

## School Psychologists and RTI

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### *About this Talk*

**Katie Eklund** and **Montina Romero** answered your questions about the various roles of school psychologists within RTI. They also offered tips and examples of strategies to support the effective implementation of RTI based on lessons learned working in local schools.

### *Transcript*

**Q** **Jon Lewis**  
What role does a school psychologist play on an RTI team?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**  
Great question, it is our view that a school psychologist can and should be an integral member of an RTI team. Often a school psychologist is the most trained in consultation, assessment, and intervention development. One of the most impactful practices of RTI is collaboration that honors the expertise of all. We find that school psychologists bring an expertise to an RTI team around process and can be instrumental in developing problem-solving practices that are most effective.

The greatest challenge for school psychologists is likely time; therefore, the extent of the role will be dependent on the time the school psychologist has to do some of the other aspects, such as progress monitoring, intervention implementation, direct consultation, etc. In our system, because school psychologists support only one building, the expectation is that they are involved in every aspect of problem-solving: intervention development and implementation, progress monitoring, consultation, etc. For school psychologists that serve multiple buildings, this may not be feasible. In this case, guiding the implementation of a problem-solving process may be most effective.

**Q** **Kim Riley**  
In your experience working in local schools, what has been the most challenging aspect related to being part of an RTI team and how did you overcome it?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**  
At our school, the most challenging aspect of creating a problem solving team has been helping staff to understand that this team is not the "gatekeeper?" to special education testing. We found that even when students are making adequate progress utilizing evidence-based interventions, teachers still come back and ask, "so when will the student be tested for special education?"

It has taken strong commitment from our building RTI team to provide ongoing training and

**A** consultation to help teachers understand this paradigm shift and that it is everyone's responsibility to ensure student growth. It has been a long-term commitment and process that has taken multiple years to get staff on board, however the outcomes for students have been extremely positive. In our district, school psychologists are actively involved in all aspects of the RTI model and have a very broadly defined role to help meet student's academic and behavioral needs.

**Q** **Kim Riley**

How does the RTI framework help school psychologists better meet the needs of children who live in poverty and have an IEP?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**

If the question is meeting diverse needs of students, some who are in poverty and some who have an IEP, an Rtl framework supports the use of multiple strategies and interventions throughout a system.

When talking about an Rtl framework, we are really talking about system reform, opening the door to collaboration across a system, supporting family and community engagement, implementing a viable curriculum, building a climate and culture that values and respects multiple individuals, and most importantly believing that all children can and will be successful through effective school practices. This directly impacts students who are in poverty and have IEPs. The level of rigor, expectations, and instructional delivery is increased.

School psychologists guide this process in many ways. School psychologists understanding of system change, consultation and collaboration, assessment, positive behavior support strategies are invaluable in this reform effort. I find systems that have a school psychologist who is well trained and effective in practice are much more proficient in making the systems changes that are most impactful to our neediest population.

**Q** **Kathryn Young Copper**

Is it true that discrepancies between intelligence scores and achievement scores are no longer used as an indicator of SLD; and that other testing in RTI Level 3 are used to make the determination?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**

Since IDEA 2004 endorsed RTI as an alternative to existing SLD identification practices, a number of states have moved away from using a discrepancy model. However, RTI practices should not be new to many educational agencies. RTI practices have been allowable under the federal law since the enactment of P.L. 94-142 (before IDEA) and many states have adopted many variations of RTI practices.

**A** In RTI, eligibility determination for special education services occurs when a student's response to both core instructional AND supplemental interventions does not result in movement towards achieving benchmarks and the performance levels of his/her peers. In terms of assessment for determination of a disability, as the law has always advocated, decisions on assessment tools should be guided by the questions that multidisciplinary teams (including parents) have about the student. Although practice often became more of a cookie cutter approach to assessment, effective practitioners selected assessment tools that would best answer questions about a student. The major shift with the implementation of Rtl is recognizing that teams need to do more than give assessments to label a child; teams need to be able to determine appropriate interventions that will improve the student's ability to be successful in an academic setting.

This shift in focus forces practitioners to broaden their assessment tools and techniques and develop assessment plans that are more individually focused.

**Q** **Stacy**  
Are you finding that Rtl implementation is increasing or decreasing the utilization of School Psychologists?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**  
Increasing! School psychologists are well-versed in consultation, assessment, data collection, and intervention practices. Rtl requires for special education eligibility student performance to be discrepant from peers, benchmark data be collected to document the discrepancy, and data be collected to inform the development and evaluation of interventions (NASDE, 2006). The new LD criteria require that data used for decision making are derived from the curriculum, collected frequently, and are sensitive to small changes.

This means that school psychologists may need to expand their role to not only include cognitive, social/emotional, and behavioral assessment intervention, and consultation, but to also be well-versed in academic assessment, intervention, and consultation. This has not traditionally been the role for many psychologists. RTI implementation offers the opportunity for school psychologists to greatly expand their role. Readers are encouraged to check-out the [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\) Practice Model](#), which delineates 10 domains of practice that actually align nicely with RTI implementation and best practice.

**Q** **James**  
How does one determine response/nonresponse to intervention for evaluating whether a child has a specific learning disability?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**

**A** In our system, school psychologists are trained and expected to utilize a gap analysis and to progress monitor a gap. This requires the school psychologist to be familiar and comfortable with assessment tools that are skill specific and where small changes can be identified. In our view it is necessary to use nationally normed assessments if the data is intended for specific learning disability identification.

The most important aspect of identifying a student's response is to know where the student is expected to be performing and what the expected rate of improvement should be. A team must know these two things before determining whether the response is adequate or sufficient. Teams must not only determine how much response is necessary, but the amount of time it will take to get an adequate response to an intervention.

Furthermore, identifying the expected length of intervention is important before determining an appropriate response. If the intervention is program based and is intended for 36 weeks, determining a response after 6 - 8 weeks is not appropriate. In this case a team would need to identify an individually based intervention to focus on a specific skill deficit and monitor the response to that intervention. In many cases, a program based intervention is not sufficient in meeting the needs of students who are significantly impacted by an academic skill deficit; therefore, teams must move promptly to implement individualized interventions to understand what a student's response will be to the identified academic need.

**Q** **Robin Lipman**

I work at the middle school and find our data team deals a lot with behavior--what universal screening instruments do you recommend for this level? and should there be more than one type of data team--one for academic concerns, one for behavioral?

**A** **Katie Eklund, MSW**

There are a number of universal screening tools available that address student behavioral and emotional concerns. There is an excellent article that I would encourage you to reference. It provides an excellent overview of the status of instrumentation around universal screening and provides evidence to support their use in schools. Levitt, J. M., Saka, N., Romanelli, L. H., & Hoagwood, K. (2007). Early identification of mental health problems in schools: The status of instrumentation. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*, 163-191.

New tools have been released since that time, which your district may also want to consider. Pearson has released the Behavioral and Emotional Screening System (BESS), which is a shorter version of the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Children-2 (BASC-2). More information can be accessed online. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is also a free tool that can be accessed online. There are many other measures available but these are two newer tools that come to mind.

**A** Personally, our team has found it difficult to separate behavioral and academic concerns as children often present with both types of concerns. We would recommend teams be able to address both areas of concern as behaviors often negatively impact academics, and vice versa.

**Q** **Kim Codori**

How can a school psychologist support teachers who may have difficulty tracking and analyzing student data? What should the school psychologist's role be in data team meetings?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**

School psychologists can support teachers through training and providing tools that are effective in monitoring student skills. Many teachers don't have experience with tracking and analyzing student data until they are in the field; therefore, it is an uncomfortable process.

Because of the training school psychologists have in data collection, being a support to teachers is a valuable role. In terms of data meetings, a school psychologist's participation is likely dependent on the time a school psychologist is available.

If a school psychologist is unable to physically attend the data meeting, he/she can be instrumental in developing efficient and effective practices to discuss data, help develop tracking forms, consult with teachers before and after data meetings, etc.

**Q** **Arlene Yong**

What additional diagnostic tests can a school psychologist bring to the problem-solving process (other than the tools like observations, CBMs, and review of records/history. etc.)? What are the best ways to provide additional diagnostic information without stepping into one-on-one testing that requires parental consent?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**

It is our practice to get parent permission when a student has been identified as needing strategic intervention and before additional assessments are provided. We consider this permission separate from parental consent for evaluation.

There are many diagnostic tests that relate to specific academic areas that are effective in identifying student needs. Some of the assessments continue to be one-on-one. Based on the needs of our district, our team of school psychologists has identified several assessments to utilize for skill deficit identification.

For example, to identify specific skill deficits for reading our team utilizes the Test of Early Reading Ability, Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing, Test of Reading Comprehension, etc. There

**A** are a multitude of diagnostic assessments that are available and we have found that collaborating as a team to determine which ones we will utilize in our district has been most effective.

**Q** **Lara**  
Please share lessons learned while working in your local schools.

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**  
Some of the most significant lessons learned have been that all schools are different systems and a well- designed and effective universal system are imperative to effectively implement a problem-solving process. To truly implement Rtl as a reform effort you have to honor where the system is and what the individual needs of the system are. It is important to identify what is working well in a system before changes are suggested or made. It is also necessary to build trust and consensus when making system changes.

Also, all systems have to recognize that universal instruction and intervention is where the biggest impact is made. If 70% of a system requires intense intervention, then the universal instruction needs to become more intense. Many systems in this situation try to refer all of those students to a more intense tier. The greatest learning experience in this situation is to recognize the universal level must change.

**Q** **Tracey Shriver**  
Do you have suggestions for how to help school psychologists become valuable members of the teams in the buildings when the schools still want to rely on standardized tests and get students in special ed.?

**A** **Katie Eklund, MSW**  
School psychologists can help initiate, develop, and lead building-wide Response to Intervention teams and procedures in order to expand their role. This includes not only providing behavioral interventions, but also better understanding academic assessments and interventions and how these results can impact student achievement.

As referred to in a previous question, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recently created a new Practice Model which clearly delineates the broad role school psychologists can play within their own school(s) and district. (See the [NASP website for more information](#)) Practitioners are encouraged not only to share this model with their administrators, staff, parents, and district, but to adopt this job description at the district and state level to help increase awareness about the breadth of our practice and competencies. At the school level, school psychologists should advocate for their role by offering to provide services beyond testing and counseling for special education students. While these services are valuable, they are only a tip of

**A** the iceberg in providing comprehensive school mental health services.

It takes a multiple year commitment for the paradigm shift to happen in many buildings, so don't give up! There are many resources available to help support your efforts and I would encourage you to collaborate with other school psychologists in your district and/or area to make this shift a reality.

**Q** **Morgan**

How can school psychologists increase their visibility in arenas other than special education, especially with parents of non-disabled students?

**A** **Katie Eklund, MSW**

School psychologists are encouraged to participate in all aspects of the school. Within our own district, school psychologists take on a very broad role within the schools. As we are actively involved in the Response to Intervention process and team, we are able to become involved with students and parents at an early level of intervention.

Further, we head up universal social emotional programming in many classrooms, so we have the opportunity to positively interact with many children both in general and special education. I currently co-lead groups with our school counselor for students identified as gifted and talented, as well as co-lead deployment groups with a family consultant in our district.

Other outreach activities to broaden school psychologist's visibility with families may include creating a short article for the monthly school newsletter, offering parent trainings on a variety of topics, attending back to school night and other school activities, as well as covering recess duty as a way to positively interact with children in other environments.

**Q** **Allyn Lee Snyder**

What do you find are the best resources for developing frameworks for Tiers and intervention?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**

The most important aspect to identify when considering resources is what a system has within its means and what the system is willing to do. The best resources depend on several factors including student population, teacher training, and willingness to implement certain interventions. One of the most effective phrases is "Best Available Solution." If the system doesn't have specific interventions or training, the intervention is not best or available. In our view, an important exercise for individual systems is to identify specific needs and develop intervention and strategies for specific skill/behavior deficits. Furthermore, we believe that trying to narrow down certain interventions to tiers is ineffective because intervention intensity is more dependent on intensity,



**A** time, grouping, etc. and not necessarily individual strategy or program.

**Q** **Candice N**

What are some ways school psychologists help to effectively develop cohesive problem solving ability within a school or district?

**A** **Montina Romero, Ph.D.**

Training is one of the best ways to develop a cohesive problem-solving process. The [Colorado Department of Education](#) provides several resources for training on the problem-solving process.

The videos within the site demonstrate the problem-solving process in action and the class handouts can be used to train school teams. In our system, school psychologists train their individual building teams on the problem-solving process and model consultation so problem-solving can be effective.

**Q** **Kim Carter**

In your experience, how have the roles of Speech Language Pathologists and School Psychologists collaborated?

**A** **Katie Eklund, MSW**

Our school psychologists and speech language pathologists (SLP's) spend a lot of time in collaboration throughout assessment, intervention, and consultation with teachers and parents. Not only with kids who are already identified and in special education, but we also heavily rely on the expertise of our SLP's throughout the RTI process.

For example at the assessment level, when students present with symptoms of inattention/hyperactivity, paired with academic difficulties, our SLP's have been effective in assessing expressive and/or receptive language difficulties as well as considering any type of auditory processing disorders. Our SLP serves on our building problem-solving team as we have found the SLP's expertise to be extremely valuable. In our district many SLP's and school psychologists also co-lead social skills groups as these types of groups can concurrently address the development of social language deficits and the social skills needed by many children.

**Q** **Allyn Lee Snyder**

How significant of a discrepancy between grade level expectation and child performance is considered 'enough', particularly when higher levels of intervention are in place?



**A** *Montina Romero, Ph.D.*

In our state, we have been giving guidelines for what a significant discrepancy is between grade level expectation and student performance. Then our district determined on specific instruments (diagnostic assessments and curriculum based assessments) what the discrepancy needs to be for identification purposes. For our district, we identify a significant discrepancy as the 10th percentile or below.

We also recognize the issue of maintaining skills and the level of intervention should be considered. Therefore, many factors should be included in the body of evidence when considering whether a student has a disability.

**Q** *Lorna*

Is it true that you can not stop a referral for psycho-educational testing and/or not do testing when a child is in the RTI process?

**A** *Katie Eklund, MSW*

If at any time a parent provides written documentation that they would like their child tested for special education, then in our district that request must be honored. Often times if parents ask questions about testing or do not understand the RTI process, then a conversation explaining the process may allow the school to move forward with providing evidence-based interventions through a multitiered system of interventions and supports.

We have found in our own district that if parents are provided ongoing feedback about their child's progress utilizing a variety of interventions, then they are typically supportive of the process. However, some parents may still choose to request formalized testing and this request must be honored or refused in writing through a formal special education action.

**Q** *Alison Eldert*

What is the best way for Principals to show support for both the school psych's and the teachers when doing Rtl?

**A** *Katie Eklund, MSW*

School principals play a vital role in the effective implementation of Response to Intervention. School principals can show support by understanding the Response to Intervention process and provide the necessary time for staff development and resources to support its use within their own buildings.

We have found that collaboration between school psychologists and principals is essential to RTI's success in a building as teams need to develop a common framework and understanding of

**A** building priorities from year to year. It takes a multiple year commitment from administration and teachers to fully implement and streamline RTI processes within a building and district.

**Q** **Alison Eldert**

Is it expected that the school psych's actually do the intervention?

**A** **Katie Eklund, MSW**

School psychologists play an important role as part of a larger Response to Intervention team. The role of who actually carries out the intervention can vary between buildings, and may include learning specialists, special education teachers, interventionists, general education teachers, and school psychologists.

School psychologists often times can be utilized to ensure that evidence-based interventions are being carried out with fidelity, progress monitoring tools are accurately assessing the area of concern, and to work with school staff to deliver appropriate interventions.

That concludes our RTI Talk for today. Thanks to everyone for the thoughtful questions and thanks to our experts, Ms. Katie Eklund and Dr. Montana Romero, for their time today.

**Please also take a few moments to give us your feedback about this RTI talk by taking our [survey!](#)**

**Related Reading from RTINetwork.org:**

- [New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children](#)

**Additional Resources:**

- [National Association of School Psychologists](#)
- [National Center on Response to Intervention](#)
- "A More Valuable Resource," by Deitra Reiser, Katherine Cowan, Stacy Skalski, and Mary Beth Klotz, in *Principal Leadership*, November 2010
- "Data-Based Decision Making," by Anastasia Kalamaros Skalski and Montana Romero, in *Principal Leadership*, January 2011