Problem Solving and RTI: New Roles for School Psychologists

By Andrea Canter, PhD, NCSP
National Association of School Psychologists

IDEA 2004 and its accompanying regulations present new challenges and opportunities for school personnel working with at-risk and special needs populations. In particular, changes in the identification of learning disabilities to include Response to Intervention (RTI) procedures have significant implications for the role of the school psychologist. The movement toward problem solving models of early intervention and disability identification is not new as such systems have been implemented at district and state levels over the past twenty years. What is new is the strong support in law for “the use of a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures” for students who may have Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), as well as the mandate that states no longer can require districts to consider an IQ/achievement discrepancy criterion.

Definitions. “Response to Intervention” (RTI) refers to an array of procedures that can be used to determine if and how students respond to specific changes in instruction. RTI does not refer to a specific model, test, or single procedure, and RTI is often used within a Problem Solving model to help identify effective instructional strategies and evaluate their effectiveness. RTI by itself is not intended to serve as a single criterion or single procedure for identifying disability.

“Problem Solving” refers to a broad, sequenced model (often referred to as a “three-tiered model” although some districts use more than three stages) that seeks to determine what instructional supports are needed to solve student achievement problems (and sometimes expanded to address behavior problems as well). Problem Solving models include early intervention components—general education classroom and school supports and ongoing evaluation of student progress—and referral for special education evaluation when those early supports fail to produce sufficient gains. Problem Solving models focus on improving student performance rather than classifying a disability. In some districts, implementation of the Problem Solving model includes incorporation of RTI procedures and nontraditional assessments in the determination of SLD. Across states and settings, there is no single “problem solving model” but rather many variations.

Challenges and Opportunities of Problem Solving and RTI
There is confusion among some educators, including some school psychologists, regarding how the elimination of the IQ/discrepancy criterion requirement will impact the functioning of school psychologists and, more generally, the assessment process. Contrary to some initial interpretations, the changes in the law actually build on the school psychologist’s expertise in assessment, whether cognitive or otherwise. IDEA 2004 does not prohibit or discourage the use of standardized measures of cognitive ability. Comprehensive assessment is required in all areas of suspected disability, including SLD. IDEA, from PL 94-142 in 1975 through the newly reauthorized IDEA 2004, never specifically required intelligence testing. In fact, prior to 2004, the federal law called for a finding of a “severe discrepancy” between achievement and intellectual ability, but did not specify how “ability” should be measured. Rather, many states have required that teams consider discrepancy between IQ test performance and achievement test performance as the primary criterion for LD—this has not been a federal requirement.
RTI is a component of comprehensive assessment. The administration of standardized tests of cognitive ability is not antithetical to the provisions of problem solving approaches using RTI criteria—the new law does not create an "either/or" process. Teams must still conduct relevant, comprehensive evaluations using qualified personnel, which necessarily will include school psychologists whose skills remain essential to the determination of SLD, as well as to the determination of other disabilities. Indeed school psychologists’ broad expertise extends far beyond gate-keeping roles and the increased opportunity to tap into these skills is a distinct advantage of the new provisions of IDEA 2004.

RTI and Problem Solving increase the need for school psychologists. The design, implementation, and evaluation of problem solving and RTI approaches create new opportunities and greater need for school psychologists, while also requiring their active participation in more familiar—if expanded—assessment roles. In fact, historically, staffing trends reflect increased positions and responsibilities of school psychologists in districts using these models. For example, in the Minneapolis Public Schools, the number of district school psychologist positions doubled over the ten years following implementation of a district-wide problem solving model that included RTI procedures, despite declining budgetary resources. Most new positions were funded directly by principals seeking expanded services (see Marston et al., 2002, in "Resources").

Challenges of the new model. There are, of course, challenges to school psychologists working in districts that undertake the shift from traditional psychometric (norm-referenced) approaches to a more pragmatic, “edumetric” problem solving model (focused on measuring changes in individual performance over time). Such challenges include the shift from a “within child” deficit paradigm to an eco-behavioral perspective; a greater emphasis on instructional intervention and progress monitoring prior to special education referral; an expansion of the school psychologist’s assessment “tool kit” to include more instructionally relevant, ecologically based procedures; and most likely the need for additional training in all of the above.

New and Expanded Roles
School psychologists working in districts that opt to develop problem solving and RTI procedures can offer tremendous value and expertise at many levels, from system-wide program design through specific assessment and intervention efforts with the individual student.

System Design
School psychologists are among the best-trained professionals in the school district to help develop, implement, and evaluate new models of service delivery. These roles include:

- Identifying and analyzing existing literature on problem solving and RTI in order to determine relevant and effective approaches for the local district (or state).

- Working with administration to identify important stakeholders and key leaders to facilitate system change (obtain “buy-in”).

- Conducting need assessment to identify potential obstacles, concerns, and initial training needs.

- Design of evidence-based model that best fits local needs and resources.

- Planning for and conducting necessary staff training for implementation (e.g., training in evidence-based instructional interventions, evaluating student progress).

- Developing local norms for “academic achievement, e.g., CBM and other measures of student progress, and monitoring the reliability and validity of these norms over time.

- Implementing and evaluating pilot projects.

- Overseeing district level implementation and ongoing evaluation.
• Ongoing communication and consultation with administration, school board, and parents.

• Identification of systemic patterns of student need (e.g., identifying persistent difficulties among kindergarten and first grade students in basic phonics skills) and working with district personnel to identify appropriate, evidence-based intervention strategies.

Team Collaboration
School psychologists are often assigned to leadership roles on school teams. Even when not designated as a team leader, the school psychologist often is regarded as a leader regarding such issues as assessment, mental health, home-school collaboration and school-agency collaboration. As members of the intervention assistance and special education teams, school psychologists play critical roles in the implementation of problem solving and RTI efforts, including:

• Ongoing consultation regarding implementation issues as well as regarding individual student needs.

• Collaboration in the development of team procedures, e.g., developing procedures for referral, monitoring and evaluation at each tier of problem solving; developing specific procedures for measuring response to intervention; developing observation and interview protocols, etc.

• Identifying team training needs and providing, or helping team obtain, relevant training (including training in applying progress monitoring procedures to decision-making).

• Serving as liaisons to parents—helping parents understand the new model and how it impacts their child, helping to ensure that parent input is integrated into each tier of intervention and subsequent evaluation.

• Serving as liaisons to community providers and agencies who may not be familiar with the new models—conducting inservice about the models to community providers; ensuring appropriate involvement and communication with community providers (with parent consent).

• Providing oversight of progress monitoring and integration of all data in team decision-making.

Serving Individual Students
Most school psychologists will continue to spend the majority of their time working with individual student problems. Within problem solving and RTI models, these activities will likely include:

• Consulting with teachers and parents regarding early intervention activities in the classroom and at home. Because PSM and RTI emphasize early intervention (Tier 1), school psychologists may spend more time and effort at this stage than they did under traditional models.

• Demonstrating (and training) progress monitoring strategies as part of the individual student intervention plan, and assisting staff in interpreting data as part of the ongoing decision-making process.

• Observing students in the instructional environment in order to help identify appropriate intervention strategies, to identify barriers to intervention, and to collect response to intervention data. Although observation has always been part of the school psychologist’s repertoire, PSM and RTI approaches place greater emphasis on gathering ecological data.

• Evaluating student’s cognitive functioning. As always, the school psychologist plays a key role in the comprehensive evaluation; this is true in PSM and RTI models, although the specific procedures used may be different. When students are referred for consideration of SLD or other disability categories, it is essential that the team gathers information about cognitive functioning. Depending on the rules and criteria used in your state and district, information regarding cognitive ability might include
observations of the student during instruction, an historical review of the student’s academic progress and health history, interviews with parents and teachers, review of data reflecting the student’s response to intervention, direct measures of cognitive ability (such as intelligence tests or informal tasks), and/or direct measures of specific cognitive processes related to specific academic skills. Using multiple sources of data to address student’s cognitive functioning not only reflects best practices but also minimize the impact of biases and limitations of standardized norm-referenced IQ measures, especially for children who are socio-economically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse.

- Under PSM and RTI approaches, the school psychologist should determine the most useful procedures to address referral concerns and the needs of the individual student. School psychologists may spend less time in formal assessment activities under PSM and RTI by individualizing the assessment based on student need rather than complying with “gatekeeping” rules.

- Evaluating student’s relevant academic, behavioral, and mental health functioning. As part of a comprehensive evaluation, the school psychologist should always consider relevant academic, behavioral, and mental health concerns that may impact school performance. This role is no different under PSM and RTI than under traditional models. If behavioral or mental health issues are not easily ruled out in considering academic difficulties, the school psychologist should work with other team members to obtain appropriate, useful data using empirically supported procedures. (More time might be available to address mental health issues under new models.)

- Working with team members and service providers to set realistic goals, design appropriate instructional strategies and progress monitoring procedures, and periodically evaluate student progress for those receiving special education services, using RTI and other data.

Meeting the Challenge
The opportunities for school psychologists working within Problem Solving and RTI frameworks are extensive. To some these opportunities may seem overwhelming—where in the workday would there be time to add all of these activities to our current responsibilities? Certainly if the traditional roles of assessment-for-classification continue, it would be difficult to expand into these new roles. The point of Problem Solving and RTI, however, is not to add more tasks but to reallocate school psychologists’ time to better address prevention and early intervention, and in the long run serve more students up front rather than at the point of special education evaluation and service. Where PSM and RTI have been faithfully implemented, this seems to be the outcome—more psychologist time spent on services within general education, less time spent on eligibility assessment activities, more time available to address mental health issues. Some districts report reductions in special education referral and placement; even where placement rates have remained stable, psychologists nevertheless report a change in the way they spend their time. The reallocation of effort will hopefully lead to more effective interventions, both for students who remain in general education and those who ultimately qualify for more intensive services.

To meet this challenge, school psychologists will need to be:
- Open to change—change in how students are identified for intervention; how interventions are selected, designed, and implemented; how student performance is measured and evaluated; how evaluations are conducted; and how decisions are made.
- Open to training—training (as needed) in evidence-based intervention strategies, in progress monitoring methods, in designing problem-solving models, in evaluating instructional and program outcomes, in ecological assessment procedures.
- Willing to adapt a more individualized approach to serving students while also adapting a more systemic approach to serving schools.
- Willing and able to communicate their worth to administrators and policymakers—to “sell” new roles consistent with the provisions of IDEA 2004.

The new IDEA 2004 does not really mandate significant change or prohibit traditional practices. Rather, it encourages the adoption of new approaches that promise better student outcomes. Such innovations in education offer numerous opportunities to enhance the practice of school psychology to the benefit of all students.

**Key Resources**


National Center on Student Progress Monitoring —[www.studentprogress.org](http://www.studentprogress.org)


Northeast Regional Resource Center, RTI website—[www.wested.org/nerrc/rti.htm](http://www.wested.org/nerrc/rti.htm)

Thomas, A. & Grimes, J. (Eds.). *Best practices in school psychology IV*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. (See numerous chapters on problem solving and assessment)

Andrea Canter, PhD, NCSP, was a school psychologist with the Minneapolis Schools for 30 years; she co-led the development of a Problem Solving Model from 1993-2000. She currently serves as a consultant to NASP and editor of the Communiqué.