Core
Function

School Leadership
and Decision Making

Effective
Practice

Establish a team structure with specific
duties and time for instructional
planning

Indicator: Instructional Teams use student learning data to identify students in need of
instructional support or enhancement. (5110)

Explanation: Relying on data from last year's assessment test or even a more recent periodic assessment does not
enable teachers to make the timely adjustments in instruction and support that students require. Instructional Teams
have access to formative assessments, including the teachers' ongoing tracking of student mastery. Instructional
Teams can respond quickly when a student is having difficulty or is exhibiting early mastery and will benefit from
enhanced assignments.

Questions: In planning instruction, do your Instructional Teams review student learning data, including close-at-hand
classroom assessments, to identify students in need of instructional support or enhancement? What data are ana-
lyzed? What supports and enhancements are available?

Schools have invested heavily in curriculum alignment, mapping their curricula to standards, benchmarks, and
specific items of standards-based assessment. The resulting alignment is a set of data, a body of information care-
fully organized, that helps answer the question "What do we expect a student to know?" The challenge that lies
ahead for most schools is to draw further connections between the aligned curriculum, the taught curriculum, the
most efficacious instructional strategies, and the mastery evidenced by the individual student. This must be done in
a way that assures that all students achieve the expected level of mastery while allowing each student ample op-
portunity to soar beyond that minimum expectation. The linkage from curriculum to instruction is tenuous in many
schools, and insufficient systems are in place for capturing information about what is taught, how it is taught, and
how it might best be learned by an individual student. The research literature provides a wealth of information on
instructional practices, but the usefulness of this information cannot be assumed from its abundance. Matching
particular practices to the subject area, grade level, and students' prior learning can be a massive undertaking, leav-
ing too much unproductive chaff in the bushel of productive grain. In the end, the teacher must hit the target where
content, instructional mode, and learner requisites optimally meet. A DBDM (Data-based decision-making) system
can help a teacher hit the target. Monitoring the application of targeted learning strategies by teachers can help a
school refine its professional development processes and improve its teachers' effectiveness. Some decisions are
best made by the teachers responsible for particular groups of students—grade level teams or subject area teams,
which we will call "instructional teams." Instructional Teams are manageable groupings of teachers by grade level or
subject area who meet to develop instructional strategies aligned to the standards-based curriculum and to monitor
the progress of the students in the grade levels or subject area for which the team is responsible. Instructional Teams
need time for two purposes: (1) meetings, and (2) curricular and instructional planning. A 45-minute meeting twice
a month is ideal for maintaining communication and organizing the work at hand, operating with agendas, minutes,
and focus. In addition, a block of 4 to 6 hours of time once a month is necessary for curricular and instructional
planning, and additional whole days before and after the school year are a great advantage. The pre-test is used as
a quick assessment, a way for the teacher to assess each student's readiness for an objective. Likewise, the post-test

is a way to get a quick read on students' mastery after completion of the unit or after completion of the period of instruction allotted for the objective. The pre-test and the post-test are the same—a before and an after, or parallel items of the same level of difficulty. In other words, the post-test isn't "harder" than the pre-test. The "items" need not be pencil and paper test items. The teacher may give the pre-test for a unit all at one time or in chunks, prior to addressing each new set of objectives. If the items are taken from a chapter test or other material, the Instructional Team indicates the specific items that correspond with the objective. The chapter test may include more items than the pre-test/posttest, of course. Pre-tests should not be graded. Post-tests may be graded, or included as part of larger graded tests. Between the pre-test and the post-test, students complete a variety of learning activities, including independent work and homework. They may also take other graded tests. Teachers have several ways to determine mastery through the instructional process. The pre-test and post-test address only target objectives. The teacher assesses for mastery of prerequisite and enhanced objectives through learning activities (Redding, 2006).

In the Wakefield County Public School System School Improvement Plan, one "Priority Concern" is "Reading 6–8"; the "Root Cause (with evidence)" is "School wide reading scores have not been a primary focus among the entire staff"; and the "Solution" is "Offer support to students that were identified as having weak reading skills through the reading skills assessment that was offered earlier this year (i.e. Reading Academy)." Another suggestion was: "There are some strategies that can be used to address these concerns. One of the solutions would be to offer elective support to students struggling in Algebra. Students that have been pushed into Algebra based on EVAAS data are missing some concepts so there are gaps that inhibit them from being successful in Algebra" (Wakefield County Public School System, 2013, p. 4)

For Special Education

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), placed a new emphasis on the use of student learning data to ensure the early provision of instructional support for students experiencing difficulties. An LEA can use up to 15% of its Part B funds, "to develop and implement coordinated, early intervening services, which may include interagency financing

structures, for students in kindergarten through grade 12 (with particular emphasis on students in K–3) who have not been identified as needing special education or related services but who need additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in a general education environment.   Activities may include professional development and direct services. Direct services may include providing educational and behavioral evaluations, services, and supports, including scientifically based literacy instruction (Section 613(f) (3)). The provision of early intervening services is typically part of a comprehensive response-to-intervention framework. Response-to-intervention, or RTI, is the practice of providing high quality instruction and intervention, matches to students' needs, using learning rate over time and level performance to make important decisions. (NASDSE 2005).   In order to establish learning rate over time and a student's level of performance, on-going progress monitoring of student learning must take place. Instructional teams should use student learning data for a variety of purposes. One purpose within a comprehensive response-to-instruction framework is to make decisions regarding when/if students should be referred for a formal evaluation to determine eligibility for special education and/or related services. When utilizing student learning data within the structure of an RTI framework, it is critical that the instructional teams keep careful records and refer for a formal evaluation when appropriate.   Instructional teams need to record the dates when specific interventions are initiated, the frequency and duration of the interventions, and what the specific learning needs are that the intervention is intended to meet.   The instructional team should meet and communicate regularly with parents during this stage and document the dates and communications with parents in order to ensure full compliance with IDEA regulations (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2009).

Since 1999, at least four organizations – the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's National Reading Panel, National Summit on Learning Disabilities (sponsored by the National Center for Learning Disabilities), the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, and the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (the Commission) – have supported using Response to Intervention (RTI) as an alternative to the discrepancy model by which most students traditionally qualify for special education. The ultimate decision to refer and/or qualify a child for

special education should be made by an instructional team after high-quality interventions have been attempted and their impact frequently monitored. RTI systems are characterized by (1) instruction and programs matched to student needs, often in tiers of instruction that differ in frequency and intensity, and (2) frequent progress monitoring to examine student progress and to inform teachers' adjustments to instructional plans. If a student fails to make progress despite increasingly intensive and targeted tiers of intervention, a referral to determine eligibility for special education may be necessary. Data gathered during diagnoses of student learning in these tiers of intervention will provide essential information to guide the instructional team in the formal evaluation process (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2009).

References and Resources

Buffum, A., Mattos, M., & Weber, C. (2009). *Pyramid response to intervention.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Redding, S. (2006). T*he mega system: Deciding, learning, connecting.* Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute. Retrieved from www.adi.org. See Download ADI Publications.

Wakefield County Public School System. (2013). *School Improvement Plan*. Cary, NC: Author.