

# Supporting Early Grades Student Achievement: An Exploration of RTI<sup>2</sup> Practices

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# CONTENTS

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Executive Summary	2
Introduction	3
RTI <sup>2</sup> Implementation Progress	5
High Implementers and Student Achievement	6
What Does RTI <sup>2</sup> Implementation Look Like for High Implementers?	7
If RTI <sup>2</sup> Practices Across High Implementers Are Similar, What Sets Big Movers Apart?	10
Improving RTI <sup>2</sup> Implementation	13
Endnotes	14
Appendix A	15
Appendix B	16

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Almost half of Tennessee's students are not on grade level in reading and math by the time they complete third grade, and very few of those students achieve proficiency in later grades. To combat this trend and support the skill development and academic achievement of all students, Tennessee has adopted a framework for addressing individual learning needs called Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>). RTI<sup>2</sup> promotes the use of research-based, high-quality instruction and interventions and provides an integrated, seamless model that supports student progress at every level. Statewide implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> occurred in elementary schools in 2014-15. According to educator reports, elementary schools have embraced the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework, incorporating its key components into their daily routines.

Despite schools' concerted efforts to implement RTI<sup>2</sup>, student achievement data reveal that patterns of student growth still vary considerably between schools. This report uses evidence from the 2015 Tennessee Educator Survey to identify RTI<sup>2</sup> "high implementers" and addresses the following question: What differentiates the high implementers that are more successful than others at moving non-proficient students to proficiency?

### Key Findings

- Using data from the 2015 Tennessee Educator Survey, we found that, on average, the majority of teachers reported that their schools were either fully or partially implementing RTI<sup>2</sup>. However, only 153 of the 634 schools included in the Tennessee Educator Survey analysis were categorized as high implementers—schools in which almost all teachers reported implementing the key components of RTI<sup>2</sup>. This suggests that many schools can continue to refine and improve their RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation.
- On the surface, we found that implementation of key RTI<sup>2</sup> practices looks similar across high implementers. Staff at these schools conduct universal screening three times per year, monitor the progress of students receiving Tier II or III interventions at least every two weeks, meet regularly to review data, and receive training related to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. Yet, we found that some of the high implementers have been more successful than others at moving non-proficient students to proficiency between grades 3 and 5.
- After interviewing school leaders and staff in high implementers that were successful at moving students to proficiency ("big movers") and high implementers that were not as successful at moving students to proficiency ("small movers"), we uncovered a few key differences:
  - Big movers use multiple data sources and constant communication among staff members to guide the RTI<sup>2</sup> decision-making process.
  - Big movers build strong RTI<sup>2</sup> teams with specialized role-players who are well-equipped to support student success.
  - Big movers use all available resources to create staggered, grade-level intervention periods and allocate space for small group work.
  - Big movers have strong leaders who encourage collective responsibility and engagement and learn from the early stages of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation to make changes and improve.

## INTRODUCTION

Less than half of Tennessee elementary school students are proficient in English language arts (ELA) and just 59 percent are proficient in math. Further, few of the state's lowest performing early grade students achieve proficiency in later grades. For example, less than three percent of below basic third graders moved up to proficiency by the end of fifth grade.

To combat this trend and support the skill development and academic achievement of all students, Tennessee has developed a framework for addressing individual learning needs called Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>). RTI<sup>2</sup> promotes the use of research-based, high-quality instruction and interventions and provides an integrated, seamless model that supports student progress at every level. It was first implemented in elementary schools statewide during the 2014-15 school year.<sup>1</sup>

According to educator reports, elementary schools have embraced the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework, incorporating its key components into their daily routine. According to the 2015 Tennessee Educator Survey (TES), most teachers reported that their schools were fully or partially implementing RTI<sup>2</sup>;

that is, they were using universal screeners, had established a daily intervention time, had convened RTI<sup>2</sup>-focused data teams, were providing training for staff, and had a process in place for monitoring student progress. Despite the high level of effort schools and their teachers are dedicating to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation, student achievement data from state assessments reveal that patterns of student growth still vary considerably between schools. One school that is "fully implementing" RTI<sup>2</sup> may be successfully moving its lower-performing students up, while another school that is "fully implementing" RTI<sup>2</sup> might not be moving its struggling students at all.

This report explores RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation by seeking to better understand the specific RTI<sup>2</sup> strategies that schools across the state are using to raise student achievement. It focuses on a group of RTI<sup>2</sup> "high implementers" in which student outcomes varied extensively and seeks to answer the following overarching question: What differentiates the high implementers that are more successful than others at moving non-proficient students to proficiency?

*Less than three percent of below basic third graders moved up to proficiency by the end of fifth grade.*

## RTI<sup>2</sup> STRUCTURE

Figure 1 shows the process for successful implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework. To start, schools conduct a universal screening process for every student, which provides baseline data that help the schools' RTI<sup>2</sup> teams determine which level of intervention each student requires. All students receive Tier I core instruction. Students who need extra support might receive either Tier II or Tier III interventions, the latter being more intense than the former. Once students begin receiving interventions, schools monitor progress regularly and

participate in data-based decision-making. Students move in and out of tiers based on their current level of need, with Tier II and III interventions directly addressing existing skill deficits so that students are better prepared to access Tier I core instruction. While implementing the framework, schools are expected to offer comprehensive training so that staff fully understand the expectations of RTI<sup>2</sup> and can subsequently provide cohesive, meaningful support to all students.

# RTI<sup>2</sup> Decision-Making Process

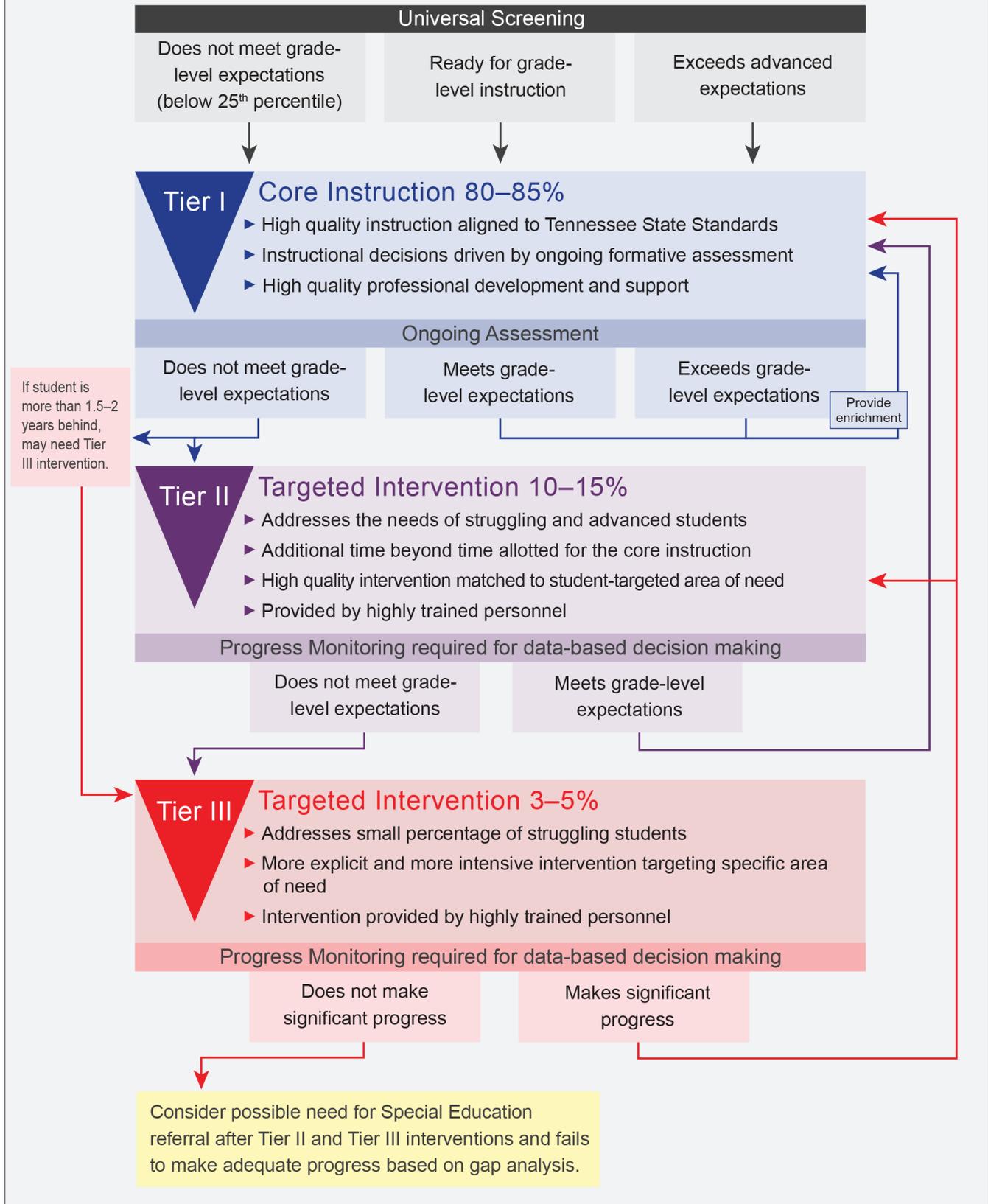
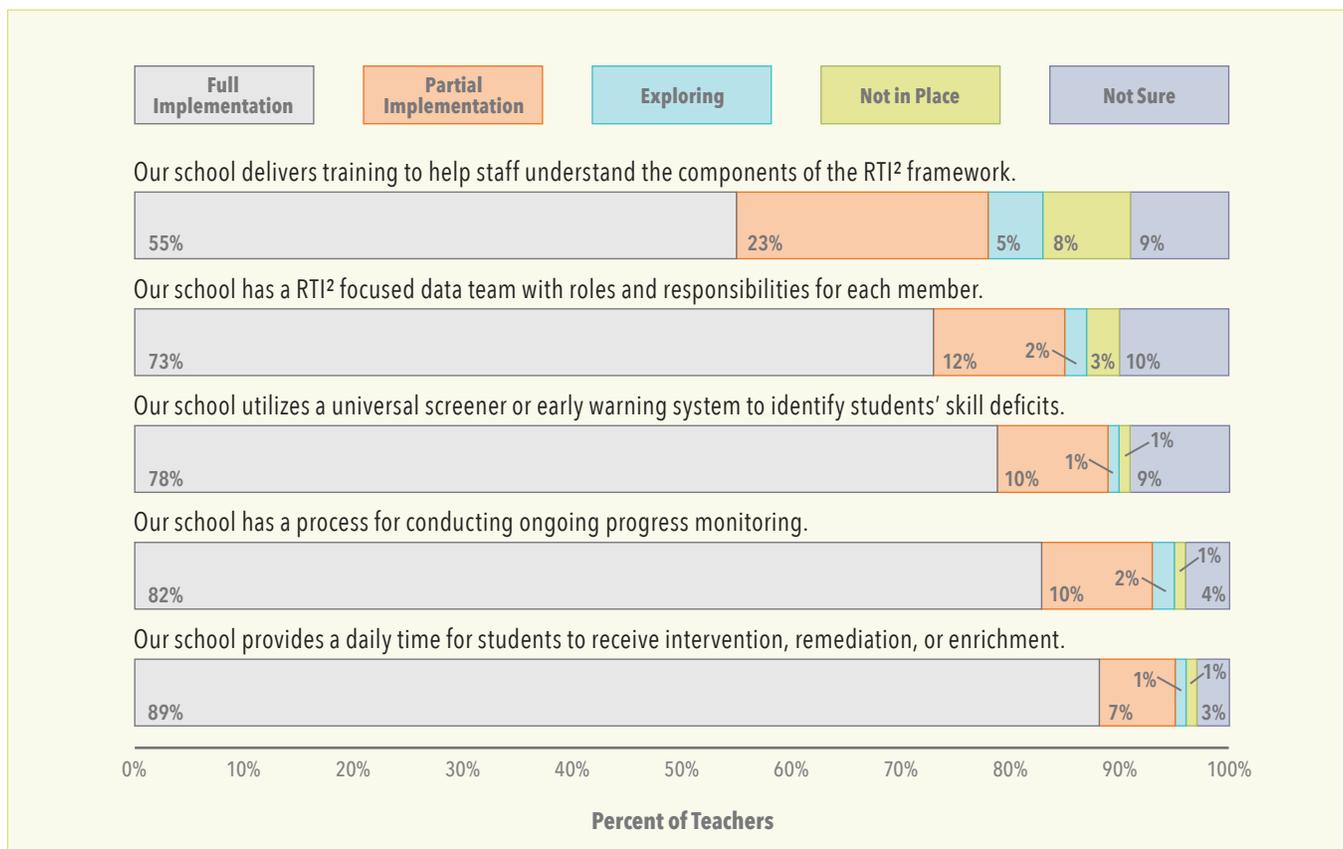


Figure 1. RTI<sup>2</sup> Decision-Making Process

## RTI<sup>2</sup> IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS

In the spring of 2015, almost 60 percent of Tennessee teachers participated in the Tennessee Educator Survey, which covered a variety of topics. In particular, it asked educators to report on their schools' progress in incorporating the five key components necessary for effective RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. In year one of implementation, most elementary school teachers agreed that their schools were either partially or fully implementing each of the RTI<sup>2</sup> key readiness areas (see Figure 2). The majority of teachers reported full implementation of daily intervention time (89 percent), ongoing progress monitoring (82 percent), universal screeners (78 percent), and RTI<sup>2</sup> focused data teams (73 percent), with almost all teachers reporting that implementation in these areas had at least started. Fewer teachers (55 percent) reported that their schools were in the full implementation stage of delivering training to help staff understand the components of the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework—though the majority (78 percent) still agreed that their schools were at least partially implementing trainings.

On average, teachers across the state reported mostly full implementation; however, responses within schools varied. Some schools had the majority of their teachers agree that full implementation was occurring across the RTI<sup>2</sup> key readiness areas, while other schools had less staff agreeing that full implementation was occurring in all areas. This provides evidence that some schools are more fully implementing RTI<sup>2</sup> than others. To learn more about the schools that have most successfully put RTI<sup>2</sup> into practice, we identified schools where the majority of teachers reported a high level of implementation for all five RTI<sup>2</sup> key readiness areas and designated these schools as “high implementers.”<sup>2</sup> Out of the 634 elementary schools included in the survey analysis, 153 schools were categorized as high implementers. This suggests that many schools can continue to refine and improve the implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> key readiness areas within their school.



**Figure 2.** Teacher reports of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation in elementary schools

## HIGH IMPLEMENTERS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Among the high implementers, some schools have been far more successful than others at moving non-proficient students to proficiency between grades 3 and 5 (see Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> For instance, five schools helped between 50 and 60 percent of their students move to proficiency in ELA between the 2013 and 2015 school years, while four schools saw none of their students move to proficiency in ELA during this time.

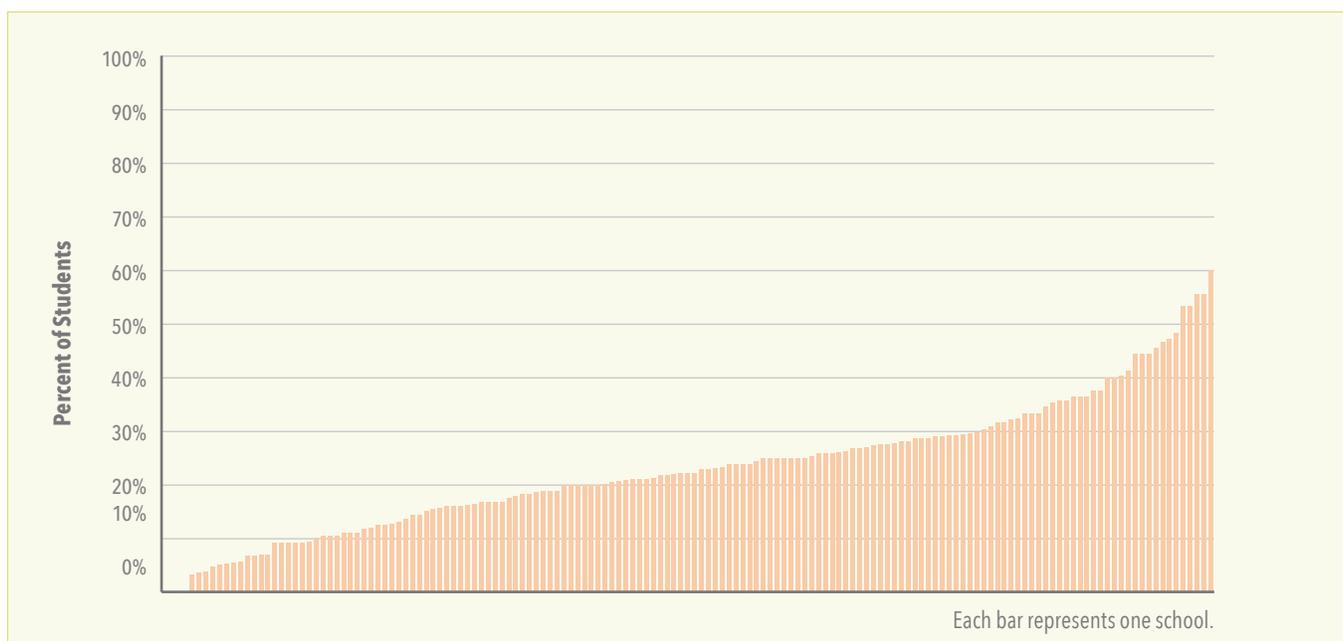
To better understand the differences among high implementers that were moving a high percentage of students to proficiency between grades 3 and 5 (i.e., “big movers”) and high implementers that were moving a lower percentage of students to proficiency between grades 3 and 5 (i.e., “small movers”), we conducted phone interviews

with staff at six small movers and six big movers. These 12 schools were identified by looking at the percentage of below basic and basic students in both math and English language arts (ELA) that they helped move to proficiency and the percentage of proficient or advanced students whose performance they helped maintain (see Appendix A).

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following question: If some high implementers are more successful than others at moving non-proficient students to proficiency, what differentiates them?

**To gather rich data on this topic, we asked interview questions that revolved around four main areas:**

- 1 What goals do schools have for moving non-proficient students to proficiency?
- 2 How do schools use RTI<sup>2</sup> to support student learning?
- 3 What does RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation look like in schools?
- 4 What other strategies do schools use to support student learning?



**Figure 3.** Percent of non-proficient students moving to proficiency in ELA between grades 3 and 5 in RTI<sup>2</sup> high implementers

## WHAT DOES RTI<sup>2</sup> IMPLEMENTATION LOOK LIKE FOR HIGH IMPLEMENTERS?

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Our interviews confirmed what the Tennessee Educator Survey data were telling us about high implementers—they are all implementing the key components of the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework. Staff at these schools are:

- **Conducting universal screening three times per year.** Although schools are not all using the same screener, they typically screen students at the beginning, middle, and end of the year in order to identify struggling students and track whether all students are getting the academic support they need.
- **Monitoring the progress of students receiving Tier II or III interventions at least every two weeks.** Progress monitoring occurs weekly for students receiving Tier III interventions and bi-weekly for students receiving Tier II interventions. Schools also reported using different types of progress monitoring tools (e.g., AIMSWeb, EasyCBM) to track student learning.
- **Meeting regularly to review data and engage in data-based decision-making.** Schools are convening RTI<sup>2</sup> data teams that are typically comprised of administrators, RTI<sup>2</sup> interventionists, psychologists, and teachers from each grade level. These teams meet, on average, every four to five weeks.
- **Receiving training related to the implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework.** Educators involved in RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation receive at least some training related to RTI<sup>2</sup>, although the time of year, frequency, intensity, and source varies by school.

Further, school leaders are:

- **Allocating a variety of staff members to support data use and RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation.** They have helped build teams that include some combination of RTI<sup>2</sup> coaches and interventionists, classroom or related arts teachers, and educational assistants to ensure that RTI<sup>2</sup> is fully integrated into their schools' daily processes.

As a result, we dug deeper into some of the more nuanced differences by slightly reframing our question: If RTI<sup>2</sup> practices across high implementers are similar, what sets the big movers apart?

# Making RTI<sup>2</sup> Work for Your School

## *A Quick Look at Two Unique Implementation Approaches*

Below are the stories of two big movers that vary by size, location, and demographics. In the last few years, both schools have not only worked hard to meet state RTI<sup>2</sup> mandates and guidelines, but have also focused on implementing RTI<sup>2</sup> in a way that supports the success of all students. Can you identify what they are doing to excel?

### EXEMPLAR A: STRENGTHENING OVER TIME

Exemplar A is a school of almost 1,000 students located in a semi-urban district. During the 2014-15 school year, about one quarter of its student population was economically disadvantaged. Exemplar A's history with RTI began six years prior to the statewide adoption of the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework, when it was asked by district staff to pilot an RTI program. During the early stages of implementation, Exemplar A lacked any "sophisticated" means for identifying struggling students and only had one staff member (a full-time RTI coach) who was responsible for delivering all interventions. This RTI coach, who has remained in the position since that time, indicated that "it required very little of teachers as far as their own progress monitoring." Over time, with the transition to RTI<sup>2</sup>, Exemplar A shifted how it assessed its students and provided support to learners.

One of the first changes involved the difficult and important process of reallocating funds within the instructional component of their budget to hire two full-time interventionists (in addition to the existing RTI coach). To support continuous growth of specialized knowledge, staff now participate in regular professional learning opportunities at both the district and school level. For example, the RTI<sup>2</sup> coach participates in a weekly Skype session and a monthly, district-wide professional learning communities with other RTI<sup>2</sup> coaches.

Further, **the administration started emphasizing a shared, "collective responsibility" for RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation** among the classroom teachers and RTI<sup>2</sup> staff. RTI<sup>2</sup> has become a "group effort" with "many hands on deck," anchored by regular communication among staff and grade-level data meetings every four and a half weeks in which the administration, RTI<sup>2</sup> coach and interventionists, special educators, specialists, and teachers have conversations about students and engage in data-based decision-making. During these meetings, staff use data from a variety of sources (e.g., the AIMSweb universal screener, past TCAP results, cognitive ability tests, behavior tracking data, other diagnostic assessments, teachers' progress monitoring, and parent updates) to craft detailed intervention plans that focus on the "whole child" and can be tweaked as necessary to reflect the teachers' and RTI<sup>2</sup> staff's understanding of the students with whom they work.

Students receive Tier II and Tier III interventions in small groups from the two full-time interventionists, while other students participate in enrichment or grade-level practice activities in larger groups run by classroom teachers or highly-trained educational assistants. Some classroom teachers are "hand selected" to provide Tier II interventions based on their instructional strengths.

Intervention periods are staggered by grade-level to allow for efficient distribution of resources (including the RTI<sup>2</sup> interventionists, who are available to work with each grade). In the past year, staff delivering the interventions have moved away from using set programs for their groups and have focused on "pulling pieces from different [sources]" to provide students with a more individualized, engaging experience. The RTI<sup>2</sup> coach summarized Exemplar A's current, more fluid approach to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation: **"there is no hard and fast [way to do this]. It's about using knowledge and data" to do what's best for the "whole child."** S/he also cautioned, "RTI<sup>2</sup> is in conjunction to, not instead of that Tier I. Tier I, it's still so important...No intervention will ever remediate good Tier I instruction."

## EXEMPLAR B: OWNERSHIP THROUGH REFLECTION

Exemplar B is a school of about 700 students located in a rural district. During the 2014-15 school year, just over half of its student population was economically disadvantaged. Exemplar B has had some sort of RTI structure in place for the past nine years and, according to the principal, started RTI<sup>2</sup> a “year early” so that the staff could “figure out how [they wanted] things to be.” This “struggle” was important to the principal. S/he explained that s/he could have said “this is how we are going to do this,” but instead had **teachers “find out on their own” what was working or not working so that they could “own it.”** The principal added, “I’ve forced my teachers to reflect on what they do...I want them to embrace [it].” Additional implementation support has come from Exemplar B’s literacy/math leader and its former Title I teacher, who now serve as RTI<sup>2</sup> interventionists. They attended a number of state- and CORE-facilitated professional learning opportunities, communicating what they had learned to other staff members in an effort to encourage successful schoolwide implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>.

Exemplar B’s staff conducts STAR assessments at the beginning, middle, and end of each year. These data, along with classroom performance, teacher observations, and “drill down” activities to identify specific student needs, are used by the principal, two interventionists, and the rest of the RTI<sup>2</sup> team to create intervention groups. Staff members use EasyCBM to monitor students’ progress on a weekly basis (alternating between reading and math), making changes to groups “based on what skills [students] have mastered” and what the data suggest is most appropriate for the child. This represents a change in Exemplar B’s culture that has influenced their staff’s approach to student learning. The principal commented, “We really use [data] to guide a lot of what we do. That has been a change...in the last 10 years. The teachers now are very comfortable being able to look at those reports and look at those instructional plans that STAR creates.”

The two interventionists oversee all RTI<sup>2</sup> interventions and work with students assigned to Tier III groups. Five teacher aides (who receive “a lot” of training from the interventionists) are responsible for delivering Tier II interventions. In addition, two retired teachers hired by the school are each responsible for providing reading and math remediation to students in Tier I who require additional assistance.

Students meet during a grade-level “Skill Time” for 30 to 60 minutes each day, switching classes to join the group to which they have been assigned. All students who receive Tier II or Tier III interventions meet in one room, the “RTI class,” and work in groups of three to five with teachers or aides. In order to support the “RTI class” at each grade level and use available space more strategically, aides travel around the school with mobile carts filled with different materials and resources. The principal expressed the belief that School B’s style of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation is beneficial to students: **“If we have a foundation [of reading skills] that’s like Swiss cheese, [RTI<sup>2</sup>] plugs up those holes.”**

## IF RTI<sup>2</sup> PRACTICES ACROSS HIGH IMPLEMENTERS ARE SIMILAR, WHAT SETS BIG MOVERS APART?

Schools like Exemplar A and B, where non-proficient students were making the greatest gains, are implementing RTI<sup>2</sup> differently than schools where gains were small to non-existent. In particular, these schools and the other four big movers have distinguished themselves by taking a more strategic approach to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation.

**First, big movers use multiple data sources and constant communication among staff members to guide the RTI<sup>2</sup> decision-making process.** They are not simply using their universal screener or progress monitoring results to determine what interventions students require. Instead, they are carefully reviewing data from multiple sources to attain a more complete understanding of their students' performance and guide the RTI<sup>2</sup> decision-making process. This might occur through "drilling down," a process that some schools use to focus their evaluation of student strengths and weaknesses. One big mover described, "After we do the initial screening, anyone who scores low in any areas, we go back and do dropdown diagnostic assessments through [our screener]. We also do diagnostics separately." This educator continued, "An example with our reading kids, we might pull and do an informal reading phonics [exercise], we might assess their sight words, we might do comprehension tests to assess their comprehension level to determine what their instructional level is." Big movers often take this one step further, incorporating other formative

classroom performance measures and teacher observations into their decision-making process. A different big mover explained, "We have the teachers look at the child and see that it's not a fluke in testing, that they really are struggling in a particular area." In general, big movers seek to gain a complete understanding of their students when identifying academic needs and selecting what types of interventions they should provide.

Additionally, big movers are extending these discussions of student progress and its relationship to RTI<sup>2</sup> beyond the standard data team meetings. Indeed, some of these valuable conversations occur when RTI<sup>2</sup> coaches, interventionists, administrators, teachers, and other staff convene periodically to share and review RTI<sup>2</sup> data. But, more importantly, big movers (and even some small movers) simply agreed that all school staff have a responsibility to work together and share information during the RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation process in order to more effectively support student learning. One small mover stated, "everyone who works with the student, whether it's the classroom teacher or all of our interventionists . . . everyone has access to a student's goals. Everyone can see a student's progress." This wasn't always the case: upon reflection, some big movers acknowledged that their past processes lacked schoolwide cohesiveness, with one RTI<sup>2</sup> coach calling their schools' early implementation a "truly linear approach." Now, big movers

## Four Key Differences

**1** Big movers use multiple data sources and constant communication among staff members to guide the RTI<sup>2</sup> decision-making process.

**2** Big movers build strong RTI<sup>2</sup> teams with specialized role-players who are well-equipped to support student success.

encourage and ensure constant communication among staff members. One big mover, in particular, pointed out that their school collects and provides easy access to individual student data throughout each school year and over multiple school years. This way, everyone who works with an individual student, whether that is a classroom teacher, interventionist, or specialist, has a strong understanding of the student's personalized needs. Overall, big movers have made efforts to facilitate an atmosphere of collaborative, subjective judgment where educators can make informed decisions about how to help students.

**Second, big movers build strong RTI<sup>2</sup> teams with specialized role-players who are well-equipped to support student success.** To start, they are hiring or reassigning certified staff to serve as specialized RTI<sup>2</sup> interventionists who are responsible for delivering Tier II or Tier III interventions. One big mover described how their school made some "major sacrifices," reallocating funding from three classroom teaching positions to hire full-time interventionists. The principal stressed the significance of finding some way to increase staff capacity to implement RTI<sup>2</sup>, either by adding new employees, shuffling educator roles, or parting ways with certain team members: "I think this is really, really important for any systems who are trying to implement RTI<sup>2</sup>. You absolutely cannot do this, in my opinion, effectively without additional staff." Other big movers similarly recognized the value of employing interventionists who focus solely on providing RTI<sup>2</sup> interventions but took a slightly different approach by reassigning existing certified staff, such as Title I reading specialists, to fill those positions.

Both of these staffing strategies mark a difference in how big and small movers use and prioritize their personnel. For instance, some small movers rely solely on classroom teachers or classified educational assistants to provide Tier II and/or Tier III interventions.

Importantly, big movers are also being more thoughtful when staffing beyond the interventionists and assigning classroom teachers, related arts teachers, and educational assistants to intervention groups. They are not just looking at staff availability during intervention periods but creating training and skill evaluation structures that best support student needs. For instance, big and small movers both acknowledged that they often use educational assistants to lead either Tier I practice or intervention groups. Several big movers, however, frequently detailed the additional efforts they put into preparing these staff and ensuring that they were capable of fulfilling their RTI<sup>2</sup> responsibilities. One big mover summarized, "Our educational assistants, I have given them more training than they've had before" to guarantee that they can lead intervention groups effectively. This same big mover also described that their school hand selects teachers to provide Tier II interventions, actively evaluating their strengths and weaknesses to match students with specific individuals who are best equipped to help them succeed.

**Third, big movers use all available resources to create staggered, grade-level intervention periods and allocate space for small group work.** These schools are looking at where instructional time is available or being

**3** Big movers use all available resources to create staggered, grade-level intervention periods and allocate space for small group work.

**4** Big movers have strong leaders who encourage collective responsibility and engagement and learn from the early stages of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation to make changes and improve.

used inefficiently to determine how they can structure their school day to best address student needs. One big mover stressed the importance of thinking strategically about time, stating: “In general, our school does a really good job of being protective of the schedule so that time is there every day. We ensure that kids are getting that spiral review every day, they are solidifying that learning every day,” and they are in “interventions more regularly.” Big movers reported that having this standalone period devoted to intervention prioritizes RTI<sup>2</sup> and allows for these schools to share staff and materials more efficiently. Despite concentrated efforts to create effective schedules that fit schools’ varied needs, the process remains challenging. One small mover summarized, “trying to get everybody scheduled and trying to find the personnel to cover all these intervention groups is just crazy.”

Big movers are also finding dedicated, isolated spaces for interventions where students can gather as a small group. Whereas most small movers seat students at tables in the hallway or split up students within their own classroom, big movers are working to provide separate spaces where students can better focus their attention on skill-based learning activities. Further, some big movers are using creative methods, such as portable resources, to ensure the transition to different locations/rooms occurs as smoothly as possible. One principal explained that after students move to their designated room, the school’s “aides have carts and they sort of move through the building, [going] to each grade level” during intervention time.

**Finally, big movers have strong leaders who encourage collective responsibility and engagement and learn from the early stages of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation to make changes and improve.**

These leaders are giving staff real ownership of the RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation process and have established a vision for their schools’ RTI<sup>2</sup> future. Further, during the interview process, leaders at big movers were more enthusiastic and detailed in their explanations of how they support and manage RTI<sup>2</sup> at their school than some of the small movers. One principal described, “I didn’t force feed it to them. I said, ‘okay, here are the parameters of the program. I want you to sit down and come up with something, and then be able

to look at it and see if it’s working or not.’” This approach, emphasizing flexibility and supporting “buy-in,” represents a move away from “checkbox implementation” and toward a more inclusionary, autonomous, and strategic use of RTI<sup>2</sup>.

Notably, all six big movers had been implementing RTI in some capacity before the 2014-15 school year, when Tennessee enacted its statewide RTI<sup>2</sup> requirement.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, all six small movers only began full implementation during the first year of the mandate. Although big movers reported that this prior experience was valuable, they didn’t simply rely on time and experience to get better. Instead, they committed to being reflective, learned from the beginning stages of implementation, and made changes to their RTI<sup>2</sup> processes along the way. One big mover summarized, “You have to be flexible, not so systemic and so prescribed. [You have to] be willing to make a change and see if it works.” Other big movers agreed, adding that there is no “hard and fast” way to implement RTI<sup>2</sup>—it’s all about school staff using knowledge and data in a way that works for them. This mindset underscores the fact that, as implementation progresses, big movers are adapting to create a school-based approach to RTI<sup>2</sup> that is standardized, customizable, and meets the overall needs of their students.

These overall findings may give us some perspective on how schools are generally tackling RTI<sup>2</sup>, but the reality is that all schools approach RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation in different, individualized ways. Nevertheless, the identification of effective implementation strategies and the understanding that schools can use reflection to learn and refine their practices provides important context for the improvement of small movers and other schools that are struggling with RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation.

*Big movers are adapting to create a school-based approach to RTI<sup>2</sup> that is standardized, customizable, and meets the overall needs of their students.*

## IMPROVING RTI<sup>2</sup> IMPLEMENTATION

Some of Tennessee's elementary schools have differentiated themselves from others by embracing a more strategic approach to RTI<sup>2</sup>. In using more thoughtful, student-focused methods, these schools have experienced a higher level of success moving their below basic and basic students to proficiency and ensuring that their proficient or advanced students maintain their high performance. Given these findings, what can we do to improve RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation across the state so that all schools are able to help their students move up?

### Tennessee Succeeds

*Tennessee Succeeds*, the Tennessee Department of Education's strategic plan for the next five years, has two priority areas that provide both context and motivation for the continued improvement of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. The first priority area, Early Foundations and Literacy, is focused on building literacy skills in the early grades and includes strategies that are related to increasing support and monitoring of early childhood programs, collecting and providing useable data in the early grades, strengthening literacy training, and deepening literacy instruction licensure requirements. More specifically, as part of this work, the department is planning to invest in new trainings and guidance related to RTI<sup>2</sup>. Another priority area, All Means All, is focused on providing individualized support and opportunities for all students, particularly those who are furthest behind. It includes a strategy that is singularly dedicated to improving the quality of interventions and implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> beginning at the elementary school level.

### State-Level Actions

We are currently using a variety of data collection tools, including the annual Tennessee Educator Survey, to gather meaningful information about school- and district-level RTI<sup>2</sup> practices. These data will help us better understand, for example, whether schools are using "multiple data sources

to track student progress and assign students to different tiers of intervention." Our ultimate goal with this work is to learn more about RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation across the state and continue thinking about how to address issues related to strategic versus surface-level implementation.

As schools' and districts' use of RTI<sup>2</sup> continues to grow and evolve, the department has broadened its statewide efforts aimed at supporting effective RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. For instance, the department has been delivering RTI<sup>2</sup> training to high school staff across the state and revising the RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation guide and other materials in preparation for full implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> in high schools during the 2016-17 school year. In January 2016 alone, the department conducted 11 high school implementation trainings around the state. The department has also convened an internal Tier I working group that is revisiting and reworking RTI<sup>2</sup> guidance documents to highlight best practices and ensure that schools across the state remain focused on the critical nature of solid Tier I instruction.

Further, the department has provided training and support for RTI<sup>2</sup> to school leaders through its elementary and secondary integrated leadership courses, which were held in February 2016. The elementary course focused on the RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation process, how RTI<sup>2</sup> has impacted student learning, and RTI<sup>2</sup> lessons learned. Training activities highlighted portions of the research detailed in this report, and leaders worked collaboratively to develop and improve RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation strategies in their school buildings. The secondary course focused on establishing an RTI<sup>2</sup> culture through goal setting, with leaders defining what criteria a student needs to be ready for and successful in postsecondary.

Finally, the department is actively engaged in a series of research efforts, including the one described in this report, to identify best practices that will improve statewide implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>. We are specifically interested in focusing on schools that have implemented RTI<sup>2</sup> with fidelity.

The department will use these continued research efforts to inform our own strategy and share findings across the state.

As evidenced by the findings of this report, all high implementers are currently making great efforts to support the effective implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>. We want schools to continue thinking carefully about the work they are doing in this area. With some strategic shifts in how RTI<sup>2</sup> is implemented, we feel that many small movers could easily transform into big movers.

## ENDNOTES

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1. RTI<sup>2</sup> was fully implemented in middle schools statewide during the 2015-16 school year and will be fully implemented in high schools statewide during the 2016-17 school year.
2. Schools were identified as high implementers if they had at least 85 percent of teachers answer "full implementation" on a minimum of 3 out of 5 RTI<sup>2</sup> key readiness area survey prompts and 85 percent of teachers answer "partial implementation" or "full implementation" on any item that does not meet the 85 percent full implementation threshold.
3. We conducted a cohort analysis that followed students from third grade during the 2012-13 school year to fifth grade during the 2014-15 school year.
4. Nationally, RTI is a three-tiered model with a focus on intervention (Tiers II and III). In Tennessee, RTI<sup>2</sup> is a three-tiered model that intentionally focuses on core instruction (Tier I) as well as intervention (Tiers II and III).

## APPENDIX A

Percent of students moving from non-proficient to proficiency and proficient to non-proficiency between grades 3 and 5 in big and small movers.

	<b>IMPROVING</b> % Non-Proficient to Proficiency in ELA	<b>DECLINING</b> % Proficient to Non-Proficiency in ELA	<b>IMPROVING</b> % Non-Proficient to Proficiency in Math	<b>DECLINING</b> % Proficient to Non-Proficiency in Math
Big Mover #1	44.4	11.7	70.0	2.2
Big Mover #2	40.4	7.1	76.9	1.3
Big Mover #3	40.0	7.8	72.0	4.5
Big Mover #4	36.4	13.6	72.2	1.3
Big Mover #5	34.5	3.3	50.0	6.5
Big Mover #6	33.3	12.1	50.0	5.1
Small Mover #1	3.8	27.8	17.4	33.3
Small Mover #2	6.9	42.9	0.0	25.0
Small Mover #3	12.5	16.7	9.4	83.3
Small Mover #4	15.2	33.3	16.3	23.1
Small Mover #5	16.1	18.2	4.0	35.3
Small Mover #6	17.9	34.1	9.5	27.1

## APPENDIX B

### School Leader and Staff Interview Questions

For the purpose of this interview, “non-proficient” refers to below basic and basic students. “Proficiency” refers to when students are proficient or advanced.

- 1) **Does your school have any specific goals during the 2015-16 school year for moving non-proficient students to proficiency?**
  - a. Similarly, does your school have any specific goals during the 2015-16 school year for keeping students who are proficient or advanced at or above those levels?
  - b. If you have these types of goals in place, how were they set?
    - i. How do you monitor progress toward these goals?
    - ii. How do you communicate these goals to school staff?
- 2) **Now, I'd like to focus on how your school uses RTI<sup>2</sup> to support student learning.**
  - a. To start, how many years have you been implementing RTI<sup>2</sup> at your school?
  - b. Which staff members in your building are responsible for delivering RTI<sup>2</sup> interventions?
  - c. What kind of RTI<sup>2</sup> training or support do staff members receive from the state, district, Center of Regional Excellence (CORE), school, or any other source?
  - d. What universal screener does your school use?
    - i. How often are screenings conducted?
    - ii. Based on the data you collect, how do you decide which interventions students will receive?
    - iii. What distinguishes special education interventions from RTI<sup>2</sup> interventions?
  - e. What progress monitoring tool does your school use to track student progress?
    - i. How often does your staff use this tool to monitor progress?
    - ii. How does your staff discuss and use the data collected during progress monitoring?
- 3) **Could you describe what RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation looks like in your school? Please provide examples of what we might see if we observed a typical classroom that is implementing RTI<sup>2</sup>.**
  - a. From your perspective, does RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation in your school contribute to moving non-proficient students to proficiency?
    - i. Can you tell me how it contributes?
  - b. From your perspective, does RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation in your school contribute to keeping students who are already proficient or advanced at or above those levels?
    - i. Can you tell me how it contributes?
- 4) **What other targeted interventions or strategies does your school use to support student learning?**
  - a. From your perspective, do these targeted interventions contribute to moving non-proficient students to proficiency?
    - i. Can you tell me how they contribute?
  - b. From your perspective, do these targeted interventions contribute to keeping students who are already proficient or advanced at or above those levels?
    - i. Can you tell me how they contribute?
- 5) **Is there anything else you would like to add about your school's efforts to move non-proficient students to proficiency and keep students who are proficient or advanced at or above those levels?**



