



“RTI: A New Way for Schools to Define Learning Disabilities”

By David T. Painter, PhD, Esquire

When Congress reauthorized the federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in 2004, it added a new way for school districts to decide which children have learning disabilities that require special education. Since 1975, with the first federal special education law, learning disabilities have been identified through a testing process, usually including a one-to-one session with a school psychologist, which measures a child’s various intellectual abilities and academic skill levels. If there is a “severe discrepancy” between a child’s measured ability and his lower, academic skill levels in reading, math, writing or language, a school-based team might determine that the child requires special education services to meet the child’s instructional needs.

Over the past thirty years, as the research findings examining the “severe discrepancy” method accumulated, there has been increasing criticism of the method. From scientific and educational policy perspectives, the harshest criticism stems from two sources. First, it is well-established that learning problems experienced by children can best be ameliorated through early identification and early intervention. Second, the “severe discrepancy” method often does not result in the identification of learning disabilities until a child is in the second or third grade, after having struggled with basic skill acquisition for several years. Built-in to the “severe discrepancy” method is the requirement that a child’s academic skill deficits be low enough to constitute a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement. Frequently, it would take several years of failure for a child’s skills to be weak enough relative to his or her peers to justify special education services.

The reauthorized IDEA 2004 includes two important provisions that may result in sweeping changes to school districts’ methods for identifying and intervening with children with learning disabilities. In order to receive IDEA 2004 funding, individual states cannot require school districts to use a severe discrepancy method for identifying children with learning disabilities. IDEA 2004 also requires that states permit school districts to use a new method for identifying learning disabilities that has been referred to as: Response to Intervention (RTI). While there are several possible RTI models, all of the models have several things in common: 1) all children are provided with high-quality instruction from appropriately trained professionals using scientific research-based curricula;

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2) RTI involves early screening of skill levels for all children several times throughout the school year; 3) children who are "at-risk" are provided with supplemental, targeted skill-building instruction using instructional methods and materials that are research-based and are delivered by appropriately trained professionals; 4) children receiving supplemental, targeted skill-building instruction have their progress measured continuously so that instruction can be altered and adjusted if necessary; and, 5) children who do not respond to intensive and explicit instruction targeting their areas of weakness, may then be likely candidates for learning disability special education services.

School districts interested in incorporating a Response to Intervention method are likely to look to the Pennsylvania Department of Education for additional guidance. The Department is currently sponsoring pilot programs in several school districts throughout the state and undoubtedly the results from these pilot programs will yield useful findings for districts. RTI methods not only hold promise for transforming the process for identifying learning disabilities in young children, but when used school-wide also have the potential to result in early identification, early intervention and reduction in the need for learning disability special education services.

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