Despite this fact, thousands of children have been labeled as learning disabled and sent from the classroom to receive reading instruction from special education teachers, most of whom are not reading specialists. Extensive research has shown that most of these students do not end up reading on grade level; instead, many of them fall further behind each year (Denton, Vaughn & Fletcher, 2003). RTI is intended to change this pattern.

As RTI has been put into place across the country, many districts have made decisions that serve children well: they have provided professional development to classroom teachers so they can better meet the needs of struggling readers; they have set a high standard for the breadth and depth of knowledge of Tier 2 reading specialists; they have done the hard work of figuring out ways to ensure that the groups of students seen at Tier 2 are kept small and comprised of students with similar instructional needs. Other districts, while well intentioned, have made decisions that do not serve children well: they have bought scripted, one-size-fits-all programs for classroom teachers; for Tier 2, they have hired paraprofessionals (who sometimes have no knowledge of teaching reading) to follow yet another scripted program, believing that doing so assures “fidelity to treatment”; and they have put together instructional groups of 6 to 8 children, all of whom have very different learning needs.

Because not all children are getting the high-quality support they need, large numbers of them are still being referred to special education—not because they have some disability, but because the school has failed to help them progress as readers. This pattern is not going to change unless teachers get involved as advocates for readers. Successful
advocacy requires an understanding of RTI, how it is intended to be used, what approaches have proven successful, and how impact can best be determined. The first three books reviewed below address the broader issues associated with RTI; the fourth provides guidelines for effective formative and summative assessment.

Allington also suggests that “schools might work harder at developing the expertise of classroom teachers and spend less time and money deciding what commercial products to buy” (p. 111). He writes, “As noted by the federal What Works Clearinghouse, there are no core reading programs that have adequate evidence to make any recommendations about their effectiveness” (p. 111). Teacher advocates could help children by volunteering to participate on textbook adoption committees, where they become familiar with publisher claims and juxtapose them with the research found on the What Works Clearinghouse site. Teacher advocates could also serve on school-based media center book-buying committees, arguing for books that address grade-level content and represent a range of reading levels.

Allington’s book contains several other helpful sections and suggestions. He includes research showing that student gains are tied to teacher expertise, that meaning-focused instruction results in greater gains than a skills-based approach, and that growth is maximized when students read books they want to read and can read easily. His text includes a summary of the findings (effective 2008) of the What Works Clearinghouse and a rubric that schools can use to assess their RTI efforts.
introduction, Johnston explains that the book is framed around a view of RTI as effective instruction. He contrasts this with a frame of RTI as measurement. While this may seem esoteric, this difference in perspective is the source of considerable tensions over RTI implementation within schools and districts, and thus is an important one to understand. When the focus of RTI is on instruction, teacher expertise takes center stage. Schools subsequently ask questions about how they will determine what constitutes “appropriate instruction” by “qualified personnel” (p. 6). When the focus is on measurement, questions about how to determine the average progress of groups of students take center stage. Schools subsequently ask questions about effectiveness and efficiency of screening and progress-monitoring measures. An instructional frame has the possibility of leading to improved instruction; a measurement frame has the possibility of a smoothly running assessment system, one which in many cases does not provide data that informs instruction. Because of how the politics of RTI are played out in schools, this chapter alone makes this book worth reading.

The other sections of the book are also quite helpful. The first section is an overview of RTI, the second is on high-quality Tier 1 instruction, the third is on assessment, and the fourth is on high-quality interventions. The fifth addresses teacher expertise, while the sixth focuses on systemic intervention. All provide the kind of background knowledge needed for teachers to advocate for readers.

Lipson and Wixson co-chaired IRA’s Commission in RTI, and their edited volume includes nine chapters that detail exemplary approaches to this initiative. Their first chapter, “Making the Most of RTI,” was coauthored by Wixson, Lipson, and Peter Johnston, who was a member of the IRA’s commission and chaired IRA/NCTE’s Joint Task Force on Assessment Standards (2006). This chapter is a must-read. The authors provide background information on RTI, explain what it looks like, review the existing research, and conclude with IRA’s Guiding Principles for RTI. Among their many key points, they describe RTI as a “comprehensive, systematic approach to teaching and learning designed to address language and literacy problems for all students through increasingly differentiated and intensified language and literacy assessment and instruction” (p. 2). They stress that “qualified personnel with appropriate expertise should provide that instruction” (p. 2).

This chapter also includes “big picture” information helpful to teacher advocates: 80% of students can make “good progress” in a Tier 1 setting, and another 15% are successful when provided with supplemental instruction (p. 3). These statistics are handy “rules of thumb” that can be used when examining progress of students in both classroom and intervention settings. The authors also point out that, contrary to the practices seen in many districts, “the statute and regulations do not mandate screening assessments or any particular assessment per se, although they do require data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at regular intervals” (p. 4). They stress that assessments “must be informative about the qualities of learning and teaching, giving direction to instruction” (p. 5). They argue against assessment tools that focus on number of words read correctly in a minute and note that “there is virtually no evidence that suggests that students’ reading is improved by using these instruments to plan instruction and monitor progress” (p. 9). They further claim that the use of such instruments fails to provide necessary information about “students’
accuracy, expression and comprehension” (p. 10), all of which are needed to effectively assess and address reading needs.

As if this were not alarming enough, the authors refer readers to a study by Valencia et al. (2006) that “found a substantial number of false negatives or students whose WCPM (word count per minute) scores indicated they were low risk but who scored below grade level on a standardized measure of comprehension” (p. 10). In the same study, Valencia found that students with similar scores on comprehension measures often have very different instructional needs. It is clear that what the field needs most are assessments that identify student need and thus can inform instruction. WCPM approaches fall short.

Relative to instruction, the authors argue against scripted programs, noting that experienced teachers need the authority to make decisions based on their expertise and that there is no “one size fits all” way to support all readers. As they explain, using Reading Recovery (RR) and Interactive Strategies Approach (ISA) as examples:

Suppose that, during instruction, a student reads a word incorrectly. A scripted program would prescribe the teacher’s response. By contrast, in RR and ISA, the teacher’s response would depend on, among other things, the text difficulty, the instructional opportunity offered by the word, the context of the error, and the student’s current processing strategies. Monitoring the teacher for treatment fidelity would miss the adaptive teacher expertise taking place and risk discouraging the teacher from adapting instruction as needed. (p. 5)

The Guiding Principles developed by IRA reinforce this position. Those standards call for optimized instruction; responsive teaching and differentiation; assessment that informs instruction; collaborative efforts among school personnel, parents, and students; a systemic and comprehensive approach to RTI; and expertise. As the standards emphasize, “All students have the right to receive instruction from well-prepared teachers who keep up to date and supplemental instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach language and literacy” (IRA, 2010, p. 12).

The fourth text was authored by the Joint Task Force on Assessment of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. The task force developed 11 standards that teacher advocates can use to help ensure that reading assessments for all students are effective means of gathering data to inform instruction. Those standards are as follows:

1. The interests of the student are paramount in assessment.
2. The teacher is the most important agent of assessment.
3. The primary purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning.
4. Assessment must reflect and allow for critical inquiry into curriculum and instruction.
5. Assessment must recognize and reflect the intellectually and socially complex nature of reading and writing and the important roles of school, home, and society in literacy development.
6. Assessment must be fair and equitable.
7. The consequences of an assessment procedure are the first and most important consideration in establishing the validity of the instrument.
8. The assessment process should involve multiple perspectives and sources of data.
9. Assessment must be based in the local school learning community, including active and essential participation of families and community members.

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10. All stakeholders in the educational community—students, families, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and the public—must have an equal voice in the development, interpretation, and reporting of assessment information.

11. Families must be involved as active, essential participants in the assessment process.

The introduction contains sections on the nature of assessment, the nature of language, the nature of literacy, the language of learning, the assessment of language, and the language of assessment. A number of points made in the text are helpful to teacher advocates. The task force points out, for example, that the primary goal of education is no longer knowledge transmission but inquiry; within such a stance, “assessment is the exploration of how the educational environment and the participants in the educational community support the process of students as they learn to become independent and collaborative thinkers and problem solvers” (p. 2). They subsequently argue that quality assessment “hinges on the process of setting up conditions so that the classroom, the school, and the community become centers of inquiry where student, teachers, and other members of the school community investigate their own learning, both individually and collaboratively” (p. 3). Just putting these ideas on the table could significantly shift school-based conversations about assessment, conversations that all too often focus on which test to buy rather than what role assessment has in learning.

Narratives follow each standard and, in and of themselves, provide very useful information for teacher advocates. Following the first standard, for example, the authors note that assessment “should emphasize what students can do, rather than what they cannot do” (p. 11), “must provide useful information to inform and enable reflection” (p. 12), and “yield high-quality information” (p. 12). In addition, assessment practices should benefit students and not harm them (p. 12). The book concludes with case studies and a glossary of terms associated with assessment.

These four texts provide teachers with the breadth and depth of knowledge needed to advocate for students. The federal law (IDEA) has provided each teacher with the opportunity to “step up” and demonstrate how individual teachers can indeed help 80% or more of their students progress as readers without supplemental support. And it provides an opportunity for teachers and reading specialists to collaborate so that together they can support another 15% of students.

There is a long history of research suggesting that it is the teacher, not the method, that makes a difference. RTI offers teachers the opportunity to move from this abstract notion to a concrete one: to demonstrate to their administrators, parents, and community members that teachers—at their school, this year—are making a difference. RTI provides a means by which teachers, not publishers, are curricular experts who know their students. All that is needed is for teachers to arm themselves with knowledge and take the first step. These texts are a most reasonable starting point.

References


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