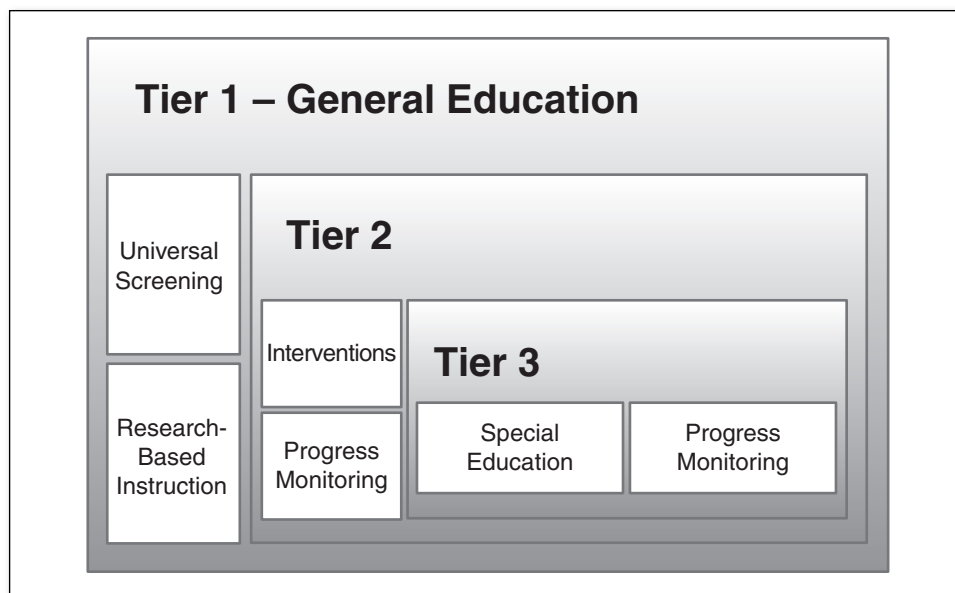


# 1

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## *What Is RTI?*

**R**esponse to Intervention, or RTI, is a multitiered approach to providing instruction and targeted intervention to improve student outcomes. Although there are variations on the number of tiers included in RTI models, RTI is most often conceptualized as a three-tiered system (see Figure 1.1), in which Tier 1 represents the general education instruction, Tier 2 represents a secondary level of intervention for students who require additional supports to be successful, and Tier 3 represents special education. RTI has roots in the preventive sciences, with its reliance on a population-based, proactive approach to ensuring strong educational experiences for all students. It is estimated that with this emphasis on providing high-quality, research-based instruction to the general population, approximately eighty percent of students will achieve targeted outcomes with general education instruction alone. However, even with a strong general education program in place, a small percentage of students, approximately fifteen percent, will require more intense interventions to make adequate academic progress. RTI relies on a system of early identification to determine which students will require this level of intensity. Finally, for approximately five percent of the population, tertiary intervention (or special education) will be needed for students to make progress toward alternate performance benchmarks and high school completion requirements. As Figure 1.1 demonstrates, all students should participate in and access the Tier 1 program in some way. For some students, that may require the additional support of an intervention (Tier 2), or it may require specially designed instruction (Tier 3) that provides access to the general education curriculum.

**Figure 1.1** A Tiered Model of Service Delivery

## PURPOSE OF RTI AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

RTI is a schoolwide initiative that has as its ultimate goal school improvement across the K–12 grade-level spectrum. At the elementary level, RTI models have been described as having three primary purposes: (a) screening and prevention of academic skill deficits primarily related to reading and mathematics, (b) early identification and intervention for students at risk for developing learning problems, and (c) learning disability determination (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). The primary goal is to identify early those students at risk for not developing the foundation of academic skills that will enable them to become successful and independent learners as they progress through the K–12 system. With this system in place, the expectation is that all students will exit the elementary setting ready to meet the challenges of the more demanding content at junior high and, finally, to develop and learn in high school the skills and knowledge that will enable them to be successful once they leave high school.

Although RTI at the elementary school level is designed to help individual students develop the capacity to read, write, and perform mathematics at a level that will enable them to be successful in a secondary setting, not all students will meet this rigorous standard. Students who enter secondary schools without strong basic academic skills are at risk for learning problems across numerous content areas as their teachers require

them to read and write to learn content. An increasing number of students enter secondary schools ill-prepared to meet the demands of a challenging junior and senior high curriculum (Jerald, 2006). Many biology, history, health, and economics teachers find their traditional approach to teaching is not effective in meeting the needs of many of their students.

In addition to the changing demands in content, once students enter the secondary grades, they encounter noticeable structural changes in the school setting. First, they no longer have one classroom teacher who teaches “ninth grade” the way an elementary teacher teaches “third grade.” Teachers at the secondary level focus on content (e.g., “I’m a history teacher” or “I teach biology”). Most junior and senior high schools do not teach students how to read but rather use reading and writing as the primary means through which teaching and learning occur. Finally, the goals and outcomes at secondary levels are quite different from those at elementary levels. Whereas elementary schools prepare students to develop skills to be successful in later school years, what is the goal of secondary schools? Not all students will have the same long-term goals. For example, some students will attend a four-year college or university. Others will seek vocational or technical training. Others may attend a local community college to continue preparation for a four-year institution of higher learning. Still others will immediately join the workforce or armed services.

Though long-term goals may vary, for all students, obtaining a high school diploma is a shared short-term outcome. Without a high school diploma, students have very little chance of being successful later in life. Indeed, research indicates that high school dropouts face significantly higher probabilities of incarceration, poverty, and need for social services (Schweinhart, 2004). Although districts and states differ on the specifics of high school graduation requirements, most include a combination of successful course and credit completion, successful performance on exit exams, and other requirements such as senior projects. As an increasing number of states require successful completion of exit exams to receive a high school diploma, performance on these assessments, along with other graduation requirements such as senior projects and credit attainment, help provide a common system of evaluation for all students.

In summary, as depicted in Figure 1.2, the purposes of RTI at the secondary level are similar to but distinct from the purposes at the elementary level. The primary purpose of RTI at the secondary level is to build the capacity of the school to meet the increasing demands for a diverse student population to meet rigorous standards for graduation. A secondary purpose is to ensure appropriate instruction and intervention is provided to all students. A final purpose is to provide a system that will support continuous school improvement to improve outcomes for all students.

**Figure 1.2** Purposes of RTI at Different Levels

Purposes of RTI at the Elementary Level		Purposes of RTI at the Secondary Level	
Screening and Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifies students as “at risk” and provides early intervention</li> </ul>	Build Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools can meet the demands of a diverse student population</li> </ul>
Early Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhances the general curriculum for all students and provides intervention and remediation</li> </ul>	Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support students at risk for dropping out of school</li> </ul>
Disability Determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determines a student’s response to instruction and intervention as one part of disability determination</li> </ul>	Continuous School Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Better teaching and learning through an integrated system</li> </ul>

## HOW RTI WORKS

### Tiered System of Instruction and Intervention

A strong general education program is the foundation for a successful RTI program. At the secondary level (grades 6–12), one of the most positive potential outcomes of RTI implementation is the provision of a systematic process through which schools can improve their general education instruction. Integrating the use of evidence-based practices that meet the needs of a diverse population of students across the content areas is the fundamental requirement for a successful Tier 1 (or general education) component.

Even with strong general education instruction, some students will require additional support to be successful in the general education program. This level of support is provided in Tier 2. In Tier 2, interventions that focus on specific, targeted skills are provided for students who struggle with the Tier 1 curriculum. These include academic, behavior, and engagement skills delivered through either a *standard protocol approach* or a *problem-solving approach* (these approaches are further explained in Chapter 6). For example, students who have difficulties in reading may require interventions that support their reading development. In addition to receiving these interventions, they also may require accommodations in the content area (e.g., science) classroom, such as graphic organizers or alternate presentation formats. A layered approach that provides targeted skill instruction as well as accommodations has been demonstrated to be very effective in supporting struggling students (Swanson & Deshler, 2003).

Finally, although many students with disabilities can have many of their needs met through accommodations in the general education class and the support of Tier 2, special education services will be required for a small percentage of students. In this text, we define Tier 3 as special education. In some cases, special education may consist of more intense interventions than those provided in Tier 2. In other cases, special education may consist of alternate performance benchmarks, curriculum, and instruction.

### **Integrated Assessment and Instruction System**

High-quality, research-based general education instruction and targeted interventions that increase in intensity depending on student need are the hallmarks of an effective RTI system. RTI is also characterized by the integration of the instructional system with an assessment system that accomplishes many things, to include the following:

1. The system screens *all* students to determine who may be at risk for poor academic outcomes.
2. It monitors student progress at all tiers.
3. It integrates a diagnostic procedure for students who are at risk to determine the nature and extent of their learning problems and to determine appropriate courses of action.
4. It provides program- and school-level data that may serve as the basis for making decisions about continuous school improvement efforts.

### **A Systemic Approach**

Although we discuss the components of RTI throughout this text, RTI is not simply a number of components implemented in a disjointed fashion. If a school has all of the required components but lacks the integrated system that makes the components work, RTI will not be successful. For example, early reports on RTI implementation at the secondary level indicate that some schools adopted an intervention program that targeted reading but then failed to make changes in the schedule and to connect the intervention to the general education program (Vaughn, Speece, & Linan-Thompson, 2008). In addition, the general education curriculum was not examined to determine how struggling readers could make progress in the content-area courses. Finally, placement in the intervention was driven by administrative factors (e.g., scheduling) rather than by Data-based Decision Making (DBDM). The result is a haphazard approach to RTI that does not promote strong student achievement.

For RTI to be effective, a school must not only put the necessary components into place, but must also integrate the components to become an effective system. To make that happen, leadership at all levels will be the linchpin for success. At the national level, for example, strong and coordinated technical assistance from research and technical assistance centers is needed to provide guidance on best practices that inform implementation. At the time of this writing, such assistance is emerging in full force (see the Resources section at the end of this text for more information).

At the state level, policies that support implementation and professional development for RTI are imperative. States that have strong, concise guidance documents that communicate a cohesive message about the purpose of RTI can effectively guide implementation efforts and support school districts. The development of policy is only the initial step, however. The states' responsibility in making RTI work is to develop a comprehensive system of professional development and to coordinate policies and procedures across many areas, such as curriculum, instruction, special education, English language learner programs, and assessment.

Districts have the responsibility of aligning RTI efforts across the K–12 level by developing policies and supports for building-level implementation. Finally, at the school level, building leaders will need to coordinate the many moving parts and guide school staff through a large culture shift. For these reasons, we believe that in addition to providing the specifics about the process of RTI and its individual components, a strong focus on describing the leader responsibilities will better support secondary schools as they implement RTI. In this text, we focus on the leader requirements for implementation at the school level. Although we do not discuss state and district policy in detail, district-level and state-level leaders will also benefit from a more thorough understanding of the implementation process.

### **RTI as School Improvement**

As described in this text, RTI is a comprehensive model for school improvement, encompassing nearly every aspect of school function. Because RTI is comprehensive in scope, schools may feel overwhelmed when beginning with RTI implementation. Implementing reform and system changes, especially in secondary schools, is a significant undertaking that requires strong leadership, a commitment from involved stakeholders and participants, and the acknowledgement that implementing change is a multiyear process (Fullan, 2004). In addition, RTI is just one of many recent policy initiatives that compete for a school's resources (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Schools are faced with an increasing number of policy initiatives, each targeting a specific population, or a specific aspect of school function, that often do not include information on how the particular initiative fits within the larger context of school functioning. When a policy initiative is interpreted on its own, as if its practices are unrelated

to others, the result can be a fragmented, haphazard approach to school improvement that rarely has staying power (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Instead, policy initiatives should be considered within the context of the school system, aligned with the school vision and mission and integrated to obtain stated school goals.

In this section, we briefly outline three current reform frameworks—Professional Learning Communities (PLC: DuFour & Eaker, 1998), Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS: Sugai & Horner, 1999), and Data-based Decision Making (DBDM: American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2002)—that can work in conjunction with the RTI framework to effectively and efficiently guide school improvement efforts. Numerous other policy initiatives can also be aligned within an RTI framework. We focus on PLCs, PBIS, and DBDM because they have been successfully integrated within RTI models at the secondary schools profiled throughout this book. An in-depth description of these frameworks is beyond the scope of this text, but the Resources section of this text directs the interested reader to further, helpful guidance.

## HOW RTI FITS WITH OTHER EDUCATION INITIATIVES

### RTI and the PLC Framework

RTI integrates best practices in instruction, intervention, and assessment to promote better student outcomes. Currently, these best practices are much better understood, defined, and available for the early elementary grades. At the secondary level, many of the building blocks for implementing a successful secondary RTI process are available but are not as well defined and require a more concerted effort for implementation. A good starting point to lead this effort for RTI implementation is the PLC framework.

PLCs, as described by DuFour and Eaker (1998), are collaborative groups of professionals who (a) work to analyze and identify problems, (b) devise solutions, (c) determine the effect of enacting solutions, and (d) make adjustments as needed. Comprising practitioners working together to solve problems and make improvements in practice, a PLC is in a unique position to address not only the technical aspects of solving a problem (e.g., What instructional strategies best meet the needs of English language learners in our school?), but also the social aspects (e.g., How do we consider the values of our community members when implementing this change?). When major reform efforts are implemented in such a way that both the technical and the social context are addressed, the result is sustainable improvement (Reid, 2007). PLCs allow schools to interpret and make sense of reform efforts, avoiding the problem of treating systemic changes merely as technical problems (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) and instead discussing how best to apply new approaches within existing school cultures.

PLCs support the implementation of RTI in two primary ways:

1. They allow the school leader to delegate specific tasks, such as investigating new instructional practices. Involving school staff helps gain school buy-in and ownership of school practice.
2. They allow a school to begin with one essential component for implementation, laying the foundation for continuing the process as other elements of the RTI process are brought to scale.

Many of the structures required for PLCs are likely in place at the secondary school. For example, departments may already collaborate for curriculum mapping or other activities. These meeting times may be re-focused to include other important components of RTI such as screening, intervention, and progress-monitoring procedures. In subsequent chapters of this text, we provide descriptions of these components and detailed guidance to direct their implementation. Organizing PLCs around these components can serve as a helpful system for RTI implementation. For example, see the textbox “RTI and PLCs in Practice” for a description of how one junior high used the two frameworks for successful RTI implementation.

### **Textbox 1.1 RTI and PLCs in Practice**

The PLC framework was used as the primary vehicle for RTI implementation at Cheyenne Mountain Junior High School. When the school began the process, the principal designated several PLC teams:

1. A “core” RTI team, responsible for reviewing student information and making decisions about which students would require academic interventions.
2. A “Tier 1” team, responsible for researching, educating, and evaluating instructional strategies for use across the Tier 1 program to improve student learning.
3. A “PBIS” team, responsible for reviewing student information and making decisions about which students would require behavioral interventions.
4. An “intervention” team, responsible for researching and developing a bank of intervention strategies based on student need at Cheyenne Mountain. After year two of implementation, the PBIS and intervention teams were combined into one intervention team that focused on both academics and behavior.
5. An “assessment” team, responsible for developing screening and progress-monitoring procedures integrated with the instruction and intervention at Tiers 1 and 2.



The principal provided the necessary administrative support to enable the teams to function effectively. For example, she designated routine meeting times and adjusted the schedule to ensure that the PLC teams had adequate time and facilities for meeting. She also scheduled staff training on the PLC framework and the RTI process. Through the integration of these initiatives, the entire staff has ownership of the RTI process, and there is a much greater integration of the process across grade levels and content areas as a result of increased collaboration and professional development.

## RTI and PBIS

In this text, we include PBIS under the umbrella of RTI. In other words, as described in this book, RTI encompasses *both* academics and behavior. The school models that are profiled throughout this book have integrated academics and behavior because they recognize that many students present with a combination of issues, and schools must work to provide interventions that support both the academic and behavioral needs of their students. Research and practice clearly demonstrate that, oftentimes, both learning and behavioral problems contribute to academic difficulties (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007), and this is particularly the case by the time students enter secondary schools (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). At the secondary level, therefore, efforts to intervene for learning problems will generally be more effective when behavioral issues also are considered.

A model for addressing discipline and behavioral concerns that shares with RTI both the philosophical underpinnings of a prevention approach and a tiered system for implementation is PBIS (Sugai & Horner, 1999). Like RTI, PBIS is a tiered model of service delivery that stems from the prevention sciences to take a proactive approach to improving schoolwide behavior and discipline. Like RTI, PBIS begins with a schoolwide focus to establish clear and consistent expectations for behavior, with well-defined consequences. It is a positive approach to creating a school climate free from behavioral problems. Like RTI, PBIS recognizes that even when this proactive approach is implemented, a small percentage of students may require some more intensive support to establish positive behavior, and an even smaller percentage of students may require specially designed services or special education to assist in the management and development of positive behavior.

RTI and PBIS share many common features, including screening, differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, and interventions targeted to support student needs (Sandomierski, Kincaid, & Algozzine, 2007). Emerging data on effective implementation of an RTI model that includes both academics and behavior (e.g., Johnson & Smith, 2008; Windram, Scierka, & Silbergliitt, 2007) are promising. Descriptions of these models in practice are provided throughout the text and in greater detail in Chapter 8.

### RTI and DBDM

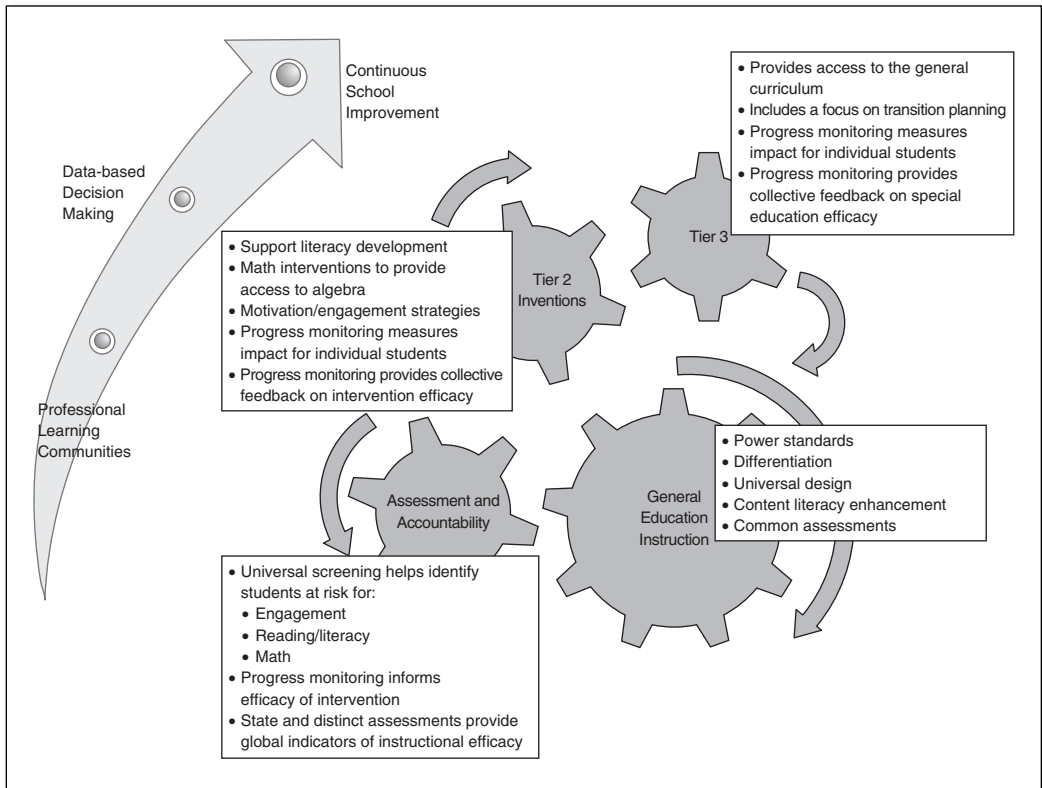
A recent focus in school improvement efforts has been the use of data to inform decision making at all levels. DBDM requires schools and districts to collect, analyze, report, evaluate, and communicate through data (AASA, 2002). DBDM can help measure student progress, measure program effectiveness, meet federal and state reporting requirements, show trends in performance, and maintain the focus on improvement efforts (AASA, 2002). Like other school-improvement frameworks, DBDM involves not only building the technical capacity to collect and evaluate data but also a paradigm shift for many stakeholders. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) developed the following guidelines for implementing DBDM:

1. Establish a school improvement team.
2. Develop a hypothesis.
3. Gather data to assess needs.
4. Evaluate and use the data.
5. Develop a data-based plan of action.
6. Monitor progress and document success.

With the focus on data, DBDM approaches to school improvement are consistent with the RTI and PBIS frameworks. With the focus on collaborative problem solving, DBDM also is consistent with the PLC model. RTI includes collecting assessment data through screening, progress-monitoring tools, and outcome measures. These data are analyzed at the individual student level to make specific decisions about student progress. At the classroom and grade levels, data analysis also informs general decisions about instruction, and at the school level it informs decisions about curriculum, instruction, and program effectiveness.

As described here, the original focus of RTI as an early identification and prevention model is greatly expanded to include continuous school improvement, especially when it is implemented to include PLC, PBIS, and DBDM. In Figure 1.3, we've depicted an expanded conceptualization of RTI that brings together numerous research-based practices and frameworks to lead to continuous school improvement. In the subsequent chapters of this text, we describe these research-based practices in detail and provide resources that will support their implementation. In Chapter 8, we revisit this figure to provide an overall summary of the RTI process.

**Figure 1.3** An Integrated Model of RTI



## PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The purpose of this book is to provide information, resources, and guidance on the implementation of RTI at the secondary level (grades 6–12). A growing number of resources related to RTI are available, but much of the literature and research to date are targeted toward the elementary grades and, more specifically, to reading. Yet, many states across the country envision RTI as a K–12 model, despite little guidance on how to use RTI at the secondary level. Our goal in writing this book is to provide initial guidance as secondary schools begin the process of implementation. As RTI implementation continues to scale up across the nation, the research base will expand and provide further guidance on improving the RTI process. As a starting point, we draw on existing school-based RTI models as well as the current research base on effective practices in secondary level education to identify current best practices for key components of RTI and to offer specific guidance to building leaders for making the process a success.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is organized in four main sections: (a) an overview that consists of a description of RTI, its purpose at the secondary level, and challenges specific to the secondary level in its implementation (Chapter 1); (b) an implementation and evaluation guide that provides information on getting started and evaluating the process and the outcomes of implementation (Chapter 2); (c) leader perspectives on RTI implementation (Chapter 3); (d) detailed descriptions and guides to implementation for each of the components of an RTI model (Chapters 4–7); and (e) a concluding summary about the future of RTI along with case story descriptions of two models of implementation (Chapter 8).

Within each section we have provided “in practice” examples from actual RTI models in place in schools today as well as a “leader check” for implementation. The implementation checklist from *RTI: A Practitioner’s Guide to Implementing Response to Intervention* (Mellard & Johnson, 2008) is included in the Appendix. In addition, this text provides a list of web-based resources to assist practitioners as they move forward with RTI implementation.

## SUMMARY

School improvement is a continuous effort that cannot be accomplished without a strong commitment from all involved (Gersten, Chard, & Baker, 2000). As a process of school improvement, RTI requires the same strong commitment. In 2003, the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities conducted a national model RTI site identification project (Mellard, Byrd, Johnson, Tellefson, & Boesche, 2004). The purpose of this project was to identify schools that had effectively and successfully implemented RTI. As a part of this effort, nineteen sites were identified nationally. These sites had implemented RTI differently but shared the following characteristics that contributed to their success:

1. They recognized that successful implementation was a multiple-year commitment.
2. They began implementation with a component already nearly in place, then continued with subsequent components.
3. They integrated professional development and collaboration as the primary means for capacity building and sustainability. (Mellard & Johnson, 2008)

Taken together, these characteristics remind us that the key to successful RTI implementation will be a collaborative effort spearheaded by strong leadership that can integrate and align the many moving parts of the system.

RTI is a comprehensive framework that encompasses numerous facets of school functioning. At the secondary level, a primary purpose of RTI is to build the capacity of the school to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. As described in this book, numerous existing policies are subsumed under the RTI framework to drive school-improvement efforts. These include the PLC, PBIS, and DBDM frameworks. When schools are able to integrate RTI with other existing frameworks and recognize that implementation is a multiple-year investment, they are more likely to be successful with RTI implementation. In the remaining chapters of this book, we discuss the unique challenges of RTI implementation in secondary schools and provide guidance for implementation of RTI components, drawing from school-based examples to facilitate understanding of the process.