

Cornell Elementary School

5817 NE 3rd Street
Des Moines, IA 50313
Principal: Deb Chiodo

Under the leadership of Principal Deb Chiodo, Cornell Elementary School's use of Response to Intervention—called Instructional Decision Making (IDM) in Iowa—has evolved over the past 15 years. Cornell, a preK–grade 3 school serving 400 students, developed RtI practices with the assistance of the Heartland Area Education Agency, a regional technical assistance provider. Heartland staff trained a core school team to lay the groundwork for implementing RtI. According to Chiodo, it took about five years to attain full implementation and high-level staff engagement in data use and differentiated instruction. Heartland continues to provide weekly support, participating in grade-level meetings that are the core of the problem-solving and decision-making process at Cornell.

- ◆ Elementary (Pre-K-3)
- ◆ 87% White
- ◆ 9% Hispanic
- ◆ 2% Black
- ◆ 2% Other
- ◆ 50% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 4% English Language Learners
- ◆ 8% Special Education

State-Level Leadership

In Iowa, RtI/IDM is emphasized as a general education initiative to support all students, including gifted students, by using data to address differences in the classroom. The Iowa Department of Education developed a set of RtI principles, a district planning approach, and a review process to assess implementation fidelity. The principles address research-based instruction, relevant measurement instruments, using data and problem solving to guide instruction, and ongoing professional development and coaching for teachers.

Working with regional technical assistance centers or area agencies, the Department of Education helps schools and teachers interpret data collected through screening and statewide assessments. A state consultant says:

We are constantly helping teachers understand that the kids in their classroom are their responsibility and we need to do what we can to best meet their needs regardless of where they're at. If a majority of kids are struggling or even 30-40% seem to be struggling what is that saying about our core curriculum... we need to be doing something systemically to address core curriculum.

To align with the state philosophy, Iowa's special education policies shifted toward non-categorical approaches. Rather than determining eligibility and applying labels, special education staff focus on adapting instruction to meet students' needs. Over time, special educators' have moved toward being more consultative with classroom teachers.

Professional Development and Ongoing Support

The Heartland Area Education Agency has played a leadership role in RtI in Iowa and nationally and has been a major supporter of Cornell Elementary. About twenty years

ago, Heartland began looking for ways to improve instructional effectiveness for students, taking on a problem-solving approach based on progress monitoring. As their process evolved, Heartland developed instructional practice principles and an understanding of the change process employed with schools.

Central to the change process is year-long training for a core school team. Heartland staff have honed consultancy and training and understand districts and schools go through predictable phases of implementation. According to Heartland's Dr. W. David Tilly:

RtI is the process of answering an interrelated set of questions with data. For example, is our core curriculum sufficiently effective? One of biggest lessons we've learned about change is question asking. It made a huge difference in our work.

School-Level Implementation

Principal Deb Chiodo closely tracks student progress on assessments and continues to track students long after they have moved on from the school. This diligence has led to a strong track record; Cornell has met AYP for the past several years.

In the grade-level meetings at the heart of Cornell's RtI approach, staff discuss students' response to instruction and diagnose problems. Principal Chiodo leads all grade-level team meetings and is closely involved in student progress monitoring, and parents are engaged in intervention decisions.

Cornell has developed a leveled approach to RtI. A teacher who observes a student not responding to instruction initially completes a Level 1 form with a diagnosis of the issue and a plan for improvement. If that plan does not work after a period of four to six weeks, the teacher moves to Level 2 and seeks the support of other grade-level teachers to design an intervention.

The focus on documentation at Level 1 means Cornell teachers have found ways to differentiate classroom instruction, frequently check for understanding, and provide small-group interventions and "on-the-spot" reteaching within the class as necessary. Teachers use learning centers for review and practice.

Teachers monitor progress on a weekly basis and use consistent methods of recording and tracking progress against expectations schoolwide. Teachers benefit from professional development provided by Heartland specialists in particular areas of the curriculum. Heartland has developed RtI approaches based on a series of "sorts" that incorporate data as well as teacher observation to determine the types of reteaching and practice required for individual students' progress.

Cornell staff's ability to differentiate instruction in math moved to a new level four years ago when they worked with Dr. Anne Foegen from Iowa State to pilot a K–1 math screening instrument. Principal Chiodo's interest in the instrument and its results led to an emphasis on differentiation in math instruction. With Heartland's assistance, Cornell staff now use a series of decision rules in math as well as reading to plan interventions.