

Data-driven student intervention program to go statewide in Wisconsin



[Michael Sears](#)

Alex Grace, 11 (from left), Jose Cisneros, 11, and Ryan Turk, 12, work on a math problem in Mike Elliott's (background left helping a student) fifth-grade classroom at Green Tree Elementary School in West Bend.

Schools will identify student problem areas, and help will be aimed at those areas

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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West Bend — Shortly after a bell signals the start of school, the hallways at West Bend's Green Tree Elementary School are still filled with children - third-graders, in particular - as they switch between their teachers' classrooms for something called "intervention time."

For a full hour, they will sit side by side with peers they may have never met and learn from a teacher they may not have had, focusing on improving their vocabulary skills.

The results will be displayed on the school's "data walls," bulletin boards that line the hallways. One already shows a classroom that improved its scores in word analysis and vocabulary from 53% to 89% and another from 90% to 95% of students meeting the grade-level standard.

Teachers have always had ways of dealing with students who struggle with certain lessons. But improvements in technology and a growing awareness of how to use test data to improve teaching are inspiring schools such as Green Tree to take a more clinical approach.

Soon such methods could be all but mandatory for Wisconsin's public schools.

Through something called Response to Intervention, or RtI, teachers are expected to use assessment data to help identify specific areas where their students have problems and target help to them. The teachers document the results of each method they use and employ an escalating series of interventions, including small-group instruction, when earlier ones don't work.

Wisconsin schools that don't use the procedure outlined by RtI and can't demonstrate that they have attempted classroom-based and small-group instruction to try to help students won't be able to label those students as having learning disabilities and refer them to special education in the future.

Under a state rule scheduled to go into effect in 2013, all school districts will be required to shift to RtI to identify new students with specific learning disabilities, traditionally the largest group of students in special education.

Officials are careful to point out that RtI is not the same as special education and that RtI is not a program that can be purchased and implemented uniformly in every school. Instead, they refer to it as a framework that guides a philosophy aimed at identifying and addressing students' learning problems. The goal is to either prevent the students' problems from becoming so bad they are identified for special education or allow students to access special-education services earlier.

"We anticipate if Response to Intervention is done correctly, students are going to be identified early on, these needs are going to be addressed in a comprehensive and specific way," said Troy Couillard, assistant director of special education for the state Department of Public Instruction.

Marcia Staum, director of district and school improvement for Milwaukee Public Schools, puts it simply: "The idea is to look at data several times a year and make sure the students are getting the interventions they need."

Tailored instruction

RtI incorporates many elements that schools have been trying to do in recent years with differentiated instruction - the term for a classroom teacher tailoring lessons to the needs of each student, from students with learning disabilities to students who qualify as gifted.

The main difference, according to Dean Schultz, co-director of instruction for the Shorewood School District, is that RtI calls for increased monitoring and a more methodical approach to working with students who are having trouble grasping a concept.

"What generally happens with faculty members is they don't set a specific end point, they just put in another intervention," he said. With RtI, the teacher has to be more aware of setting out expectations for the child and establishing measurements to gauge the student's success before trying another technique.

Before students at West Bend's Green Tree School start their "intervention time" for the next school year, they take tests in the spring to identify specific reading and math areas that teachers in the next grade can focus on to improve performance.

The pre-tests are used to help guide where teachers at each grade level might want to focus - such as word analysis and vocabulary or reading comprehension in reading or math process or algebra in mathematics - as well as separate out the individual performance of the students.

Students are then divided by how well they performed on the test for the targeted skill area and sent to teachers who build their lessons around bringing the students' performance up from their current levels. The teachers are careful to vary their instruction so that students are not receiving more of the same lessons that might have been unsuccessful in the classroom. Fifth-grade teacher Mike Elliott has found hands-on activities to be particularly helpful in helping struggling math students to improve.

To Elliott and other teachers at the school, the philosophy of this is simple. "If a kid doesn't get something, we first look at ourselves," Elliott said.

That also means conferring with each other and planning their lessons for their students.

For a lesson on analogy as part of reading intervention time, third-grade teachers Carol Murphy and Kristen Dummer used a similar flash card approach for part of the hour.

But, while Murphy spent time teaching her students what an analogy was and slowly walking through comparisons, Dummer had her students categorize more complex types of analogies into groups of synonyms, antonyms and homophones.

Done right, RtI is supposed to help not only students scoring at the bottom of tests, as some fear, but also those who are at the top and identified for gifted and talented programming.

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