

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## State Leadership: Building an Rtl System

Gerald Zahorchak, Ed.D. • November 2009

Topic: Response to Intervention in Primary Grade Reading  
Practice: Rtl Implementation

### Highlights

- Response to Intervention (Rtl) aligned with state's overall framework of reform
- Explanation of Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII); begins with quality core teaching
- Quality core instruction is the basis for interventions
- State's role: preparing teachers and principals to understand and use system
- Local role: discover the best means to intervene
- Development of capacity is about building leadership for principals in standards-based system, use of data, how to do instruction and intervention well

### About the Interviewee

Dr. Gerald Zahorchak has served as Pennsylvania's secretary of education since 2006. Prior to this, Dr. Zahorchak served as deputy secretary for elementary and secondary education, where he worked diligently on the development and implementation of support systems for public schools that are working to

meet the high demands set by Pennsylvania and No Child Left Behind targets. Dr. Zahorchak has managed educational state funding that included \$200 million in Accountability Block Grants that used for tutoring, math and literacy coaching, the expansion of full-day kindergarten, and the creation of pre-kindergarten classes. He has led the development of Pennsylvania's Inspired Leadership initiative to develop and support the state's educational leaders. He has directed Pennsylvania's leading role with the Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education. Dr. Zahorchak has also played a prominent role in the Laboratory for Student Success that leads the way for inspired leadership in six states.

Dr. Zahorchak also has presided over progressive initiatives such as Classrooms for the Future, which will equip high schools with laptop computers on every student desk in English, math, science, and history classrooms, and Science: It's Elementary, a program to upgrade science education in elementary schools. He has helped craft high school reform initiatives that allow an ever-growing number of high school students to take challenging courses in a small-school environment that will prepare them for postsecondary success.

Dr. Zahorchak has been widely published and is a frequent speaker at numerous national educational conferences, symposia, and other forums. He is a frequent guest on Pennsylvania public television and radio stations. As the former superintendent of the Greater Johnstown School District, Dr. Zahorchak implemented full-day kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, high school reform, and tutoring programs and hired reading and math coaches to boost student learning. His leadership and passion for helping students excel academically helped raise student achievement levels and led all schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress during his tenure. Data from his last two years as superintendent analyzed by Standard and Poor's listed Johnstown as one of the 47 outperforming school districts in Pennsylvania. Dr. Zahorchak has worked with students at virtually every level of education as a superintendent, principal, teacher and football coach.

## Full Transcript

I am Gerald Zahorchak, and I am the secretary of education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and in Pennsylvania that means literally from prebirth through our Ph.D. system and our library systems.

The idea, as we started framing the architecture for our plan to get to student results, intervention was obviously a critical, maybe the most important, part of the work. So our staff, lots of leaders from around the state, started a response to the nation's call for RtI and how do we really do intervention well. And as we started the work, it became clearer and clearer about the necessity of alignment, the necessity of using proven practices, and the assessment of good reporting and monitoring of a child's progress. So it began as we began to think about what we had in terms of initiatives going on. It fit perfectly in our framework, of course, that you are going to intervene for students who struggle.

In Pennsylvania, we use RtII as our acronym. RtII is the Response to Instruction and Intervention. So if you

think of the model, we think of core instruction first and we get that right: is there best teaching practices with built-in support for students who would struggle, a way to understand—does every child in the room understand and make progress. So the first instructional level is why we added the second I, and we say it's first response to quality instruction. And then if there is a student who continues to struggle, of course, and there will be, you then link really well vertically the intervention. What tutoring or supports can we give to extend learning, and beyond the normal instruction—the quality instruction that children get—how can we extend learning and provide a way to do quality tutoring, for example, our intervention, with data that's emerging constantly that feeds back in the loop for the intervention process but also feeds back to the classroom teacher on how the teacher for that student can change instruction? So the intervention is based and aligned with instruction, all aligned with our standards-aligned systems.

It's the state role to make sure that teachers are prepared that way, inducted that way and supported that way, principals are prepared and supported that way, data systems flow into that; everything we do builds that one system. Then it's the local community's role to discover the means. So learning communities start happening; best practices to get to those then start happening. We know a lot of the right things. There is no one anywhere that would say the answer for a struggling student is an intervention intervention; the answer for a struggling student, from the Shepard and Smith and other research, is not to hold them back and do it again and get the same result, or wait a year and see the regression occur again. The answer isn't just to promote them and say, "We are sorry you didn't do so well, and we wish you well." The answer is, make sure—intervene, intervene, intervene.

The responsibility starts at the very top of the systems. So we need to say, "What kind of leadership do principals need in terms of understanding how to be the architect of standards-based systems, in terms of understanding how to use data and how to create operational plans, and mostly how to do instruction well and intervention well." So building capacity means building the ability of those people to lead and work in a context that's clear.

We anticipate that we are going to, in new policy terms, link school improvement funds—the potential to partner with us in initiatives like Race to the Top—linking those funding opportunities and support opportunities to making sure that they are doing the standard-aligned system very well and especially making sure they are doing the RtI model very well.