



Audio

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Lessons From Iowa About RtI

Lana K. Michelson and Eric Neessen • December 2009

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

Highlights

- Approach to RtI as a way of helping general education teachers meet the needs of all students
- Rollout approach based on voluntary innovation by school districts with support from intermediate units; creation of best practice sharing opportunities to spread grassroots efforts
- The Instructional Decision Making process site visit and implications from data review
- Changing roles of special education personnel to provide consultative assistance to general education teachers
- Importance of treating RtI as a general education innovation
- Current challenge is fidelity of implementation to ensure that concepts of RtI haven't drifted from core components

About the Interviewees

Lana K. Michelson

Lana K. Michelson has served as the chief of the Bureau of Student and Family Support Services with Iowa Department of Education for the past eight years. She is responsible for leadership in the areas of special education, learning supports, alternative education, service learning, and safe and drug-free schools.

Eric Neessen

Eric Neessen is a consultant for School Psychological Services with the Iowa Department of Education. He has helped lead efforts in the Instructional Decision Making process since it began in 2003. He has been with the Iowa Department of Education for eight years.

Full Transcript

Lana K. Michelson: My name is Lana Michelson. I am the chief of the Bureau of Student and Family Support Services for the Iowa Department of Education.

Eric Neessen: My name is Eric Neessen. I am a consultant for School Psychological Services here at the Iowa Department of Education.

Michelson: Response to Intervention in Iowa started out as a special education initiative in which we were really looking at a better way to engage in the identification process for students with disabilities. But after doing that for a few years, we soon learned that in order to do it really effectively, we really needed to be fully engaged with our general education partners. We began to look at it together with general education in this partnership about how can we support general education teachers meeting the needs of all students, and making sure that all students met the essential skills and the concepts of the Iowa Core Curriculum, and using the intervention concept to help general ed teachers deal with the differences within the classroom.

As we began to roll out Response to Intervention, we looked at really making this a part of innovation and supporting schools to engage in innovation. So school districts began to look at the practices that we thought were important, such as coteaching and collaboration and looking at building assistance teams and how a team of people can come together and support students within general education being successful. And we asked them to experiment, to play, to engage in the practice with support from our intermediate units. So districts began to engage in those practices, and they were very successful. And when districts were very successful, we provided opportunities to showcase their success so that other districts could see how they were able to implement them within their school districts. And so it really began to grow from a grassroots effort.

Neessen: The Instructional Decision Making process, which we call IDM in Iowa, is really a process by which we use the data regarding students' responses to instruction to determine the instructional needs of those students so that we can best support those students. When we look at screening data and universal screening data in Iowa, one of the biggest challenges we have encountered is helping general education teachers understand—what do the data mean and then what do we do with that data? If the majority of our

kids are struggling, what is that saying about our core curriculum and our core instruction? We need to be doing something systemically to address those issues. At the same time, we also say that there are going to be some kids who may not be achieving because the instruction that they are receiving just isn't clicking with them for whatever reason. So we are looking at providing instruction for those kids through Universal Design for Learning, through coteaching type of supports. But then also with Instructional Decision Making we are implementing what we are calling supplemental and intensive type of supports and services for kids.

The other piece that is often overlooked are those kids that are accelerated, those kids that are gifted, those kids that are ready to just take off if we would let them. And that's one of the benefits of the Instructional Decision Making process, is that the data help us see which kids are ready to go and what can we do to provide supports for those kids as well.

There are so many nuances involved here that really the roles, the traditional roles, have changed and this has also caused some people to reevaluate what is it that they are being asked to do and to understand that they possibly might need some more professional development in areas that they previously may not have thought of. When there was more emphasis on eligibility determination, we were asking staff to really use the assessment data to determine, does this child really need special education, are they eligible for special education? So much of our time was spent essentially sorting kids.

One of the things in Iowa that we have learned is that when something is rolled out and is seen as somewhat of a special education initiative, a lot of times the general educators, if you will, aren't necessarily interested because they don't feel that that may or may not apply to their particular students. When we started Instructional Decision Making, we had about 40 educational professionals present. And 75-80% of those people were general educators, and those people provided a perspective that was necessary in order to move this Instructional Decision Making process forward in Iowa so that when we were talking about students, we were talking about all students. When we were talking about what educators needed to do to help provide supports and how to look at the data, again, we were talking about all educators.

Michelson: So one of our biggest priorities at this point in time is really to begin to look at implementation integrity and to make sure that we have a process that's being implemented statewide that we really can call Response to Intervention and provide support through coaching and other means to help new staff and mentor new staff who come into our state so that they will really understand what the Response to Intervention process is.

Iowa is really in that change process of refocus. We needed to take a step back and really look at what our practices look like and learn from other states so we have the best implementation possible.

Neessen: The exciting thing is that we are not just focusing in on a certain group of kids as we move forward, but we are really trying to look at all kids. As educators, we are taking responsibility to help them now as opposed to blaming something in the past or hoping that something changes for them in the future.