



School Social Work  
Association of  
America

## **Response to Intervention: New Roles for School Social Workers**

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### **Introduction**

Response to Intervention (RTI) is the practice of providing high quality instruction and evidence-based interventions to address student needs. Educators and other school personnel use learning rate over time and the student's level of performance to make educational decisions that will assist in the student achieving success. By employing student screening, diagnostics, and continual progress monitoring to inform instruction, decisions about general, compensatory, and special education are more accurate and defensible.

Emanating from the reauthorization of IDEA and identification criteria of Specific Learning Disability, RTI is encouraged as a system wide approach in general education to prevent and/or resolve lack of student success. Using this multi-tiered problem-solving approach allows for early identification of struggling students and offers increasingly intensive interventions for specific groups of students rather than waiting for students to fail.

In a typical three-tiered model the first tier, universal intervention services, are interventions applied to all students in an effort to improve competencies and build capacity. These interventions help to promote academic achievement, student mental health, and positive school climate. The second tier, targeted intervention services, uses those strategies that seek to prevent and intervene in problems that are impeding smaller groups of students at risk. The third tier, intensive intervention services, targets individuals and small groups of students who require intensive support in order to succeed in school academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.

### **Challenges and Opportunities of the New Model**

There is confusion among some educators regarding how the elimination of the IQ/discrepancy criterion requirement will impact the assessment process. The changes in the IDEA 2004 statute support the ecological and systemic models that are the foundation of school social work practice. In addition, the education, training, philosophy and tradition of school social work support an ecological identification and intervention model prior to a special education referral.

IDEA 2004 continues the requirement that a child be evaluated in all areas of suspected disability and that no one assessment or measure may be the sole criterion for determining eligibility. Teams must still conduct relevant, comprehensive evaluations using qualified personnel. School social workers' broad skill sets, ranging from advanced clinical to highly skilled generalist approaches (with particular emphasis in school mission, functioning, and processes), are essential to the assessment process and design of effective interventions. All students, their families, and school personnel benefit from access to the expertise of school social workers in implementing system level universal (school or district), evidence-based programs, as well as early-targeted interventions. This expertise is particularly critical in working

with students struggling with behavioral, emotional, family system, and ecological challenges to ensure a truly systemic, comprehensive assessment.

The design, implementation, and evaluation of RTI practices strongly support the inclusion of school social workers in the process. Trained and versed in systems approaches to problem-solving, school social workers in many states are dually licensed by their state departments of education and mental health or other clinical licensing boards and can provide the ecological perspective of RTI to academic, social/emotional, or behavioral concerns in schools and with individual students.

Challenges of RTI practices include stronger emphasis on instructional intervention, progress monitoring, and data gathering in relation to school social work interventions that tend to be less directly academic and more mental health and ecologically focused. Expanding awareness of additional and new programs may require increased professional development opportunities. While there are sufficient data to support the efficacy of these interventions, typically it has not been the role of school social workers to gather these data. The additional opportunity to assist administration and educational staff to appreciate the import of systemic change and RTI practices is exciting.

### **New and Expanded Roles**

School social workers in districts that choose to incorporate RTI practices will provide quality services and expertise on issues ranging from program design to assessment and intervention with individual students. In addition to providing interventions, school social workers will continue to link child-serving and community agencies to the schools and families to support the child's academic, emotional, behavioral, and social success. The principles of RTI are highly consistent with professional standards of school social workers. Trained in collaborative and strength-based approaches, school social workers are natural leaders in the implementation of RTI.

#### *System Design*

School social workers are highly trained professionals who can assist systems to make the transition from ensuring access (e.g., through Child Find) to a demand for results. Assessing needs and developing, implementing, and evaluating new models of service delivery are intended to increase the educational success of all students. There are several opportunities for school social workers to do this by:

- Actively identifying and addressing systemic barriers to learning.
- Serving as change agents to bring stakeholders together in collaborative efforts to create an environment that is conducive to effective problem-solving and learning.
- Conducting needs assessments and progress monitoring.
- Developing, implementing, and evaluating programs that address educational and behavioral concerns.
- Training staff in the foundations, evidence-based instructional strategies, implementation, and evaluation of RTI practices.
- Assisting administrators and staff to understand the familial, cultural and community components of students' responses to instruction, learning and academic success.
- Evaluating student progress specific to behavioral, emotional, and mental health concerns and the effects on academic progress.
- Continuing the traditional school social work role of serving as the liaison to families, the community and other stakeholders to ensure open communication and continuing dialogue.
- Facilitating and coordinating the delivery of educational and mental health services with and by community agencies and service providers.

### *Team Collaboration*

An essential belief of school social workers is the necessity of collaboration in addressing systemic and individual needs of all students, but particularly struggling students. Frequently the team leader in these efforts, school social workers bring together the expertise of other school professionals including educators and administrators, families, community providers, and other supports and resources to resolve problems and enhance the educational experiences of students. School social workers are critical to successful collaboration and focus their efforts on:

- Being informed liaisons to parents, assisting them to effectively participate in their child's education and to strengthen their parenting skills.
- Helping parents to understand their child's developmental and educational needs and expand their knowledge base of RTI practices and strategies.
- Consulting with all stakeholders to ensure that the intervention plan devised is appropriate to the needs of the targeted student or students.
- Ensuring that the team process and decisions are implemented in accord with the goals and desired outcome of the team and the evidence-based strategies chosen.
- Assisting team members to understand mental health and behavioral concerns of students identified as needing assistance and the potential impact of chosen interventions.
- Providing relevant training regarding problem-solving steps and decision-making.
- Serving as a resource to educators and other team members on understanding the process and requirements of RTI initiatives.

### *Individual Students*

Most school social workers will continue to provide services to individual students, particularly those who are found to require the services provided in the targeted and intensive intervention tiers of RTI problem-solving practices. Key activities will typically include:

- Early intervention with struggling learners to link them with appropriate resources.
- Ongoing progress monitoring.
- Comprehensive formal and informal ecological assessments including academic functioning, social/emotional and mental health functioning, adaptive functioning, and family and community interactions.
- Development of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
- Development and monitoring of Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIP).
- Comprehensive family services.
- Individual counseling services.
- Small group counseling.
- Community liaison to ensure adequate and appropriate resources for students and families in need.
- Helping students to develop and maintain personal, social and academic competencies.
- Consultation to and with educators to ensure understanding and support of struggling learners.
- Crisis response for students in critical need (e.g. suicide ideation, self-harm, family crisis, homelessness).

### **Meeting the Challenge**

Because school social workers are ecologically versed and systems trained, RTI's problem-solving, tiered approach is a natural fit that allows the school social worker to extend more services to the general education student in an effort to prevent or resolve problems, strengthen student skills, and potentially avoid the consideration of special education need. With the shift to better behavioral and achievement outcomes for all students, school social workers may be able to reallocate their time in favor of stronger and more extensive prevention efforts, helping students to identify fully and clearly with the general

education population. The intent of RTI is to prevent and resolve student problems at early stages to enhance their educational experiences.

To meet this challenge, school social workers will need to:

- Be willing to re-examine their approaches to change and problem resolution.
- Take risks in terms of attempting new interventions and strategies.
- Examine their beliefs about special education and services to students with special needs.
- Engage in regular and ongoing professional development opportunities.
- Be more physically available to the classroom.
- Examine their personal service delivery system and make adaptations to better serve students.
- Determine more efficient ways to provide services to more students.
- Become more expert in data collection.

Response to Intervention practices are not new or foreign to school social workers. However, they do challenge school social workers to examine how they deliver services and demand that those services be more fully planned and documented. RTI encourages school social workers to develop more creative interventions, thus improving the learning process for students and school social workers themselves.

### **Key Resources**

Adapted from *Problem Solving and RTI: New Roles for School Psychologists*, by Andrea Canter, National Association of School Psychologists, *Communique*, 34, (5), insert, 2006. Available: [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

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National Association of School Psychologists website, [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org); NASP's RTI References and Weblinks, <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/rtireference.pdf>

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National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) (2005). *Response to Intervention: Policy considerations and implementation*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

School Social Work Association of America website, [www.sswaa.org](http://www.sswaa.org); Publications and Resources, *Response to Intervention*. <http://www.sswaa.org/about/resolutions/RTIFinal.html>

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website, [www.dpi.wi.gov](http://www.dpi.wi.gov) Roles of the School Social Worker. <http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/socialwork.html#school%20social%20work%20roles>

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website, [www.dpi.wi.gov](http://www.dpi.wi.gov) Linking School Social Work to Student Achievement. <http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/socialwork.html#linking%20school%20social%20work%20to%20student%20achievement>