



AZ Response to Intervention (RTI)

Literacy

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Overview

The information age has forever changed the face of literacy. As a result, the art and science of teaching reading and writing has drastically changed, as well. In the 21st century, basic literacy not only encompasses the ability to read, understand, analyze, interpret, synthesize, evaluate, and use information gained from a multitude of sources, it also encompasses the ability to communicate clearly and concisely, both verbally and in writing. The most current research indicates that "with very few exceptions, students can learn to read at grade level," and some progress is being made toward that end. Nevertheless, the data shows that as educators, we must reframe our thinking if we are truly going to achieve our goals. We must do business differently if we are going to insure the highest reading attainment for all students.

In accordance with the most current nationally recognized research in the field of comprehensive literacy instruction, and with Arizona's experience in implementing AZ READS and Reading First, the Arizona Response to Intervention (AZ RTI) Literacy Framework addresses the needs of educators at two levels; grades K-3 and grades 4-12. It includes five inter-related components: Critical Thinking, Motivation, Core Instruction, Assessment, Data Based Decisions and Intervention. Each of these components are embedded in the AZ RTI framework. Student motivation and critical thinking wrap around the framework to highlight that they are essential to the success of this model. Within each Framework component, educators will find links that direct them to resources relevant to that particular component. Because the components of the Framework do overlap, at times, in very specific ways, some resources may overlap, as well.

At the K-3 level, research-based literacy instruction is currently under way in many Arizona schools through the AZ READS Initiative. Through the AZ RTI Literacy Framework, the sound basis for literacy instruction is extended to grades 4-12 where content-literacy instruction currently receives the greatest emphasis.

Research Based Assessment System

Determining a student's particular need is a complex process. In Arizona, AIMS scores are helpful in establishing that a reading deficit exists, but AIMS is not intended to identify the specific interventions required in order to remedy that deficit. Just because two students' scores are in the category "Falls Far Below" does not mean that they have the same instructional needs. Thus, **standardized diagnostic assessments** identifying levels of deficiency in phonology, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—in combination with ongoing instructional assessments—are critical. Taken together, these assessments provide the data that drives effective intervention.

The passage of Arizona's reading initiative, AZ READS ARS Section 15-704, demonstrates Arizona's commitment to making Literacy a priority for the children in the state of Arizona. There are five critical components to AZ READS. The E in AZ READS stands for Early Diagnosis and Intervention, calling for the prevention of early reading difficulties through early screening, ongoing diagnostic assessment, and progress monitoring to inform instruction and intervention.

In order to further define subsections A and D of ARS Section 15-704 legislation, a Task Force was created with education representatives from around the state. The Task Force determined that schools providing instruction to K-3 students must select and administer classroom-based screening, ongoing diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments. The AZ Reads Task Force established criteria for evaluating assessments. The Task Force called for assessments that are reliable and valid, efficient, and part of an assessment system. Of the assessments submitted to the Task Force for review, three met the established criteria. The three assessments that met the Task Force's established criteria are: DIBELS, AIMSWeb, and Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI).

In addition to establishing criteria for selecting K-3 reading assessments, the Task Force was charged with defining assessment terms. An effective, comprehensive, reading program includes reading assessments to accomplish four purposes:

1. **Outcome Assessments** provide a bottom-line evaluation of the effectiveness of the reading program. These are performed after the instruction has occurred and give information to determine the efficacy of academic standards based instruction. They usually are used to determine program effectiveness. Examples are the Arizona Instrument to Measure Instructional Standards (AIMS) and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).
2. **Screening Assessments** are administered to determine which children are at risk for reading difficulty and which will need additional intervention. In AZ RTI Literacy we recommend that elementary schools screen all students in reading at least three times a year. At the secondary level schools may choose to screen only new students and students who did not meet the standard on AIMS. While the task force determined that DIBELS, AIMSWEB and Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) met the established criteria for K-3, grades 4-12 may choose from the three mentioned assessments or may choose any oral reading fluency, maze or curriculum based measurements that are valid, reliable and measures critical indicators of performance in reading and content. (Deno, 1985; Fuchs & Deno, 1994). Screeners are not a comprehensive assessment, their purpose is to look at a large number of students and determine which of them are at risk of being unsuccessful in literacy acquisition.
3. **Diagnostic Assessments** help teachers plan instruction by providing in-depth information about students' skills and instructional needs. They are used to look

at the individual student and determine the skill deficiencies that are preventing the student from being successful.

4. **Progress Monitoring Assessments** determine whether or not students are making adequate progress or need more intervention to achieve grade level reading outcomes.
- Best practice calls for students in Tier 3 Intensive level reading instruction to be progress monitored once a week. These students are also labeled deficit and at-risk.
 - Best practice calls for Tier 2 Strategic level readers, also known as emerging or some-risk, to be progress monitored every other week.
 - Best practice calls for Tier 1 Benchmark level readers, also known as established or low-risk, to be progress monitored at least once between benchmarking periods or three times a year.

Each of the four types of assessment must be standardized, reliable, and valid; it must target the early literacy skills that all students must acquire in order to be proficient readers; and it must be used to evaluate and inform instruction. As much as possible assessments should be administered in an efficient and effective manner, focus on mastery, and be sensitive to change. The following are integral components of any healthy assessment system.

1. Assessments used in the classroom for all students need to be administered with fidelity to the standardized format and the instructions of the vendor, so comparisons can be made across students, teachers, grade levels, schools, and districts.
2. Assessments used for all students must be reliable and valid. Reliability refers to consistency. The score should remain the same if the assessment is given on a different day, by a different person, using similar items. Reliability enables teachers to be confident in the accuracy of their scores. A valid assessment measures what it says it will measure and provides meaningful information.
3. Assessments should target essential literacy skills. Generally, it is not necessary to measure all skills, just those that are the most critical.
4. Assessments should be used to evaluate and inform instruction. They should answer critical questions, such as “Did the student learn what I taught?” “What do I teach next?” “Can I move on?” “Do I need to re-teach?” And so on.
5. Assessments should be easy to administer and provide useful information.
6. Assessments need to be repeatable and sensitive to small amounts of change over time so the results can be used to inform and evaluate instruction.

The role and use of assessment in schools is taking a dramatic and exciting turn for the benefit of children. The Arizona Department of Education recognizes that assessment is integral to the art and science of teaching and learning; that the purpose and role of assessment is to drive instructional decision making; and that assessment

helps educators identify students' specific reading needs. In support of Arizona educators at all levels, the Assessment component of the K-12 Literacy Framework provides:

- professional resources
- research based/evidence based assessment tools
- professional articles
- professional development opportunities
- links to relevant ADE resources

Data Based Decisions

Data-based decisions are the collection, management, analysis, and utilization of relevant data to make informed decisions. Data is a critical and required component of the ongoing progress assessment process and RTI decision making. Data is used to determine where children are on an assessment continuum and who needs intervention, the type of intervention needed, and whether the intervention is supporting the child in his/her development.

When interpreting and reflecting on the evidence gathered regarding a child, the teacher's learning is what is most directly related to improving conditions for student learning. The focus should be on how teachers use, adapt, and create processes for examining student work. Instead of looking at children's work to grade it, teachers are being asked to examine it in order to learn from it so as to learn about the child, learn about learning, and about the teacher's own practice.

Examining the Evidence

When examining a piece of "evidence" from a child's portfolio or file, the teacher should answer the following questions:

1. What did the child do?
2. What skills and concepts does this demonstrate? Where does it fall on the chosen assessment continuum?
3. What might be next steps with this child?
4. What questions does this work raise?

When reflecting on a child and the evidence gathered, the teacher's focus should be on what the child can do, center on specific skills and strategies, look for the details of the learning process, and clarify the kinds of environments that support different kinds of learners. The teacher will be better prepared to plan for the developmental and instructional needs of the child.

Planning Individual and Classroom Goals and Activities

...using assessment information to inform a process of thoughtful, sensitive, and creative curriculum planning is the most powerful use that teachers can make of that information... it means that the teacher applies everything she knows about how children learn to design a set of learning experiences that will be maximally effective with them. (McAfee, O., Leong, D.J., & Bodrova, 2004, p.68)

In elementary classrooms, the ongoing progress assessment system combines both formative and summative assessment. Its formative purpose is fulfilled when the information brought together daily, weekly or monthly is used to modify instruction and lead to curriculum and activity changes. As a summative assessment, it provides an overview at the end of the lesson, unit, semester or end of the year, of each child's accomplishments, areas of difficulty, and progress.

Each of the four ongoing progress assessment tools has a summary report or a progress and planning report.

Once the evidence has been examined and interpreted, the teacher can identify the strengths, needs and progress that a child has made. The teacher can then use the evidence to:

- Identify concerns
- Plan appropriate follow-up
- Make referrals
- Plan interventions or enrichment
- Create intentional activities to address needs
- Plan appropriate support for next steps in development
- Reflect and analyze follow-up or interventions or enrichment

AZ RTI Literacy is founded on tiered levels of instruction and interventions. At Tier 1, universal instruction interventions occur within the general education classroom. These interventions are based upon the varying needs of students. The teacher continually monitors each student and, for elementary students, school wide screening is done three times a year. In secondary, screening three times a year may be done on targeted students who fall below the "meets" performance level on the AIMS.

Some secondary schools may want to screen all incoming and new students. The purpose of these assessments is to provide data to drive instructional decisions. As long as at least 80% of the class is successful in the general education classroom, we can be assured that the instruction is effective. At the elementary school, if some students begin to fall behind the expected progress, classroom interventions take place that correct the problem. At the secondary level the school may establish intervention classes that all students who score below the established point on the screening will need to take; these become the Tier 2 interventions. Middle school and high school Tier 1 universal instruction should also include content literacy across the curriculum, in

which content teachers support student literacy with proven successful imbedded instructional practices.

At Tier 2, targeted interventions occur. When the whole class has been screened, universal curriculum interventions have been tried, and a student is still having difficulty, it may be necessary for that student to receive additional instruction, outside of the regularly scheduled literacy time. This additional instruction should be 30 minutes a day, in addition to the general instruction. Targeted instructional materials should be evidence based supplemental program that supports the core curriculum. Instruction should be delivered in a small group setting. For Tier 2, a student plan is written that sets the goals and the needed progress to achieve those goals. In the tier 2 intervention the student's progress will also be monitored bi-weekly and the trend line of this monitoring will be plotted against the needed aim line for the student to achieve the goals of the intervention. The progress monitoring data is used to determine the student's response to the intervention and if a student's score falls below the aim line for three consecutive assessments or if the student begins to show a pattern of assessments that fall below the aim line, the team will need to meet and decide how to adjust the intervention to better facilitate the student's growth toward the goal. In adjusting the intervention the team should look at:

- The amount of time
- The curriculum
- The frequency
- The time of day

In addition, the team will look at the fidelity of the intervention in relation to the student plan and the curriculum. The team will need to answer the question: Are there any reasons that the student is not responding positively to the intervention? If a student has had the intervention adjusted and still does not make progress, then the team may decide that the student needs a more intensive intervention.

For Tier 3, the student would receive the most intensive intervention. The student study team will need to perform additional diagnostic assessments. Any specific skill deficits will be addressed in the student plan. An evidence based curriculum will provide the instruction and the student's progress will be monitored weekly. The student plan will set the goals with an aim line that can measure student response that is compared with the progress monitoring trend line. The intervention is provided for 60 minutes a day in addition to the universal curriculum. Regardless of the student's age, the goals at Tier 3 may need to be as basic as literacy instruction using the "Big Five" (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension). If the student's progress monitoring scores fall below the aim line for three consecutive assessments or if the student begins to show a pattern of assessments that fall below the aim line, the team will need to meet to discuss the possibility that the student may have a disability. If a disability is suspected, procedural safeguards are sent to the parents and the student is referred for a full evaluation.

Throughout the process, all decisions are based upon data. For Tier 1 the data supports the effectiveness of the universal curriculum and assists in identifying students in need of intervention. For Tier 2, the progress monitoring data provides the information to judge the student's response to the intervention and to make decisions to modify or adjust the student's plan. For Tier 3, the data is used just as in Tier 2, with the addition, that it may be used as part of a special education evaluation.

The Arizona Department of Education supports the idea that well-implemented research based intervention programs in every school are critical if we are to meet the needs of Arizona's struggling readers. In addition, it recognizes that "innovations such as literacy intervention are designed to serve students, not school structure" (Allain). In order to be truly successful, intervention programs must be part of the larger infrastructure. They must be supported and sustained at all levels—district, site, and classroom.

In order to assist Arizona educators as they develop and implement meaningful and sustainable intervention programs, the AZ RTI Literacy Framework provides:

- Current scientifically based/evidence based research,
- An annotated bibliography of professional articles, and
- Professional development opportunities.

Curriculum and Instruction

Universal curriculum is the foundation of Tier 1 instruction and is the basis for building K-12 literacy in Arizona students. The curriculum at each level must be an evidence based program that has been shown to be effective in teaching the students with whom it is being used. The basis of Response to Intervention (RTI) is that we remove inappropriate instruction as one of the reasons a student is not making progress. This reflects the position of the 2001 President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education that many problems affecting students identified as having learning disabilities (LD) are not related to student disabilities, but instead are related to instruction that does not result in the students successful academic growth.

In addition, the universal curriculum needs to be taught using explicit, direct instruction, which is differentiated for the variety of student's skills in a classroom. Not all students are alike. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instruction applies an approach to teaching and learning to ensure students have multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. The model of differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjusting the curriculum and presentation of information to learners rather than expecting students to modify themselves to meet the level of the curriculum. Classroom teaching is a blend of whole-class, group, and individual instruction. Differentiated Instruction is a teaching theory

based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms. Tomlinson (2001) identifies three elements of the curriculum that can be differentiated: Content, Process, and Products. Additionally, several guidelines are noted to help educators form an understanding and develop ideas around differentiating instruction.

Content

- *Several instructional elements and materials are used to support instructional content.* These include acts, concepts, generalizations or principles, attitudes, and skills. The variation seen in a differentiated classroom is most frequently the manner in which students gain access to important learning. Access to the content is seen as key.
- *Align tasks and objectives to learning goals.* Designers of differentiated instruction determine as essential the alignment of tasks with instructional goals and objectives. Goals are most frequently assessed by many high-stakes tests at the state level and frequently administered standardized measures. Objectives are frequently written in incremental steps resulting in a continuum of skills-building tasks. An objectives-driven menu makes it easier to find the next instructional step for learners entering at varying levels.
- *Instruction is concept-focused and principle-driven.* The instructional concepts should be broad based and not focused on minute details or unlimited facts. Teachers must focus on the concepts, principles and skills that students should learn. The content of instruction should address the same concepts with all students but be adjusted by degree of complexity for the diversity of learners in the classroom.

Process

- *Flexible grouping is consistently used.* Strategies for flexible grouping are essential. Learners are expected to interact and work together as they develop knowledge of new content. Teachers may conduct whole-class introductory discussions of content big ideas followed by small group or pair work. Student groups may be coached from within or by the teacher to complete assigned tasks. Grouping of students is not fixed. Based on the content, project, and on-going evaluations, grouping and regrouping must be a dynamic process as one of the foundations of differentiated instruction.
- *Classroom management benefits students and teachers.* Teachers must consider organization and instructional delivery strategies to effectively operate a classroom using differentiated instruction. Carol Tomlinson (2001) identifies 17 key strategies for teachers to successfully meet the challenge of designing and managing differentiated instruction in her text *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, Chapter 7..

Products

- *Initial and on-going assessment of student readiness and growth are essential.* Meaningful pre-assessment naturally leads to functional and successful differentiation. Assessments may be formal or informal, including interviews, surveys, performance assessments, and more formal evaluation procedures. Incorporating pre and on-going assessment informs teachers to better provide a menu of approaches, choices, and scaffolds for the varying needs, interests and abilities that exist in classrooms of diverse students.
- *Students are active and responsible explorers.* Teacher's respect that each task put before the learner will be interesting, engaging, and accessible to essential understanding and skills. Each child should feel challenged most of the time.
- *Vary expectations and requirements for student responses.* Items to which students respond may be differentiated for students to demonstrate or express their knowledge and understanding. A well-designed student product allows varied means of expression, alternative procedures, and provides varying degrees of difficulty, types of evaluation, and scoring.

One of the basic elements of AZ RTI is that all students are screened and those whose skills are not sufficient will receive help. The screening also performs another and even more important function. By looking at the overall data we can see if the instruction in the classroom is meeting the needs of at least 80% of the students. If it is not, then before we begin to plan for individual student interventions, we need to think about how we can improve the performance of the entire class. Several factors may be causing the problem. As we have already discussed, the basic requirement is that all instruction is from an evidence based curriculum. Next, question if the curriculum is being taught as it was intended. Many times teachers may modify the instruction and teach only parts of the material or teach it in a different way. Evidence based curriculums need to be taught as they were in the studies that showed them to be effective instructional tools. Also is there sufficient time being devoted to teaching? Research shows that at the primary level, students should be receiving 80 to 90 minutes of literacy instruction per day. In addition are we providing?

- Dynamic and involved literacy leadership
- Coherent instructional design (sufficient amounts of teaching and research-based curriculum)
- Classroom Interventions for at-risk students
- Valid/reliable assessments to guide instruction
- On-going professional development which provides in-depth theory based knowledge of literacy
- A quality, organized, literacy environment
- Parents as critical partners in developing and sustaining lifelong literacy behaviors

Content Literacy

Content literacy not only encompasses the ability to read, write, listen, and speak intelligently within the context of an academic discipline, it also encompasses the ability to think critically. Critical thinking is fundamental to the effective teaching of any subject, for every subject is grounded in a particular way of thinking, in a particular way of viewing the world. Moreover, the process of developing a knowledge and understanding of any subject necessarily depends on thought. One of the most important abilities that a thinker can have is the ability to monitor and assess his or her own thinking while processing the thinking of others. Since text is a primary means for communicating ideas and concepts, reading, writing, and thinking critically are integral to effective universal instruction.

A recent study by the National School Boards Association concluded that the more than 540,000 students who drop out of school each year leave the education system because they can't read well enough to succeed—even marginally—in high school (2004). As well, an increasing number of students who do stay in school and who continue on to the workplace and/or college cannot read well enough to meet the rigor of the texts they encounter. Still other studies indicate that even in the case of good readers, by 7th grade, reading development slows to such a great extent that by 8th grade, and through to the end of 12th grade, no measurable development takes place (Francis, et al., 1996). In light of such research findings, the ability to read and think critically about content-specific ideas has become more important than it ever has been before.

The Arizona Department of Education AZ RTI Literacy Framework aligns with current research in the view that students' mastery of "The Big Five" reading concepts (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension) is an on-going process that builds over time upon increasingly more complex and demanding text. The process begins with primary literacy instruction in the early grades; it continues through content literacy instruction in middle school and high school; and it extends into college and beyond through self-directed application and practice. In order to be successful, therefore, middle and high school students must continue to develop the fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension skills that they will ultimately need in college and the workplace.

The AZRTI Literacy Framework also supports the idea that content-area teachers possess the substantive knowledge of the concepts and principles that lie at the heart of their disciplines. As experts in their fields, teachers of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies are specialists who know what it means to read, write, listen, speak, and think philosophically, mathematically, scientifically, and historically. Consequently, content-area teachers are the ones *best* suited to teach content literacy.

The Core Instruction component of the AZ/RTI Literacy Framework addresses core literacy instruction at grades K-3 and core content literacy at grades 4-12 by providing:

- Current evidence base research into reading instruction
- Strategies for teachers
- An annotated bibliography of professional articles
- Professional development opportunities
- Links to relevant ADE resources

References

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