

Special Education Update

Response to Intervention (RTI) in Connecticut: Significant Changes Ahead

As of July 1st, 2009, districts will no longer be permitted to use IQ-achievement discrepancy formulas to identify students with specific learning disabilities

Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004, there has been much discussion nationally over the process known as response to intervention (RTI). RTI is the practice of providing high-quality instruction/intervention to students using a problem-solving methodology and involving regular measurement of student achievement and student behavior (i.e., universal screening). In an RTI model, there is a multi-tiered approach to providing services and interventions to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity. Support to students is based on student need and performance rates over time, not a particular label or existence of a particular program. RTI is an initiative that takes place in the general education environment and typically is implemented as a schoolwide or districtwide initiative.

Under IDEA 2004, states must permit the use of a process for schools to determine whether a child has a specific learning disability based on his/her response to research-based interventions. This process can be RTI or another research-based process. However, the federal law states that school districts can no longer be required to consider whether the child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability. The criticism of the traditional discrepancy model has been that it has led to a wait-

to-fail model of identification for learning disabilities. Moreover, some have argued that students end up being identified due to factors other than the presence of a disability such as “inadequate general education practices and limited opportunities for extra help for struggling students.”¹

In its February 2008 Executive Summary, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) outlines its state model for RTI implementation in Connecticut. It was developed by an advisory panel that was charged with reviewing current research and practices and making recommendations for an RTI process to be used across the state. Among the key recommendations and findings of the report:

- Connecticut will refer to the RTI process as **scientific research-based interventions (SRBI)** to emphasize the integral role of general education in the intervention process and the utilization of practices that are scientific and research-based. Universal screening will be referred to as **“universal common assessments”** in the SRBI framework.
- **As of July 1, 2009, the use of IQ-achievement discrepancy formulas will be no longer be permitted and an evidence-based analysis of identified gaps between student performance and expected outcomes will be part of the comprehensive**

evaluation for identification of learning disabilities. District personnel must incorporate the review of SRBI data in a comprehensive assessment to identify a student with a learning disability.

- The basic principles of RTI/SRBI have been utilized in Connecticut for years and were recognized in the CSDE’s 1999 guidelines for identifying children with specific learning disabilities.
- Through SRBI, the CSDE intends to provide “a coordinated, comprehensive, high-quality system of education for all students.”
- SRBI is a new approach for many districts that previously had utilized common assessments that “were not adequately monitoring progress, informing instruction or detecting need for intervention early-on.” Rather, districts need “assessments that can be given and scored quickly, and that are reliable and valid for monitoring student progress . . . SRBI will enable school personnel to determine which educational practices yield positive student outcomes and accelerate student learning.”
- CSDE believes that SRBI will not be a costly initiative for schools but rather, it involves **“finding more effective ways to deploy existing resources”** (emphasis

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added) . . . Implementation of SRBI should not require extensive additional time commitments for educators, administrators, and support services personnel — **although for some of these groups, it certainly may change how educators spend their time** (emphasis added)."

- SRBI encompasses three tiers. Tier 1 includes the general education curriculum and instruction for all students. The assumption is that Tier I will be successful for at least 80 percent of students as measured by the universal common assessments. Tier II provides more intensive instruction and supports through the use of smaller groups on a short-term basis (i.e., 8 to 20 weeks). Tier III also includes short-term interventions but for those students who continue to make inadequate progress despite interventions in Tiers I and II. A student's lack of progress after Tier III may result in the consideration of whether a special education evaluation is necessary. However, students can be referred for an eligibility deter-

mination for special education at any time and during all three tiers of the SRBI process. But the CSDE warns that students should never be referred unless the use of interventions has clearly shown that the student's difficulties are not due to "insufficient instruction, unhealthy school climate, inadequate practices in the area of social-emotional learning or cultural relevance."

As SRBI is implemented in districts across the state, it inevitably will impact the work of all teachers, especially general education teachers. It is extremely important that CEA's local Associations ensure that teachers play an integral role in the district's SRBI planning process and system design so that the needs and concerns of teachers are considered and incorporated. SRBI also likely will result in the need to bargain over increased workload (e.g., common assessments, ongoing monitoring, providing supplemental instruction, etc.), and additional time necessary for collaboration, planning, and professional development for both general and special

education teachers. SRBI also may impact the number of students who are identified for special educational and thus could reduce the number of special education classes and resource specialist programs. As a result, there may be transfer and reassignment issues in the bargaining unit. Finally, local Associations need to be vigilant in the teacher evaluation process and ensure that student progress and/or achievement in SRBI programs is not used to evaluate teachers' performance.

To read the full SRBI Executive Summary, go to http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/Pressroom/RTI_Executive_Summary.pdf.

ⁱ "Using Scientific Research-Based Interventions: Improving Education for All Students/Connecticut's Framework for RTI," Connecticut State Department of Education, February 2008 Executive Summary, p. 1.

Reprinted from an article written by Robyn Kaplan-Cho of the Connecticut Education Association for the Spring 2008 edition of the *Human & Civil Rights Reporter*.