
Implementing RTI²: Reports from the Field

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FOREWORD

Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²), is an instructional framework for learning. Successful implementation of RTI² will result in each learner receiving instruction in Tennessee State Standards and, if needed, intervention aligned to a specific skill deficit. Interventions aligned to an area of deficit will close learning gaps for students and allow them the opportunity to meet high academic expectations set forth for all Tennessee students. Effective July 1, 2014, the RTI² framework will be the means of identification for a student with a specific learning disability if that student has not shown adequate progress through the tiered intervention process.

The Divisions of Curriculum and Instruction and Special Populations have provided support for all district leaders and teachers through conference trainings, regional trainings through the CORE offices, new administrator trainings through the Tennessee Academy for School Leaders, and individual technical support visits to over 83 districts in Tennessee. These professional development opportunities began in 2013 with overview sessions describing the goals of the RTI process. Further trainings based on information from the field led to more in depth training for school personnel in the areas of data analysis, identification of skills-based universal screeners and progress monitoring tools, calculation of rates of improvements necessary to close learning gaps for struggling students, identification of research based interventions, and assistance with scheduling for building level administrators. Intervention courses in the areas of reading and math have been provided for teachers across the state through TNCore Direct Teacher Training and will continue to be provided in the future.

The Office of Consolidated Planning and Monitoring is working extensively with the United States Department of Education to provide guidance for individual districts as they leverage their current resources to support the RTI² framework.

Findings from this report validate the work that has been done up to this point to educate and provide training for districts as we shift to an RTI framework. More importantly, it provides evidence of areas that are challenging for districts as they move toward implementation. This evidence will guide our work to provide a structure of support for districts as we move forward.

Ultimately, we believe this model will have significant impact on all student learners by addressing areas of deficit early through a proactive model of intervention. As educators, it is our responsibility to meet the learning needs of all students and to provide intervention prior to student failure. TDOE continues to work with districts to provide support to implement this instructional framework to best serve the students of Tennessee.

SUMMARY

Starting in 2014-15, districts across the state must implement a Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²) plan. RTI² is an instructional framework which provides ongoing monitoring of student performance and progress through the use of universal student screeners and interventions targeted at students' identified problem areas. The framework is meant to identify and reduce student skill deficits and to provide a consistent method for diagnosing special education candidates.

For some districts and schools, the RTI² framework is entirely new. Others have used some version of the program, often in select grades or subjects, for several years. The variation in RTI² preparedness across the state suggests the need for state personnel to provide a variety of different support strategies to insure strong implementation statewide.

This report attempts to survey the spectrum of district and school readiness through a series of case studies in order to identify the kinds of targeted support that might prove most useful. To gain perspective on the implementation of RTI², we interviewed district and school leaders from 14 schools in seven districts across the state.

Our findings in brief:

- Nearly all of the district and school administrators that we spoke with demonstrated a remarkably strong knowledge of the state's RTI² framework, suggesting that state communication and trainings have been quite successful in raising awareness of the new requirements.
- Scheduling has proved to be a major difficulty for most schools, and administrators say they are unable to find enough time in the school day to adhere to state RTI² scheduling guidelines around uninterrupted core instruction and intervention time and still retain time for activities such as Art and Physical Education.
- Nearly all administrators feel that RTI² has placed additional strain on already thin resources, and they identify challenges in financing the initial system, building the human capital to execute the program, and finding the physical space for the required small group interventions.
- Many schools still are struggling to successfully blend the silos of general and special education in order to create the collaboration that feels necessary for strong RTI² implementation.
- Most districts are still focused on identifying screeners and progress monitors and few have reached the point where they are thinking deeply about the interventions that will take place once deficits have been identified.

WHAT IS RESPONSE TO INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION?

The RTI² framework combines high-quality instruction and interventions tailored to students' needs with frequent progress monitoring to make instructional and intervention decisions. In Tennessee, the RTI² system is built around a tiered intervention model that spans from general education to special education. Tiered interventions occur in general education depending on the needs of the student.

Under the RTI² model, schools administer a universal screener three times per year which assesses students' foundational skills in reading, writing, and math. At-risk students are identified using the screener results in conjunction with school achievement, behavior, and/or test results. The Tennessee RTI² model helps schools determine the level of intervention students need in addition to their core academic instruction. Students are placed into interventions that provide small group, explicit instruction based on their area of need. These skill-based interventions are designed to help students better access their core academic instruction. School-level RTI² teams conduct ongoing assessment and monitoring to determine whether student progress is being made, in which case students may no longer need interventions, or whether a student may need more specialized interventions through a formal special education program.

Figure 1. Student Classifications within RTI²

	Instruction/Intervention	Monitoring/Outcomes
Tier I (100% of student population)	General education, with high quality instruction aligned to Common Core	Ongoing monitoring to identify students with further needs
Tier II (10-15% of student population)	Supplemental small group interventions targeted at students' area of need	Significant Progress: Return to general education Inadequate Progress: Referral to Tier III
Tier III (3-5% of student population)	Intensive individual or small group instruction targeted at students' area of need	Significant Progress: Return to Tier II or general education Inadequate Progress: assessment for special education

RTI² IMPLEMENTATION: THREE CASES

As districts and schools begin to implement RTI², they confront a variety of challenges. The following examples describe the way that some districts and schools have taken on the process. They begin to illustrate the primary areas in which educators need to work to achieve RTI² readiness. These areas include:

1. District and school leaders with a strong knowledge of the RTI² framework and investment in the core RTI² tenets
2. Dedicated intervention time built into the master schedule
3. Adequate training, resources, and support
4. Structures that encourage frequent collaboration and communication between general and special educators
5. A full set of RTI² tools, including a regularly administered universal screener, tools for progress monitoring, and appropriate research-based interventions for struggling students

Balancing Flexibility and Guidance—The District Role in RTI² Implementation

In District C, a large district serving a majority of economically disadvantaged students, elementary schools have been using Response to Intervention for reading for several years. However, the switch to RTI² requires a scaling up of the existing program along with new expectations. District C is supporting its schools with by setting clear guidelines while also allowing schools flexibility to determine what works best for students and staff. This balance of strict guidelines with gentle guidance is not easy to achieve, but District C has used collective decision making with insight from school staff to help them navigate their role in RTI² Implementation.

District personnel leading RTI² Implementation overwhelmingly voiced support of RTI², stating that they thought students would benefit from the focus on both good core instruction and skill-based monitoring and interventions, even saying that they thought RTI² would reduce new special education referrals. Having **knowledgeable and invested leaders** seems to have promoted strong investment throughout the district. The district RTI² team includes **both general and special education district personnel** and school representatives. The team used tools in the state implementation manual to gauge their RTI² readiness and used that information to map out their 2013-14 agenda and goals, which included evaluating and selecting a **universal screener**, making decisions about district-level fidelity monitoring, and developing a district-level RTI² guide. In these meetings and through other communications, district personnel also pass along information from the state to schools. School administrators noted that the **decision**

making was collective, explaining that the district RTI² team is working together to establish goals. Another school administrator noted that “the chain of communication has been good” saying that having point people on the district team to learn and share has been useful.

The district balance of clear guidelines that allow for some flexibility is illustrated in intervention **scheduling**. District personnel explained that they did “put out some non-negotiables” by setting “minimum expectations for the amount of time that needs to be spent for tier I mathematics and tier I reading language arts.” They described Tier I time as “sacred.” Still, the district also allowed for flexibility in scheduling. While all elementary schools have intervention time built into their schedules, some schools include 45 minutes every day for intervention and enrichment into the master schedule and others allow grade level teams to determine when to schedule the intervention time. In other areas, the district has provided school s with information needed for making their own decisions. For example, one school administrator noted that the district provided **training** on how to access data to estimate the numbers of students who will need interventions for scheduling and personnel planning purposes. District personnel said providing this type of information was part of an effort to help schools be “strategic about the staff that they have in place and use the existing staff to work the plan that their team is developing.” They even noted providing extra **support** on using human capital most effectively to schools with the highest numbers of students needing interventions in both reading and math.

New Demands on Teachers—Committing to Ongoing Teacher Support

A middle school in District G provided insight about the importance of ongoing professional development and guidance for their teachers in all Tiers of the RTI² model as well as the critical determination of who delivers interventions. A large district with about half of students classified as economically disadvantaged, District G has been very active in proceeding with RTI² implementation. As one of District G's pilot RTI² schools, this middle school was operating at full implementation of the RTI² model in the 2013-14 school year having both math and reading intervention time integrated into the master schedule. Like many middle and high schools, this middle school was challenged by teachers' unfamiliarity with Response to Intervention as well as their tendency to be content experts rather than skills experts. Administration responded to these weak areas by viewing **knowledge, collaboration, and training** as a continuous process.

A key topic of the RTI² discussion at the middle school was the strong push to improve the quality of instruction in the core classes. The administration's focus on providing the **appropriate knowledge, resources, and training** to teachers to ensure quality, differentiated instruction in Tier I was ongoing through both formal (**collaborative monthly RTI team meetings**) and informal (quick one-on-one talks between teachers and the RTI coach) professional development. The RTI Coach advised teachers daily on differentiation and scaffolding that is necessary to make "the content more accessible to all students." The middle school principal reinforced the importance of this issue by using

an example of low performing students: "They (teachers) have a difficult time understanding that that kid in Tier III, while yes you are teaching a Tier I class, you have to scaffold you have to differentiate otherwise that child who is two or three grade levels behind and he's not a very good reader, and his fluency is lacking, and he doesn't comprehend what he does read, he will have no chance at accessing the curriculum if you do not make some modifications for him."

To address the need for **training** in effectively delivering core instruction as well as intervention, the RTI coach and team concentrated on continuously providing ideas and resource options for improving instructional practice. The administration was committed to their role in continuing to **support** teachers. When assigning teachers to lead **interventions**, many school leaders considered teachers' knowledge and skills. Furthermore, highly-trained teachers with the ability to form relationships and build trust with at-risk kids were noted by the RTI coach as ideal for leading interventions. The principal also emphasized the importance of pairing at-risk students with great teachers with whom they are comfortable and can build a rapport with. As the principal said, "That group of kids. They're used to failing; they're used to not being good at school. Those are their expectations, so you have to love them, nurture them, but at the same time you have to have some pretty high expectations for them. . . . And so, it's my responsibility to put the very best teacher in front of those kids, because they're the furthest behind so I have to pair them up with very best teacher."

Moving Step-by-Step Toward RTI² Implementation

Middle School A is located in a small district where the majority of students are economically disadvantaged and over 70 percent of students are white. The school has taken a gradual approach of moving towards RTI² Implementation in preparation for full implementation in the 2015-16 school year. The principal noted that, while "everybody agrees with the vision" behind RTI², there is "lots of concern that we can logistically do it." Thus, school leaders are using an incremental approach to help alleviate school-level uneasiness.

In 2012-13, the school focused on its Tier I instruction by fully adopting the Common Core State Standards. The principal said, "We wanted to push Common Core first and then bring in RTI² after that so as not to overwhelm our teachers." Teachers at the school attended the state-led Common Core **trainings**, which the principal said were also helpful for RTI²'s focus on good Tier I instruction for all students. He noted that moving to the CCSS "has pushed instruction up" at the school.

In 2013-14, the school took another step toward RTI² implementation by adding 30 minutes of "**RTI Time**" into the school day for Tier II **interventions**. The 30 minutes was carved out from existing daily club time for grade 8; clubs now meet weekly instead of daily. For grades 6 and 7, school leaders shaved "five minutes here and five minutes there" from other periods in the day to get the 30 minutes. During RTI time,

students meeting grade level standards engage in "higher level" reading or projects or even serve as peer tutors. Other steps toward RTI² implementation included forming a volunteer-based **RTI school team** of grade-level teachers and other school leaders. Throughout the year, the team has been planning for RTI² implementation as well as evaluating aspects already in place and discussing resources for improvement.

Next year the school will be adding Tier III intervention time by utilizing a structure that already existed where struggling students were placed into an extra reading or math course as an elective. The principal said they have already seen success "in kids moving up the ladder on the TCAP" from this program. If students need Tier III **interventions in both reading and math**, they will only be placed in one course so as not to take up all their elective time. The principal noted, "I don't want to create another problem by trying to fix one. We pick the one we feel like we can get the most movement from." In the 2014-15 school year, the school will also be focusing on getting the district-selected universal **screener** in place, conducting the ongoing progress monitoring, and providing intervention training. While the principal expressed some concern regarding the time requirements and getting all the pieces in place, he felt that **students are benefiting from RTI²** and will continue to benefit as they move toward full implementation.

PREPARATION IN THE RTI² READINESS AREAS

In the following sections, we delve further into the previously described themes in order to illustrate the landscape of RTI² preparation across the state. These findings are based on a broader set of phone interviews and visits that the Office of Research and Policy completed in districts and schools over the last several months.

The participating districts included four districts flagged by TDOE staff as relatively far along in the RTI² implementation process and another three matched districts. The three matched districts mirrored the TDOE flagged districts in terms of size and student demographics. On average, case study districts and schools were demographically similar to the state as a whole and varied within the group across important characteristics such as size and poverty level, suggesting that the sample provides a fair representation of overall range of preparedness across the state. More information on the selection of case study districts schools is provided in Appendix A.

In each district, we interviewed the general and special education coordinators and members of the RTI² implementation teams in at least two of the district's elementary and middle schools (see Appendix B for sample interview questions).

Assessing RTI² Implementation Readiness

To systematically assess RTI² implementation readiness of the case study schools, we developed a rubric that defined what it meant for a school to be ready, moderately ready, or not ready in each of the six RTI² readiness areas. Key findings from the rubric ratings are listed below.

1. Across all 14 case study schools, the strongest area of readiness was **knowledge and investment**, with 11 of the case study schools rated as “ready” for RTI² implementation in this area.
2. Half of the 14 schools were “ready” for RTI² implementation by having dedicated Tier II and Tier III **intervention time built into the master schedule**, and the remaining schools were all at least “moderately ready” with some time set aside for delivering interventions.
3. Six schools were “ready” and 8 schools were “moderately ready” in the area of **training and resources**. Thus, while most schools reported needing more training and resources to prepare them for RTI² implementation, all of them had done some work in this area.
4. **Collaboration** between general and special educators was a struggle for many of the schools, with three schools rated as “not ready” and four rated as “moderately ready.”
5. Most schools were ready to administer a **universal screener** and to use progress monitoring tools. Ten schools rated as “ready” and only one school rated as “not ready.” Just five schools rated as “ready” for delivering **research-based interventions**. Many schools had yet to select reading and math interventions or to provide teachers with training on how to deliver them.

The RTI² Implementation Readiness Rubric (Figure 3C) and more details on the ratings are located in Appendix C.

**Area
1**

Knowledge and Investment in RTI²

“It has not been difficult to help our educators to understand the power in this framework and that this really has the potential to transform what we do every day.”

–District RTI² Coordinator

Nearly all of the district and school administrators that we spoke with demonstrated a remarkably strong knowledge of the state’s RTI² framework, suggesting that state communication and trainings have been quite successful in raising awareness of the new requirements. Across interviews, respondents used common language drawn from TDOE’s implementation guide, calling on regular education teachers to “become interventionists,” discussing the need for more individual focus “student by student, skill by skill,” and focusing on the quality of core instruction as the driver of student identification into Tier II and Tier III.

Similarly, district and school leaders overwhelmingly voiced the belief that RTI² will benefit students by increasing learning and helping close the achievement gap. “Response to Intervention has been very positive for us,” said one district administrator. “We’ve seen kids, with strategic interventions that are scheduled using scientifically research based programs; we’ve seen it really impact some of our kids: kids that would’ve, maybe, fallen in the cracks or ended up having a sped referral. We’ve seen some of those kids be successful filling in those gaps and they were able to transition back to the classroom and have some success.” Other respondents noted that students could not master content in specialized areas such as science and social studies if they are unable to read, and suggested that RTI² might help. As one district general education supervisor said: “We have too many students that can’t read in middle and high school. This is an opportunity for them to have small group settings where they can work on deficit areas that are never addressed in a classroom.”

Administrators also rarely voiced any doubts about the alignment between RTI² and other priorities in the district and school. Given the rate of reform in Tennessee over the past several years, this finding seems particularly positive. Regardless of how far along districts were the implementation process, participants suggested they considered RTI² to be a major priority.

However, several respondents did note that they felt like RTI² had to compete with other state initiatives for local resources. For example, one middle school principal noted that there was only so much time available for training, and that if they provided RTI² training, it would take away time from other training options like common core or teacher evaluation. One possible takeaway here is that state department personnel might do more to avoid isolated seminars that focus on individual initiatives and instead plan trainings that reach across multiple departmental initiatives.

Finally, many of the school leaders that we spoke with focused on the renewed importance of state, district, and school messaging about RTI² as the initiative moved into classrooms over the next several years. Administrators highlighted the idea that all students transition during Tier II time as a way of demonstrating that intervention time is important for everyone and removing the potential ridicule



“What I like about this particular model is that it’s a system of interventions where we don’t just address struggling kids; we also address proficient and advanced kids. So I feel like with this model, we’re meeting all the students where they are in the hopes of moving them forward.”

–Elementary School Principal

and embarrassment associated with being singled out for remediation. “We want to send a common message that this is a time for them to receive additional support during the school day, explaining to parents how it looks different from normal remediation,” one district RTI coordinator explained.

KNOWLEDGE & INVESTMENT

Innovative Ideas

Recruit RTI² Supporters for RTI Teams

Designating staff members who are RTI² advocates to participate on the school-level RTI teams can help garner teacher support and buy-in for RTI². One school principal referred to invested staff members as “RTI² cheerleaders.” A middle school RTI Coach suggested that these RTI² supporters share success stories about students’ progress in skill deficit areas. Having clear examples that intervention is improving student achievement encourages teachers to become more invested in the process.

Create District-specific Guides for Schools

One district identified a need for a simplified, district-specific version of the RTI² implementation guide for school administrators. The district was in the process of developing a short guide that would be a quick reference for administrators. They expect that the district-level guide will decrease confusion and ambiguity about the implementation process. The guide allowed the district to establish some RTI² non-negotiables and allow the school administrators flexibility in other areas of implementation.

Area 2

Dedicated Intervention Time in the Master Schedule

“From the school-wide perspective, schedule is kind of that magic piece. We’ve got to make sure that schedule is in place. We’ve spent a lot of time talking about schedules.”

– District RTI Coordinator

While schools differed in the steps they had already taken around scheduling for RTI², many are struggling with integrating interventions into their master school schedule. Schools are seemingly unable to find enough time in the school day to adhere to state RTI² guidelines around uninterrupted core instruction and intervention time and still retain special area time for activities such as Art and Physical Education.

An elementary principal expressed his concerns about the time constraints and ability to fit intervention into the school bell schedule, “That’s one of my biggest concerns right now—working out where to get 120 minutes of math and reading, and then somewhere finding time for activity classes and bathroom break and lunch. I’m sure I’ll work it out somehow. There is not enough time in the day to get interventions in, but we will work it out.”

To find extra time, many elementary schools are integrating social studies and science content into the reading and math blocks. However, a middle school principal was opposed to this idea at her school: “I don’t have time to shave off my content area classes to fit that Tier II and Tier III in. I don’t want kids pulled out of science and social studies to go to an RTI intervention class. I feel like that sends up a wrong message to the teachers of that content, and also to the students.” Many middle and high schools also feel like they are at a disadvantage since the teachers and administrators have few examples of how to transition from 55 minute block schedules to the required 90 minute blocks of uninterrupted math and reading time.

Area
3

Adequate Training and Resources

“We don’t have funds in the district to support additional personnel. That’s not an option for us for the coming school year, and so what we have told schools is that they need to be strategic about the staff that they have in place and use the existing staff to work the plan that their team is developing.”

– District RTI coordinator

Leaders in districts and schools observed that they faced resource challenges in three areas: financing, human capital, and physical space. The financial challenge involved finding the extra funds both to purchase universal screeners and intervention tools and to hire staff to lead interventions and conduct progress monitoring. Around human capital, respondents spoke of the difficulty of sufficiently training staff to effectively execute RTI². And finding the actual space for RTI² has proved to be a challenge as well, since small group interventions require different physical setups than are currently present in some schools.

On the financial side, interviewees repeatedly spoke about the need for additional money to make RTI² viable and to support the extra personnel they thought were necessary, even as they also understood that the policy was meant to be bankrolled by the reallocation of school and district funds. During the case studies, it was clear that variability existed in the availability of staff and personnel to fully implement RTI² at the school level. Schools on the higher end of the spectrum employed two interventionists as well as an RTI coach in addition to its general and special education teachers. One elementary school was utilizing seven part-time interventionists in addition to its full time instructional facilitator. Often, however, schools’ needs outnumbered the schools’ personnel capacity to serve students in Tiers II and III. This required many schools to become extremely resourceful and rethink the ways staff was being utilized. Educational Assistants were no longer doing clerical work such as making copies, but they were trained and serving as interventionists. One principal noted, “Everyone in the building is being used. We have several EAs that provided Tier III services as far as reading goes and math in the morning. We also use retired teachers that come in daily and work with students.”

“I’ve already looked at staffing for next year and I’m going to have to pull teachers out of classrooms. I’ll be paying a math interventionist through my Title I money, and I’ve already been doing that for the past two years, because I feel it’s very important. But again that 50, 60 thousand dollars takes away from other priorities. We have 60 computers for 862 kids. Some of those things that we really need moving ahead toward Common Core may have to take a backseat for just a little while until we can kind of work out the personnel piece.”

–Middle School Principal

For the most part, interviewees reported receiving a lot of information, support, and training in preparation for RTI² implementation. Overall, it seemed that the districts and schools that had progressed farthest in the implementation process had received multiple, high-quality trainings and supports. Interviewees cited numerous examples of useful trainings and resources provided by the state and districts. People spoke most positively about the Partners in Education conference, TNCore trainings, as well as the RTI² Manual and Implementation guide. But in the districts and schools that were lagging behind, some school administrators reported having only received one district-provided training on RTI² in the form of a PowerPoint presentation that reviewed the purpose, framework, and expectations.

“We need more professional development that is offered at a broader scale for all educators to have the opportunity to hear from someone other than at the school level about what’s expected. I think that would help them to understand the purpose and urgency, and that it’s not just a district expectation or an administrator expectation, that this is something that is a collective push for students.”

—Middle School Principal

An area that districts and schools found particularly challenging about RTI² training was the inability to send more teachers and other school-level personnel to state-led trainings. One district supervisor commented, “More webinars would be good. It’s kind of hard to train teachers because they are in the classroom. We’re wondering how to do a better job on that. We bring information back. I wish that, sometimes, we could tap in directly to the teacher.” Another district suggested “having somebody on the ground that can meet with us in a smaller group as opposed to large groups. At CORE offices there are so many folks there, you don’t get to ask questions that would just be pertinent to your system. Do it in a more intimate, smaller setting would be beneficial.” Even given the TDOE’s strong push to provide regional trainings and workshops focused on RTI² across the state, there is still a very strong desire for more state-led trainings.

ADEQUATE TRAINING & RESOURCES

Innovative Ideas

Take Advantage of State Trainings and Share Helpful Ideas with School Staff

Several school leaders noted that state professional learning opportunities were helpful in preparing for RTI² implementation. Principals noted that the TNCORE content-area trainings were helpful for improving Tier I instruction and that the Reading Course helped their school staff to better understand skill deficit areas and how to diagnose students’ skill deficits. One district noted that Reading Course was particularly useful for middle and high school teachers who are not used to skills-based instruction.

As one district administrator said, “You learn more because it is spread out and you have time to think about it and can go back and implement what you see.” Another district noted that they thought one state training involving an activity on identifying students’ skill deficits was particularly useful so they brought back the materials and did the same training with the principals and teachers in their district.

Target Professional Development Related to RTI²

Small group instruction is an integral part of Tier II and Tier III interventions. Many a few school leaders noted that teachers’ strengths and weaknesses in small group and differentiated instruction were exposed during the RTI² implementation process. As a result, one elementary school principal is focused on strengthening small group instruction during teachers’ professional development.

Evaluate Existing Intervention Resources

Several district and school leaders noted that they have been evaluating their potential intervention resources in preparation for RTI² implementation. One district official said they asked schools to look at the resources they had available in the building and to see what they were doing well to meet the needs of their struggling students. Another district noted that they asked RTI Coordinators at schools to look at what intervention resources their school already has, what deficit areas the intervention tools address, and whether anyone at the school has been trained on how to use them.

**Area
4**

Collaboration Between General and Special Educators

“Now it’s ‘our children’ instead of yours and mine. These are beautiful things to watch. Schools are recognizing this as big success.”

—District Administrator

In our case studies, closer collaboration between general and special education professionals correlated with the district’s apparent readiness for RTI². At the same time, many schools still are struggling to successfully blend the silos of general and special education.

One district special education coordinator suggested that the collaboration must be purposeful and structured. Another district level RTI² coordinator discussed the conscious effort their special and general education coordinators have made to support one another, “We have really tried to be very transparent about how both departments are supporting each other. We are trying to be good stewards of our funding and make sure that what exceptional education is looking at in interventions is, in fact, different and more intense than what we’re looking at for Tier II and III resources.”

Only about half of the schools that we interviewed had RTI² teams in place as recommended by the TDOE’s RTI² Manual and Implementation Guide. The remaining schools informed that RTI teams would be established next school year. Importantly, the functions of the school teams varied greatly depending on the school’s level of readiness for RTI² implementation. For example, schools that were found to be fully prepared for implementation

had RTI² teams that met every 4 to 5 weeks to discuss student progress within Tiers II and III as well as identifying alternative interventions to better serve students’ needs within the tiers. Schools in the earlier phases of implementation had teams that tended to concentrate their focus on educating teachers on the RTI² framework and discussing shared strategies for effectively executing RTI².

Many middle schools interviewed seemed to emphasize that most their teachers had no experience with RTI². As a result, ensuring that all educators in the building understand the purpose of RTI² and its framework was an essential responsibility for the RTI² team. One middle school principal discussed using the RTI² meetings to address teachers’ difficulties with differentiation, “It’s our responsibility to give them ideas; well it’s the team’s responsibility to give them ideas. You know, here are some things you could do to change the intervention. Sometimes the teacher thinks the only way to change the intervention is to make it longer. Well, no, that’s not true; it can actually be more intensive and shorter in duration.”

“We had to go in and teach them how to collaborate. Just setting up a time and saying, ‘This is your collaboration time; here you go, go for it,’ doesn’t get it done, because a lot of people are hesitant to collaborate with others, because they feel they are being picked apart as they are collaborating.... You have to get over those fears. And once you get over those, then the collaboration process really takes off and you start seeing high-level lessons in the classroom.”

—District Special Education Coordinator

**Area
5****A Full Set of Tools: Universal Screener, Progress Monitoring, and Skill-Based Interventions**

“It seems like we want a piece of different types of instruments all wrapped in one and we can’t find it. We like little pieces of each one; we wish that we could find one that encompassed all the different things that we’re looking for.”

—K-8 School Principal

We found that most of our respondents were deeply engaged in the initial development work, connecting with vendors about their different offerings, and training personnel to use the universal screeners. At the same time, most districts were focused on finding screeners and progress monitors that could identify student skill deficits and few had reached the point where they were thinking deeply about the interventions that would take place once deficits had been identified. One additional wrinkle here is that many respondents seemed quite focused on the need to find a single tool that would fulfill all of their RTI² needs, providing screeners, progress monitors, and interventions. Every district spoke of the challenge of identifying effective, all-encompassing interventions for large schools. The same was true for schools that served a wide range of grades.

Of the seven districts we interviewed, the majority had identified and most had actually purchased a screener and progress monitoring tool. Most respondents considered the screener to be fundamental for the successful implementation of RTI². However, many respondents suggested that the timing of the purchase and subsequent training was vital to making the process work, and some were waiting anxiously for decisions made at the district level to filter into their schools and classrooms. When asked about choosing a universal screener, one middle school principal responded, “Nothing has been chosen at this time. . . . I need to know what we are doing so I can figure out what strategies are going to coordinate what we are going with.” Similarly, an elementary school principal knew that the district had a short list of three universal screeners, but no final decision had been made at the time of the interview. Schools in the same predicament often discussed using the summer months and even the first in-service day(s) of the 2014-15 school year to train staff to use the universal screeners.

Similarly, the importance of progress monitoring was commonly recognized by the administrators interviewed. Though progress monitoring may not be a novel idea to educators, the consistent use of a tool to assess academic improvement and adjust interventions accordingly as required by RTI² was welcomed by the interviewees. One middle school principal commented, “The thing I like most is the progress monitoring piece and using the real time data to make instructional decisions. Along those lines it is moving in the right direction in terms of Common Core State Standards and overall goals for achievement of our students.” Additionally, progress monitoring was found to be rewarding and a positive reinforcement for teachers when students showed improvement. One middle school RTI² coach reported that her teachers found it very encouraging when the data revealed progress on skills even when the students had not yet mastered certain standards.

Yet, districts and schools still are struggling to determine how to intervene with students once a screener or a progress monitoring tool has detected a skill deficit. Overall, our case study districts were least ready in the area of interventions. This could potentially be attributed to the natural progression of RTI² implementation with the identification and procuring of intervention tools tending to be at the end of the process. Quite a few schools and districts were in the selection phase and hoping to finalize decisions on intervention tools as soon as possible, so personnel delivering interventions could be adequately trained over the summer prior to the 2014–15 school year. A middle school principal discussed the time pressure, “Teacher leaders, principals, people doing interventions need to start getting some interventions now. Going to wait too long to get those teachers adequate training.”

UNIVERSAL SCREENER, PROGRESS MONITORING, & SKILL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Innovative Ideas

Use Retired Teachers and Recent College Graduates to Deliver Interventions

An elementary school hired unemployed recent college graduates and retired teachers to assist with delivering interventions on a part time basis using money from small grants. They received training from the school's instructional facilitator on the intervention programs. The additional personnel helped the school keep intervention groups small.

Pilot Intervention Tools

To start the process of determining which intervention tools the school would use, one middle school principal worked with Reading Plus to pilot different three different reading intervention programs for three months each at no cost. The intervention tools were piloted with a group of about 40 students. This process allowed to school to try out the interventions before making a financial commitment. The interventions were piloted with certified teachers during the school year. The principal noted that during the summer, other teachers and paraprofessionals would be trained on the intervention tools that were selected. A separate district official also noted using this strategy and telling the companies, "If you want me to use you, you need to let us try you out."

Strategically Determine Who Will Deliver Interventions

Several districts and schools noted that determining who would deliver interventions was a key component of RTI² implementation planning. One district administrator said schools were advised to identify staff members that were capable of delivering instruction and then justify their decisions. The administrator noted that staff delivering interventions need particular skills and said, "Don't just train anyone with a pulse." The district also recommended that itinerant staff should not be part of the plan for delivering interventions. It was further emphasized that no one should deliver an intervention until they have been fully trained on how to deliver it. Several schools shared that classroom teachers would be providing Tier II interventions, while Tier III interventions would be provided by interventionists, other certified teachers, and educational assistants.

Flexibility and Variety of Interventions

One principal noted that having a variety of appropriate skills-based interventions was key to meeting individual student needs. She said that classroom teachers worked with special education and instructional coordinators to utilize interventions best suited to individual students' skill deficits. If a student was not making progress with a particular intervention then more appropriate intervention tools were used.

APPENDIX A: CASE STUDY SELECTION PROCESS

As a goal of this study was to uncover innovative practices around RTI² as well as to gauge the general level of readiness for RTI² implementation, Tennessee Department of Education staff members identified four districts already working toward RTI² implementation. We then selected three districts similar in size, racial breakdown and percent economically disadvantaged. All districts voluntarily agreed to participate. In each district, we interviewed special education, general education, and RTI coordinators. We then selected two schools within each district to interview based on district personnel suggestions. Interested in capturing implementation readiness for RTI² across grade levels, there was a focus on elementary and middle schools. Elementary schools are expected to be fully implementing RTI² in the upcoming school year, whereas middle schools may complete a waiver allowing them an extra year before full implementation. Of the 14 case study schools, 7 served grades pre-kindergarten to grade 4, 5, or 6; 2 served grades 3-5; 1 served grades pre-K to 8; and 4 served grades 6-8.

On average, case study districts and schools were demographically similar to the state as a whole. Figure A1 compares the averages for the case study districts to the state average for percentage of economically disadvantaged students, percentage of students with disabilities, and racial breakdowns. While similar to the state on average, the case study districts and schools were demographically different from each other. Table A1 shows the range of demographic characteristics represented by the case study districts and schools. Districts also varied in size. Two districts served less than 5,000 students, three served between 5,000 and 10,000 students, and two served above 10,000 students.

Figure A1. Average Case Study District and School Demographics Compared to State as a Whole

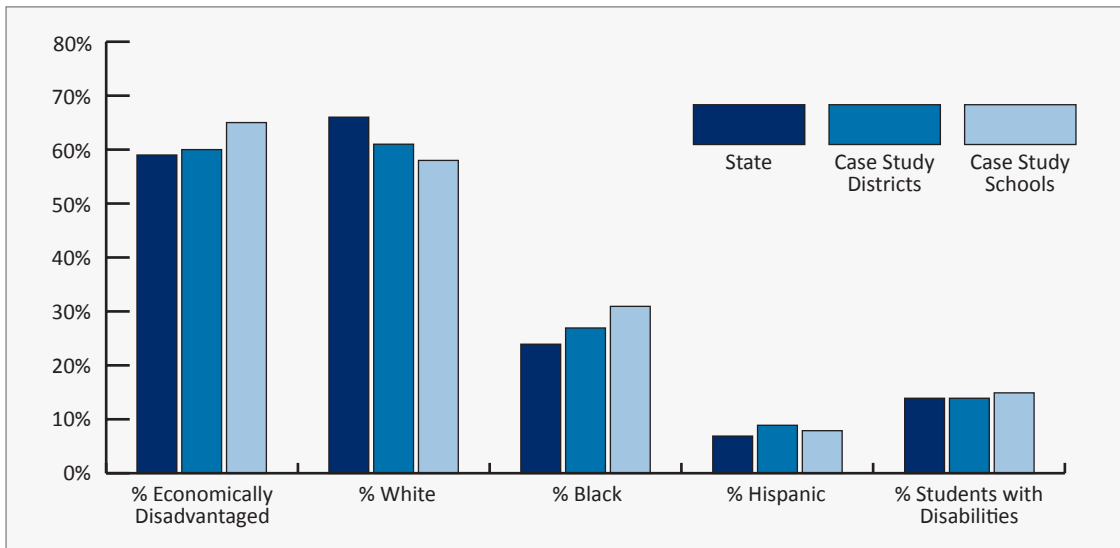


Table A1. Range of Demographic Characteristics of Case Study Districts

	Economically Disadvantaged	Students with Disabilities	White	Black	Hispanic
Districts	40% to 80%	10% to 20%	40% to 90%	0% to 60%	0% to 20%
Schools	30% to 90%	10% to 20%	10% to 90%	0% to 80%	0% to 20%

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

We selected interview questions that aligned with the key components of RTI² implementation. We also asked what barriers were hindering implementation of RTI² and what aspects of RTI² were easier and harder to implement.

Knowledge and Investment

- Has your district/school used response to intervention as a strategy to prevent academic failure in the past? Has your district/school started implementation of RTI²?
- What messages are you getting from the state around RTI²?
- Do you feel like fits with RTI² the other priorities of your district?
- Do you feel like you understand the purpose of RTI²?
- How has RTI² impacted general instruction?
- Do you feel like students are benefiting (or will benefit) from RTI²?

Scheduling

- How has RTI² affected scheduling and instruction time?
- Does your school have intervention time built in to the master/bell schedule?

Training, Resources, and Support

- What training/supports has your staff received regarding RTI²?
- Who has delivered these supports?
- Which of these supports have been the most helpful?
- What other supports do you think would be helpful?
- Do different schools need different supports depending on the level of readiness for implementation?
- What, if any, impact does RTI² have on staffing and resources?

Collaboration

- Does your district/school have a RTI² team? Do these teams meet regularly? What is their function?
- What is the level of collaboration between general education and special education coordinators/specialists? How has RTI² impacted that collaboration, if at all?

Screener

- What universal screeners/progress monitoring tools are being/will be used?
- Why did you choose this/these screeners?
- How often are/will you be administering it?
- How is this data being used?

Intervention

- What interventions do you plan to use?
- What skills deficits do these interventions address?
- Who are the people delivering the intervention? What training have they received?
- How are you monitoring/plan to monitor student progress from receiving the interventions?
- How is intervention time framed for teachers, students, and parents?

APPENDIX C: RTI² READINESS RUBRIC AND RATINGS

To systematically assess RTI² implementation readiness, we developed an RTI² implementation readiness rubric (Figure C3). The rubric specifies three categories of readiness, (1) not ready for implementation, (2) moderately ready for implementation, and (3) ready for implementation, in each of the six RTI² readiness areas. As RTI² will be implemented at the school-level, we focused this analysis on our case study schools. Using the readiness area definitions as our guide, we defined what it meant for a school to be ready, moderately ready, or not at all ready in each readiness area. There is potential for this to be a comparative tool for schools and districts to gauge their progress towards full RTI² implementation.

All 14 case study schools were rated using the readiness rubric. Each school was scored independently by three raters. The three raters then collaboratively agreed upon a score for each readiness area for each school. The highest composite score a school could receive was an 18, which indicates being ready for implementation in all six areas. Schools were assessed based upon their current level of preparedness for the 2014-15 school year. Figure C1 shows the number of schools rated as not ready, moderately ready, or ready in each of the RTI² readiness areas.

The strongest area of readiness was Knowledge and Investment with 11 of the 14 schools included in the case studies rated as “ready” for implementation in this area. Most schools were ready to administer a universal screener and to use progress monitoring tools. Ten schools rated as “ready” and only one school rated as “not ready.” Intervention proved to be the area with the greatest need for improvement with eight schools being “moderately ready” and one school identified as being “not ready”. There are several potential explanations for the weakness seen in this particular readiness area. One clear barrier is absence of sufficient funds to purchase intervention tools for both math and reading.

Figure C1. Number of Schools by RTI² Readiness Rubric Rating

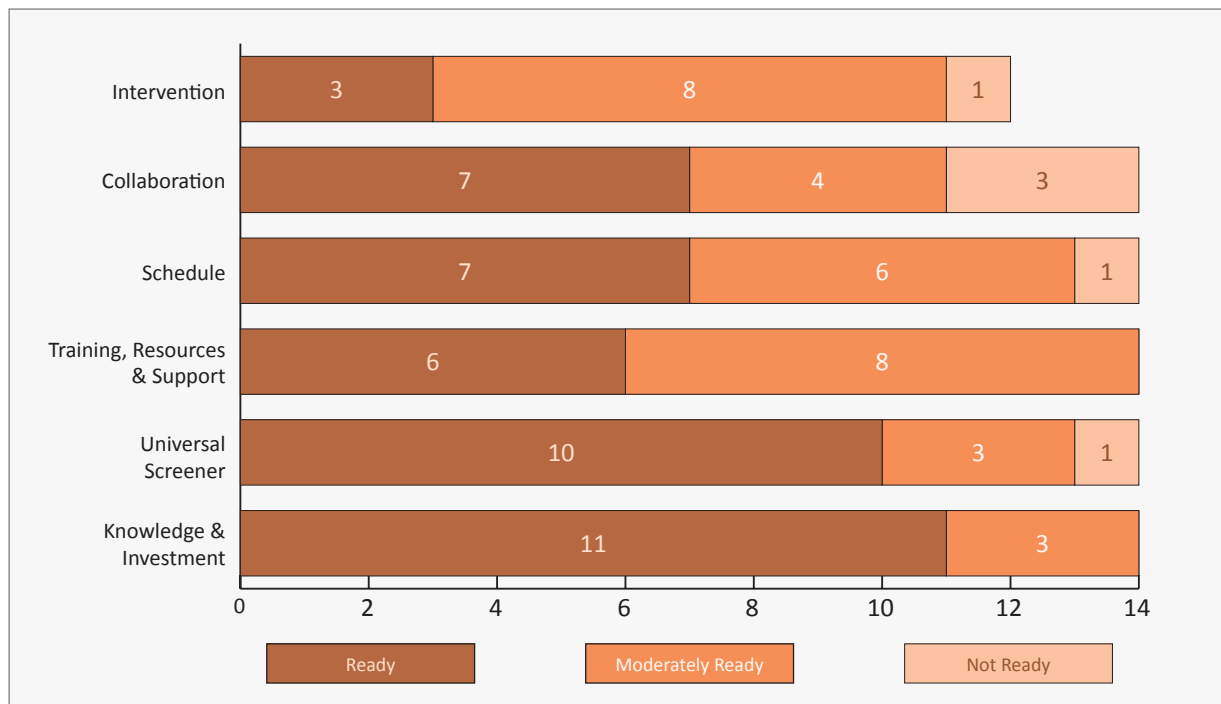


Figure C2 provides a more detailed look at the breakdown of readiness area ratings for each school as well as each school’s composite score across the readiness areas. Schools recommended by the TDOE for inclusion in the case studies are noted in the figure below by an asterisk (*).

Five schools received a composite readiness score of 18 which indicates these schools are fully prepared in all six RTI² implementation readiness areas. It should be noted that all five of these schools are in TDOE recommended districts. Surprisingly, the school with the lowest composite score is also in a TDOE recommended district. Given the interview with that school, School J, it seems the largest hurdle contributing to low implementation readiness is the large range of grades this school serves as a K-8 school. Beyond the pattern of the schools having perfect composite readiness scores being in districts recommended by the TDOE, it is notable that six of the eight school found to be “ready” in Collaboration also had the highest implementation readiness composite scores. Only one match school, “School E”, was rated as “ready” in the area of Collaboration.

Figure C2. RTI² Readiness Rubric Ratings for Case Study Schools

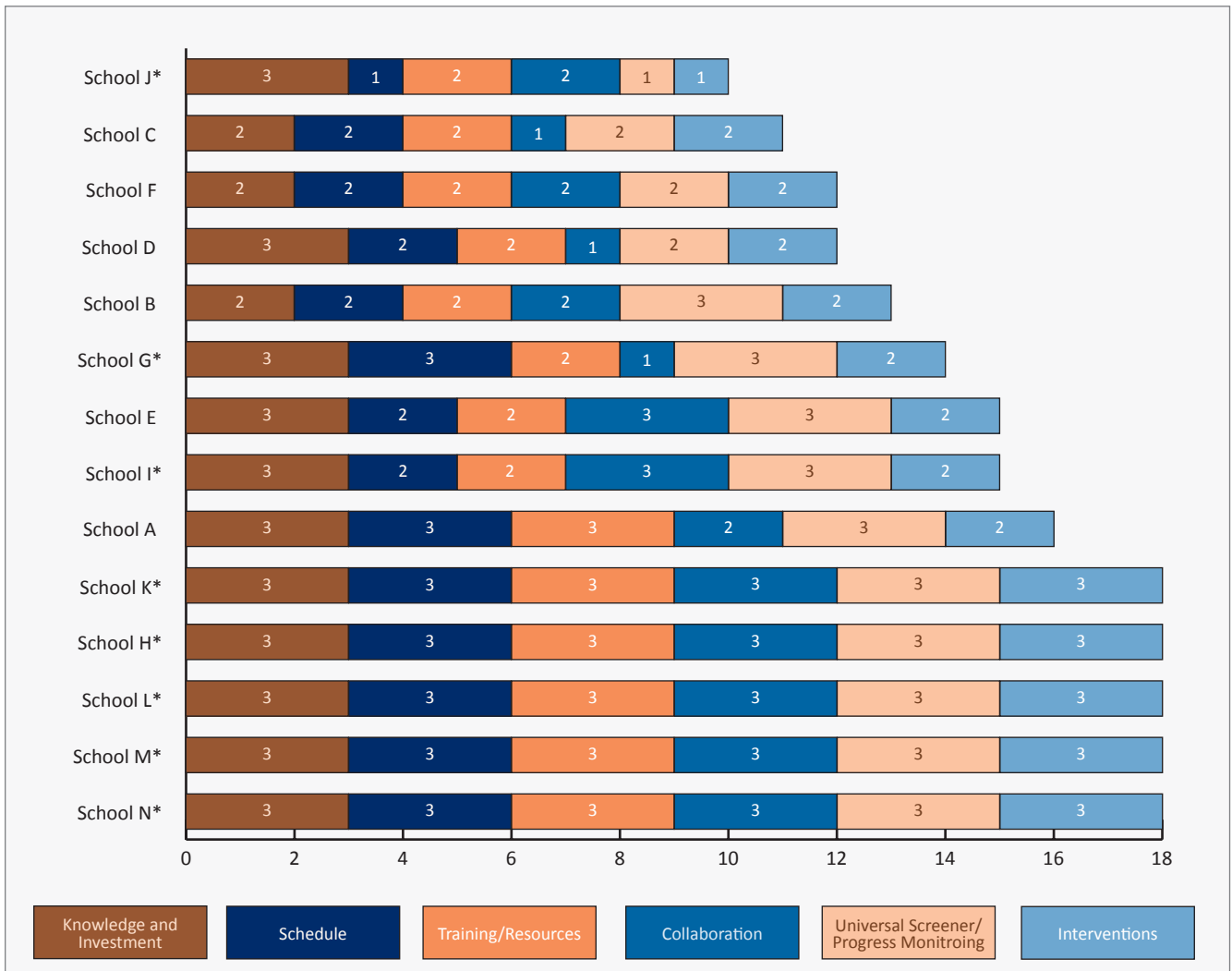


Figure C3. RTI² Implementation Readiness Rubric

	Ready (3)	Moderately Ready (2)	Not Ready (1)
Knowledge & Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrator relays strong understanding of RTI² framework (e.g., focus on skills). Strong beliefs that RTI² will benefit students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrator understands basic information about RTI². Believes RTI² will benefit students, yet shows some concern for logistics of implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited understanding of RTI² framework. Little or no expectation that RTI² will benefit students.
Scheduling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School has Tier II and Tier III interventions time integrated into the master schedule. School has submitted a proposed schedule, including tiered interventions, to district administrator for approval for use in 2014-15. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School has Tier II intervention time integrated into the master schedule and still working to integrate Tier III. School expresses some concerns about ability to meet Tier II and III requirements due to time constraints. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School has no plan for integrating Tier II and Tier III into the master schedule. School expresses grave concerns about ability to meet Tier II and III requirements due to time constraints.
Training, Resources, and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School administrator shares both district and school are providing appropriate RTI² training and supports to personnel. Resources in the forms of human capital and funding are not barriers RTI² implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School administrator shares that they have received RTI² training but teachers have yet to receive training. Limited resources in human capital and/or funding are barriers to full, effective RTI² implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School administrator(s) and faculty have not received RTI² training. Resources in human capital and/or funding are major barriers to full, effective RTI² implementation.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General education and special education professionals working together to ensure continuity of services. School RTI teams (composed of general and special educators as well as administrators) in place and meeting regularly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some evidence of general and special educators working together. School RTI team has been established, but not meeting regularly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No clear evidence that general and special education professionals are working together in the RTI² process. No school RTI team has been established.
 Screener	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified and purchased a skills-based screener for both math and reading by Fall 2014. Appropriate training provided to faculty required to use screener prior to Fall 2014. Actively using screener by Fall 2014. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In process of identifying skills-based screener, yet unsure if will be complete prior to 2014-15. Expect to train relevant staff to use during 2014-15. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School has not identified or procured skills-based screener. Staff has not been trained to use screener.
Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will have identified and purchased research-based interventions for both math and reading by Fall 2014. Appropriate training provided to faculty required to use interventions by Fall 2014. Relayed understanding of expectations and intent to progress monitor students regularly upon full RTI² implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will have identified and purchased research-based interventions for math or reading by Fall 2014. Appropriate training provided to faculty required to use interventions by Fall 2014. Relayed understanding of expectations and intent to progress monitor students regularly upon full implementation of RTI². 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School has not identified or procured research-based intervention(s) for math or reading. Staff has not been trained to use intervention(s). Failed to relay understanding of expectations and intent to regularly progress monitor students.