Educating and Involving Parents in the Response to Intervention Process

The School's Important Role

E. Stephen Byrd

Juan did not have a good kindergarten year. He struggled with recognizing letters and numbers. His mother, Claudia, met several times with the classroom teacher, Mrs. Wong, who suggested several activities that Claudia and Juan could do at home. Although Claudia was a working mother, she read with Juan regularly and even purchased literacy software for him. In addition, Mrs. Wong worked one-on-one with Juan twice a week on basic decoding skills. Nevertheless, at the end of the year, Juan still lagged behind his peers.

After Juan entered first grade, Claudia received a telephone call and a follow-up note in the mail saying that the school's response to intervention (RTI) leadership team would like to meet with her to discuss Juan's learning challenges. Claudia changed her work schedule so that she could attend the afternoon meeting. At the meeting, school personnel discussed how the school had moved to a new way of working with students who struggle in reading and mathematics—

RTI. They said that Juan had scored poorly on the universal screening for reading and mathematics for a first grader and that they were therefore recommending Tier 2 interventions, as well as ongoing progress monitoring. Claudia did not know exactly what a universal screening, intervention, or progress monitoring were but she believed that if they would help Juan do better in school, she approved of them.

In February, the same team again asked Claudia to come to a meeting. One of the members of the school's RTI leadership team said that Juan had not been successful with the interventions that the teachers had tried and showed Claudia a graph of Juan's performance. The team leader said that Juan might need to be moved into Tier 3. Claudia asked whether Juan needed to repeat first grade or whether he might need special education. Several members of the team answered her questions by saying that they were not considering his repeating a grade at that time and that it was still too early

to decide whether special education was appropriate.

Claudia was confused. After she went home, she went online to look up the terms response to intervention, progress monitoring, and intervention. She found a number of web sites that included summary information about RTI and questions that parents could ask teachers. To her, the information, in addition to containing more educational jargon, was puzzling. The version of RTI that the web sites described seemed to differ from what Juan's school was doing. In Claudia's opinion, the RTI approach did not seem to be working with her son, and she still wondered whether special education services for learning disabilities might be a good option. Although Claudia was a working mother, she believed that being involved in her son's education was important. She was not sure how best to help Juan, and she was not convinced that the school did either. She felt frustrated.

Parents like Claudia are encountering a new system that addresses struggling learners. This system is called *response to intervention*, or *RTI* (see box, "What Is RTI?"). Schools are using this philosophy and process to direct choices about school curriculum (e.g., the core reading curriculum), ongoing assessment procedures, and decisions about special education services. In many states, RTI is replacing the previous mode—the IQ discrepancy model (Brown-Chidsey, 2007)—for identifying students with learning disabilities. In the discrepancy model, a significant gap between IQ scores and achievement scores is a strong indicator of learning disabilities (Vaughn & Bos, 2009). One positive result of the RTI system is that instead of looking only at gaps, principals, teachers, and other school leaders have had to develop and implement a variety of ways to remedi-

What Is RTI?

Response to intervention (RTI) is a multitiered system for struggling learners that provides increasingly intense levels of academic interventions and assessment.

ate instruction for students who struggle in their schools.

While schools shift toward RTI, parents like Juan's mother sometimes become confused about the process. Turnbull, Zuna, Turnbull, Poston, and Summers (2007) state, "The role of families in response to intervention has been minimal" (p. 575). Reviewing major RTI studies and documents (e.g., Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009; Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; Griffiths, Parsons, Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Tilly, 2007) indicates that the role of families or the way to involve them has received

little if any mention, let alone direction, as to how best to include and educate them. In other words, neither literature nor practice addresses where parents fit into the RTI process. Questions about the role of parents include the following:

- With RTI here to stay, why and how should schools educate and involve parents like Claudia in the process?

- What strategies can schools use?

- How can Claudia—as well as other parents—become more than just a spectator with her struggling son?

- How can school leaders increase parental involvement by designing a programmatic approach to ensure parental understanding and involvement?

- What benefits does the RTI process have for schools, teachers, and families?

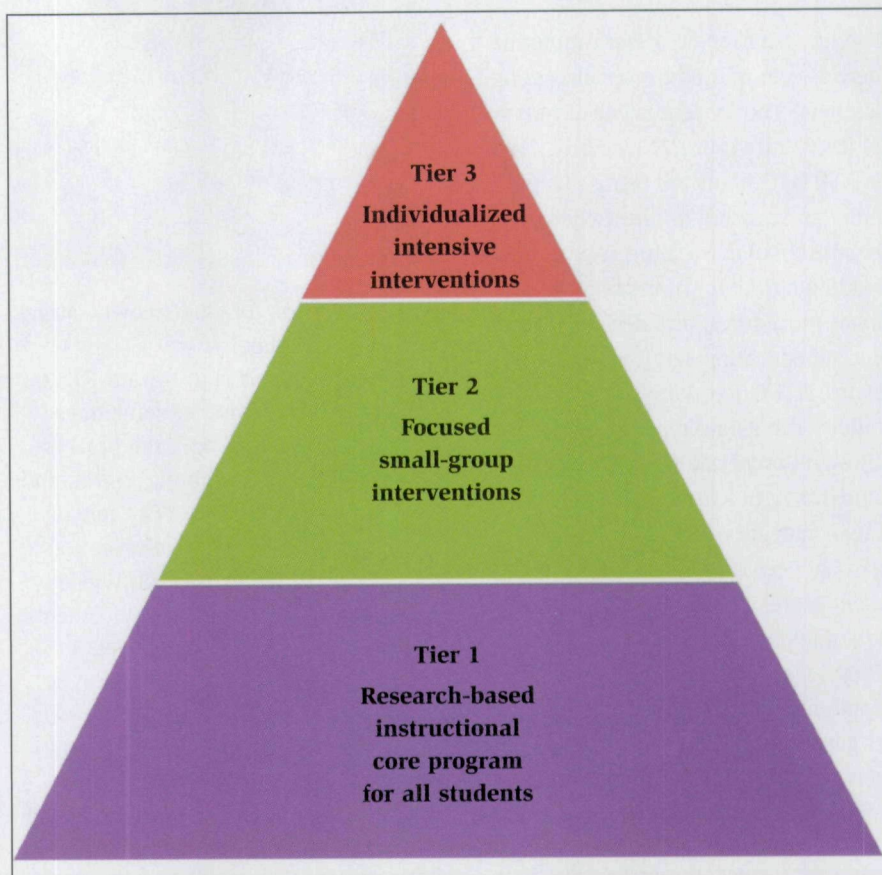## Why Should School Leaders Educate and Involve Parents in the RTI Process?

Generally speaking, parents want to understand the types of academic and behavioral support that their child is receiving, particularly when he or she is struggling. Many parents also want to know what they can do at home to help their child be more successful. Nevertheless, parents may not always be able to grasp the educational terminology that teachers use or the practical implications of those terms for their child. In addition, because of the ongoing demands of school and family life, teachers may not have enough time to train parents or even explain to them the particulars of new initiatives in the school. Instead, teachers must give parents a quick overview of RTI terms and interventions either at the beginning or end of parent conferences or during another informal meeting, such as at a beginning-of-the-year orientation. Parents are often left to their own devices to understand the process or do not comprehend it at all and defer to the expertise of school personnel.

Why should school leaders make a conscious decision to educate and involve parents in RTI? The first reason is that RTI is complicated and can be difficult to understand. Research in the area of parental involvement indicates that parents believe that educational

Figure 1. Tiers of Intervention in RTI

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Tier 3
Individualized intensive interventions

Tier 2
Focused small-group interventions

Tier 1
Research-based instructional core program for all students

grade. Furthermore, parents may not be accustomed to approaching learning problems from a problem-solving model. That is, parents may think that a one-time decision is necessary rather than a series of decisions based on progress monitoring of performance.

dents may be successful in the lower tiers of RTI and may not need further or more intensive interventions, some students eventually need special education placement. In fact, the third tier of RTI resembles special education—and some schools may even use that term. For parents who have been knowledgeable about the process from the beginning, the transition into special education services can be a more natural and easier progression than if they had not known about RTI. Educating parents in RTI may also reduce misunderstandings regarding special education decisions that can take place. Making the natural progression for more and more support on the basis of data-driven decisions at each stage of the process leads to a clearer understanding of the reasons that a child needs more support.

The final reason that the school's RTI leadership team should train parents in RTI is that research shows that when schools work to involve parents, outcomes are positive for students and parents. Although not all studies of

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jargon is intimidating and that it makes them less involved and less willing to communicate with teachers (Pena, 2000). The RTI system uses new terminology and approaches with which many parents may be unfamiliar. For example, generally speaking, the RTI process uses the term *tiers of intervention* (see Figure 1 for a graphic describing the tiers of intervention in RTI). Although teachers may be using the term *tier*, the parents may still be thinking along the lines of referral to special education or even repeating a

Table 1 provides a handout to share with parents to explain terms that the RTI process often uses.

The second reason that the school's RTI leadership team should instruct and involve parents in the process is that a referral to special education can be an outcome of the RTI process. Because parents must be part of the special education process, having them as core members from the start just makes sense. RTI is not a replacement for special education, even if a child is in one of the tiers. Although many stu-

Table 1. Key Terms Related to RTI

Term	Explanation
Core curriculum	A course of study deemed crucial and usually mandatory for all students of a school or school system
Intensive intervention	An intervention characterized by increased focus for students who fail to respond to less intensive forms of instruction; educators can increase intensity through many dimensions, including length, frequency, and duration of implementation
Problem solving	A process used to individually tailor an intervention; the problem-solving process has four stages: problem identification, problem analysis, plan implementation, and plan evaluation
Screening	A process conducted, usually as a first stage, to identify or predict students who may be at risk for poor learning outcomes
Standard protocol intervention	An intervention that relies on empirically validated intervention for all students with similar academic or behavioral needs
Tiered instruction	Levels of instructional intensity within a multitiered prevention system

Source: National Center on Response to Intervention. Retrieved from www.rti4success.org

parental involvement programs have been favorable (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002), many research studies have demonstrated a positive link between parental involvement and student achievement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Fan and Chen (2001) examined the issue of parental involvement and academic achievement. In their meta-analysis of 25 studies, they found a positive correlation between these two variables, suggesting that when parental involvement increases, academic achievement also increases. Furthermore, Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) reviewed a number of studies that demonstrate positive behavioral, emotional, and social outcomes for students whose parents are involved in schools (see box, "Select Studies on Parental Involvement" for more information).

However, it is important to recognize that better systems for schools and teachers in working with parents do not automatically result in good parent involvement and strong partnerships. Experience and research show

that parental involvement varies and is not always a strong partnership (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Some parents may choose or need to have a limited role. Some parents may not be very involved for a variety of reasons, including work, day-care issues, time demands, or cultural practices (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Pena, 2000). Educators cannot force involvement upon parents. Nevertheless, in making this necessary qualification, constructing positive relationships with parents should be at the core of the RTI process.

Strategies to Educate Parents About RTI

What can school principals, teachers, and especially the school's RTI leadership team do to educate and involve parents in the process? The following are some important tips.

Think and Plan for the Long Term

When the principal and the school's RTI leadership team decide how to inform parents about RTI, they should

have a long-term vision. In the beginning, it may be easy to let idealism regarding parent involvement lead the Team to set expectations that are too high or too difficult to implement. Instead, the School RTI Leadership Team should develop a long term plan (i.e., 3 to 5 years) with attainable and measurable goals. The school's RTI leadership team should also develop a long-term plan (i.e., 3 to 5 years) with attainable and measurable goals that consider the what-if factor; for example, what will the team do if parents do not show up or do not want or choose to be involved in the RTI process? These goals might include increasing the percentage of parental participation in school-based RTI programs or developing media that parents can access. The team should also determine the types of data that it will collect to assess whether it is making progress toward those goals (e.g., questionnaires, interviews) and whether it should modify, replace, or discard goals. Short-term assessments and long-term evaluations can help the team focus planning more specifically and meaningfully. More important, this type of planning and assessing should

Select Studies on Parental Involvement

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, . . . Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal, 106,* 105–130.

Pomerantz, E. M., Moorman, E. A., & Litwack, S. D. (2007). The how, whom, and why of parents' involvement in children's academic lives: More is not always better. *Review of Educational Research, 77,* 373–410.

Sheldon, S. B., & Van Voorhis, F. L. (2004). Partnership programs in U.S. schools: Their development and relationship to family involvement outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 15,* 125–148.

Figure 2. Parent Connection Checklist

Student name: Parent name:	Grade level:
Teacher name:	Case manager:
Meeting date:	RTI tier: 1 2 3
❐ Key RTI terms discussed:	❐ Ideas for home:
❐ Resources suggested for or given to parent:	❐ Invitation to RTI open house, RTI support group, etc.
❐ Questions for next time:	
❐ Intervention timeline:	

increase parental involvement over time.

In their work with the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), Sheldon and Van Voorhis (2004) demonstrated that outcome. They found that parental involvement increased over time when school leaders assessed their progress on parent-involvement goals. The study points out that it took 3 years to establish high-quality, comprehensive parent programs. It also found that schools' previous ratings of quality parental involvement were the best predictor for future positive parental involvement.

Get Started

Each group—principals, teachers, parent leaders, and the school's RTI leadership team—has a different role to play in involving and educating parents in the RTI process. Principals can make it the business of everyone in the

school to educate and involve parents in RTI. For example, a principal might devote a faculty meeting to the theme of RTI and increasing parent involvement. Staff might then generate ideas about encouraging participation. Principals can also schedule times for the school's RTI leadership team, as

Principals can make it the business of everyone in the school to educate and involve parents in RTI.

well as for grade-level teams, to meet together for planning and decision making. Parent leadership teams can survey parents about increasing involvement and share the RTI process from a parent's perspective at school–parent functions.

Classroom teachers can be active in the lower tiers of RTI to inform parents about RTI terminology, to describe how the tiers work, to discuss the types of

interventions that they are trying, and to furnish assessment data. Teachers can begin to discuss these issues in parent–teacher conferences or phone conversations. They can develop a checklist of key areas concerning RTI that they have covered with parents so they can give it to the following year's teacher (see Figure 2). This approach can help streamline the process of educating the parent and can help avoid redundancy. Teachers can also work together at grade-level meetings to strategize and discuss how to inform and involve parents (e.g., Salend, 2006).

When the school's RTI leadership team begins to work through RTI implementation, the process may seem difficult and even overwhelming (Mahdavi & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2009). One member of the team—a parent–RTI coordinator—can have primary responsibility for encouraging parental involvement. The coordinator may also oversee the ongoing assessments that indicate how the school is doing in involving and educating parents. The coordinator can look at the goals and decide whether questionnaires, surveys, or interviews will be more effective in developing a sense of what parents need.

Recruit Parent Leaders and Develop a Support Group

The RTI team can invite parent volunteers to participate in schoolwide RTI trainings and meetings. A few parents can even serve on the school's RTI leadership team. These trained parents can assist teachers who are carrying out the interventions. In addition, these parent leaders can develop other avenues for instructing parents. Because these parent leaders have a window into the RTI processes, they can explain and promote RTI to other parents.

The assistance of PTA officers may also be helpful in educating parents in

Table 2. Further Online Resources to Explore

Organization	Web Site	Resources for Teachers and Parents
Intervention Central	http://www.interventioncentral.org/	Provides a variety of practical resources and materials for teachers
National Association of School Psychologists	http://www.nasponline.org/index.aspx	Provides a primer for parents about RTI
National Association of State Directors of Special Education	http://www.nasdse.org/	Provides a variety of documents for teachers and researchers
National Center on Response to Intervention	http://www.rti4success.org/	Furnishes helpful handouts to review including *The ABC's of RTI: A Guide for Parents*
RTI Action Network – National Center for Learning Disabilities	http://www.rtinetwork.org/	Provides a variety of links, including podcasts, for teachers and parents
Wrightslaw	http://wrightslaw.com/info/rti.index.htm	Furnishes helpful information for teachers and parents, including several articles that explain RTI to parents

the RTI process. Schools often use PTA meetings to discuss new initiatives and events. For example, the principal can summarize the key principles of RTI at a PTA meeting, or a panel of individuals can discuss key points and then answer questions. After the presentation, optional breakout sessions can explain or even model what happens in the various tiers. This approach furnishes an excellent opportunity to disseminate information to many parents in a meaningful way.

The school's RTI leadership team or parent leaders might decide to form an RTI support group—much like a support group for parents of students with disabilities. A support group enables parents to come together in an organized way to discuss issues and solutions that relate to common goals, in addition to allowing them to provide emotional support to one another (Seligman & Darling, 2009). This type of group might encourage more parents to become involved in the RTI process, as well as in other school functions. Incorporating an RTI support group with professional learning communities (PLCs) or book clubs that already meet at school might also be possible.

Develop Information About RTI

Many parents also appreciate receiving general written or online information about RTI. Examples include a parent web site with relevant information and links, a pamphlet with a simple summary of RTI, or a DVD presentation to view at home. The key is to have several avenues that can reach all parents and include culturally diverse families. Furthermore, to reflect the diversity of the school, the school's RTI leadership team might need to develop more specific written materials in multiple languages that correspond with each tier of RTI. Table 2 includes several online resources.

Final Thoughts

In summary, the school's RTI leadership team can make educating and involving parents part of the implementation process in the school. While the team develops and implements goals and programs related to RTI, school leaders should assess the process and conduct ongoing evaluations. This ongoing evaluation should allow teams to continue with certain features of the plan and to revise features that are not working. The outcome will be that the school will educate and involve more parents and

families in RTI. Not all parents will be active in the school or in the RTI initiative; however, the start will be a positive one.

This type of purposeful approach can have many benefits. For example, parents who are knowledgeable about RTI might have a positive view of the school's proactive approach. Parents can see the school leaders (particularly the school's RTI leadership team) as partners in the problem-solving process because school leaders have meaningfully included them. Ideally, involved parents will appreciate this effort and will respond by increasing their work on other school initiatives.

When parents are educated and involved in RTI, educators can save time, energy, and resources while they build relationships. Creating processes or programs to educate parents requires more meetings, more creativity, and more personal attention by RTI leaders than at present. Nevertheless, when school leaders structure and implement parent-involvement initiatives with RTI, the time spent with parents early in the RTI process yields long-term dividends. When done with efficacy, the focus of the parents and that of the school should align to ultimately increase student achievement.

Parents like Claudia can become involved in the process and encourage other RTI parents to attend open houses and ask better questions.

When Juan entered second grade, Claudia's view of RTI and her school changed. First, she started receiving a monthly newsletter about RTI. Second, Claudia received a note that indicated that the school was planning RTI open houses on several nights during September and October. During these 2-hour-long meetings, parents could talk with the school's RTI leadership team about their questions and concerns. The school also offered two alternative times during the day, and the principal made the same announcement at the first PTA meeting.

Claudia attended two of the evening open houses. To obtain clarification of the information that she had received, she brought questions, as well as several documents that she had received during team meetings. The school psychologist explained to her many of the terms that the team had used at previous meetings. Furthermore, Juan's teacher showed Claudia the curriculum that she had been using to help Juan with his reading weaknesses. At the second open house, Claudia received instruction about supporting literacy at home. She was pleased to learn how the school was working to meet the needs of her son

and how her helping at home supported the school's efforts.

Soon after the second open house, Claudia attended an RTI update meeting led by the school's RTI leadership team. This time Claudia came to the meeting enthusiastically, although she was still a bit nervous, and she asked several specific questions. The meeting was productive, and Claudia's suggestions were helpful to the team. Claudia impressed the team members, who asked her why she seemed more positive in this meeting. Claudia indicated that the open houses had given her the information and help that she needed.

Claudia believed that she had a better understanding of RTI. When her friend Gretchen said that her son was struggling and beginning the RTI process, Claudia shared the information and support that she had received at the open houses. She described how proud she was of her school and its commitment to struggling students. Talking with Claudia reassured Gretchen, who promised to attend one of the open houses. Claudia now leads the parent RTI committee at her school.

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