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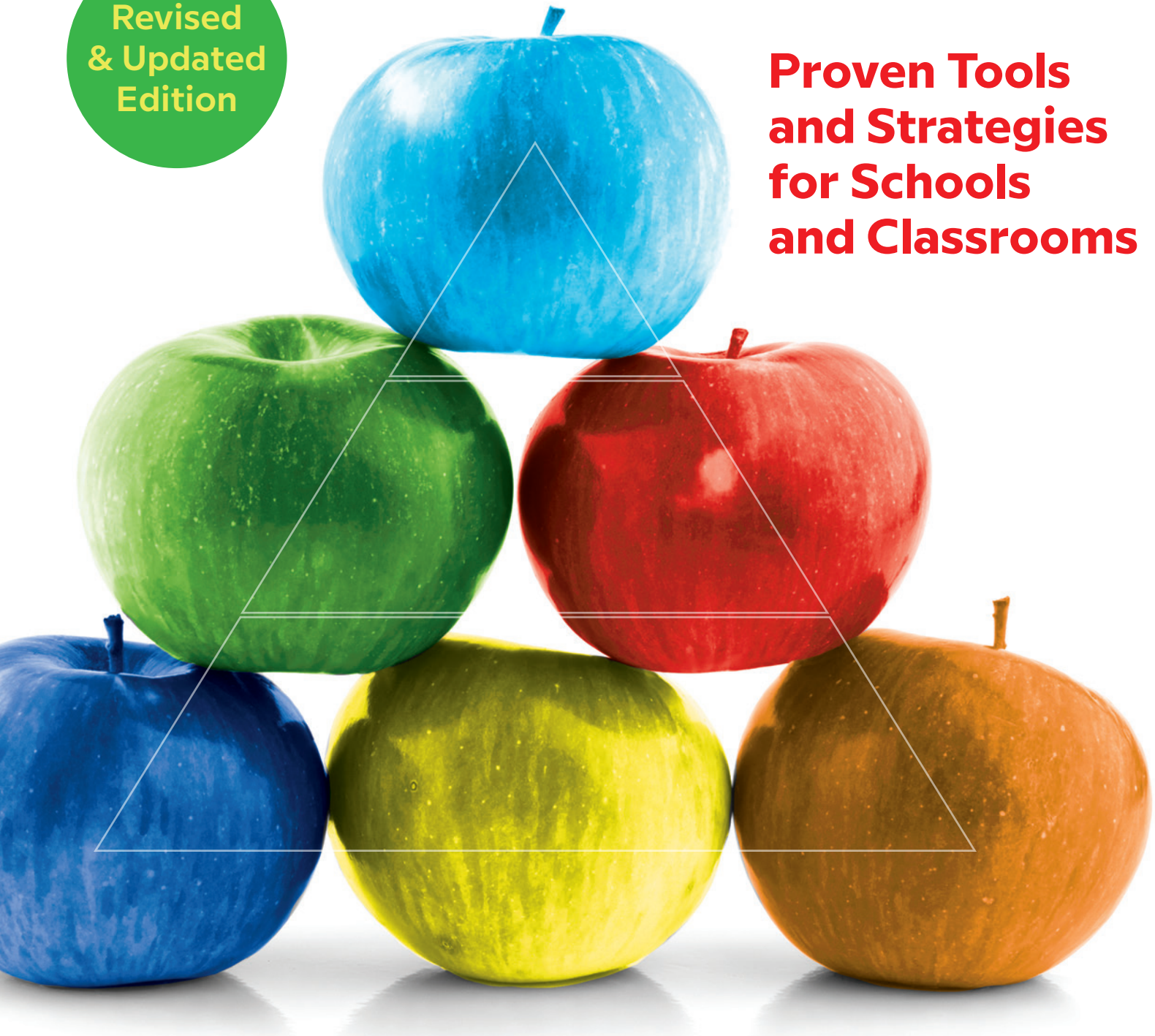
RTI SUCCESS

Revised & Updated Edition

Proven Tools and Strategies for Schools and Classrooms



Elizabeth Whitten, Ph.D., Kelli J. Esteves, Ed.D., and Alice Woodrow, Ed.D.

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Praise for

RTI SUCCESS

"*RTI Success* provides the essential tools teachers need that allow them to focus on positive student relationships, collaborate with other professionals and families, and design learner-centered instruction to meet each child's unique needs. The chapter on co-teaching is invaluable, and the entire book is well organized with reproducible forms and 'What to Try When' charts to save teachers time!"

—**Karen Evans,** special education teacher, Oakridge Public Schools

"This is a must-have resource on your RTI shelf! Whether you're looking for an introduction or a refresher, you'll find what you need in this book. The authors have provided theory along with a practical approach for implementation of an RTI process. I appreciate the emphasis on essential elements of teaching and learning, such as strong student-teacher relationships and Universal Design for Learning within core curriculum. With guidance on assessment, progress monitoring, and considerations for each level of academic support, this book provides information, ready-to-use templates, and resources to help educators enhance learning and find success for all students."

—**Heather Gorgas,** current administrator and former instructional coach, Avon Community School Corporation

"*RTI Success* is the most comprehensive resource I've found to enhance or begin a school's RTI implementation. As a district leader of RTI for Indianapolis Public Schools, I have found this book to complement and improve our district's current practices and teaching strategies. While the US Department of Education requires the use of a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention, it does not mandate or endorse any particular model. This can make RTI subjective, complex, and confusing. Fortunately for educators, *RTI Success* brings welcome clarity. You can read the book cover to cover or pick it up and focus on the aspects of the RTI framework that your school needs to develop. The guidelines and reproducible documents in *RTI Success* can be easily implemented for any school's unique needs, and the 'RTI in Action' sections provide real-life scaffolding examples to deepen understanding of the content. Our district has significantly increased our matrix of interventions due to the teaching strategies provided in this book, allowing us to implement specially designed instruction at any tier, all while sprucing up teachers' personal tool kits. I'm grateful to have this all-encompassing book to reference time and time again."

—**Kassi Hall,** special education specialist, multi-classroom leader, and district leader of RTI, Indianapolis Public Schools

"The authors of *RTI Success* have created a versatile guide that is beneficial to both veteran and new educators. This book is a powerful resource for continuous growth through the RTI process, utilizing easy-to-follow explanations, charts, tables, and templates to guide any educator. I am excited about using this book with my teams as we continue to move forward with RTI."

—**Scott A. Deetz, Ph.D.,** superintendent, Madison-Grant United School Corporation

"All too often, the books we read as educational practitioners seeking to meet our students' needs leave us wanting more. They fall short in the area of research or practice, and we find ourselves looking for guidance from the next book. The beauty of *RTI Success* is that it is founded, in all aspects, on comprehensive research and useful practical strategies that can be put into immediate practice in every school setting. Whether you are a seasoned educator or a novice, you'll find step-by-step directions to help your students thrive as learners. Between the covers of *RTI Success*, school leaders will discover the knowledge they need to develop staff and create systems and structures within a school. The authors understand what students need to be fully supported as well as how to put structures in place that enable educators to provide that support. *RTI Success* is one of the few books that you will keep within reach on your desk and refer to over and over."

—**Dr. Deborah Nuzzi,** director of secondary education, Battle Creek Public Schools

"*RTI Success* has helped me in my entire career. I have used it not only in special education, but also in my general education classes. In the revised and updated edition, the authors give more resources and data-driven strategies to maximize students' learning outcomes. These strategies are targeted to all students! I also love the strategies and methods for effective co-teaching in classrooms, something that is happening in the school district where I work. Thank you for this great resource!"

—**Katerin Duran,** 6th-grade bilingual teacher

RTI SUCCESS

Proven Tools and Strategies for Schools and Classrooms

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Elizabeth Whitten, Ph.D.
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9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100
Minneapolis, MN 55442
(612) 338-2068
help4kids@freespirit.com
www.freespirit.com

Dedication

For Mike, Mackenzie, Mallory, and Matthew
—E.W.

For Dean, Ava, and Alex
—K.E.

For Rob, Parker, and Addison
—A.W.

Acknowledgments

To our families, thank you for your encouragement to write the original version of *RTI Success* and for your continued support as we researched, revised, and updated this edition. To the teachers, counselors, principals, and many others in various roles who collaborated with us, thank you for helping us make improvements on this edition, and most importantly, for making a difference in the lives of your students. To our editor, Alison Behnke, thank you for understanding our vision and for helping us convey our ideas in the best possible way. To the team at Free Spirit Publishing, thank you for putting books out into the world that are aimed at helping children develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

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Introduction

"A teacher's purpose is not to create students in his [or her] own image, but to develop students who can create their own image."

—Unknown

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a schoolwide approach to help educators address the needs of all learners. The multitiered structure is an intentional framework that provides for the delivery of high-quality, flexible, and differentiated instruction based on students' academic readiness, needs, interests, and learning preferences. It draws on the proven efficacy of productive goal setting and ongoing progress monitoring within a multifaceted assessment system. Through the implementation of the many strategies, programs, and keys to effective teaching provided in this book, schools and educators can use RTI to harness their own skills, strengths, and resources to best meet the needs of every student.

Additionally, while the use of RTI *can* lead to a diagnosis of a student's specific learning disability, it provides a school with a great deal more. When implemented well, it can be a powerful engine for improving the achievement and engagement of all students. *RTI Success* provides you with the practical information and tools you need to put RTI in place or refine an existing approach, to harness RTI's benefits, and to successfully tackle its challenges.

RTI can be a powerful engine for improving the achievement and engagement of all students.

Educators who have embraced the practices of universal design for learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction will recognize that the core principles of UDL and differentiation are at the foundation of RTI. *Universal design for learning* is defined as "a framework for guiding educational practice that (a) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (b) reduces barriers in instruction; provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges; and maintains instructional accommodations."* UDL allows for accommodations in materials or procedures to help students learn. At the same time, UDL recognizes that these accommodations do not alter the standards that all students need to achieve. Rather, UDL's accommodations allow students to learn *within* a standards framework, giving all learners an equal opportunity to meet the required goals. Differentiated instruction is similar in concept to UDL but is carried out in more fluid ways to respond to individual student needs.

UDL and differentiated instruction complement one another and many teachers have implemented both of these practices in their classrooms. RTI moves UDL and differentiated instruction to a schoolwide level by putting in place the structures needed for a team-based approach to meeting the needs of diverse learners.

* Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, and Hall, 2005.

The RTI model began to gain prominence after the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) recognized it as an alternative means for identifying students with specific learning disabilities. However, RTI is much more than a diagnostic process. It is designed to improve the achievement of *all* students. The RTI framework emphasizes the importance of quality teaching, early intervention, and progress monitoring through effective instruction. The intention is to address students' unique learning needs in the general classroom whenever possible *before* academic problems requiring special education services can develop.

We have worked with many educators implementing RTI in schools, and we know that the model can raise questions and concerns at first. Teachers and administrators often are unsure how RTI will affect daily instruction yet they are also intrigued and encouraged by the model's many potential benefits. Educators are looking for assistance to help make it a reality in their schools.

RTI Success provides that assistance. The book presents comprehensive information on the RTI process, and then goes further, supplying hands-on, how-to tools teachers can use to help students succeed in the classroom. At the same time, it provides school leaders with step-by-step implementation guidelines and practical solutions to challenges that may arise in the course of building a strong RTI program and coordinating services throughout an entire school or district.

Whatever your role—general educator, special educator, literacy specialist, school counselor, or administrator—*RTI Success* is a one-stop resource for moving forward with the model in your environment.

▲ The RTI Model

Response to Intervention is a multitiered instruction model designed to promote growth for all learners. RTI first calls for the use of high-quality, evidence-based instructional techniques proven to foster learning and limit learning difficulties. These teaching methods are geared toward each student's individual learning preferences and interests. A systematic screening process is set up to identify students at risk for academic difficulty. Those students who struggle in the classroom then receive targeted academic interventions based on learning needs.

Within the RTI framework, teachers use frequent progress monitoring to gauge student achievement. If initial instructional efforts do not produce adequate academic growth, then more intensive interventions are introduced. Only after more vigorous intervention methods are shown to be unsuccessful (through comprehensive assessment) are students considered for special education services.

RTI encourages a great deal of collaboration and teamwork among teachers, administrators, special educators, and other staff. As members of RTI teams (discussed in chapter 2), staff members make decisions together about student instruction. Educators work together (along with parents) to assess students, monitor their progress, and implement interventions, which include differentiated grouping and instruction. Organizing and sharing information with one another is crucial as students receive instruction at each of the tiers.

In an era when many in education are continuously asked to do more with less, some educators express reservations about RTI, fearing it will add responsibilities to an

already full school day. It's important to recognize that RTI is not an add-on. In fact, it incorporates much of what educators already do. While RTI does present some new ways of doing things and a new lens for looking at instruction, these practices represent a step toward meeting an important objective: the success of all students.

▲ Why Use RTI?

The focus of RTI is on the use of high-quality personalized instruction, screening and progress monitoring for early intervention, schoolwide collaboration, and goal-oriented instruction within a multitiered service delivery model. This powerful approach has the potential to dramatically improve how we meet the needs of all students and transform how schools operate. Among RTI's many benefits are the following:

Increased focus on early intervention. RTI's emphasis on screening students at least three times each year can help identify early on those with learning challenges. Teachers can then implement interventions to remediate skill deficits before they lead to significant academic difficulties. Schools may use up to 15 percent of IDEA funds on these early intervention efforts for the whole school population.

RTI represents a step toward meeting an important objective: the success of all students.

Targeted instruction based on student needs. Teachers design instruction based on what they have learned about the academic readiness of each student. This attention on unique learner attributes keeps the classroom focus on delivering instruction that works for individual students (rather than a one-size-fits-all approach). UDL and differentiated instruction—staples of RTI—enable teachers to simultaneously address individual, small group, and large group needs.

Instruction driven by assessment. Within the RTI framework, student progress is monitored frequently and systematically to ensure learning is happening. If it is not, a different teaching strategy is put into place. This can help prevent time from being lost in addressing academic difficulties. Rather than try something over a long period of time without knowing whether it's working, teachers can verify a strategy's effectiveness with a particular learner. Thoughtful assessment practices can give insight into learner development and guide well-informed instructional decisions. This is at the heart of the RTI model.

Improved quality of instruction. RTI emphasizes the need for quality teaching through use of evidence-based instructional methods. When teaching methods are grounded in research, students have the best chance at success. Additionally, the model involves ongoing professional development. Training in the use of assessment tools and using proven curriculum, teaching strategies, and academic interventions help schools raise the bar when it comes to instruction.

Focus on positive relationships in the classroom. Within the RTI framework, teachers identify students' unique characteristics. This information can be helpful in creating a classroom where learners feel supported and confident in who they are. They are also more likely to be motivated when instruction accounts for their learning preferences and interest areas. At the same time, students learn to respect peers for their individual strengths and specialized knowledge.

Increased schoolwide collaboration. Administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, and other staff members work closely together within the RTI framework. School professionals participate on RTI teams, discussing student strengths and needs with one another and determining appropriate academic interventions. Diverse areas of expertise among these educators can help groups identify effective strategies. At the same time, shared knowledge of a student's needs can ensure consistency in instruction. Collaborating together can also help staff members feel closer and more invested in one another's work. Many schools and teachers already follow principles on which RTI is based—it's the purposeful commitment to a consistent and comprehensive schoolwide approach that gives it its strength.

Many schools and teachers already follow principles on which RTI is based—it's the purposeful commitment to a consistent and comprehensive schoolwide approach that gives it its strength.

▲ What the Research Says*

In 2001, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education issued a report suggesting that the discrepancy model (see page 11) be replaced as a basis for determining eligibility in the area of learning disabilities. The Commission recommended a system of early intervention and assessment directly tied to instruction. At the National Summit on Learning Disabilities that same year, RTI was called the "most promising" method for identifying learning disabilities. These developments were reflected in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA recognizing RTI as an option for the identification process. Ongoing studies by the National Institute for Child Health and Development confirm that the discrepancy model delays appropriate education services to students. The organization endorses the early intervention services integral to RTI.**

Response to Intervention is much more than a replacement of the discrepancy model, and the research on RTI is complex given the many elements of RTI's implementation and use. Research does exist focusing on individual elements of RTI such as universal screening, various evidence-based instructional strategies and programs, monitoring student progress, and differentiated instruction within a multitiered system of support. Comprehensive field study research is still emerging, and more longitudinal research needs to be done to assist educators with implementation and application. Still, we can draw some conclusions from the field study research that does exist:***

- Evidence shows that a multitiered approach to early intervention can improve academic achievement for students who are at risk. (However, most studies on early intervention have focused on reading skills.)
- RTI is more sustainable when its implementation involves professional development, administration support, buy-in from all school personnel, and time for collaboration.
- Some studies show that RTI may lead to a decrease in referral and placement rates for special education, although others show largely consistent rates.

* Batsche et al. (2005); Fuchs and Fuchs (2006); Bender and Shores (2007); and Hughes and Dexter (rtinetwork.org/learn/research/researchreview).

** Many of the studies supporting the efficacy of RTI have been conducted by US government agencies looking to establish best practices for identifying and addressing learning disabilities.

*** "Field Studies of RTI Programs, Revised" by Charles Hughes and Douglas D. Dexter, rtinetwork.org/learn/research/field-studies-rti-programs.

The RTI Action Network website (rtinetwork.org) is one place where you can monitor research related to RTI. For more information on this site, see page 12.

▲ About This Book and Digital Content

RTI Success has been written with the needs of the entire school staff in mind. Some sections may be more useful to one reader or another. In this new edition of *RTI Success* we have included expanded information in each chapter as well as a new chapter on how to co-teach effectively within the context of RTI.

Part I: Implementation. Here are tools for developing a successful RTI program.

- **Chapter 1: Response to Intervention** offers comprehensive information helpful for all staff toward understanding RTI as a schoolwide model. The section explains the core beliefs behind RTI and provides a full analysis of the multitiered service delivery model.
- **Chapter 2: Setting Up RTI Teams and the Problem-Solving Process** details how staff can work together to support the RTI initiative and includes information for administrators who are putting together RTI teams in a school- or district-wide effort. Descriptions of RTI meeting structures and the problem-solving process illuminate staff roles in making decisions about instruction.

Part II: Assessment. A crucial aspect of RTI is ongoing learner assessment. This part of the book provides tools for developing a comprehensive evaluation program.

- **Chapter 3: Creating and Sustaining Positive Learning Environments** provides tools for carrying out personalized learner assessments to understand students as individuals and learners. Gathering this information helps base instructional decisions on how students best learn. Tools in this section also help promote strong relationships in the classroom. It also provides tools for promoting a strong and supportive classroom culture that values learner diversity.
- **Chapter 4: Academic Assessment** provides information on achievement indicators important within the RTI framework. Tools for screening and progress monitoring are covered in depth, as are guidelines for making determinations about movement between tiers. RTI team members can use the "Educational Profile" at the end of the chapter to make and record decisions about instruction.

Part III: Instruction. The final section of the book offers practical strategies for the classroom.

- **Chapter 5: Purposeful Grouping** provides differentiation strategies teachers can use to meet student needs based on personalized learner assessments as well as academic assessments. The chapter includes information for creating and managing groups that challenge and meet the learning needs of all students within diverse classrooms.
- **Chapter 6: Co-Teaching** explores how educators can work together to help students reach learning goals. Descriptions of co-teaching models are explained. Quality indicators for evaluating your approaches are provided, along with evidence-based strategies for effective co-teaching practices.

- **Chapter 7: Evidence-Based Teaching** features a wide range of proven instructional methods to use with learners. "What to Try When" charts will help educators align learning goals with instructional strategies. Over 100 evidence-based strategies are offered to meet a variety of needs.

Within each of these chapters, you'll find a variety of helpful elements. The figures located throughout the book provide at-a-glance information about RTI. In addition, "Spotlight" boxes provide key information about the framework and demonstrate how to carry out important RTI processes. The "RTI in Action" elements offer instructive examples of how the model is being carried out in schools. Throughout the book you will also find reproducible forms that can be used in planning, implementing, and carrying out RTI. The forms can be copied from the book, downloaded and printed, or filled out electronically in their digital format. For information on downloading the forms, see page 250.

At the end of the book you will find an extensive list of references and resources for further exploration.

▲ Overcoming Challenges

Because RTI continues to evolve at the same time schools are implementing it, certain challenges are inevitable. This book has been written with the challenges in mind and is designed to help address them.

One challenge is that most research on the effectiveness of RTI has been conducted on individual elements of RTI rather than on comprehensive programs. Field studies on comprehensive implementation are complicated by the fact that school structures are unique, and various schools' implementation of RTI differ significantly. This makes it difficult to generalize based on field studies. Additionally, confusion remains about the framework's role in the determination of specific learning disabilities (SLD). While some states do provide guidance on best practices, it is often up to individual districts to develop procedures on their own.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

This book features examples from across grade levels and subject areas to give you an idea of how the model can take shape in diverse environments. Additionally, you'll find a discussion of the model's role in special education referrals (pages 97–98) in chapter 4. The web links included throughout the book can also connect you with updates on best practices as RTI procedures continue to evolve.

Another potential difficulty that can arise in schools implementing RTI is confusion about the model within the school community. Administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, and support staff must work together in new ways to support a school's RTI initiative. Significant changes in staff relationships and roles may be necessary and can create the potential for misunderstanding (or even resentment).

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

Carefully crafted professional development can help increase confidence in your RTI initiative and ensure consistency in the delivery of services. This book and digital content provide comprehensive information on RTI and a PDF presentation that can

be used for staff development. Ready-to-use reproducible forms can also help streamline RTI processes.

Misperceptions about the scope of RTI within the school community can also present challenges. Classroom teachers may think of RTI as a "special education thing." Even those who understand RTI as a model designed to meet the needs of all students might perceive its potential benefits to be limited to students with learning disabilities, when in reality, it has great potential to meet the needs of all learners, including those with high levels of academic readiness. While the model strives to meet the needs of all students at their current levels, that message may sometimes be difficult to get across.

Carefully crafted professional development can help increase confidence with implementation of RTI and ensure consistency in the delivery of services.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

Students benefit when teachers learn more about them as unique learners. With this information, teachers can plan lessons that engage and challenge all learners. It's important to highlight this information with parents or advocates who may have reservations about RTI. (You might share the PDF presentation from the digital content in a parent-teacher organization meeting.) You'll also find tools for the practical work of identifying students' unique attributes, capitalizing on their areas of strength, and differentiating instruction according to learning preferences and other factors.

Rapid, full-scale implementation of Response to Intervention has the potential to be costly. Depending upon a school or district's readiness for RTI, there may be a need for in-depth staff development and extensive curriculum resources. Considerable funding and time requirements may appear to be a barrier to implementation for schools looking to adopt the model.

How *RTI Success* can help . . .

The practical tools in this book are offered toward reducing potential costs related to training, progress monitoring, and resource requirements. Also, the resources that appear throughout provide web links where additional tools (often cost-free) can be found. One other thing to keep in mind: RTI can save districts money (and in effect "pay for itself") due to the emphasis on early intervention.

This last potential concern highlights a very important point: RTI can be implemented in stages. Schools may start, for example, by either piloting the program in limited locations or at specific grade levels across the district. Training and resource decisions can thus be made on a limited scale. This is true during initial implementation or if your school district needs to reevaluate and make changes to the way it has implemented RTI.

▲ A Word of Advice

While this book presents a structure to follow and a wealth of tools to support your RTI initiative, it is not a rigid blueprint. All the recommendations are offered with the caveat that specific situations at your school or in your classroom may call for doing things in