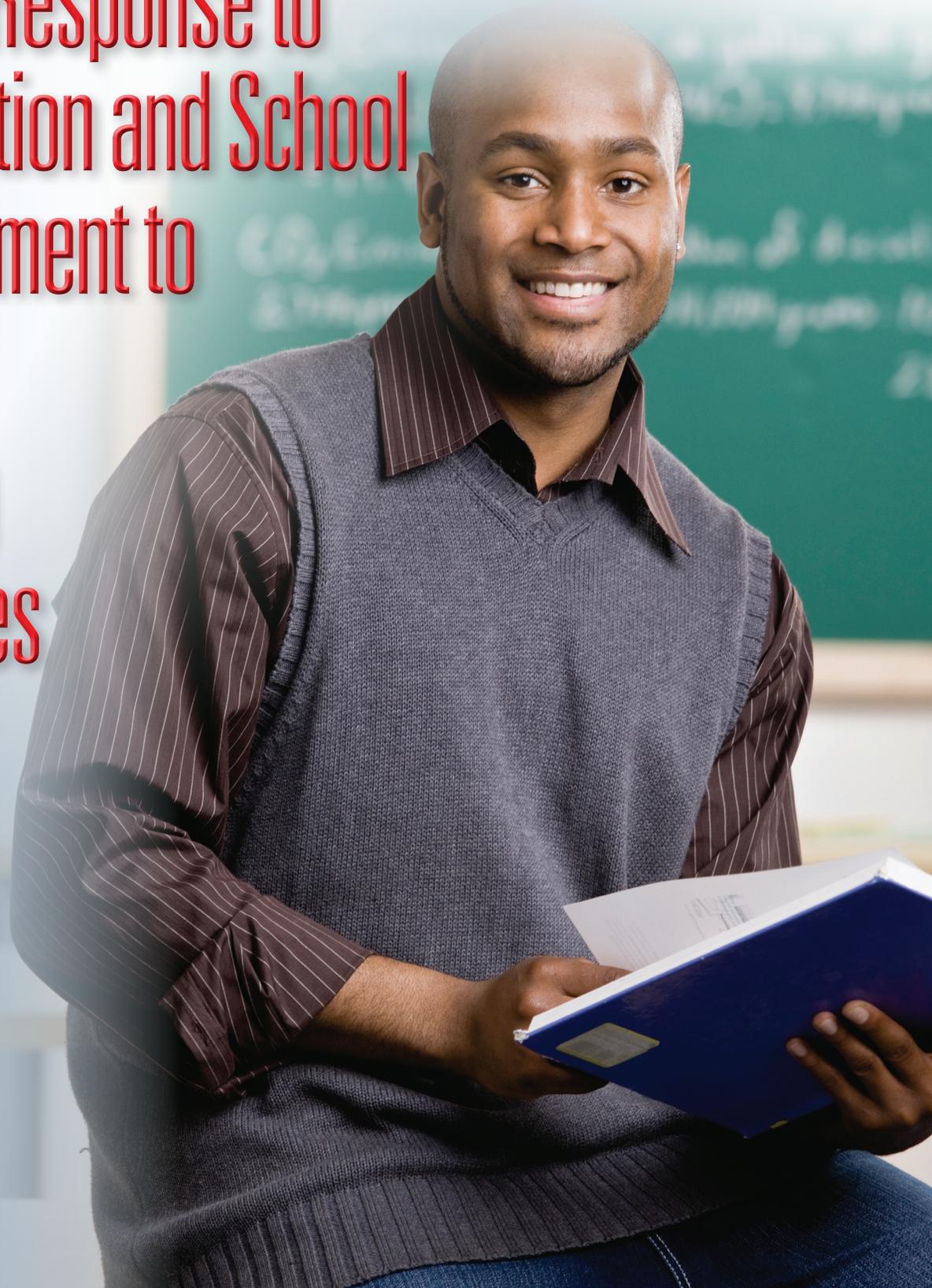




Sustainability Series

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# Linking Response to Intervention and School Improvement to Sustain Reading Outcomes



# Welcome

## Linking Response to Intervention and School Improvement to Sustain Reading Outcomes

Over the past several years, many schools have significantly improved the reading outcomes of students in grades K-3 by implementing the essential elements of the Reading First program. Many people are now wondering how they can continue to implement the model and sustain improved results without continued funding. One path to consider is to identify a successful program that is very comparable to Reading First—a program, model or initiative which uses the same essential elements found in Reading First. RtI, as a school improvement model, is very similar to Reading First. It is a model that can provide an instructional and programmatic “anchor” to which Reading First strategies can be tied and through which Reading First outcomes can be sustained. In this brief we will describe how a school or district Reading First program can be blended into a local RtI initiative, and how implementing RtI in a school improvement context can function as a strategy to sustain an evidence-based reading program.

This brief, seventh in a series addressing key aspects of sustainability, can be useful as school and district leaders consider how they might use current initiatives, such as RtI, to sustain the success they have established through Reading First. Other aspects of sustaining school-wide reading models that are based on scientific research are addressed in other briefs in this series. Please check the Reading First Sustainability website at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/support/sustaining.html> for other titles in this series.

This brief was written by Carl Cole, of RMC Research Corporation, and Skip McCann of Research for Better Schools. Dr. Cole has over twenty years experience as a Director of Special Education and Title I programs and has in-depth knowledge of Positive Behavior Supports, Response to Intervention, inclusive education, and scientifically based reading instruction. Mr. McCann has provided technical assistance in school improvement to state, district, and school leaders in the Mid-Atlantic region for a number of years.

Sustainability is the ability of a staff to maintain the core beliefs and values (culture) of a program and use them to guide program adaptations over time while maintaining improved or enhanced outcomes.

*-adapted from Century and Levy, 2002*

## **The Challenge Facing Reading First Schools, Districts, and States** 4

Reading leaders are defining sustainability strategies as Reading First funding comes to a close.

## **Strategy: Linking On-going Initiatives** 5

One potentially powerful sustainability strategy is aligning your evidence based reading program with RtI and school improvement.

## **Looking at Reading First from the Perspective of School Improvement** 6

Learn what evidence-based reading programs and ESEA school improvement have in common.

## **Looking at Reading First from the Perspective of Response to Intervention (RtI)** 8

Learn what evidence-based reading programs and a school improvement-oriented implementation of RtI have in common.

## **Evolving to Reading Improvement in a Three-tiered Model** 10

See some of the practicalities in moving from the Reading First program to an evidence-based reading program implemented to meet the requirements of RtI.

## **A Sense of Urgency** 11

The window of opportunity is open now— seize the opportunity to sustain.

## **References and Additional Resources** 12

“Response to Intervention (RtI) as a school improvement model offers great promise to those interested in sustaining the outcomes produced in Reading First.”



# The Challenge Facing Reading First Schools, Districts, and States

Over the past several years, many schools have significantly improved the reading outcomes of students in grades K-3 by implementing the essential elements of scientifically-based reading research through the Reading First model. Because of the success many have had in raising student reading achievement, leaders in schools, districts, and states are now seeking

Those who are able to sustain a reading initiative will be those who see it not as a funding stream, but as a different way of thinking about teaching and learning.

to maintain those essential elements and sustain the student reading results that they are achieving.

However, since its inception, Reading First has been identified with a funding source. Now that the federal funds that made the program possible have been eliminated, many people are wondering how they can continue to implement the model and sustain improved results without continued funding. We know from experience and from the organizational change literature that innovations can disappear quickly once the impetus for them disappears. What can education leaders do to prevent this?

This Brief suggests that the similarities between evidence-based reading programs and a school improvement-oriented definition of RtI create a powerful opportunity for sustaining the reading outcomes seen in Reading First schools. To take advantage of this opportunity, leaders must think in terms of aligning initiatives, rather than simply replacing the old with the new.



# Strategy: Aligning with On-going Initiatives

In many state and local education agencies, there are currently two on-going concerns that align well with each other and well with Reading First.

A good strategy for addressing the sustainability challenge is to view the approach to teaching reading established through the Reading First program from a broader perspective and identify commonalities with other on-going initiatives and requirements. This has the effect of turning potentially competing efforts into mutually reinforcing work. This brief suggests two on-going concerns that align well with Reading First and with each other:

- ◆ **School Improvement:** Reading First is, foremost, one of the most sophisticated examples to date of how to conduct school improvement more effectively.
- ◆ **Response to Intervention (RtI):** Reading First also demonstrates in concrete and effective ways what Response to Intervention means in operational terms. It provides evidence of the potential power of the RtI approach, within a school improvement context,

to increase schools' effectiveness with increasingly diverse students.

We know from research that if improvement efforts are enacted in a way that they compete with each other, the effect will be a shift of focus and resources from existing programs to new initiatives; and this will be a barrier to sustaining successful educational improvements (Datnow 2005). But if a new initiative, such as RtI, is closely aligned with an existing one (Reading First), the new program can actually act as a catalyst for sustaining the program which has lost its funding. If a school is implementing—or considering implementing—a school improvement approach to RtI, that initiative can possibly absorb or assimilate what has been learned and what has been accomplished through Reading First into a new, but on-going model for improved student outcomes. As schools

begin to implement the instructional practices that are at the core of RtI, the focus does not need to shift, as Reading First practices and terminology remain the same, and many of the resources needed for RtI support the continuation of Reading First practices.



# Looking at Reading First from the Perspective of School Improvement

Reading leaders are familiar with the critical design elements of Reading First. In Table 1, these are juxtaposed with a general statement of the elements of school improvement that are found in the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act of 1965, as amended (ESEA).

We can see that the essential elements of the Reading First program and ESEA school improvement have much in common:

1. **Both have *demanding goals*:** Reading First wants all students to be proficient readers no later than third grade, while School Improvement wants all students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills

**Table 1: School Improvement and Reading First**

Features of School Improvement in ESEA	Essential Elements of Reading First
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging academic standards that make clear what students should know and be able to do</li> <li>• Valid and reliable assessments that track student progress toward reaching standards</li> <li>• Measurable objectives for school Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)</li> <li>• Requirements for improvement of schools that do not make AYP and support provided through technical assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal of all children becoming proficient readers no later than the end of third grade</li> <li>• A comprehensive assessment system</li> <li>• Use of Scientifically Based Reading Research (SBRR)</li> <li>• Core, supplement, and intervention programs in reading</li> <li>• Increased amount of uninterrupted time for reading instruction</li> <li>• Intensive professional development</li> <li>• Leadership and collaborative decision making to monitor student progress and take action</li> <li>• Documentation and evaluation in support of on-going program improvement</li> <li>• Involvement of families in improving reading achievement</li> <li>• Strengthening pre-service reading programs</li> </ul>

described by the academic standards in reading and mathematics at proficient or higher levels.

2. **Both emphasize the importance of an assessment program** that helps school staff identify students who are making progress and those who are having difficulty. Reading First also advocates assessments that help screen students and diagnose student difficulties in ways that help teachers to plan instruction and to deliver specific interventions.
3. **Both emphasize the use of strategies based on scientifically based research** that will address academic issues that caused the school to be identified for school improvement. Reading First incorporates some strategies identified by research and focuses on what students need to learn to become skilled early readers.
4. **Both emphasize the importance of professional development.** Title I recognizes the critical role of professional development in improvement. Reading First reinforces this with a precise focus: prepare teachers in all components of reading instruction; provide them information and training on the use

of instructional materials, programs, strategies, and approaches based on scientifically based reading research; and train them on how to use screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based reading assessments to identify student difficulties.

5. **Both emphasize the use of a system of technical assistance and other forms of support** from across the education levels to help schools improve practice in ways that improve the performance of their students. Again, Reading First, because of its focus on early reading achievement, is able to be much more focused on what that assistance and support needs to be to help schools to attain higher levels of achievement with their students.
6. **Both have incentives** to recognize schools making significant improvements in student achievement. Though both have sanctions, Reading First's primary threat was to discontinue funding to schools beyond the

third year, if they did not adequately implement practices that reflect the law's requirements and did not show increases in the numbers and percentage of students achieving grade-level reading standards. In contrast, School Improvement has an ever escalating set of sanctions. These begin with "school choice" and external provision of supplementary educational services and culminating with restructuring, which can involve significant changes in school staff and leadership, turning the school into a charter school, turning the school over to an external management firm to operate, and/or turning it over to the state to operate.

In effect, Reading First is very supportive of the ESEA school improvement requirements and offers one way in which schools can build the capacity for effective reading instruction by offering a comprehensive, research-based design. Schools and districts will continue to be identified for improvement under ESEA after the end of the Reading First program and the approach to teaching reading that was established through the program will continue to be a very viable approach to meeting school improvement goals in reading.



# Looking at Reading First from the Perspective of Response to Intervention (RtI)

Response to Intervention (RtI) has the potential to further strengthen the connection between Reading First program elements and school improvement.

Response to Intervention was included in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as an alternative to the discrepancy model for identifying students with learning disabilities or significant behavioral problems. RtI can also be viewed as **a school improvement model**, and that is how we are using the term here. Many components of RtI give it strong potential for improving outcomes on a schoolwide level—its multi-tiered approach to instruction

and intervention (portrayed in Figure 3), its use of universal screening and formative assessment data to guide instructional decision-making, and its use of evidence-based practices and systems elements. While RtI is most often associated with special education eligibility decisions, **it is fundamentally a general educational instructional process** in which special education services are a possible outcome if earlier interventions are not successful. RtI is first and foremost an instructional approach which happens to share a set of defining characteristics with Reading First, as seen in Table 2.

**Figure 3:**  
Response to Intervention Triangle



**Table 2: What Reading First and Rtl have in Common**

Elements of Reading First	Related Rtl Elements
A comprehensive <i>assessment program</i>	Annual screening assessments that help school staff to identify reading difficulties early. Progress monitoring assessments, including teacher observation protocols that help teachers to monitor how students are responding to their instruction, both from a knowledge and skill perspective as well as from an affective perspective. Diagnostic assessments that help teachers to identify in more depth what problems specific students are having and that help them to design interventions they could provide within their classrooms.
Use of scientifically based <i>programs and interventions</i> to help students learn the knowledge and skills that research has identified to be needed for a student to become a proficient reader	High quality instruction in regular education classrooms (i.e., tier 1) – that is, instruction that reflects research about what students need to learn to become proficient readers. High quality supplemental and intervention programs for students experiencing reading difficulties (i.e., tiers 2 and 3).
Building and district <i>leadership teams</i> that are constantly monitoring the implementation of research-based practices and their effects, and taking action when needs with respect to student learning and instructional practices are identified	A diagnostic/design team, sometimes referred to as a Student Assistance Team, that: (1) helps regular teachers problem-solve students who are not making adequate progress, (2) can help design and implement more powerful interventions with those students in real time, (3) can help monitor student responses to those intervention and make appropriate modifications in both the general education program and the interventions. A system for maintaining records of what is done to address specific student difficulties and their effectiveness; together, these records can inform the ways in which teachers' respond to future student difficulties.



# Evolving to Reading Improvement in a Three-tiered Model

So what does a general three-tiered, schoolwide reading model look like without Reading First funds? It looks very similar to a fully funded Reading First implementation, except the coaching and professional development elements may be handled in different ways.

And what is the connection to school improvement? The school improvement planning process is where student reading needs, supports for implementation of the reading program (such as coaching and professional development), and coordination of funding sources are made.

- ◆ **Assessment:** Assessments and progress monitoring can be accomplished by this same combination of resources working together by realizing that the task of gathering essential data is a shared responsibility.
- ◆ **Instruction:** General education, Title services, and special education become blended services on a continuum and are not restricted by categorical boundaries. In the context

of RtI, the first tier of instruction would occur in the general education classroom and subsequent interventions offered through a combination of general education, Title, and special education.

- ◆ **Team collaboration:** Team decision making remains an essential feature in the general schoolwide reading model. Teachers, both general education and specialists, in Reading First schools have the experience in team decision making gained by reviewing student achievement data and making instructional decisions. RtI involves the same process of educators reviewing the student response to instruction and making decisions to continue or alter the interventions.
- ◆ **Coaching role:** The functions of the reading coach, so often a key to success in Reading First schools, are distributed among staff members. Teacher leaders are identified and receive

advanced training in core programs, interventions and assessments so they can provide continued training and support to their colleagues. Or schools make a commitment to use general fund dollars or Title I resources to maintain a full-time coaching position.

- ◆ **Principal role:** Principals increase their role as instructional leaders and provide some of the school level supports commonly associated with the coaching position. (See the Reading First Sustainability Series Leadership Brief for more detail about how principals and other leaders can support a school-wide reading initiative.)



# A Sense of Urgency

Many districts have already seen the era of Reading First funding come to an end, and other districts will soon find themselves at the same point. We know from experience and from the organizational change literature that innovations can disappear quickly once the impetus for them disappears. Hence, there is a potential that characteristics of an existing Reading First program will weaken, fade, or be lost before sustaining strategies can be put in place. RtI provides a clear avenue of support with a systems approach containing the same components as Reading First. The danger lies in failing to recognize this potential replacement strategy—or in moving from one system

to another without recognizing that they are structurally very similar. The Reading First structure and culture can be maintained by blending it into a new or existing RtI initiative. The sustainability of Reading First through RtI practices is accomplished in part by the utilization of personnel across the domains of general, special education, and entitlement programs. The urgency is to act before the components, systems, and culture that support Reading First disintegrate or are dismantled, recognizing that they provide the foundation for an effective school improvement effort or an RtI initiative that has the capacity to sustain the practices and improve the outcomes achieved through Reading First.

“I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do.”

*Leonardo Da Vinci*



# References

Datnow, A. (2005). The sustainability of comprehensive school reform models changing district and state contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 121-153. Retrieved October 2006, from <http://eag.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/41/1/121>

# Additional Resources

RTI Practice Guide from the Institute of Education Sciences: Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades: [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/rti\\_reading\\_pg\\_021809.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/rti_reading_pg_021809.pdf)

National Center on Response to Intervention: [www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org)

Center on Instruction – Special Education: <http://www.centeroninstruction.org>

RTI Action Network: [www.rtinetwork.org](http://www.rtinetwork.org)

Reading First Sustainability: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/support/sustaining.html>



RMC Research Corporation  
1501 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1250  
Arlington, VA 22209

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