

# A small district with mighty results

After teaching for years in Texas, teacher Tari Canny was stunned when she arrived at Roland-Story Elementary School.

“This is the first school district I’ve worked for that moves special education kids regularly to general education,” she said. “We move them ahead as quickly as possible so they can join general education.”

In addition, Tari was introduced to research-based interventions.

“We can see where we have been and where we’re going,” she said. “In Texas, we had no progress monitoring.”

In short, Tari was introduced to Response to Intervention, better known as Rtl.

“I initially thought, ‘Wow, this is a lot of stuff to learn,’” she said. “But it’s great.”

Rtl is nothing new to the Roland-Story School District, located north of Ames in central Iowa. The district has been working on it for the last six years. The benefits are clear: The level of students on Individualized Education Programs who were testing in the low proficiency level dropped 29.5 percent in three years at the elementary school. In that same time period, students testing in the intermediate proficiency level increased 23.5 percent. And students testing in the high proficiency level increased by 3 percent.

What does this all mean? Rtl is working, said Roland-Story Elementary Principal Kate Hartzler.

“Our scores have improved over the last six years, and they continue to improve,” she said. “Even more important, our kids love the interventions. They fly in from recess because they are excited about being able to read. Today at every staff meeting, the top item at the meeting is, ‘Interventions – how are they going?’”

At the inception of Rtl, the school rearranged its schedule to accommodate 25 to 30 minutes of focused reading Monday through Thursday. High-performing students read for pleasure; educators ensure that students who need explicit skill instruction receive it during the sessions. Developing the blocks of reading time weren’t without hardship.

“Teachers had to make the greatest sacrifice,” Kate said. “They had to consider, ‘What are we going to give up?’ It was hard to sell at first. We had to have hard, meaningful discussions.”

One critical piece of the Rtl puzzle was developing grade-level teams so they could plan. From extensive training, they learned to progress monitor key reading components: phonics, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary and comprehension.

“Once you learn the process, you realize this is precisely what the kids need,” Kate said. “We want to get the students out of special education. We work toward getting them to receive more than a year’s worth of growth in a year. Rtl taught the staff and me that differentiating instruction and every other technique, along with all the work that goes into it, is doing right by the students.”

As for working from the classroom perspective, Tari points to one of her students who just received impressively high scores and is rejoining general education full time.

“That never happened in Texas, and here it is common,” she said, nodding her head toward the student with the pride of a parent. “Rtl makes a difference. If you haven’t done so, just try it and you’ll be surprised. For me, it makes teaching so clear. You can monitor progress and, if you’re not seeing suitable progress, you immediately change your instructional approach. It works. It’s for the kids.”

## **When students are wrongly placed in special education**

Do you have students in special education who shouldn’t be? It does happen. Sadly, the negative consequences for the student are far-reaching:

- Historically, the expectation level for student achievement is much lower (though we are working hard to get better at this);
- The placement becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, both for the staff and the misplaced student;
- The segregation of the student affects not just academic but social success.

This is according to Dan Reschly, a former Iowan who is a disproportionality expert at Vanderbilt University. First and foremost, he told an audience at a recent learning supports workshop in Des Moines, “we need to avoid the two extremes of blame – those who blame it on the kids and the community and those who blame it on the schools and educators.”

Instead, energies are best spent by looking at the causes of overrepresentation and/or disproportionality within our special education classrooms and ways to avoid it.

Reschly says no group of children is immune to being wrongly placed in special education. However, African Americans are nearly three times as likely to be inappropriately placed into special education as other students. The reasons are long and varied, Reschly said; in general they tend to fall into one or more of the following categories:

- **Teacher referral** (a subjective rather than data-based determination).
- **Lack of general education interventions that are appropriate.**
- **Using special education as the intervention.**
- **Cultural expectations.**
- **Biological:** Those living in poverty have greater exposure to pre- and postnatal toxins (lead, alcohol and tobacco); more premature births; poorer health care; and poorer overall nutrition.
- **Social:** Those living in poverty generally have less supportive environments for language and cognitive development; poorer preparation for reading and academic achievement generally; less direct teaching.

“It’s trivial to predict outcomes unless it’s used to come up with solutions to fix them. If we don’t do this, we are failing our kids.”

Reschly said that other states have conquered overrepresentation and disproportionality, but both academic and social/behavioral steps must be put in place before the child is determined to require special education.

General education should:

- Focus on all five reading components (phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, fluency and vocabulary) – all of which are scientifically based reading instruction;
- Train teachers in this scientifically based reading instruction – many institutions do not include all five reading components in their teacher preparation curriculum;
- Use direct, systematic and sequential instruction (such as explicit instruction). This is especially important for struggling readers because they simply won’t get it if you don’t use this kind of instruction;
- Conduct universal screening beginning in the fall of kindergarten;
- Have intense instruction and progress monitoring for students who are reading below trajectory;
- Use rigorous academic achievement standards;
- Use school-wide systems to identify struggling students, intervene as quickly as possible, and monitor student progress (such as Response to Intervention).

Socially and behaviorally, general education should:

- Screen for behavior problems in order to identify students early before their problems become more resistant to change;
- Define rules and positive behaviors;
- Define classroom rules and behavioral routines (such as lining up, small group work);
- Encourage and reinforce appropriate behavior;
- Employ negative behavior reduction strategies, such as consequences to reduce disruptive behavior. Use school-wide systems such as Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) to ensure common language and common practice.

Reschly noted that academic and behavioral principles aren’t always mutually exclusive.

For example, strong classroom organization and behavior management must include engaging instruction as well as structuring the environment.

“These are all supported by scientific evidence – beyond evidence-based,” he said.

Reschly said it’s wrong to blame low socioeconomic status for a group’s overrepresentation.

“Remember, three years of highly effective teachers overcome the effects of low socioeconomic status,” he said.

## **Iowa Core: Students with significant disabilities**

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards requires Iowa to develop a new Iowa Alternate Assessment aligned to the Iowa Core. In this effort, Iowa joined Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM), a 14-state member consortium.

The DLM assessment consortium is guided by the core belief that all students should have access to challenging grade-level content, which is reflected in the Common Core Essential Elements (Iowa Core Essential Elements).

The Essential Elements for students with significant cognitive disabilities were developed at each grade level in the areas of English Language Arts and Math by Iowa teachers (both general and special education). The Iowa Core Essential Elements are scheduled to be released late this spring. They will be located on the homepage of the Iowa Core menu under Students with Significant Disabilities ([http://www.educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2485&Itemid=4602](http://www.educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2485&Itemid=4602)).

The DLM assessment system is designed to map a student’s learning throughout the year. The system will use items and tasks that are embedded in day-to-day instruction. In this way, testing happens as part of instruction, which both informs teaching and benefits students. An end-of-year assessment will be created for states that want to include a summative test in addition to the instructionally embedded system. The DLM assessment will be operational 2014-15.

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