

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## How Rtl Changes Special Education

W. David Tilly III, Ph.D. • January 2010

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

### Highlights

- Dave Tilly explains the Heartland Agency's role in supporting Rtl implementation in Iowa.
- He explains how Rtl significantly changed special education and quickly became a general education initiative in Iowa.
- Impacts on special education include the nature of instruction, the elimination of special education labels, and the types of assessments in use, specifically the move from an emphasis on diagnosis to monitoring progress.
- He summarizes the benefits for special education students of Rtl.

### 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 as an administrator in Iowa. He participated in the leadership of Iowa's transformation to using Rtl practices and has extensive experience working with districts, intermediate agencies, states, and professional organizations on the implementation of Rtl. 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. The beginning of RtI was really, and continues to be, just a simple quest of, "How can we do better for our students, and how can we work more effectively to get better results for all of our kids?"

Over time, it transitioned from just being, for us, a special education idea to an every education idea. We realized that a lot of the challenges that students in special education face weren't created in special education. There were other factors, and we realized that while we could have a reactive system, many of the general principles that we were working with in special education also applied to all of education. So, one of the questions that we get asked a lot is, "So, how does special education look different? What impact has all of this had on special education?"

It's had a number of different impacts. One, the way that we go about evaluating students with disabilities has gone through a significant change. In the past, when I started practice back in the late 80s, our approach to evaluating students with disabilities was a pretty standard approach. We had what we called our standard battery of assessments we did for pretty much any problem. We had the standard nine things that we measured. And it didn't really matter what the problem was; we measured those same nine things. And then our purpose really was to identify, "Does the student have a disability? Which disability do they have, and what are their needs for specially designed instructions?" So it was very much focused on child find. What we realized was that a lot of the processes and practices that we were using, while they were useful for finding students, didn't really contribute a lot of information to, "So what are we going to do with them next week?" I like to say that, in my mind, RtI doesn't really stand for Response to Intervention; it stands for Really Terrific Instruction. And that's what its focus is. Because if we don't change, if we are not able to support and improve instruction in the classroom, the rest of it doesn't matter. That's where it needs to start, and that's where it needs to live.

We had the ability to start moving away from a normative comparison to more of a benchmark comparison of, "We know that a second grade student at this point in the year ought to be reading about this well, and here are the kinds of reading performances that they ought to do." And we moved to a diagnostic approach that wasn't diagnostic at the level of which diagnosis do we give the student in terms of their disability, but which skills does the student have. Which of the foundational reading skills does the student have that

they are supposed to have, and which of them are they missing? And if they're missing these skills, what is it that we should do? What instructional strategies can we match up specifically with the kinds of skills that the student's struggling with? And that gives us a much richer basis and a much richer body of information upon which we can make decisions. So from that information, not only can we make decisions about does the student have a disability and need special education, we can also make decisions about what should that special education look like.

Another change is we moved away from using specific disability labels in identifying students with disabilities. We found that often times those disability labels themselves created false expectations and low expectations for students. And we realized that, you know, the expectations we have for students are very important, and we need to have high expectations for all students. And we moved to a non-categorical service delivery model. So basically, students in Iowa who are eligible for special education are eligible individuals. That's the designation that they're provided, and then they get all of the specially designed instruction-related services that they need in order to be successful. So we moved away from using disability labels. We've realized early on that just placing a student in special education doesn't guarantee success, and often students with disabilities are tough-to-teach kids. And we realized that we can't predict with certainty that just placing a student in special education is going to result predictably in better outcomes for that student. And so we knew that we needed to have better measurement technologies to give us feedback, to give the system feedback, on is what we are doing effective because these students are already behind. We can't wait six months or nine months to do the post-testing to find out how well did our instruction work. We have to be able to ask within a six- to eight-week period, "Is our instruction working?" And to do that, it takes a very different kind of measurement. When we make adjustments to our instruction based on the data we collect on student performance, student performance improves. When kids can see the target and it stands still for them, kids are capable of almost anything.

Schools that are effective do three things, and they do them very, very well. They identify what they want their students to know and be able to do, they align their curriculum instruction to teach their kids those things, and they keep score. That's what this process helps them to do.