Making RTI Work

Although Response-to-Intervention (RTI)—a series of increasingly intensive interventions with struggling students—is mandated at schools across the country, many schools are finding it difficult to implement successfully. Making RTI Work offers proven guidelines for implementing RTI effectively in any school setting—urban, suburban, or rural. Written by Wayne Sailor, who recently directed a major national study in the area of RTI and Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support funded by the U.S. Department of Education, this important resource explains how successful schools using RTI manage the process and put the various components of the program into action. Filled with helpful real-world examples, the book shows how the RTI process can work effectively in addressing both academic and behavioral challenges. Step by step, Sailor outlines the best practices for implementing RTI at the classroom level, school-wide, district-wide, and statewide level.

Making RTI Work offers educators and school leaders the knowledge and tools they need to establish and sustain an effective RTI program that will help ensure that all students succeed.

Praise for Making RTI Work

“At its heart, school reform is about great teachers and great teaching. RTI is one of the most powerful tools to support great teaching, and...Sailor shows how it can be implemented most effectively.”
—MICHELLE RHEE, M.P.P., chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools

“The promises and possibilities of RTI become real in this book. Sailor’s refreshing approach makes the content accessible and doable for general and special educators; school administrators, counselors and psychologists; district and state leaders; and community and family members.”
—GEORGE SUGAI, Ph.D., Carole J. Neag endowed chair and professor, Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs

“For educators who work in the complex world of America’s schools, Sailor offers a path forward.”
—ELIZABETH B. KOZLESKI, Ed.D., professor and principal investigator, The Equity Alliance, Arizona State University

WAYNE SAILOR, Ph.D., professor of Special Education at the University of Kansas, has been working on behalf of children with disabilities more than 30 years. He is associate director of the Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas.
Making RTI Work

How Smart Schools Are Reforming Education Through Schoolwide Response-to-Intervention

Wayne Sailor
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Foreword

Wayne Sailor writes that the three domains of teaching are science, relationships, and inspiration. I would say that the book he has produced is about those same three themes. Let me explain.

First, the book is about the science of assessing the differences between learning and performance, which Dr. Sailor is well grounded in both theoretically and practically. He offers examples from teachers, principals, and superintendents as they come to see the differences. In a clear, concise, and painstaking way, he provides the theoretical and structural foundation for understanding response to intervention (RTI). Most books on this subject eschew the structural, yet it is collaboration and the integration of resources that make RTI happen in schools.

Dr. Sailor combines his science, the theoretical underpinnings of this presentation, with multiple school-, district-, and state-level examples of how this policy has largely remained a special education initiative. The fact that this policy is aligned with special education could, if it so remained, prove to be an insurmountable barrier to its success in local schools.

His science is not limited to teaching and learning. He provides examples of successful systems change as well. He also wisely takes time in this book to note the limitations of rational-technical approaches to any structural change initiative, and then speaks to the importance of relationships. This should make all readers
engaged in this topic smile with appreciation in recognition of the limitations of research.

Second, teaching and learning is about relationships. The importance of first establishing meaningful relationships preceding anything else is a widely accepted practice. Coming to know the other is the starting point for teacher and learner alike. Dr. Sailor emphasizes instructional coaching through the work of James Knight and explains how coaching and the relationships formed are an instrumental part of changing the nature and type of teaching practice. Dr. Sailor shows teachers how to use data to inform instruction formatively to improve student learning and performance. Formative assessment is part of the continuing cycle of the teaching-learning process and building the teacher-to-student relationship. Without feedback on performance students cannot improve in their learning. Data are the vehicle for deepening the relationship between teacher and student.

Third, Dr. Sailor offers a story of both relationship and inspiration about a fourth-grade teacher who knew how to engage a precocious and gifted but bored child. This book is inspirational because the author as researcher is also a social activist who has conducted research in complex schools filled with poverty, ethnic division, conflict, and poor school performance—Ravenswood, California; Kansas City, Kansas; New Orleans, Louisiana; and, most recently, the nation’s capital—to take up the cause of school reform. He tells inspiring stories with data of how these cities are coming to understand how they can change their thinking and structures to support the academic and social development of all their students.

The methods Dr. Sailor outlines include collaborative practices that integrate students, teachers, and systems of support for all students. In these challenging times, he writes of empowerment, not separate silos of people, resources, and ideas. He writes as well of collaboration and integration of effort, not continued fragmentation and separation of expertise, and for ownership of all students
and the engagement of families and communities, especially for very needy students.

Much work is revealed and effort displayed at every level of our educational system. This book is the result of a lifetime of effort, and we should all be grateful to Dr. Sailor's fourth-grade teacher. She created an inspiration for us all.

Leonard Burrello
Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida
Acknowledgments

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Finally, I thank my schoolwide applications colleagues Blair Roger in Oakland, California; Amy McCart, Nikki Wolf, and Jeong Hoon Choi at the University of Kansas; and especially Mariann Graham, without whom this book would never have made it to press.

Many others assisted in this project, and I ask forgiveness from others I should have named and offer my sincere apologies. I plead fading memory.
Wayne Sailor graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964, and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in clinical psychology at the University of Kansas in 1967 and 1969, respectively. He taught in the Special Education Department at San Francisco State University and in the joint doctoral program with the University of California, Berkeley, for seventeen years. He moved to Lawrence, Kansas, in 1992 and has taught in the Special Education Department as a professor since 2001. Together with his colleague Blair Roger in California, he created the schoolwide applications model school reform process to assist schools in fully implementing schoolwide response to intervention (RTI), which is operational in schools in Kansas, California, and, most recently, Washington, D.C.
This book is dedicated to Wendy, my soulmate and my constant source of inspiration. Thanks.
Preface

The children, as they gained in strength and capacity, were gradually initiated into the mysteries of the several processes. It was a matter of immediate and personal concern, even to the point of actual participation. We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and of character-building involved in this kind of life.

John Dewey

November 2008 was a momentous year in the history of the United States. Against all odds, an African American man, who ran on a platform of change and hope against a grim backdrop of worldwide financial calamity, was elected president. It was also a fascinating year of change and hope in America's public schools: the era of accountability ushered in by the Bush administration succeeded in moving science from university research centers directly into measurement of the classroom teaching-learning process and, more important, pupil progress. The results of this overlay of scientific assessments, however, have been discouraging for the most part. America's schools for the first time have been held measurably accountable for student learning. The problem is that they are being held accountable for producing something they do not know how to do given the realities.

U.S. schools, like most other public institutions, are products of a bygone age of specialization, where goals could be segmented
into discrete targets of opportunity and specialists could be trained to address those targets. Specialized resource systems tend to grow into small industries, ever expanding their own discourse communities and communities of practice—but also moving away from the original enterprise. If the whole is only as good as the sum of its parts, then the next step must be to reconnect the parts.

This book offers one pathway to achieving that next step, the reframing of educational resources to focus on a common goal: the improvement of academic achievement for all students. Response to intervention (RTI) as a schoolwide endeavor offers a potential breakthrough by moving science in the classroom beyond accountability assessment and into the direct improvement of the interactive processes engaged in teaching and learning. As such, it is a good fit with the ethos of change and hope.

I wrote this book from the standpoint of nearly three decades of research in public schools. Most of my work has been in urban schools, my particular passion, but the conclusions I have drawn from that work, as well as from the work of many colleagues around the country and in Canada, from whom I have learned much, are applicable to all of America’s schools—urban, suburban, and rural. Why shouldn’t a high-performing suburban school be able to move to the next level and become a much higher-performing school? Why shouldn’t an inner-city low-performing school become a high-performing school? We know from published examples from all over the country that we can no longer blame the children, or their parents, or their race, culture, or neighborhood if those children fail to learn. The lessons from the outstanding successes of the few schools that moved from poor to great need to be made widely available. This book is thus designed to reveal a potential framework for success. As such, it is offered as a resource to school and district leaders, teachers in both general and specialized educational support systems such as special education, Title I, etc., and to parents, and researchers who are ready to engage the difficult task of undertaking systems change by working from a blueprint of educational reform.
grounded in science, on the one hand, and steeped in hope, on the other.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One lays out in three chapters the essential framework for change that is embodied in RTI. Part Two, which consists of Chapters Four to Six, offers a step-by-step process for putting the various components of RTI into motion in the school and in the classroom. The final chapters, in Part Three, show what RTI looks like at the individual school, district, and statewide levels. The Conclusion offers a glimpse of the potential future of schoolwide RTI in helping to take American education to the next level.

I have sought throughout this book to provide examples of key points and to guide readers to useful books, Web sites, and other tools. New resources on RTI are emerging at a fast pace, a hopeful sign.

Hope and promise for the future are in the air. No longer can any child—black, brown, or white; rich or poor; girl or boy—say, “Why make the effort? I can never reach the highest levels of power and make a true difference in the world.” It is up to us to give America’s young people the educational tools for success to reach their own personal aspirations. Schoolwide RTI may provide the catalyst to begin to realize that goal in all of our nation’s schools.

Wayne Sailor
Lawrence, Kansas
Part I

The Origin and Design of Schoolwide RTI
Defining RTI

Response to intervention (RTI) is best understood as a model used to guide efforts to teach (intervention) based on measures of pupil progress (response) and grounded in the idea of prevention. The phrase, “little kids, little problems; big kids, big problems,” captures the idea. Suppose we could collect some relatively simple data on a kindergarten class that could be a powerful predictor of which children would succeed in the third-grade curriculum and which would be likely to fail. What if, based on these data, we could structure specific decisions about our teaching approach directed to the children determined to be at risk for failure that could greatly improve their chances of succeeding in the third grade? Of course, we would need to carefully monitor the progress of these students to ensure we are on the right track and make needed teaching adjustments if indicated. If we do these things, which I show in this book are not particularly burdensome, we will be using schoolwide RTI to raise the power of the teaching-learning process to boost academic achievement and prevent academic failure downstream for all kids.

Suppose we could collect some relatively simple data on a kindergarten class that could be a powerful predictor of which children would succeed in the third-grade curriculum and which would be likely to fail.
Features of RTI

Current definitions of RTI have several features in common as well as several that diverge. The common features, which this book examines in some detail later, are these:

- A three-tier system of matching interventions to assessed student academic and behavioral needs
- Systematic screening of young children using scientifically acceptable measuring instruments
- Interventions that have solid grounding in research and for which there is scientific evidence that they improve behavior or academic achievement, or both
- Progress monitoring of students identified as being at risk for low academic achievement, again using scientific measures
- Decision rules concerning levels of support provided through intervention

Features of RTI that diverge across various published definitions have mainly to do with the uses to which RTI is addressed. We look at standard protocol RTI, problem-solving, RTI, and school-wide RTI.

Standard Protocol RTI

Many of the systematic investigations of RTI processes that have appeared to date have been focused on disability determination (for a summary of this research, see *Handbook of Positive Behavior Support*, which I edited with Glen Dunlap, George Sugai, and Rob Horner). This standard protocol RTI refers to sets of research-validated decision rules with which to guide specific interventions