



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Evolution of Response to Intervention

Russell Gersten, Ph.D., and Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D. • October 2009

Topic: Response to Intervention in Elementary-Middle Math

### Highlights

- Reasons for the spread of Response to Intervention (RtI), including:
  - the role of Reading First in encouraging interventions
  - meeting the interests of school psychologists
  - characteristics of RtI as voluntary with lots of options for implementation
  - RtI as a cohesive framework for building on existing reform elements
  - workable way to get regular and special education systems to work together
- Converging evidence around the important components of RtI such as screening, tiered interventions, and systematic instruction
- Core components that are common to RtI frameworks:
  - importance of valid screening instruments
  - importance of quality core instruction
  - tiered interventions geared to level of student need
  - frequent progress monitoring and analysis of data to guide decision making

## About the Interviewees

### Russell Gersten, Ph.D.

Dr. Russell Gersten is executive director of Instructional Research Group, an educational research institute in Los Alamitos, California, as well as Professor Emeritus in the College of Education at the University of Oregon. Dr. Gersten recently served as a member of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel, cochairing the Task Group on Instructional Practices. In 2002, Dr. Gersten received the Distinguished Special Education Researcher Award from the American Educational Research Association's Special Education Research Division.

He also chaired two recently released Practice Guides for the U.S. Department of Education on Response to Intervention (RtI) for both mathematics and reading. These are among the most frequently downloaded publications of the Department.

Dr. Gersten has been frequently interviewed by *Education Week* for articles on a wide range of topics involving mathematics education, English learners, and reading instruction. At present, he has over 150 publications and serves on the editorial boards of many prestigious journals in the field. He currently serves as a principal investigator for the What Works Clearinghouse project on English learners and as a national consultant and technical expert for numerous national research projects involving evaluation.

Dr. Gersten has conducted numerous randomized trials, many of which have been published in major journals in the field of education. He has either directed or codirected 42 applied research grants addressing a wide array of issues in education and been a recipient of many federal and nonfederal grants (totalling more than \$17.5 million).

### Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D.

Dr. Sharon Vaughn holds the H. E. Hartfelder/Southland Corp. Regents Chair in Human Development at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk. She is the author of numerous books and research articles that address the reading and social outcomes of students with learning difficulties. She is currently the principal investigator or coprincipal investigator on several Institute for Education Sciences, National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, and Office of Special Education Programs research grants investigating effective interventions for students with reading difficulties and students who are English language learners.

## Full Transcript

Russell Gersten: I am Russell Gersten. I am executive director of Instructional Research Group, in Los Alamitos, California.

Sharon Vaughn: Hi, I am Sharon Vaughn. I am the executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk and a Regents Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. And the reason Russell and I are doing this together today is because, for the past two decades, we have worked on issues related to prevention and intervention with respect to Response to Intervention (RtI).

Gersten: RtI has really spread very, very rapidly, especially from when the special education law changed five years ago. Whenever special education law changes, states and districts take it very seriously. But I think it goes beyond that. I think Reading First maybe didn't call it Response to Intervention but talked about intervention for students whose screening measure showed "needed help." So schools, at least in kindergarten through third grade, had that experience.

I think another impetus has been the school psychologists. RtI allows for a much more active creative role in terms of a school psychologist being part of the school and helping, for example, a group of third-grade teachers work out a plan for a group of students.

And I wonder, what do you think, Sharon, about other forces?

Vaughn: You know, Russell, I think one of the reasons RtI has spread so quickly is that it's a movement that has sort of been from the ground up, in which school districts and key stakeholders feel like they have some options and choices about how they do it. And in fact, even in the law, it is recommended practice rather than mandated or required. And I think it makes districts sort of embrace the idea of the critical components, but also giving them some flexibility about how it is they go about implementing it.

Many states and districts have already tried on screening; they have gotten a feel for it. But as you know, you want to screen for a reason. And so then they were sort of dabbling with interventions—and sometimes at the district level, sometimes at the state level—so that elements of RtI were part of their system already and a cohesive framework for putting it together was embraced.

Gersten: People have talked for a long time of really getting special education and the classroom teacher to work together. Most classroom teachers were mystified by a lot of the special ed language and jargon, and didn't know how this was part of their job, how to get it to fit in. There was just something about the array, the timing, and the incentives that didn't work. So I think RtI also was an attempt to seriously get the two systems to work together.

Vaughn: One of the exciting things that has allowed these promising practices with respect to RtI to really come together is this notion that we have converging evidence with increasing confidence around some of these critical components. We know about screening in a way that we didn't several decades ago. We know how to do it quickly with high specificity and sensitivity, and that would not have been the case previously. In addition, we know about interventions and their effects. Perhaps more so with reading than with math, but with a growing body of research in both areas that helps us define the kinds of instruction that would support students at risk.

Gersten: There are a lot of variations in RtI and how it's implemented in different schools, but there are some core principles that permeate it, and one of them is screening. One thing that was needed for us to even seriously think about RtI in education was to be able to have screening measures that were quick and that were valid. In the areas of reading and math for young students, we do have—by young, I mean kindergarten through second grade, and then reading really going up to fourth, fifth grade—we do have quick, efficient ways that everybody can be screened. And one advantage [is] we like to do everybody, then you get a nice quick snapshot of the whole school. And Sharon, you may want to talk a little about the other aspects, the instructional aspects.

Vaughn: One of the important contributions of core instruction that integrates research-based practice is that it gives all students the opportunity to have access to good, quality instruction. And then if students are at risk, we know it's because they need additional instruction, not because the instruction that they have received is inadequate.

Another critical component is what we do after we provide good instruction in a classroom, what we do after we screen students and then we find students who are at risk and need additional support. And I think that's when we start thinking about these layered interventions and how we might move from providing some additional support for students to more intensive support depending upon their initial needs and/or their needs after they are provided intervention. There is this general idea that there are multiple layers of intervention as safety nets to provide increasingly intensive instruction for students who demonstrate difficulties. And, of course, matching that intensity to the needs of the students, with students with milder needs getting less intensive interventions.

The last element that we think of when we think of RtI is an opportunity to use all of this data from the assessments and screening as well as from students' response to intervention to guide decision making, to help teachers really make those kinds of decisions about what students need in the classroom, in intervention, and even to use it as a data source to potentially refer and place students in special education.