

# ASSESSING PROGRESS



## Four Years of Learnings from RTI<sup>2</sup> Implementation in Tennessee

February 2018



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# Executive Summary

**IN 2014, TENNESSEE LAUNCHED A STATEWIDE** initiative known as Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>) aimed at better supporting students' individual learning needs. RTI<sup>2</sup> is a framework for teaching and learning that includes regular screenings to identify student areas of need and a tiered model of intervention for those that need additional help. In Tennessee, it is also used to determine the eligibility of students to receive special education services for specific learning disabilities (SLD).

This report describes the Tennessee Department of Education's reflections and conclusions from the last several years of RTI<sup>2</sup> in Tennessee.

Since RTI<sup>2</sup> was first implemented in Tennessee, we have seen significant drops in the number of students identified with an SLD and a substantial

rise in the equity of identification across different student subgroups.

We believe RTI<sup>2</sup> continues to be the right framework for our state, both to keep students from slipping through the cracks and to provide a set of flexible structures to support students who need additional instruction in certain areas.

However, we also have heard from educators in schools where RTI<sup>2</sup> has not felt like a worthwhile investment and we have seen considerable variation in the quality of implementation across the state. While we remain fully committed to the work, we are also learning from these challenges and are working to address specific needs. As a result, we propose several changes designed to capitalize on our learning and to support the strongest versions of RTI<sup>2</sup>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 Easing the burden of RTI<sup>2</sup> guidelines:

- A simplified RTI<sup>2</sup> framework that aims to clarify the set of RTI<sup>2</sup> requirements and flexibilities at all grade bands.
- Proposed modifications to the framework itself that aim to reduce implementation challenges across Tennessee schools.

### 2 Enhancing support and resources for district RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation:

- A legislative funding request to better support RTI<sup>2</sup> staffing in all Tennessee districts.
- Additional resources, trainings, and feedback tools for districts and schools to assess the strength of their own RTI<sup>2</sup> practices.

### 3 Differentiating RTI<sup>2</sup> for high schools:

- A listening tour to define new guidance and resources for high school implementation.
- Communities of practice that support high school RTI<sup>2</sup> design.

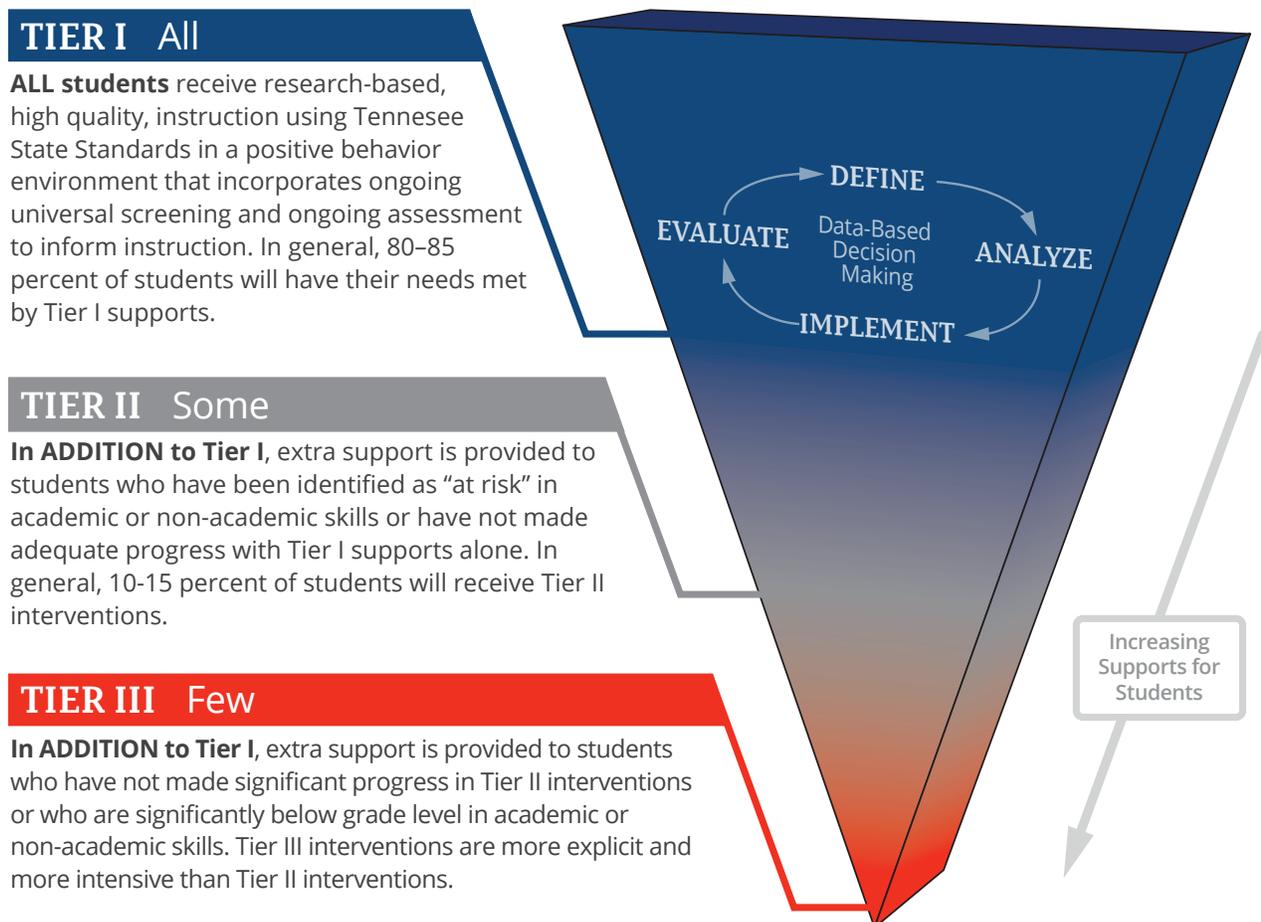
## NEXT STEPS

This coming spring, representatives from the department will tour the state to discuss potential improvements to our state guidance on RTI<sup>2</sup> and describe the series of proposed changes. These changes are meant to improve the manageability of the system and cut down on unintended consequences while taking into account the continued need for equity in SLD identification, for more effective intervention practices, and for stronger, data-driven instruction.

FIGURE 1 **What is Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>)?**

RTI<sup>2</sup> is a system that demands collaborative, co-ordinated planning; valid assessment of student progress; and strong instructional practices. Implementation of the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework starts with a universal screening process for every student that provides baseline data to help schools' RTI<sup>2</sup> teams determine which level of intervention each student requires. All students receive scaffolded Tier I core instruction that is differentiated according to student need. Students who are significantly below grade level in an academic area or who are not responding to Tier I instruction might receive either Tier II or more intensive Tier III interventions. 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.



# Introduction

**SEVERAL YEARS AGO, AS TENNESSEE ROLLED** out new academic standards, the state confronted a two-part problem.

First, there was ample evidence that lower-performing students were not making the progress they needed to access grade-level material, an issue that was only likely to worsen given the more rigorous demands of the new standards.

Second, data suggested that a large contingent of struggling students were being identified with a specific learning disability (SLD) for reasons that were as likely to be related to unmet instructional needs as they were to any definite disability. The result was that poor, minority, and male students were highly overrepresented in the special education population, and they were disproportionately likely to receive a disability label that would then stick with them throughout their school career.

These two concerns led the Tennessee State Board of Education to adopt Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>) in July 2014.

This move to a new model for SLD identification required schools to show evidence that students had received a series of increasingly intensive, targeted interventions based on individual needs before becoming eligible for special education.

More broadly, RTI<sup>2</sup> aimed to institutionalize a powerful theory of student progress. If schools were regularly screening all students for skill gaps and if student remediation could be increasingly personalized toward individual needs, core instruction could be more effective. Regular

meetings to evaluate student progress would create close interactions between academic support staff and ensure that all schools had the structures and routines in place to keep students from slipping through the cracks.

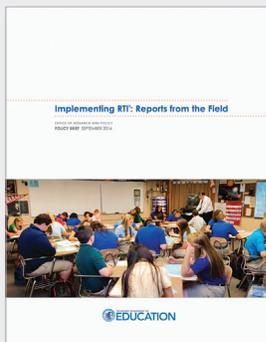
We cannot overstate the impact of this work. Implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> has led to tremendous changes in Tennessee schools and classrooms, especially at the elementary level where rollout first took place. Schools have shifted staff positions to fill instructional needs; schedules were altered to incorporate additional time for intervention periods; assessment tools were purchased to gauge student needs and student progress within interventions, and schools have reconfigured professional development and meeting structures to incorporate RTI<sup>2</sup> data needs.

Three years in, the time is right to assess long-term progress on the initiative. What have we learned across the course of this work? Where have we succeeded, and where have we fallen short in addressing the original problem? Most importantly, how can this learning translate into programmatic change that might improve the pace of progress in the coming years?

This report offers a reflection moment, a chance to look across several years of implementation of a massive statewide reform to determine the right next steps. It also offers an opportunity to take greater ownership of the department's mission of continuous improvement so that, rather than pivoting from solution to solution, we improve current initiatives by building on progress and learning from areas of need.

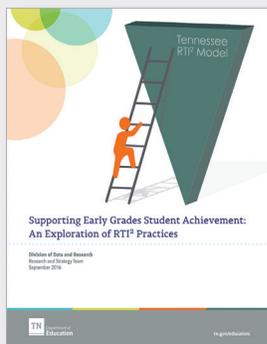
## Read More about RTI<sup>2</sup> Implementation From Past Reports

<https://www.tn.gov/education/data/research-and-policy-briefs.html>



### Implementing RTI<sup>2</sup>: Reports from the Field

This report was released in September 2014 prior to statewide implementation of Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI<sup>2</sup>) to assess readiness for implementation. Department research staff interviewed district and school leaders from 14 schools in 7 districts across the state. Nearly all of the district and school administrators that we spoke with demonstrated a remarkably strong knowledge of the state's RTI<sup>2</sup> framework. At the time, most districts were focused on identifying screeners and progress monitoring tools, and few had reached the point where they were thinking deeply about the interventions that would take place once deficits were identified. Schools and districts reported that their primary challenges were scheduling, resources, and blending the silos of general and special education in order to create the collaboration needed for strong RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. We also noted that, for some districts and schools, the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework was entirely new but that others had used some version of it for several years, often in select grades or subjects, and we recommended greater differentiation of department RTI<sup>2</sup> support.



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

Two years after our first RTI<sup>2</sup> report, the department released a second report focused on quality of implementation. The report used evidence from the 2015 Tennessee Educator Survey to identify schools that had strong implementation across the RTI<sup>2</sup> key readiness areas and addressed the following question: "What differentiates the high implementers that are more successful than others at moving non-proficient students to proficiency?" On the surface, we found that implementation of key RTI<sup>2</sup> practices looked similar across high implementing schools. Staff at these schools conducted universal screening three times per year, monitored the progress of students receiving Tier II or III interventions at least every two weeks, met regularly to review data, and received training related to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. Yet, we found that some of the high implementers were far more successful than others at moving students to proficiency ("big movers"). The "big movers" used multiple data sources and constant communication among staff members to guide the RTI<sup>2</sup> decision-making process; built strong RTI<sup>2</sup> teams with specialized role-players who were well-equipped to support student success; used all available resources to create staggered, grade-level intervention periods and allocate space for small group work; and had strong leaders who encouraged collective responsibility and engagement and learned from the early stages of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation to make changes and improve.

## CASE STUDY An RTI<sup>2</sup> Data Team Meeting in Action

### “Look Fors” for Effective RTI<sup>2</sup> Data Team Meetings

The following case study illustrates an essential component of RTI<sup>2</sup>—a data team meeting where staff gather to discuss student progress. Structured processes and invested staff members lead to productive conversations that drive student learning. **Look for the following features—based on prior research—of an effective RTI<sup>2</sup> data team meeting:**

- 1 The meeting includes the right stakeholders and begins with everyone on the same page about the **goals** of the meeting.
- 2 Clear **targets** are agreed on for student growth.
- 3 Each **individual student’s data is examined** in turn and the team discusses students’ areas of strength and weakness related to the identified skill deficit.
- 4 The team considers the possibility that the intervention is **not a good match** for a student’s particular needs.
- 5 The team takes a problem-solving approach to discussions of individual students and concludes each conversation with **concrete action steps**.

It’s the first RTI<sup>2</sup> data team meeting of the school year at Minglewood Elementary, a large and diverse school in Montgomery County where around 50 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. Because the school building is undergoing renovations, around a dozen staff members—teachers, interventionists, administrators, and the school psychologist—huddle together in a cramped office to review student data. There isn’t enough space for a projector, so everyone is equipped with notebooks containing charts and notes for each student who will be discussed.

- 1 Assistant Principal Helen Nicholas begins the meeting by **stating the purpose**: to review student progress and determine if each student is matched to an appropriate intervention that addresses his or her specific skill deficit. At this first meeting, students only have 4–5 data points, so Mrs. Nicholas clarifies that the team will not yet be moving students between tiers as interventions have not been in place long enough to make decisions with confidence. Mrs. Nicholas hands out a list of all the students in this grade level who are currently receiving Tier II or III interventions. The list is clearly delineated by tier and by the group’s specific skill deficit, with headings such as letter/sound identification, decoding, fluency, addition, etc.

An interventionist kicks off the discussion by speaking briefly about a second grade Tier II intervention group she has been working with on fluency at the subword level. She specifies the intervention she has been providing as well as how she is monitoring progress. In this case the group, which is less than one grade level behind, has been receiving a systematic phonics intervention program and monitoring progress with weekly grade-level oral reading fluency (ORF) probes. The interventionist clarifies that the **grade-level target for this group** is 55 words read correctly per minute (WCPM). She reports that the entire group is showing improvement to varying degrees with the

exception of a single progress monitoring data point, which was collected immediately following the district's fall break, resulting in an uncharacteristic dip in performance for all the students in the group. The interventionist notes this in advance so the team can be aware of the anomaly as they examine individual student data.

Next, the team proceeds to **examine each individual student's data in turn**. For each student they first refer to the previously established metric (i.e., WCPM), then to the student's chart and trend line in the data notebook, so that every team member can tell if the student in question is on track to reach the goal (i.e., "Sally was at 20, now she is at 35."). The student's interventionist and/or classroom teacher provides additional formative assessment data, such as measures of sight word vocabulary or word attack skills. The team then **discusses the student's areas of strength and weakness related to the identified skill deficit**: one student struggles to blend letter sounds, another is not familiar with digraphs, another still struggles with letter-sound correspondences but compensates with a large sight word vocabulary.

Some students show adequate growth that indicates they are on pace to catch up to their peers; others show growth that is inadequate. If growth is inadequate, or if the classroom teacher indicates that growth is not translating to Tier I instruction, **the team considers the possibility that the intervention is not a good match for this student's particular needs**. They ask questions like, "What is the root cause of this student's skill deficit?", "Do we need more diagnostic information about this student?", "Does this intervention hone in enough on the specific skill deficit?", or "Is there better way we could be addressing this student's needs?" They shuffle groups or change interventions as needed to make sure they are meeting the needs of all students.

When relevant to the student's specific skill deficit, team members often share non-academic factors impacting their academic success. For example if the team suspects that the student's skill deficit may be related to his or her English proficiency, a team member is designated as the liaison to consult with the school's ESL teacher. Other issues that come up include students with ADHD, students who rarely bring their glasses to school, and students with severe behavior issues. As these topics arise, **the team takes a frank, problem-solving approach that concludes with concrete action steps from one or more team members**.

At the conclusion of the meeting, participants recap their individual action steps. One teacher verifies all the shifting of students and/or interventions that were decided during the meeting. Another teacher who has been drafting parent contact letters during the meeting asks clarification questions. This was one in a series of grade-level data team meetings that would take place throughout the day. In four to five weeks, the same group will gather again with more information, this time to discuss the potential of moving individual students between tiers of intervention. They will follow a similar structure, working together methodically and fluidly to ensure that they are meeting the individual needs of students.

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# Assessing the Impact

**THE STATEWIDE ROLLOUT OF RTI<sup>2</sup> TO ELEMENTARY** schools during the 2014–15 school year initiated a period of significant and often challenging realignment.

District-level staff, school administrators, and teachers began the iterative process of reevaluating and restructuring their practices to align with the newly implemented framework. Following the first year of implementation, most elementary school teachers reported that their schools were either fully or partially implementing the core components of RTI<sup>2</sup>: they were using a universal screener, had established a daily intervention period, had formed a RTI<sup>2</sup> data team, were delivering RTI<sup>2</sup>-related staff training, and were regularly monitoring student progress.

To help with RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation, districts turned to outside vendors for screening instruments, intervention programs, and progress monitoring tools. AIMSweb, STAR, and easyCBM are the most common vendors with nearly 90 percent of districts contracting with one of these three companies. Districts also shifted staff assignments to fulfill the new demands. Currently, almost all districts report a staff roster that includes full or part-time interventionists, with over one-third of districts reporting full-time interventionists in every building.

In subsequent years, RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation began in middle schools (2015–16) and in high schools (2016–17), ushering in further shifts in school and classroom practices.

These changes amount to tremendous and potentially far-reaching shifts in school and classroom processes. But what did they mean for students?

## SPECIAL EDUCATION

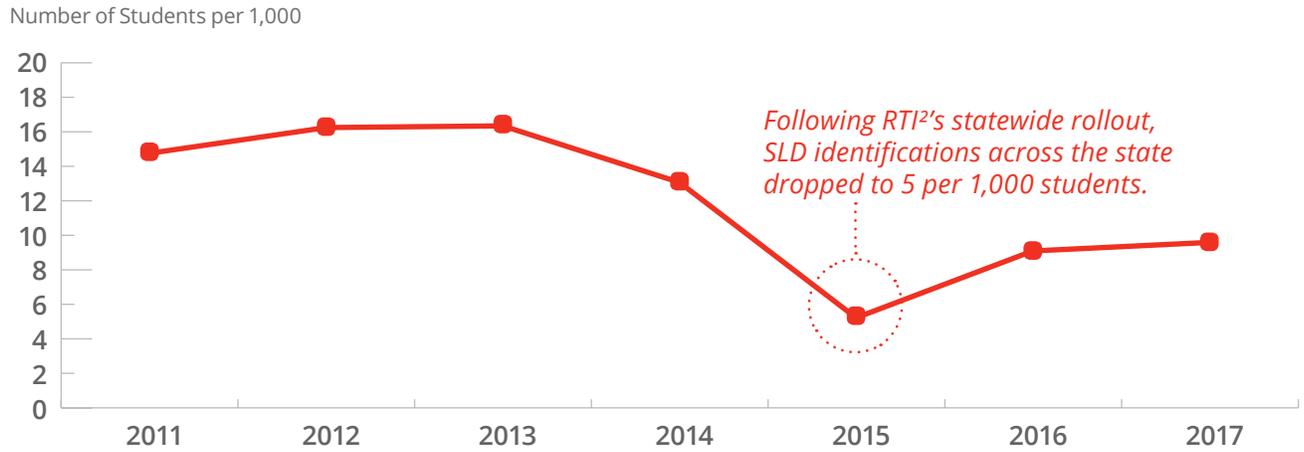
The most concrete success story of RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation is a more equitable system of special education identification. Since RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation, Tennessee has seen a significant decline in the number of students identified with an SLD in ways that improve equity statewide.

RTI<sup>2</sup> moved Tennessee away from a discrepancy model, sometimes called a “wait to fail” approach, where SLD identification was based on a discrepancy between a student’s actual and predicted achievement according to his/her cognitive abilities. In the new model of tiered support, students receive increasingly intensive interventions based on need before being identified with a disability.<sup>1</sup>

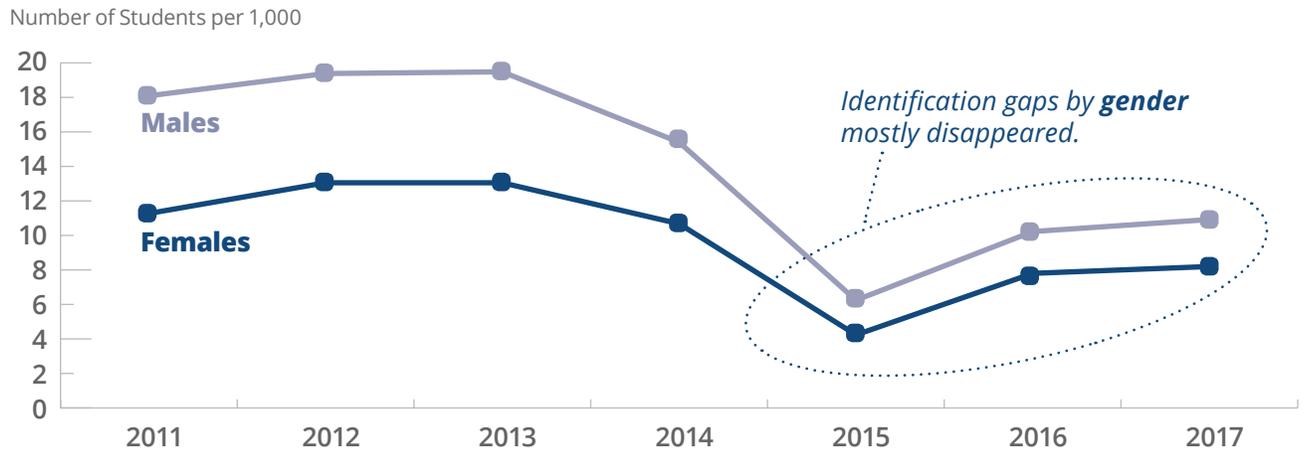
Under the previous model, SLD identifications made up about one-third of all new special education identifications, and around 15 students within every 1,000 were identified annually with an SLD. These numbers had stayed constant for years, marking relatively high numbers of students with a disability label that followed them through their schooling career. The SLD identification rate for male students was twice as high as the rate for female students, and the rate for minority students was around 1.5 times higher than the rate for non-minority students.

Following RTI<sup>2</sup>’s statewide rollout, SLD identifications across the state dropped to 5 per 1,000 students. Numbers rebounded slightly the following years to around 9 students per 1,000, still representing a significant drop from the pre-RTI<sup>2</sup> total (Figure 2). Equally important, the identification gaps by gender and racial subgroups mostly disappeared. Since the implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>,

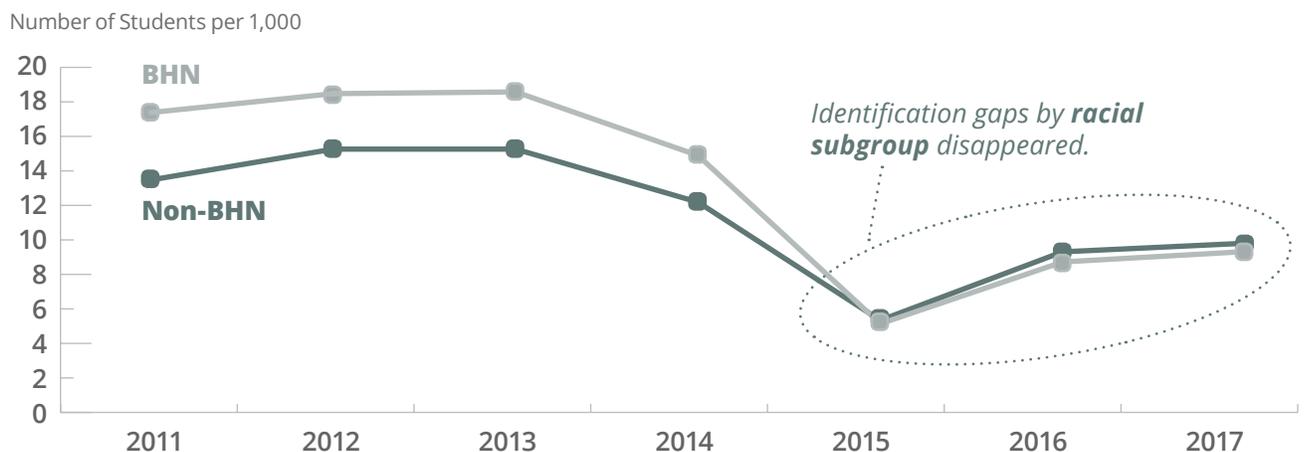
**FIGURE 2 SLD Identification Rates in Grades K-5**



**FIGURE 3 Grades K-5 SLD Identification Rates by Gender**



**FIGURE 4 Grades K-5 SLD Identification Rates by Racial Subgroup**



Since the implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>, Specific Learning Disabilities identification gaps by racial subgroup have disappeared and male/female gaps have mostly disappeared.

minority and non-minority students have been identified with and SLD at equal rates statewide and male/female rates have moved far closer together (Figures 3 and 4).

There is no evidence that the students who would have previously been identified with an SLD are ending up in other categories of special education. Identification rates for other disabilities that do not use RTI<sup>2</sup> as the method for identification have all remained stable in the three years both before and after RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, while SLD identification rates have decreased, the distribution of when they are occurring (mostly in grades 2 and 3) is consistent. These findings suggest that the observed decreases are not due to shifts in the students with disabilities population or to delays in determining student eligibility. Instead, the patterns are those we would expect to see if more students are in fact receiving the support they need through tiered interventions rather than through special education.

### **STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

We cannot yet provide a definitive answer as to whether RTI<sup>2</sup> is achieving the aim of raising the pace of improvement for students who were furthest behind. In the years before implementation, we know that students who had fallen far behind their peers by third grade rarely regained

lost ground. Indeed, less than two percent of third graders who scored “below basic” on state tests reached proficiency by fifth grade. Unfortunately, because the state did not administer assessments in grade 3–8 in 2015–16, we cannot conduct similar analyses until we have additional years of data.

What we have so far are suggestive forms of evidence that point in multiple directions. On the one hand, we hear from the majority of elementary school educators that the process supports greater student learning. Indeed, 75 percent of teachers and 90 percent of administrators in Tennessee’s elementary schools reported this spring that RTI<sup>2</sup> has the potential to improve their students’ learning. Some districts have reported decreases in the number of students performing below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on universal screener data as well as decreases in students requiring Tier II or III interventions. Moreover, we see that schools where teachers tended to be more supportive of RTI<sup>2</sup> and who report stronger implementation have fewer students in the lowest performance category.

At the same time, we also see some concerning trends in the data. For example, we have seen evidence in some places that students are staying in tiered interventions for long periods of time and, in others, that those students who exit often require intervention again later in the year. We have also seen universal screener data from some districts suggesting that students in Tier III were making slower progress in foundational areas than their counterparts in Tiers I and II, raising concerns that RTI<sup>2</sup> is not closing gaps in the ways we would have hoped.

As more data become available, we will continue to track these trends in student achievement and use them to evaluate aspects of the state’s RTI<sup>2</sup> policies.

# Areas of Challenge

**THE EVIDENCE TO DATE AROUND PATTERNS** of SLD identification suggests that continued implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> could pay high dividends for our state in terms of student progress and equity. Yet we also see room for significant improvement in structures and guidance.

Over the last several years, we have heard calls for improvement from educators and districts, many of whom are believers in RTI<sup>2</sup> as a framework but are concerned about certain aspects of implementation and the ways these challenges might affect students and schools. While 37 percent of all teachers say they strongly believe that RTI<sup>2</sup> is improving student learning, 29 percent report that RTI<sup>2</sup> can improve students' learning but that the framework needs significant improvement in their school. The remaining 33 percent are unconvinced that RTI<sup>2</sup> will improve student learning (Figure 5).

In the next section, we outline four key challenges facing district and schools as they strive to implement RTI<sup>2</sup>. These findings come from a series of observation- and interview-based studies conducted by the department over the past several years, from examinations of RTI<sup>2</sup> within the group of districts that make up the Tennessee Early Learning Network, and from our analyses of the annual Tennessee Educator Survey.<sup>3</sup> Together, they offer a window into specific areas of dissatisfaction with the framework and potential focus points for improvement moving forward.

## CHALLENGE

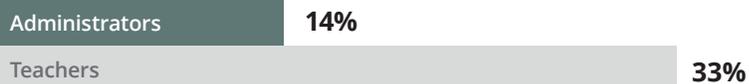
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## INTEGRATING RTI<sup>2</sup> INTO SCHOOL STRUCTURES

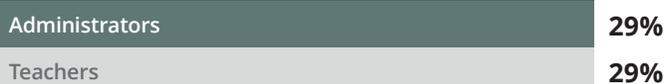
National research has highlighted the challenges that schools across the country face in fitting key RTI<sup>2</sup> practices into already packed daily schedules. Educators must find time for multiple student intervention periods, regular data team

FIGURE 5 **Teacher and Administrator Perceptions of RTI<sup>2</sup>**

**As of now, I am not convinced that RTI<sup>2</sup> will improve student learning in my school.**



**I have seen evidence that RTI<sup>2</sup> can improve my students' learning, but the program needs significant improvement in my school.**



**I strongly believe that RTI<sup>2</sup> has and will continue to improve student learning in my school.**



meetings, and educator professional development opportunities. This past year, an article by Vanderbilt researchers Douglas and Lynn Fuchs expressed concern about the level of complexity involved in implementing “an effective three-tier system” and reinforced the extent to which fully implementing the various components of RTI<sup>2</sup> at both the district and school levels “represent[s] an ambitious undertaking.”<sup>4</sup>

In Tennessee, we see that the time pressures of RTI<sup>2</sup> have caused real challenges in many schools, and we hear from educators who worry that the massive commitment that their schools are making to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation forces them to sacrifice other important priorities.

Many of these concerns are centered on classroom content. Although state guidance specifies that intervention periods should not cut into core instruction, many educators perceive a zero-sum game. For example, one teacher notes: “RTI<sup>2</sup> has taken a significant amount of our instructional time this school year and that has reduced our class time for math to 60 minutes, ELA to 60 minutes, and science and social studies are only given 30 minutes each day.”

The time pressures of RTI<sup>2</sup> have caused **real challenges** in many schools, and we hear from educators who worry that the massive commitment to RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation forces them to **sacrifice other important priorities**.

Other concerns revolve around how time needed to effectively implement RTI<sup>2</sup> has cut into planning time and even classroom space to accommodate additional intervention tiers. As one teacher said, “The amount of collaborative time required to create, give, and score common formative assessments, as well as plan and put together Tier [II and Tier III] instructional materials has also taken away from planning time that, in the past, would have gone to Tier I instruction.” Another noted: “Our school schedule is so tight; we are filled to capacity; and space is so limited that everything from technology usage to the sharing of space (RTI<sup>2</sup> teachers all on rolling carts) is a jigsaw puzzle.”

#### CHALLENGE

## 2

### STAFFING TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION

In addition to time and space, RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation also takes human capital—staff to lead the interventions and to carry out the overall oversight and organization. In some cases, schools have restructured budgets to accommodate salaries for interventionists and districts have hired coordinators to oversee the system-wide efforts. Still, staff primarily assigned to other roles have been called upon for support, sometimes at the expense of other equally important efforts.

“Instructional coaches or instructional facilitators have prioritized RTI<sup>2</sup> services over the past few years,” writes one teacher. “In so doing, intervention services have become the overall school priority, which has in turn ignored addressing instructional challenges, support, and improvement in the classroom.”

We hear from some schools that communication gaps often exist between those staff conducting Tier II and Tier III interventions and Tier I classroom teachers. Indeed, in the Tennessee Early Literacy Network, school teams have worked to develop systems that can help to ensure smooth

“Intervention services have become the overall school priority, which has in turn **ignored addressing instructional challenges**, support, and improvement in the classroom.”

communication across the multiple parties involved in intervention.

While better systems can help, we also see that the districts that appear to have been most successful are those that have allotted staff to ensure consistent communication and supports across school personnel, but we have also heard frustration from many districts that their current funding levels do not allow them to make such staffing possible.

#### CHALLENGE

### 3 DEPARTMENT GUIDANCE

Some educators report that they actively seek the department’s guidance on RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation but that this guidance is often both insufficient in its detail and restrictive in terms of what it requires. Educators also note they are unclear which elements of department guidance are best practice for districts and which are required in order to meet federal and state laws around SLD identification.

Addressing this complicated tension requires straightforward guidance that some educators feel is lacking. For example, educators highlighted how the department’s published resources weren’t meeting the needs of district’s staff. One teacher stated, “The RTI<sup>2</sup> manual seems to be the ‘how to book’ for our system’s RTI<sup>2</sup> process, yet the fine print seems to be missing. There seems to be no clear, concise criteria to identifying skill

deficits. This is a major area that needs to be addressed within our system, but can’t be resolved without more knowledge at all levels.” Another teacher was concerned about the guidance around how RTI<sup>2</sup> should function for different types of students, specifically English learners (ELs): “A system or decision tree for referral of ELs to RTI<sup>2</sup> could help strengthen this area and get those students the interventions they need to be more successful in reading.”

Similarly, other educators pointed toward a lack of high-quality training. While providing feedback on the Tennessee Educator Survey, one teacher wrote, “RTI<sup>2</sup> is not executed efficiently. There was no formal teacher training regarding RTI<sup>2</sup>, and many teachers are still unaware of the purpose of this daily time with students.”

While some educators expressed apprehension around the availability and quality of guidance, others focused on the perceived inflexibility and subsequent negative effect of the guidance that currently exists—whether that guidance pertains to intervention group sizes, time allotted for interventions, fidelity checks, or overall implementation. For instance, one school psychologist mentioned how staff at his/her school saw fidelity checks as strict mandates with little value: “Often, if something is missing like a fidelity check, I will have faculty tell me they are willing to backdate it and just do one. Because they still see RTI<sup>2</sup> as a series of hoops that you’ve got to jump through.”<sup>5</sup> Others spoke more generally about specific RTI<sup>2</sup> “rules” that promote compliance rather than a focus on individual student needs.

“They still see RTI<sup>2</sup> as a **series of hoops** that you’ve got to jump through.”

Another educator summarized: “Because schools are trying to check all the mandated boxes, we aren’t able to do what’s best for our individual buildings. There has to be more flexibility, and what flexibility there is has to be communicated to district leaders so they know what flexibility is there to offer. I’m meeting all the requirements at my building, but I am not doing what’s best for my students.” These competing issues (i.e., insufficient and inflexible guidance) speak to the complexity of RTI<sup>2</sup> and highlight a multi-layered issue that demands purposeful forethought and planning in order to maximize educator buy-in and support for effective implementation.

## CHALLENGE

4

**HIGH SCHOOL ROLLOUT**

High school implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> has been particularly challenging. While around three-quarters of teachers at the elementary level say that they have seen evidence that RTI<sup>2</sup> can improve student learning, only about half of secondary teachers make this claim and the other half say they are unconvinced that RTI<sup>2</sup> will improve student learning in their school.

To some extent, this is likely the result of the longer time that elementary schools have had to make sense of the process. But there is also evidence that high schools face a distinct set of challenges around RTI<sup>2</sup> that are not sufficiently addressed by current state supports. As one school psychologist wrote, “It still feels like we are trying to adapt an elementary-focused model

to high school needs, and it is not working well.” The data requirements and/or intervention class requirements should be able to be modified to fit high school needs.”

On the educator survey, high school teachers most frequently selected RTI<sup>2</sup> training and enrichment for staff as the greatest need for improving RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation with progress monitoring as their second area of focus. In the comments, a number of educators noted that appropriate progress monitoring tools and interventions are more difficult to find for the high school level. As one principal noted, “I wholeheartedly believe in the RTI<sup>2</sup> process. I have seen students and teachers grow, and thoroughly enjoy being a part of this growth. I hope to have more funds or better appropriation of funds for middle and high school intervention classes. It is difficult to find reading intervention programs appropriate for the middle and high school levels, and the ones we have found are very expensive.”

Struggles around scheduling and collaboration are heightened at the high school level where structures tend to be even more complicated. RTI<sup>2</sup> depends heavily on collaboration of teachers, interventionists, and special educators. This type of collaboration has historically been more challenging in high schools. Scheduling is also more trying because of the variety of courses students are taking to fulfill their individualized programs of study and course requirements.

“It still feels like we are trying to adapt an elementary-focused model to high school needs, and **it is not working well.**”

# Recommendations

**WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? RTI<sup>2</sup> APPEARS** to have significantly improved the process of SLD identification in the state and there are indications that the initiative has strengthened Tennessee schools' ability to support low performing students. Yet we also see considerable variability in implementation with some schools implementing RTI<sup>2</sup> far more successfully than others. We also hear concerns from educators about the ways that department guidance and support around RTI<sup>2</sup> have not consistently met their local needs.

From the outset of this work, the department has been committed to listening to educators and other stakeholders, gathering feedback, collecting data, and measuring outcomes to create a continuous improvement process. As a part of this effort, we released two prior reports on RTI<sup>2</sup>. The first—[Implementing RTI<sup>2</sup>: Reports from the Field](#)—focused on school readiness for initial implementation. The second—[Supporting Early Grades Student Achievement: An Exploration of RTI<sup>2</sup> Practices](#)—highlighted promising RTI<sup>2</sup> practices among schools where struggling students were making large gains.

We are now at a stage where we are reassessing state policies in light of what we have learned. The three recommendations below—which include easing the burden of RTI<sup>2</sup> guidelines, enhancing support and resources for district RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation, and differentiating RTI<sup>2</sup> for high schools—represent our commitment to continue adapting our own policies in response to educator feedback.

RECOMMENDATION

1

## EASING THE BURDEN OF RTI<sup>2</sup> GUIDELINES

Educators and administrators across the state

describe the difficulties they have faced in implementing certain process-based requirements of RTI<sup>2</sup> with fidelity. Specifically, some schools and districts have struggled with the required frequencies of universal screening, progress monitoring, and fidelity monitoring, as well as the time and group-size constraints for intervention periods. While getting these elements of RTI<sup>2</sup> right is crucial to effective implementation, we believe it is possible to adjust the specific requirements in these areas in ways that will ease the burden on schools without removing key components of the model or compromising program quality.

Over the next several months, department representatives will gather feedback in regional meetings across the state on potential revisions to the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework that respond to concerns we have heard from educators. Feedback collected at these meetings will serve the dual purpose of reinforcing decisions to move forward with proposed revisions and/or providing a rationale for additional revisions the department hadn't previously considered.

Potential framework revisions would look at making key elements of RTI<sup>2</sup> more doable for schools and, in turn, improving the occurrence and quality of these practices. For example, current guidance requires three fidelity checks in Tier II and five fidelity checks at Tier III prior to making an instructional decision to intensify intervention. There may be room to adjust the number of fidelity checks while still meeting the purpose of determining whether a student has been provided appropriate instruction in their area of deficit. Potential changes could require fewer fidelity checks overall, fewer direct fidelity checks for intervention providers who score

a Level 5 on TEAM evaluations, or fewer direct fidelity checks for intervention providers who demonstrate strong fidelity in previous direct fidelity checks.

Schools also report challenges with keeping Tier II and III interventions at the recommended group size, and report not having enough staff to provide interventions, especially in the case of grades K–5 Tier III intervention, grades 6–8 Tier II and III intervention, and grades 9–12 Tier II intervention. Providing flexibility in group size within these tiers and grade bands while maintaining focus on several variables that increase intensity of interventions may result in stronger implementation.

Moving forward, it will be critical that potential revisions to the RTI<sup>2</sup> framework not further complicate implementation of an already complex process. Thoughtfully revising key piece(s) that have been identified as the most difficult barriers to successful implementation may prove beneficial.

#### RECOMMENDATION

**2**

### **ENHANCING SUPPORT AND RESOURCES FOR DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION**

As a department, we are committed to improving state resources and materials to provide stronger support for districts' areas of challenge.

We are focused in two areas of need. First, we aim to provide additional funding for district RTI<sup>2</sup> staffing and, second, we will work to strengthen the tools and trainings that our department provides to build district capacity.

District and school staffing for RTI<sup>2</sup> has been a continuous challenge, and we have seen over time that the districts that have successfully implemented high quality RTI<sup>2</sup> across schools have

provided robust support at the district level (see case study on the next page for an example of a district with strong supports). In the Fiscal Year 2019 budget proposal, the department requested funding to provide for an interventionist position in every district within the Basic Education Program (BEP) formula. The current governor's budget includes this request to fund at least one interventionist per district.

Over the last several years, the department has supported program implementation through a structure of regional Professional Learning Communities that were mostly focused on creating the conditions to launch RTI<sup>2</sup>. At this point, districts are no longer primarily working on developing their RTI<sup>2</sup> framework, but are now actively shifting their focus towards improving the implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup>. We will be reformatting the department's PLC support to provide a more continuous professional learning experience for district and school staff. With support from department CORE interventionists, we hope to better connect the content of PLC's with application of skills in districts and will devote considerable portions of time to discussing potential problems of practice and determining solutions to these challenges.

Another challenge districts face in their work around RTI<sup>2</sup> is determining how they are progressing with RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation and the real impact on student outcomes. At this time there are no consistent tools or data being used across the state to determine progress with this initiative. In partnership with the Regional Educational Laboratory–Appalachia, the department will pilot over the next year a series of tools that aim to help districts and schools monitor the strength of their RTI<sup>2</sup> and identify areas that might still need improvement.

## **CASE STUDY** Robust Support at the District Level

Murfreesboro City Schools has highly prioritized implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> in all of its 12 elementary schools. On the Tennessee Educator Survey, four out of five teachers in the district reported that RTI<sup>2</sup> has improved student learning in their school. This intense collective ownership over RTI<sup>2</sup> was reinforced by a number of intentional, district-level behaviors. Here are a few guiding principles that emerged in conversations with their district leaders:

- From the start, the district acknowledged that successful RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation would take time and continuous refinement.
- The district first aligned interventionists' and teachers' instruction by requiring the use of a "very systematic, scripted program" to provide interventions. Then, the district focused on building educators' knowledge base by providing training on reading development, interventions, and research-based best practices.
- While exerting more oversight in its early implementation phase, the district was mindful that requirements and guidelines were created with the input of those who are working most closely with the students.
- The district is up front in its stance that intervention decisions are not always "black and white" and can't be determined by a single screening tool, data source, or individual staff member. Instead, through both providing guidance and attending RTI<sup>2</sup> data team meetings, the district has helped school teams feel empowered to make their own decisions after reviewing multiple pieces of evidence and thoughtfully considering both academic and non-academic factors.
- The district has not short-changed their investment. They have dedicated RTI<sup>2</sup> personnel at both the school and district level. All elementary schools have at least one interventionist who provides building-level support for assessing student needs and progress, making data-based instructional decisions, and delivering interventions that target students' specific skill deficits. The interventionists are led by a district-level RTI<sup>2</sup> Coordinator who remains highly involved in day-to-day school-level RTI<sup>2</sup> activities.

## RECOMMENDATION

## 3

**DIFFERENTIATING RTI<sup>2</sup>  
FOR HIGH SCHOOLS**

Implementation of RTI<sup>2</sup> at the high school level has its own unique challenges, and Tennessee high schools have repeatedly highlighted specific needs that don't apply to the earlier grades. The difficulties that high schools are facing in making RTI<sup>2</sup> work in the secondary context suggests that the department must better differentiate guidance and support at the high school level.

After the first year of full implementation at the high school level, the state is at an opportune moment to take stock of current practices at the high school level in a systematic way. A listening tour will take place this spring specifically targeting high schools across the state with varying levels of belief in RTI<sup>2</sup>. Focus groups will be conducted with high school staff as well as a separate group of students who have participated in Tier II or III interventions. Information gained from the focus groups will determine root causes for the challenges already identified

with high school RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation. This examination will inform the development of high school specific guidance and resources that will be provided on a regular basis.

This spring, the department will also launch a set of Communities of Practice for high school practitioners. The Communities of Practice will be co-facilitated by current high school practitioners with the department's Director of RTI<sup>2</sup>. It is essential that professional learning for high school RTI<sup>2</sup> implementation be led by someone currently engaged in this work. The content of the professional learning will be grounded in problems of practice identified at the high school level including topics such as navigating scheduling, how to motivate and engage students in participating in Tier II and III interventions, tying interventions to post-secondary goals, and what successful high school interventions can potentially look like. Results of the listening tour will also inform content for the Communities of Practice.

# Conclusion

## **IN RECENT YEARS, TENNESSEE HAS MADE ENORMOUS EDUCATIONAL STRIDES.**

We have seen rising scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), increasing graduation rates, and higher postsecondary enrollments. Beneath these gains lies the tremendously difficult work that takes place in schools every day to support students and to integrate new ways of working that have the potential to build on and accelerate our progress. RTI<sup>2</sup> represents a key element of our state's improvement strategy, but, as with all such strategies, it is not a silver bullet. Over the last several years, our department has learned from the ways that schools and districts have implemented RTI<sup>2</sup>, and we will continue to adapt the framework over time in order to support this work. By working together to ease the burden of RTI<sup>2</sup> guidelines, enhance support and resources for district implementation, and differentiate RTI<sup>2</sup> for high schools, we hope to make small changes that can lead to big outcomes for our students.

By working together to **ease the burden** of RTI<sup>2</sup> guidelines, **enhance support and resources** for district implementation, and **differentiate RTI<sup>2</sup> for high schools**, we hope to make small changes that can lead to big outcomes for our students.

# Notes

1. Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 and updated its guidance so that school districts are not required to use a discrepancy model and have the option of using RTI. On January 9, 2013, the department convened an RTI Task Force, which decided a statewide model for RTI was appropriate for Tennessee's students. On January 14, 2013, a proposal for identifying students with an SLD using RTI<sup>2</sup> was passed by the Students with Disabilities Advisory Council. The Tennessee State Board of Education passed the proposal and finalized RTI<sup>2</sup> as the method for determining students' eligibility for an SLD in July 2014.
2. Other disability codes include: Intellectual Disability, Autism, Emotional Disturbance, Speech/Language, and Other Health Impairment
3. The department's annual Tennessee Educator Survey, administered in partnership with the Tennessee Education Research Alliance, includes an open response box at the end of the survey that allows educators to highlight anything they'd like to communicate to the department. This year, we received around 10,000 responses. Over 1,200 of these responses referenced RTI<sup>2</sup>.
4. Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. (2017). Critique of the national evaluation of response to intervention: A case for simpler frameworks. *Exceptional Children*, 83(3), 255-268.
5. Ebbinger, A. M. (2017). Elementary school psychologists' perceptions of response to intervention and its use to diagnose students with specific learning disabilities in Tennessee: A mixed methods study (Order No. 10605271). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1964388366).



