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Introduction and the Research

Throughout this book, we will provide concrete recommendations and resources to allow educators to translate response to intervention (RTI) from research to practice, from ideas to reality. We will also connect the practices of RTI to decades of empirically validated research and best practice. But first, it's essential that we address the "Why?" questions: Why do we need to address changes to a system that has worked for the majority? Why is it important or necessary to reshape the last great bastion of a bygone era—the public school? Why are we looking to alter the notion of schools as the sorter of human potential and capacity? Invariably, the response to the "Why?" is because we know more about teaching and learning, we live in a world that is changing in significant ways; the opportunities that existed even a generation ago for students who did not graduate, or did not graduate with the skills essential for postsecondary opportunities or a skilled career, are almost nonexistent today. Once upon a time, schools served the purpose of imparting the academic requirements that were needed by the citizenry to function in their daily lives. Everything else that was required to function as a responsible member of the community was delivered at home by the immediate and extended family. While schools today are still charged with the responsibility of delivering the academic goods, they are also charged with the increased burden of delivering the social and emotional care that was once the purview of the home.

The world of work has also changed. In the United States, approximately seven thousand students drop out every school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In bygone days this may not have been a significant factor, as a high school dropout with minimal skills could earn a living wage. This era

has ended in the United States. In the 21st century, dropping out of school significantly diminishes the chances of securing a good job and a promising future. This is compounded even further when one considers the substantial financial and social costs to the communities, states, and countries in which dropouts live. Over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, \$260,000 less than a high school graduate (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Dropouts from the class of 2010 alone will cost the United States more than \$337 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). The discrepancy grows at an increased rate when comparing dropouts to those who complete a college or university degree. Recent statistics in British Columbia, Canada, indicate that an adult with a postsecondary degree will make \$879,300 more than dropouts over the course of a career. Finally, advances in technology have rendered the view of the teacher as the only source of knowledge as a relic of schools we once knew. Knowledge acquisition is the easy part for today's learners; their various devices rapidly gather information that once took hours or days to uncover. Students today are connected to more people and knowledge, in ways unknown a generation ago. Using knowledge, critiquing points of view, and synthesizing information is the new expectation for students . . . and teachers.

The demands on the school system of today are significant, and the expectations for graduates greater. These expectations apply to all students: students who respond immediately to core instruction as well as students who will require additional time and differentiated support. Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2011) clarify that all students include "any student who will be expected to live as a financially independent adult someday" (p. 24). Requiring that all students graduate with the ability to enter a postsecondary institution or a skilled career with the 21st century skills required to continue to learn further heightens the challenge. The statistics above support that notion wholeheartedly. RTI, then, is about so much more than interventions. It defines what we are as a profession and philosophically underpins the reflective checkpoints we use to assess the extent to which all students are learning.

As schools and districts refine and redefine their values, we would be wise to examine the practices and research that have endured for decades. The work of Ron Edmonds (1979) and Larry Lezotte (1991) and the Effective Schools Movement; Benjamin Bloom (1968, 1984) and Tom Guskey (2007) and Mastery Learning; and Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) and Understanding by Design (UbD) provide the connections that ground the tenets of RTI and allow them to flourish.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

The birth of the Effective Schools Movement arguably marked the beginning of education as a modern profession, and continues to define the moral imperative of teaching and learning. Founders Ron Edmonds and Larry Lezotte outlined the seven correlates of effective schools as follows.

1. Safe and Orderly Environment

Schools are orderly, purposeful, and businesslike, free from the threat of physical harm. The school climate is not oppressive; it's conducive to teaching and learning. However, a safe and orderly environment does not simply involve the absence of undesirable student behavior. A school environment conducive to learning for all necessitates an increased emphasis on desirable behaviors involving students taking active responsibility for their learning and working in collaborative partnerships. To accomplish these goals, adults in schools must model collaborative behaviors in professional relationships. Teachers must learn the *technologies* of teamwork and schools must create the opportunities for collaboration. Staff must nurture the belief that collaboration will lead to higher levels of student learning and working environments that are more professionally satisfying. Students will work together cooperatively when they learn to respect human diversity and appreciate democratic values, and when they have the opportunity to interact with the 21st century skills that will prepare them for postsecondary opportunities or a skilled career. RTI is built on the tenets of creating a positive learning environment for all students. Tier 1 supports for all students, with progressively more intensive interventions in response to student needs as appropriate, lead to a positive learning environment for all. Educators gain information about each individual student and gain the capacity to respond with appropriate strategies to ensure all students learn at high levels.

2. Climate of High Expectations for Success

School staff must believe, and demonstrate the belief, that *all* students can attain mastery of essential school skills, and staff must also believe that they have the capability to help all students achieve that mastery. Expectations cannot simply describe the attitudes and beliefs of teachers within the teaching-learning situation, such as the even distribution of questions among all students and the equal opportunity for all students to participate in the learning process. Teachers will find themselves in the difficult position of starting with high expectations, and acting on them, and yet finding that some students have not yet learned. Teachers, teams, and schools must develop a broader array of responses. High expectations for success will be judged not only by initial staff beliefs and behaviors, but also by the school's response when some students do not learn. Schools must restructure time and resources to ensure that teachers have access to more *tools* to help them successfully achieve learning for all. Schools must be transformed from institutions designed for *teaching* to institutions designed to ensure *learning*. The instructional model used in the RTI framework has application to core academics *and* behavior, and is based on the notion of increasing the intensity of instruction based on student need. The value and strength of RTI lies in the provision of more-targeted, intensive, and explicit supports in response to student needs. Differences between tiers are characterized by significance of the student need and the intensity of the supports.

3. Instructional Leadership

In an effective school, the principal acts as an instructional leader and effectively, and with patient persistence, communicates the mission described above to staff, parents, and students. The principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness to the management of the instructional program. And yet instructional leadership cannot reside exclusively with the principal and administrative staff of the school. Instructional leadership must be broadened and leadership dispersed to all adults. The principal cannot be the only leader in a complex organization, but must create a community of shared values. The role of the principal must be as a leader of leaders, rather than a leader of followers. When building leaders and classroom teachers agree on the why of RTI, they work closely to ensure its cohesive and consistent implementation. The clarity of a written plan detailing steps of the implementation is essential as a road map to consistency. The principal, skilled as an instructional leader rather than as a school manager, establishes and maintains an RTI model as the first and most important job. Among other responsibilities, the school's leader makes decisions about staff, time, and material allocations to support the model.

4. Clear and Focused Mission

A clearly articulated school mission—in which the staff shares an understanding of and commitment to the instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability—is insufficient. Staff must accept responsibility for *all* students' *learning* essential skills and attributes. Schools must clearly define *all* and *learning*. *All* means all, including children of the poor, students with unique learning needs, and English learners. *Learning* must represent an appropriate balance between critical thinking and those more-basic skills prerequisite to higher-level learning. Students supported by a team of educators who collaborate for learning success are far more likely to succeed. This notion of collaboration is essential to successful RTI implementation and the outcome of this collaboration should guide decision making. The goal is to create and implement instructional and intervention strategies with a high probability of success. Successful implementation requires focused leadership and collaborative practices among all educators in a school and district. This clear and focused mission allows for RTI implementation to become a seamless school-wide and districtwide model.

5. Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task

A significant, and increased, amount of classroom time must be allocated to instruction related to essential skills through well-planned learning activities. Teachers cannot be oriented toward covering content at a breakneck pace. Interdisciplinary curriculum and a clear, collaborative understanding of *essential* content is a must. Schools must courageously declare that some things are more important than others, be willing to abandon less-critical content to dedicate energy to those areas that are valued most, and adjust the available time that students spend on essentials so that they reach mastery. The use of

research-based instructional practices at each tier is crucial to achieving outcomes. As a student moves through Tiers 2 and 3, educators may not involve other programs, but instead use the core curriculum with increased intensity. Focusing on achievement levels and setting goals for advanced students are also parts of the RTI approach, as is bringing struggling students to grade level, which is more widely but inaccurately understood as the sole focus of RTI.

6. Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress

Schools must measure student progress toward mastery frequently through a variety of assessments to improve individual student performance and the instructional program. The quantity of data, the requisite specificity of data, and the rate at which schools must respond to data will necessitate the use of technology. This same technology and these same assessments should also allow students to monitor their own learning and adjust their own behavior. Monitoring of student learning must also increasingly emphasize more authentic assessments of mastery, with less emphasis on multiple-choice tests. Increased attention must be paid to the alignment between the intended, taught, and tested curriculum. To effectively use data to drive decisions in the RTI model, educators must understand what data will be collected, how often staff and students will monitor progress toward mastery at different tiers, what instruments and materials will be used, and who will collect the data. Douglas B. Reeves (2009) suggests that schools and districts are drowning in data, but thirsty for evidence. We must consider the function of data as well as the source.

7. Home-School Relations

Parents must understand and support the school's basic mission and must be given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school to achieve this mission. The relationship between parents and the school must be an authentic partnership. Schools must clearly identify the ways in which parents can be involved and must take an active role in ensuring parents comprehend the rules of school. In the RTI approach, parent involvement is characterized by meaningful two-way communication where parents are informed of intervention options for their children before they are implemented. At Tier 1, parent involvement in school decision making may lead to an improved, more-positive school climate. At the Tier 2 and 3 levels, when some portions of the intervention may extend to the home, parent expertise regarding the individual student is vital.

While the notion of Mastery Learning may have earlier roots, the subject really gained momentum in education as a result of the work of Benjamin Bloom (1968). Bloom looked at the approach taken by teachers to organize curriculum into instructional units and modified it to include two components that he believed would improve the results for students. Feedback and corrective procedures became the hallmark of Bloom's Mastery Learning. Rather than assessments being used to mark the end of units, Bloom

suggested they be used in a formative fashion to identify areas of struggle for students (and by extension areas that may need adjustments in the instructional phase for teachers). Once identified, these struggles could be remedied through individualized, corrective procedures. These correctives would be specific to items from the assessment so as to provide clarity for the student and teacher. Following corrections, the student would receive a second, mirrored assessment that served two roles: it would verify the efficacy of the corrective action, and it would provide a motivational tool for the student. Bloom also suggested that additional enrichment activities ought to be considered for students who successfully master the unit content so as to broaden and expand their learning. We view Bloom's Mastery Learning as a forerunner to Tier 2 academic supports.

Guskey (2007) has furthered the work of Bloom and made a strong connection between Mastery Learning and RTI. In a 2011 paper with Jung, the two authors suggest that RTI and Mastery Learning represent powerful tools in schools' efforts to help all students learn at high levels. The commonalities between the two approaches are identified as follows.

MASTERY LEARNING

1. Universal Screening (RTI) and Diagnostic Pre-Assessment With Preteaching (Mastery Learning)

Both RTI and Mastery Learning involve a method of assessing students prior to beginning instruction. These quick diagnostics focus on knowledge, skills, and behaviors required for students to be successful in the upcoming unit. In both RTI and Mastery Learning, the intent is to identify which students might be at risk of learning difficulties based, in part, on whether the student possesses the entry-level skills needed to be successful in the unit.

2. High-Quality, Developmentally Appropriate Initial Instruction (Tier 1 in RTI and Group-Based Instruction in Mastery Learning)

Engagement of all students in high-quality instruction using evidence-supported teaching strategies is key to both approaches. This instruction should focus on essentials, be contextualized and differentiated, and include meaningful learning activities within the general education classroom for all students, regardless of current levels of readiness or label (e.g., special education, English learner).

3. Progress Monitoring (RTI) and Formative Assessment (Mastery Learning)

Regular and systematic monitoring of student results and progress is another common element of the two approaches. In RTI the intent of this monitoring is to determine if students are benefiting from instruction and

intervention and, if not, to inform instruction and intervention that is more effective. The frequency of these checks varies depending on subject and class configuration. Mastery Learning includes regular formative assessments that are designed to check students' learning of the critical learning goals of the unit. These are followed by diagnostic feedback to students on their learning progress. Both types of formative assessment ultimately provide information to students to guide their learning and close any gaps.

4. Appropriate, Evidence-Based Intervention (Tier 2 in RTI and Corrective Instruction in Mastery Learning)

Both approaches anticipate that some students may still experience some learning challenges and need further assistance after initial instruction. The progress monitoring and formative assessments mentioned above provide the clarity that allows teachers to respond. Specialists or assistants may assist classroom teachers in providing intervention that is qualitatively different from the initial instruction. The key to this step is not *teaching slower and louder*, but rather using an alternative instructional approach and allocating more time.

5. Additional Progress Monitoring (RTI) and Second Formative Assessments (Mastery Learning)

The two approaches require frequent progress checks to ensure that students are learning and that interventions are working.

6. Specialized, Highly Intensive Instruction (Tier 3 in RTI)

Tier 3 in RTI represents supports that will be necessary for a small percentage of students. These students have been screened to be at risk for failure based on current information or have not responded adequately to less-intensive supports and likely lack knowledge for foundational prerequisite skills. Schools will likely need to provide individual students intensive interventions to ameliorate significant deficits in foundational skills, as well as scaffold access to essential, core content. While Mastery Learning does not have a comparable step, Bloom did anticipate that some students might require individualized tutorial time that would target their specific learning needs.

7. Enrichment or Extension Activities (Mastery Learning)

Mastery Learning clearly identifies the need for additional extension activities for those students who can demonstrate mastery of unit concepts. Rather than a traditional approach of more of the same, Mastery Learning suggests providing activities that broaden the learning experiences of students. Within an RTI framework, students who master essential content presented in Tier 1 may pursue interesting, enriching activities rather than

moving farther ahead of their peers who struggled with concepts, thereby allowing the teacher to maintain some capacity to plan out the learning progressions of the whole class.

UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN

Developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, Understanding by Design (UbD) is another framework for improving student achievement. UbD emphasizes the teacher's role as a designer of student learning with clearly defined learning targets, as a creator of assessments that are strong indicators of student understanding, and as a planner of engaging and effective lessons. UbD is based on several key ideas.

- A critical goal of education is the development and deepening of student understanding. Rather than a traditional approach of rote memorization focused on drill and kill, UbD aims to nurture students' genuine learning and deep conceptual understanding. When teachers provide students with the opportunity to explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, empathize, and self-assess, they can better assess understanding.
- Effective curriculum development involves a three-stage process called backward design that clearly defines and describes student learning outcomes prior to initiating classroom activities. This process challenges the notion of the textbook as instructor, and prevents teaching from becoming activity orientated, both of which diminish the establishment of clear priorities and purpose. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) define the three stages as follows:
 - *Stage 1.* Identify desired results: enduring understandings, essential questions, and knowledge objectives.
 - *Stage 2.* Determine the types of evidence needed to assess and evaluate student achievement of the desired results.
 - *Stage 3.* Design learning activities that promote students' mastery of desired results and their subsequent success on assessment tasks.
- Student and school performance gains are achieved through regular reviews of results (achievement data and student work) followed by targeted interventions to curriculum and instruction. Teachers administer formative assessments, gather evidence from students, and gain feedback from colleagues, using that feedback to adjust instructional practices.
- Teachers, schools, and districts engage in collaborative efforts to design, share, and peer-review units of study.

UbD and RTI intersect in three key areas—identifying desired results, determining acceptable evidence, and planning learning experiences and instruction. UbD complements RTI by clearly defining the main purpose for doing the work; ensuring that learning targets are clear; and focusing on learning, not on teaching or testing. UbD also informs RTI by defining what the evidence of

learning might look like, clarifying essential performance tasks, defining other sources of evidence, and identifying how success will be measured. Finally, UbD helps center RTI's focus on Tier 1 by identifying what we need to teach and in what order, what best practices exist, and what tools we might use to achieve our goals.

There are other important systems of educational practice that have been connected to RTI and that contribute to response to intervention, most notably those associated with professional learning communities. (While RTI is most commonly known as response to intervention in the educational literature, we encourage educators to interpret RTI as students' responses to both instruction and intervention.) RTI is a framework for organizing schools in which systems exist to guarantee that every student receives the time and support they need to be successful. RTI is not a fad, but builds on the foundations of the Effective Schools Movement, Mastery Learning, and UbD. RTI is a process for ensuring higher levels of academic and behavioral success for all students. Full and rigorous implementation of RTI requires schools to provide high-quality instruction, balanced assessment, and time for collaboration. RTI systems use a multitiered system of support to identify and respond to student needs, which will include and require authentic family involvement, data-based decision making, and effective leadership at both the school and district levels. While RTI has entered into schools' consciousness and practices as a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), due in part to the superiority of RTI over the discrepancy model as a way of determining the presence of a learning disability for the purposes of eligibility for special education services, it is most useful as a representation of the cultures and structures required to meet the needs of all learners.

RTI is simply a framework that helps define the time and support that all students need to be successful. In simple terms, RTI may best be understood as a verb: To what extent are students responding to instruction and intervention; that is, to what extent are they RTI'ing? When data and other evidence suggest that students are RTI'ing, then we continue to provide similar supports. When data and other evidence suggest that students are not responding to instruction, we begin a smooth process of determining what supplemental time and support (interventions) may be necessary to ensure that students begin responding as soon as possible.

RTI involves every staff member. Classroom teachers deliver and differentiate instruction. They assess to ensure students are mastering standards, help diagnose to determine specific areas of need, monitor student progress to ensure that supports are working, and communicate this information to other staff. Paraprofessionals and interventionists help provide supplemental supports to students in need and provide feedback regarding observations and assessments of student progress. Clinicians assist in diagnosing, problem solving, assessing, and providing direct supports to students in need. Administrators oversee the entire process and assist in all steps as necessary and hold all staff accountable for the consistent implementation of all processes, including regular team meetings, to check on the progress of students. Every educator's goal must be for every student to possess the academic and behavioral skills to

be on track for postsecondary education or a skilled career. RTI is simply the best and most research-based, evidence-based framework for guiding us in ensuring that every single student meets that goal. John Hattie, for example, after his exhaustive meta-analysis of decades of educational practices across the globe, rates RTI as one of the top three ideas ever to be employed on behalf of students.

The culture and structures of RTI do not simply build on the powerful work of Ron Edmonds and Larry Lezotte, Benjamin Bloom and Tom Guskey, and Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe; RTI helps us fulfill the promise and potential of our profession. High levels of learning for all is not simply our ethical responsibility to the students we serve; it's a practical necessity for students, our schools, and our nations.

SCHOOL CULTURE

At the conclusion of each chapter we will address the collective will required to accomplish the tasks discussed within the chapter and describe strategies to address these obstacles. In our experiences, the actual work required to implement RTI in schools, beginning with the foundational steps of identifying and unpacking essential standards, will not overwhelm staff or inhibit their success. Educators are more than professionally capable of completing this work. The obstacles that derail schools in their efforts are most often based on a lack of will. Here are a few cultural challenges that schools may face:

- **The system works for most kids so why change? Is it really possible to have *all* students succeed?**

Often the people with whom we work are successful products of a school system (with success being defined as completing a degree and working in the field of education), and so staff may question why change is needed. Similarly, many parents who willingly and frequently interact with the school are successful products of a bygone school system and they also wonder, "Why is change needed?" One of the biggest reasons for continuous improvement is that we know more today about teaching and learning than at any other point in the history of education. We can, and must, do better for many of the reasons outlined in the text above. Think about most other professions: Haven't they progressed over the previous decades? We need to incorporate the best of what we have learned today with the best of what we know worked yesterday to prepare our students for tomorrow.

As for the question of *all* students, we remain steadfast in the belief that not only is this desirable, but it also is achievable. Educators can and must learn from successful schools that face the challenges of poverty, immigration, race, single-parent households, schools that might despair but that still thrive rather than wither. This is not to suggest prescriptive replication of those schools but instead that we extract from these sites what works, contextualized to your location, to ensure all students succeed.

- **It's sink or swim in the real world, and that's the way it should be in our schools.**

While the former part of this statement may have some validity, the latter part misses the true reason for why schools exist. They are not factories where empty minds are filled to prepare the masses for the real world, but instead are learning institutions whose role is to ignite the passion of students so they can make valuable and valued contributions to the communities in which they will live. The role of the teacher is not to predict the future, but to create it. If the world is sink or swim, we need to prepare our students by teaching them how to swim.

- **My job is to teach and their job is to learn.**

This notion belies the fact that the learning is the teaching. The best measure of teacher efficacy is demonstrated learning by students. “Did they learn?” truly answers the question “Did I teach?” more effectively than simply relying on sound pedagogy. Hamre and Pianta’s 2005 study of students identified as being at risk, cited in Daniel Goleman’s *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (2006) found that those placed with cold or controlling teachers struggled academically—regardless of whether their teachers followed pedagogic guidelines for good instruction. But if these students had a warm and responsive teacher, they flourished and learned as well as other kids. Our job is to create the conditions where learning is the best option available to our students.

The next six chapters will provide a comprehensive framework for describing how schools can put RTI into action, because interpreted most powerfully, RTI is a verb that will lead to high levels of learning for all.

Chapter 2. Content and Instruction in Tier 1. Focus instruction with high standards.

- Transform student engagement and achievement by creating high-impact classrooms.
- Develop common formative assessments (CFAs), and classroom assessments or tasks.
- Adopt and use next-generation standards, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), with a local perspective.
- Support curriculum design by focusing all educators on clear (unpacked and unwrapped) essential priority standards.
- Improve assessment literacy to focus educators on specific student needs.
- Plan, implement, monitor, and model engaging, high-yield instructional strategy frameworks.
- Leverage professional development to ensure clear understanding of excellent teaching and learning.
- Determine when and how to use which strategies for which students.

Chapter 3. Common Formative Assessments, Evidence, Data Analysis, and Collaboration. Leverage teams as the vehicle for school improvement.

- Use data to monitor and improve teaching and leadership practices.
- Effectively use collaboration and data analysis consistently across the system.

- Ensure collaborative data analysis is driving instructional decision making.

Chapter 4. Information Within RTI: Screening, Progress Monitoring, and Diagnoses. Evidence is the engine that drives an RTI-based system of supports.

- Universal screening assessments identify students in immediate need of intensive, Tier 3 supports.
- Diagnoses help identify the causes of student difficulty.
- Progress monitoring tools help inform the extent to which students are responding to interventions.

Chapter 5. Tier 2 and 3 Interventions, Strategies, and Resources. Students with identified areas of need require our best alternative approaches.

- High-leverage reading supports.
- Timely, impactful writing interventions.
- Alternative, visual, and conceptual supports for mathematics.
- Simple, evidence-based strategies for improving behaviors.

Chapter 6. Social and Academic Behavioral Interventions. Behavior and academics are inextricably linked and our approach to both must be consistent.

- Simple, evidence-based strategies for improving social behaviors.
- Research-based methods of improving academic behaviors, those self-regulatory and executive functioning skills so essential to success in life and school.
- Resources for precorrecting and deescalating misbehaviors.

Chapter 7. Lead the Work With Confidence, Leadership, and Accountability. Create focused and supportive accountability so leaders and teachers make the best decisions.

- Lead and inspire the work.
- Ensure that the logistics—the structures—of RTI are comprehensively in place.
- Use key leadership research and intensive professional development to plan, implement, and monitor sustainable improvement.
- Create a clear and useful accountability system that is linked to adult actions in addition to test scores.

Classroom teachers, specialists, clinicians, special education staff, and district offices are hungry for specific guidance on RTI. RTI, while a potentially promising and positive guiding presence for schools, has often been misunderstood and misapplied. The following detailed description of RTI, with easy-to-use, sound templates, will support schools in reculturing and restructuring our efforts to ensure high levels of learning for all. When combined with professional development support on *how* to apply the thinking and templates within this book, and by ensuring that the thinking that guides the work validly and accurately represents both the *why* and *what* of RTI, we are confident that it can be a transformative resource for schools across the United States and Canada.