20,000 students in 13 states wrote, “this turns out to be what RTI looks like when it plays out in real life.”

This Federal evaluation was a project of the Institute of Education Sciences of USDOE. The report was based on an extensive study of schools that had implemented RTI for at least three years, 86 percent in full implementation of RTI, and stated in its major conclusion that “For those students just below the school-determined eligibility cut point in Grade 1, assignment to receive reading interventions did not improve reading outcomes; it produced negative impacts.” The study stated that “intervention may have displaced instruction time and replaced some small-group or other instruction services with intervention services,” that “in contrast to more controlled studies of Rti that have relied on non-classroom teaching staff to provide

intervention services, the current study included intervention services provided by whoever was designated by schools to provide these services,” and that “classroom teachers played an additional role and provided intervention services to 37 percent of those groups in Grade 1.”

A fatal flaw in the evidence in favor of RTI is pointed to—“this study is unique in the sense that it examines the RTI system as it operated in multiple states in a large sample of experienced schools that had implemented RTI on their own, without monitoring or support from researchers.”

There have been previous warnings that RTI would not and could not do what it had been promised. It turns out the reason RTI has failed is simple: instead of spending every moment teaching their students, teachers and everyone else (in some schools every person in the building is expected to contribute to RTI) are spending time using a huge variety of interventions, of varying reliability, for a particular student, changing the intervention after failure, doing so again and again after more failure, testing and testing and testing, charting the results, supposedly making judgments based on the slope of those results, and far too often *not* finding success or eligibility for special education.

In other words, everyone involved in RTI is very busy doing almost everything *except* effective teaching. Declining academic achievement was reported in 2010 (a study paid for by the Illinois State Board of Education using funds from a Federal grant to the Illinois Alliance for School-based Problem-solving and Intervention Resources in Education—ASPIRE, the Illinois project to train people to use RTI). The study of RTI included only the 57 school buildings in Illinois that had received the most assistance in implementing RTI. “The school sites received priority access to project training, onsite technical assistance and coaching from Illinois ASPIRE regional staff to support planning and implementation and access to time-limited financial support for training and implementation.” And what were the results at these 57 school buildings? “Unfortunately, the data show that the percentage of schools making AYP [annual yearly progress] has actually decreased over time.”

“Thus far, at the state and regional levels, there are no significant improvements over time, either when comparing programmatic changes (third grade student performance in AY [academic year] 06-07 to third grade student performance in AY 07-08) or a cohort of students (third grade student performance in AY 06-07 to fourth grade student performance in AY 07-08).”

“Summary of Student Outcomes—In summary, while for AY 07-08 *all* of the outcome measures used to determine impact on student progress unfortunately showed a *decline*, results may have been impacted...as school staff are trained and more diligent in their efforts, accuracy of data improves but may *unfortunately seem to reflect a serious decline in outcomes* [emphasis added]” (Golomb, 2010).

It is important to attend to warnings that RTI is virtually certain to fail if the search is for a quick fix to schools' problem of dealing with difficult students, the claimed paradigm shift for all of education, and if RTI relies more on intervention programs that are commercially produced than on highly trained, knowledgeable teachers (Noll, 2013).

Moreover, it is important to realize that RTI represents a role desired by school psychologists to change their role in schools and the special education process (Kauffman, 1988). "RTI represents the best venue for school psychologists to implement desired roles since the calls for role change and expansion started over 50 years ago" (Burns, 2007).

That article, "RTI *Will* Fail, Unless...", published in the February, 2007, edition of *Communique*, the newspaper of the National Association of School Psychologists, also stated: "It now almost seems unfortunate that RTI was institutionalized in special education regulations."

"Are we attempting to identify children who are truly learning disabled? If so then RTI is *almost indefensible* [emphasis added] because labeling a child with a disability due to a lack of adequate response to effective interventions is basing a diagnosis on prognosis." "This represents the same high inference logic as current diagnostic approaches such as the discrepancy model or identifying processing deficits."

In other words, RTI is not only not better than other methods of identifying LD, it has the same weaknesses as claimed for the other methods. As the article says, "Gerber (2005) stated that the RTI approach does nothing to inform us about learning disabilities."

RTI is in Federal law only as part of the process of identifying LD, there is not any evidence it can do that successfully as even its supporters admit, so it is being used for all disabilities in an attempt to change all of education, without any evidence whatsoever that it can do that.

The unfortunate result of RTI has been to deny and delay—to deny or delay significantly the recognition of LD and other disabilities and to deny or delay the legal protections afforded by an older framework for dealing with school failure associated with disability—IDEA. It is among the fads used to neutralize special education (Silverstri & Heward, 2016).

Likely because of opposition to RTI and to its obvious failure as a way of defining and dealing with disabilities, the name RTI was omitted from the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) recently passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama. Instead the name in the new ESEA (the Every Student Succeeds Act—ESSA) is MTSS, Multi-Tiered System of Support, yet another name change for the same concept as RTI.

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