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The Phases of RtI Implementation
W. David Tilly III, Ph.D. • January 2010

Topic: Response to Intervention in Elementary-Middle Math
Practice: RtI Implementation

Highlights

- Dave Tilly explains the Heartland Agency's role in supporting RtI implementation in Iowa.
- He describes why RtI is known as Instructional Decision Making in Iowa.
- Tilly describes what Heartland has learned about the change process and the value of using a series of questions to structure RtI planning.
- Tilly describes three phases of RtI Implementation: consensus building, infrastructure building, and full implementation.
- Consensus building is an ongoing process.
- Building infrastructure begins with identifying what RtI components the school already has in place.
- Full implementation is the process of institutionalizing RtI components into everyday practice.
- Tilly concludes with a summary of the benefits of RtI.

About the Interviewee

W. David Tilly III, Ph.D., is the Coordinator of Assessment Services at Heartland Area Education Agency. He has worked as a practicing school psychologist, a university

trainer, a state department of education consultant, and an administrator in Iowa. He participated in the leadership of Iowa's transformation to using RtI practices and has extensive experience working with districts, intermediate agencies,states, and professional organizations on the implementation of RtI. His research interests include implementing system change, instructional interventions, formative assessment, and translating research into practice. He coauthored a widely used publication on RtI for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

Full Transcript

I'm Dave Tilly, and I'm the Director of Innovation and Accountability at Heartland Area Education Agency in Johnston, Iowa. We provide services in lots of different areas of education to our schools.

Heartland's role in the evolution of RtI, I guess I would say, is we began looking at ways we can improve our system in the late '80s. We've gone through multiple iterations of implementation of these principles and practices, but we've remained constant in our implementation that the purpose of what we are doing is squarely improving results for all of our kids.

In Iowa, we made the decision, as a state and as a team, to not use the words "Response to Intervention," but instead we use the term Instructional Decision Making. Most important change that needs to happen is instruction needs to continually improve because instruction directly impacts student learning, and the better we get as teachers, the better we get as instructors, the better instruction we are able to provide to our students, the better the learning outcomes are.

Implementing IDM in a school really is about answering these ten interrelated questions with data, and they're questions like, you know, the first question in the series is, "Is our core curriculum sufficiently effective?" Wow, that's a big question that we hadn't been asking before.

One of the things that we've learned as we've gone through the process of working with many, many schools over many years and many educators is that within RtI, or what we call Instructional Decision Making, there's really a predictable pattern of phases that folks go through as they implement the process. And there's really three sort of big phases, and they're interrelated.

The first phase is consensus building. One of the things we learned early on is that taking the time upfront to help people not only understand what it is that we're proposing in terms of the changes but also, importantly, why is it that we need to make these changes. Doesn't mean everybody is always going to agree, but developing that common purpose upfront, what we have realized is absolutely critical. And that consensus building process allows schools to build a knowledge level, to build a buy-in level, and to build an understanding of not just what it is we need to do but why it is we need to do it. So, when schools embark they're doing it as informed consumers, as informed professionals. Why they're doing it, and then they

can move it forward. Consensus building is never over. When we first started to think about it, we kind of thought about it, "Consensus building comes first and then phase two and then phase three." What we have learned is consensus building is truly on ongoing process.

The second phase, that we've learned is fairly predictable, is what we call infrastructure building. I've never worked with a school who, when I walked through the front door, didn't already have some of the components of RtI in place. I've also never worked with a school, on first blush, that had all of the components of RtI in place. So, the infrastructure building part really is about doing a gap analysis of, "Which of these components of RtI or IDM do we have in place? Which of these do we need to build?" And every school is unique on that, so we have some tools that we use to help schools do sort of that needs assessment. The school will have a leadership team, and that leadership team will work with the rest of the staff to kind of get that done, and then that can set some priorities. And the infrastructure building really relates to maintaining and strengthening the components we've already got, as well as building some of the components that we don't have. So, it may be that we've got really effective initial instruction in place, but we don't have good tools for monitoring students' progress. And that process takes a good year to 18 months just to get some of those components built, and it just depends on the school—where they are starting, which pieces that they need to build and what they prioritize—how slow or how fast those pieces fall into place. But as they're infrastructure building, they're also starting their initial implementation because part of that infrastructure building is identifying and starting to answer some of those questions, you know, "Is our core-curriculum effective?" If it's not, you know, "For who is it effective and who isn't it effective?" If it's not effective, if it's not as good as we want it to be, "Why isn't it effective enough?" And then it turns into, "What are we going to do about it?" and then monitor, "Did what we do work?" And that's one of the foundational pieces underlying all of RtI is sort of that very common and simple problem-solving thinking framework.

The final phase in RtI or IDM implementation, really, is full implementation, and full implementation is the process of very planfully and thoughtfully institutionalizing the new practices. Doing new skills and new behaviors, it's a new thing for a while. And all of us, when we're learning new skills, there is a phase where it's still a little uncomfortable. So there's feedback, there's support, there's coaching, there's lots of different pieces that go into that initial implementation. Full implementation deals with the process of, as I said, institutionalizing and building the practices into the fabric of the culture, into the fabric of the culture of the building. Full implementation is basically the integration of the new things we've learned through infrastructure building into the business as usual at the school. There are benefits to the system that accrue at all levels, but it is a process, and it doesn't occur overnight. RtI doesn't tell people what to think; it tells them what to think about, and when they're thinking about the things that make the most difference in the school and making modifications to those and monitoring how well they're doing, it makes a great difference.