

How Did We Get Here?

1

Response to intervention (RTI) is arguably one of the most popular initiatives within school districts across the country. Some educators are well versed with implementing RTI, while others are becoming more familiar with the process. The good news about RTI is that components that comprise the model have been used in the classroom for years; in fact, most educators have been implementing principles related to RTI throughout their teaching career (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005). Although key components of RTI have been used for years, important questions surround the model:

- Why did RTI become so popular two decades ago?
- What's the big idea about RTI?
- Why are states implementing this process now?
- How did we get to this point in education?
- What is the relationship between current educational policy and RTI?

A discussion on how we have gotten to this point in education—with regard to accountability measures and emphases placed on scientifically based instructional strategies—begins with the *Nation at Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) report, perhaps the most devastating report on education in America's classrooms that was issued in the 1980s.

A NATION AT RISK REPORT

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means

that all children, by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

—*The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983, p. 4)*

In 1981, the secretary of education, T. H. Bell, instructed the National Commission on Excellence to examine the performance of students in schools nationwide and to create a report based on its findings. Secretary Bell requested that the commission make the report accessible not only to him but also to the American people. He recommended that the commission publish the report no later than 18 months from his request. By 1983, the report was ready for publication, and T. H. Bell and the American people had to bear the devastating news. The United States was a nation at risk (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The commission's report confirmed the beliefs of most Americans that the education in our school systems was not adequately preparing our children and youth to compete with their peers globally. The report showed that approximately 13% of our 17-year-old students were functionally illiterate, SAT scores were decreasing, and students entering college were required to take a number of remedial courses to prepare them for postsecondary education (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

As indicated as a risk factor, the report explained that perhaps 40% of minority students were functionally illiterate at the time the report was released. From the data that showed how poorly students of color performed, accountability factors were created to ensure that all students, including students from diverse backgrounds, achieve and thrive in the classroom. Although researchers spoke to the need to improve performance among African American students prior to 1983, it was the *Nation at Risk* report—and the standard and accountability movement—that generated nationwide discussion around setting goals and improving performance among students of color. The federal government's response to the commission's report has created a paradigm shift in the field of education, a shift that had begun gradually but has made marked changes in the way educators are required to provide instruction in the classroom. To be sure, the *Nation at Risk* report did not singlehandedly change the discourse of education in America; rather, it was the impetus that catapulted change.

4 • Part 1 Culturally Relevant Response to Intervention (CR-RTI)

EDUCATION LEGISLATION

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) are important educational laws that explain, in part, how we have gotten to this point in education.

No Child Left Behind Act (2001)

The NCLB is a policy initiated by the federal government to hold educators accountable for the educational success of not only high achievers but also of low achievers, students with disabilities, and students who come from low-income and culturally diverse backgrounds. The intent of the NCLB legislation is to implement a comprehensive educational strategy to bring all students to a “minimum level of competency” (Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman, & Anastasiow, 2012, p. 36), in an effort to leave no child behind in the process. The mandate holds educators accountable by measuring the success of students—based on test scores—who attend public schools; schools that do not demonstrate academic gains over time run the risk of losing federal funds. To this end, all states require public schools to assess student progress in the areas of reading and math in Grades 3 through 8 and at least once during Grades 10 through 12; schools must measure student progress in science at least three times—once during Grades 3 to 5, Grades 6 to 9, and Grades 10 to 12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

As mentioned, the intent of NCLB is to ensure that all students, including those from low socioeconomic and diverse backgrounds, will achieve high standards. Moreover, this mandate was to change the culture of America’s schools by emphasizing accountability and scientific, research-based instruction. But for many parents of color, the NCLB initiative has become another medium that shows how poorly students of color perform in relation to many European and Asian American students.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (2004)

The IDEA is the reauthorization of the Education for All Handicapped Act of 1975 (Public Law [PL] 92–142), which is the original law that required schools to provide specialized services for students with disabilities (Kirk et al., 2012). This act (PL 94–142) emphasized six key service provisions: (1) zero reject, (2) nondiscriminatory evaluation, (3) individualized education program, (4) least restrictive environment, (5) due process, and (6) parental participation.

1. Zero reject

Zero reject explains that all students with a disability should receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE). This means that the education must be provided free of charge to the student and must address the student's needs as appropriately as possible (there have been many debates and court cases regarding what is *appropriate* for students with disabilities).

2. Nondiscriminatory evaluation

Nondiscriminatory evaluation means that all students have the right to receive a full evaluation surrounding all areas of suspected disabilities, including academic, social-emotional, and cognitive functioning, prior to being placed into special education services. An essential component of nondiscriminatory evaluation includes testing students with instruments and tools that are appropriate for the student's age, culture, and language.

3. Individualized education program

All students who qualify for specialized services must be provided an individualized education program (IEP). This document must specify the identified disability, goal(s), and strategies on how to help the student achieve in the classroom.

4. Least restrictive environment

Least restrictive environment explains that students with disabilities must be educated, to the greatest extent possible, in classrooms and spaces with students who do not have disabilities.

5. Due process

Due process refers to legal procedures that take place to ensure fairness when making decisions about specialized services.

6. Parental participation

Parental participation explains that all legal guardians/parents have the right to participate in the decisions of special education services; parents are a part of the educational team and assist with making decisions about IEPs. The law explains that parents have the right to access student records.

The Education for All Handicapped Act (PL 94–142) is now called the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); the above six components (of PL 94–142) remain key provisions of the IDEA and continue to lay the foundation for specialized services for students who require additional support in the classroom (Jacob & Hawthorne, 2007).

RTI PRINCIPLES ARE NOT NEW

Although the NCLB and IDEA of 2004 are federal regulations that highlight instructional strategies consistent with RTI principles, the idea of conceptual grouping based on student needs did not arise from these legislations. Rather, conceptual grouping strategies based on student needs were foundational in Deno's (1970) cascade model. Deno's model was used as a special education service delivery initiative during the 1970s and 1980s. In his model, Deno emphasized appropriate instruction in the least restrictive environment, with additional support provided to students who continued to demonstrate limited growth (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005).

Throughout the 1980s, instructional strategies included placing students in increasingly smaller groups and tailoring academic instruction based on student needs. Deno's (1970) cascade model emphasized grouping strategies, but the NCLB and IDEA of 2004 are responsible for the emphasis placed on accountability, scientifically based practices, and appropriate instruction in the classroom.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND RTI

For years, educators have used components of the RTI model, including differentiating instruction by skill level. But RTI, as a scientific problem-solving model and identification system used to determine special education eligibility, did not gain momentum until the NCLB and the reauthorization of the IDEA of 2004. These two educational policies place emphases on *scientifically based instruction* to increase performance among all students and support the use of RTI within the classroom (Meyers, Meyers, Graybill, Proctor, & Huddleston, 2012). For example, the reauthorization of the IDEA of 2004 places great emphases on evidence-based instruction, "including (1) a requirement for the use of scientifically based reading instruction, (2) evaluation of how well a student responds to intervention, and (3) emphasis on the role of data for decision making" (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005, p. 18). In addition, the IDEA of 2004 places emphases on using evidence, scientifically based instruction, reliable data, and a student's response to instruction to understand achievement and performance.

Consistent with the language in the IDEA of 2004, many school districts now refer to response to instruction and intervention to identify and determine the need for special education services surrounding learning disabilities rather than relying solely on IQ and achievement tests to determine eligibility. Thus, educational policy—the NCLB, with its emphasis on

scientifically based instruction, and the IDEA of 2004, with its emphasis on evidence-based and appropriate instruction—has changed the way educators provide services for students in the classroom, and educators nationwide are using RTI principles, including prevention and intervention, to provide the greatest support for students the moment they enter the classroom. Moreover, when considering learning disabilities, special education team members can now make students eligible for special services based on how students respond to evidence-based strategies—or appropriate instruction—over time, rather than by IQ and achievement scores that are usually determined within a few hours.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

During the 1980s, the American people received devastating news: The United States was a nation at risk. *A Nation at Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) shed light on the poor performance among children in America's classrooms, including students of color. The report showed that many students were functionally illiterate, SAT scores were decreasing, and students enrolled in college were unprepared to take college-level courses. In addition, this report showed that the process of teaching and learning in the classroom required drastic changes. Two of the most significant educational policies that are responsible for making changes to the ways educators are required to teach in the classroom—if they are to receive federal funds—are the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 2004. These two policies place emphases on *accountability*, *data-based decision making*, *scientifically based instruction*, and *appropriate instruction* in the classroom. States are now referring to RTI principles to provide best practices in the classroom and to meet the requirements set forth in the NCLB and the IDEA of 2004; also, states are now using student response to instruction over time to make decisions about special education eligibility—rather than relying solely on IQ and achievement scores.

In the next chapter, I define RTI, discuss the basic idea and components of the model, and provide concrete examples of how the process should look within the classroom, using scientific and evidence-based instructions and interventions.