

Section 4

Fidelity of Implementation



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OVERVIEW

One reason for the emphasis on changes to specific learning disabilities (SLD) identification procedures in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-446) (IDEA 2004) is the perception that problems with the current assessment tools result in a number of problems with eligibility decisions:

- The aptitude-achievement discrepancy method represents a wait-to-fail model.
- The discrepancy definition contains variability.
- Assessment tools do not provide data that inform service delivery.
- Use of one data point lacks reliability and validity.
- Inappropriate instruction lacks “formal” prereferral documentation.

IDEA 2004 allows state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to consider a student’s responsiveness to intervention (RTI) as one component of SLD determination. RTI is thought to address several of the shortcomings noted in past approaches to SLD identification.

As presented in our *Getting Started with SLD Determination: After IDEA Reauthorization* manual (*Getting Started with SLD Guide*), improvements to the method of SLD identification represent only one facet of the process of RTI implementation. For an RTI component to be successful in addressing current challenges, that component needs to be implemented with high integrity. Many failures of education reforms and practices can be attributed to poor implementation (Gresham, 1989; Levin, Catlin, & Elson, 2005). When schools adopt new initiatives in name only, without fidelity to essential program design features, results are often poor (Kovaleski, Gickling, & Marrow, 1999).

Other sections of this *RTI Manual* provide detailed information about design features and how to implement RTI. This section focuses on helping schools consider how consistent and detailed measures of fidelity of implementation may enhance the potential efficacy of an RTI system—including as a component of the SLD determination process—while providing high-quality instructional experiences and better outcomes for students.

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WHAT IS FIDELITY OF IMPLEMENTATION?

Fidelity of implementation is the delivery of instruction in the way in which it was designed to be delivered (Gresham, MacMillan, Boebe-Frankenberger, & Bocian, 2000). Fidelity must also address the integrity with which screening and progress-monitoring procedures are completed and an explicit decision-making model is followed. In an RTI model, fidelity is important at both the school level (e.g., implementation of the process) and the teacher level (e.g., implementation of instruction and progress monitoring).

WHY IS FIDELITY OF IMPLEMENTATION IMPORTANT?

For valid disability determination to occur, a diagnostic team needs to be able to determine that a student has received appropriate instruction in the general education classroom. Implementing instruction with fidelity satisfies one of IDEA's legal requirements for appropriate instruction. "In making a determination of eligibility under paragraph (4)(A), a child shall not be determined to be a child with a disability if the determinant factor for such determination is— (A) lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction; (B) lack of instruction in math; or (C) limited English proficiency [SEC 614.(b)(5)]." Several studies confirm the importance of fidelity of implementation to maximize program effectiveness (e.g., Foorman & Moats, 2004; Foorman & Schatschneider, 2003; Gresham et al., 2000; Kovaleski et al., 1999; Telzrow, McNamara, & Hollinger, 2000; Vaughn, Hughes, Schamm, & Klingner, 1998). Although these studies examined various interventions, the results suggest that positive student outcomes may be attributed to three related factors:

1. Fidelity of implementation of the process (at the school level)
2. Degree to which the selected interventions are empirically supported
3. Fidelity of intervention implementation (at the teacher level)

Although both common sense and research support the concept of fidelity of implementation to ensure an intervention's successful outcome, the practical challenges associated with achieving high levels of fidelity are well documented. Gresham et al. (2000) and Reschly and Gresham (2006) noted several factors that may reduce the fidelity of implementation of an intervention:

- *Complexity.* The more complex the intervention, the lower the fidelity because of the level of difficulty. (This factor includes time needed for instruction in the intervention).
- *Materials and resources required.* If new or substantial resources are required, they need to be readily accessible.
- *Perceived and actual effectiveness (credibility).* Even with a solid research base, if teachers believe the approach will not be effective, or if it is inconsistent with their teaching style, they will not implement it well.
- *Interventionists.* The number, expertise, and motivation of individuals who deliver the intervention are factors in the level of fidelity of implementation.

HOW CAN SCHOOLS ENSURE FIDELITY OF IMPLEMENTATION?

When school staffs administer a standardized assessment, the assumption is that the test is administered according to the directions in the test's accompanying manual and that the examiner is qualified. Implementation of RTI must meet the same standard. Direct and frequent assessment of an intervention for fidelity is considered to be best practice. When *researching* the effectiveness of an intervention, it is critical to be able to report the fidelity with which it was implemented so that any resulting gains in student achievement can be accurately attributed to the intervention under scrutiny and so that the intervention may be replicated. When *implementing* an intervention, it is critical to know whether it is being implemented as designed, so that if the intervention is initially unsuccessful, schools can take appropriate measures to remedy the deficiency rather than abandoning the entire reform.

Specific proactive practices that help to ensure fidelity of implementation include the following:

- Link interventions to improved outcomes (credibility)
- Definitively describe operations, techniques, and components
- Clearly define responsibilities of specific persons
- Create a data system for measuring operations, techniques, and components
- Create a system for feedback and decision making (formative)
- Create accountability measures for non-compliance

The ultimate aim of a fidelity system is to ensure that both the school process of RTI and the classroom instruction at various tiers are implemented and delivered as intended. This aim must be balanced with the school’s existing resources. General education in Tier 1, using a standard treatment protocol, is an important beginning to the RTI process. Several key components lead to high fidelity, and several key indicators are evidence of implementation with fidelity.

Key components. The key components that lead to RTI fidelity in general education include the following:

- Systematic curriculum
- Effective instruction
- Direct instruction
- Specified instructional materials
- Checklist of key instructional components
- CBM assessments
- Videos and/or observations of classroom instruction
- Results graphed against goals
- Data (results) graphed against goals
- Student progress monitored monthly
- Decisions regarding curriculum and instruction based on data

Key indicators. Key indicators of RTI fidelity in general education include:

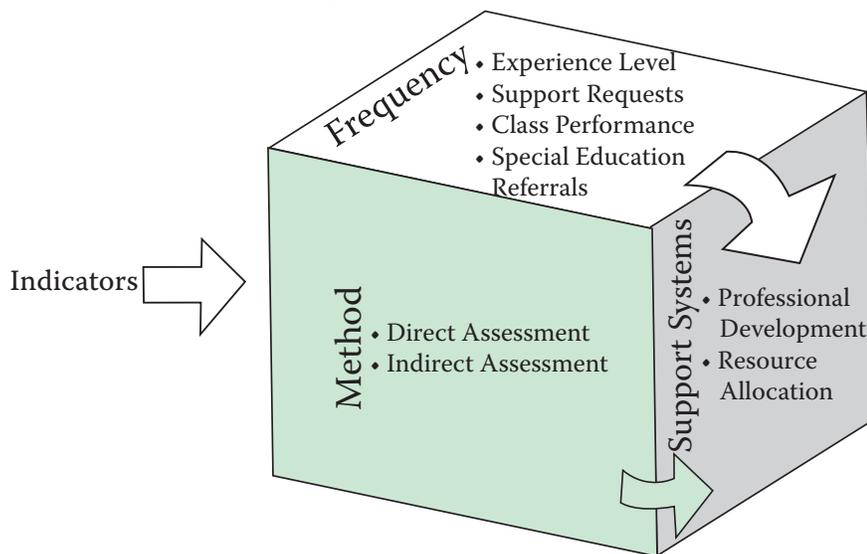
- 80 percent to 85 percent of students pass tests
- Improved results over time
- High percentage of students on trajectory (Reschly & Gresham, 2006)

To keep fidelity manageable for schools, we have conceptualized an approach based on the following three dimensions (see Figure 4.1):

1. *Method.* Different tools provide various kinds of information.
2. *Frequency.* The frequency with which checks are conducted varies depending on the situation.
3. *Support Systems.* The feedback and professional development opportunities needed to implement a process with fidelity are provided to staff.

In using this three-dimensional model, a proactive approach will help promote the implementation of RTI as intended, with more intensive support being provided as needed. Beginning on page 4.4, we explain each of the three fidelity dimensions and describe some indicators that schools can use to select the methods, the frequency with which they use the methods, and the support systems chosen to remedy areas of deficiency. A sample application of this three-dimensional model (Figure 4.2 on page 4.5) illustrates how to pull this information together to work toward high fidelity in your school’s instructional practices.

Figure 4.1. Three Dimensions of Ensuring Fidelity



High Fidelity

High Fidelity in Tier 2 and Beyond

DIMENSION ONE: METHOD

Checking the implementation of a process for fidelity can be an extremely complex and resource-intensive process. In the research literature, checks for fidelity typically involve frequent observations and recording of behavior, teacher questionnaires, and self-report or videotaping of lessons. The tools available to achieve fidelity can be divided into two main categories (Gresham, 1989):

1. *Direct assessment.* The components of an intervention are clearly specified in operational terms within a checklist based on the task analysis of the major intervention components. A qualified staff member observes the intervention and counts the occurrence of each component to determine the percentage correctly implemented and identifies those teachers needing retraining.
2. *Indirect assessment.* Included in this type of assessment are self-reports, rating scales, interviews, and permanent products. Of the indirect methods, permanent product assessment is thought to be the most reliable and accurate. Permanent products might include samples of student work or student performance on assessments and videotapes of instructional sessions.

Written instructional materials or manuals represent a necessary but not all-sufficient method of ensuring the fidelity of implementation of interventions. The use of such written materials or manuals should be corroborated by direct and indirect measures. In other words, in reviewing a checklist, a teacher might use student work samples as evidence of compliance with the outlined steps on the checklist (Reschly & Gresham, 2006).

Although direct assessments of an intervention are considered to be best practice, schools likely will have to prioritize the ways in which they plan to ensure fidelity of implementation of the various components of RTI. Many of the tools to begin a process of fidelity checks may already exist within a school or are “built in” within the RTI process.

DIMENSION TWO: FREQUENCY

The frequency with which teachers are observed to ensure fidelity of implementation will vary depending upon several factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Teacher experience level
- Teacher requests for support
- Overall class performance
- Degree to which special education referrals do or do not decrease

In the interest of maintaining a non-punitive viewpoint of the evaluation process, it is important that a school set up a timeline for conducting teacher evaluations at the beginning of the school year. This allows teachers to see (a) that fidelity of implementation is important to the principal, school, and district and (b) that regular observations of teachers’ implementation is a typical course of action. The person who is designated as the observer (e.g., the principal or reading specialist) would ensure that all teachers are on the schedule for at least one observation.

It is important that new staff be evaluated during the first month of the school year and then further observations can be set up throughout the year depending on need. The dates for the screenings can also be included on this timeline so that teachers are aware of when the student progress data will be collected. Throughout the year, it is also important for teachers to be able to submit comments regarding the evaluation process or the curriculum as well as requests for support in the implementation process.

DIMENSION THREE: SUPPORT SYSTEMS

As applied by schools, fidelity of implementation serves the purpose of identifying areas of deficiency that need to be remedied. For example, a newly hired teacher may not be familiar with the school’s reading curriculum. This teacher might require professional development opportunities to become acquainted with the principles and procedures of the curriculum. Or, a particular classroom may not have sufficient resources to implement and sustain a system of progress monitoring. This de-

iciency would require the subsequent attainment or redistribution of resources within the school. The kinds of support systems that are required to correct areas of deficiency likely will fall into one of two categories:

1. *Professional development and training.* This may include formal opportunities for workshops and in-service training as well as partnership with mentor teachers or coaches.
2. *Resource allocation.* If teachers do not have the proper resources to implement the intervention, it is incumbent upon the school leadership to obtain or redistribute resources.

Figure 4.2. Fidelity of Implementation (Sample Application of the Three-Dimensional Model)

	Indicator	Method of Evaluation	Frequency	Support System
New Staff	Hire new staff	Direct observations	Ideally 3 times/year, once early on	Pairing with mentor/coach, provide training in curriculum program
Screening Results	Class average lower than school average, larger number of students identified as "at risk"	Direct observations to review data, review teacher logs, review any supporting evidence from parents, and review student work samples	Same schedule as screening - ideally 3 times/year	Teacher works with mentor coach to problem solve, identify areas of strength and weakness, and provide training opportunities
Teacher Evaluations	Observation/evaluation highlights deficiency in instructional methods	Follow-up observations, dialogues with teachers, teacher logs/self-reports	As needed	Identify problem to either require professional development and/or re-allocation of resources

PUTTING THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL MODEL TOGETHER

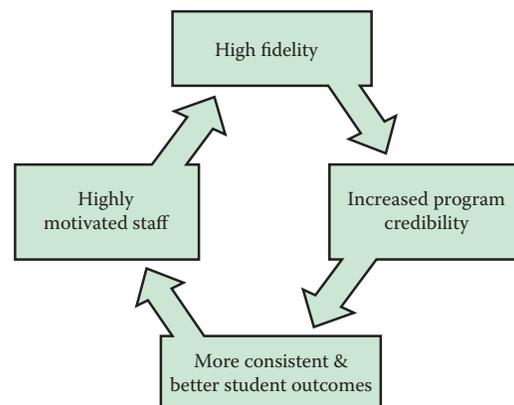
RTI represents a significant instructional shift for many schools that requires a coordination of processes at the school and teacher level. Fidelity of implementation is critical if RTI or any education intervention is to be successful. We recognize that schools have limited resources with which to implement the many initiatives and policy requirements they face. In Figure 4.2, we portray a sample application of the process of fidelity of implementation, noting indicators and applying the three-dimensional model described on these pages.

ACHIEVING HIGH FIDELITY

Overall, a school’s objective is to achieve high fidelity of implementation of the curriculum and instructional practices. If there is a high rate of fidelity in the implementation of the curriculum and appropriate instruction, this enables the administration and staff to rule out this variable with regard to student achievement. Essentially, if scientifically based curriculum and instructional practices are im-

plemented as they were designed, then the student outcomes should be better and more consistent than previous years. When student outcomes are better, the school’s instruction and curriculum program increase credibility and reliability. This credibility naturally leads to a more highly motivated staff who wish to maintain this credibility through continued faithful implementation of the curriculum and instructional practices. Figure 4.3 illustrates this recursive process toward achieving high fidelity.

Figure 4.3. Achieving High Fidelity



Changes

Changing Structures, Roles, and Responsibilities

Ensuring fidelity of implementation integrates the following three components of a school:

1. Instructional tools and strategies
2. Student achievement
3. Professional development

This integration cannot occur if teachers are threatened by the system of observation and evaluation that will accompany this process. Accountability measures related to state assessments and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110) (NCLB 2001) have in many cases placed an emphasis on punitive measures for teachers. We emphasize that schools should have the opportunity to implement a system of fidelity checks within a collaborative and positive environment that promotes teacher improvement. Honest and open communication with mentors or coaches can help a school tailor its professional development resources to support its

staff and ultimately improve student achievement. Evaluations and observations of teachers then need to be approached in a positive manner that emphasizes problem solving.

Teacher mentors also can play a larger role in the school environment to ensure fidelity. To make this process work, mentors or coaches will need to have authority on which to act. Mentors who have proven ability in the relevant area (e.g., additional certifications, consistently high student performance, National Board Certification) should be selected to serve as coaches to new staff. Mentors may require some training for their new role, especially if they now find themselves evaluating their peers.

Roles and responsibilities for ensuring fidelity of implementation are outlined in Table 4.1 on page 4.7.

Table 4.1. Ensuring Fidelity of Implementation

Teachers*	Mentor Teachers/ School Coaches	Administration
<p>Collect direct and indirect assessments that can help corroborate instruction based on written materials or manuals.</p> <p>Review existing checklists and manuals for implementation</p> <p>Implement necessary changes to instructional practices (as a result of fidelity check)</p> <p>If requested, complete teacher reflections or teacher logs</p> <p>If requested, videotape and review delivery of instruction</p> <p>Review fidelity of implementation observation results with supervisor</p>	<p>Monitor progress of teachers in delivering instruction in the content area</p> <p>Provide professional development, coaching, and training</p> <p>Conduct teacher observations according to schedule and include the evaluation of evidence-based instructional practices</p> <p>Evaluate results of observations and collected work samples to provide meaningful and specific feedback to teachers</p> <p>Respond to teacher requests for assistance or information</p>	<p>Lead effort to create infrastructure for a cooperative fidelity of implementation process</p> <p>Provide required resources that include access to curriculum, opportunities to interact with mentors/coaches, and other materials and equipment</p> <p>Conduct teacher observations according to schedule and include the evaluation of evidence-based instructional practices</p> <p>Evaluate results of observations and collected work samples to provide meaningful and specific feedback to teachers</p> <p>Monitor the special education referral rates and average class performance of teachers</p> <p>Ensure fidelity of implementation through routine, periodic walk-throughs, observations, and discussions with staff</p> <p>Coordinate needed professional development</p> <p>Determine when/whether classroom performance warrants intervention (i.e., entire class performance is considerably lower than other classes in the same grade level)</p>

* Teachers include general and special education

Activities/Tools

Methods and Procedures

The following activities (*Activity 4.1: Essential Task List for Fidelity of Implementation*, *Activity 4.2: Standards for Judging High-Quality Fidelity of Implementation*, and *Activity 4.3: Internal Resources Needed to Ensure Fidelity*) provide ways for your school to think about fidelity of implementation.

Activity 4.1

Essential Task List for Fidelity of Implementation

Directions: In the second column, write the name of the individual or team who will assume responsibility for the task identified in the first column. In the third column, write the deadline for or the status of the task.

Task	Responsible Individual/ Team	Timeline/Status
Develop a system of professional development and training as the school begins RTI implementation and as it hires new staff.		
Develop a fidelity data collection system that includes both direct (e.g., checklists) and indirect (e.g., permanent products) measures.		
Develop criteria (i.e., percent accuracy) to indicate when a teacher may require additional supports.		
Coordinate master schedules to conduct fidelity checks (i.e., teacher evaluations, walk-through checks, trainings).		
Develop a plan to systematically review results of fidelity information collected.		
Develop a plan to provide continuing additional supports and professional development.		

Activity 4.2

Standards for Judging High-Quality Fidelity of Implementation

Directions: Read each of the standards, which have been identified as mechanisms for judging high-quality fidelity of implementation. The checklist is formatted so that you can indicate current and planned implementation.

- If the practice has been implemented, indicate that with a checkmark (√).
- If the practice is being developed, rank its priority: 1 = highest priority through 3 = lowest priority.

Standard	Status	
	In Place (√)	Priority (1-2-3)
Specific, qualified staff member or members are designated to observe instructional methods.		
Staff members (observers) are trained in fidelity procedures and have authoritative status (i.e., they can take action if necessary).		
To document fidelity of instruction, a teacher who is using a newly learned instructional method should be observed immediately and then weekly or twice a week, as needed. A “master teacher” can be observed less frequently (three times per year or less).		
Classroom observation data are collected at least three times per year for Tier 1 and two times per year for Tier 2 and beyond to document instruction and the implementation of strategies addressed in professional development activities.		
Observers complete a written checklist comprising the specific critical features of the instructional methods to document the degree of fidelity.		
Specific criteria (e.g., percentage of critical features observed) are used to judge methods as having, or lacking, fidelity.		
Feedback to instructional staff members includes one or more of the following: a scheduled conference, written information about problematic key features of the checklist, a plan for improvement, and a videotape of exemplary implementation with fidelity.		

(Mellard & McKnight, 2006)

Activity 4.3

Internal Resources Needed to Ensure Fidelity

Directions: In *Activity 4.2: Standards for Judging High-Quality Fidelity of Implementation*, you identified which fidelity of implementation standards had been implemented in your school and which standards still need attention. In the space below, list the resources (material, curriculum, space, equipment, and people) your school will need to effectively ensure fidelity.

Material/Curriculum	Space/Equipment	People

Conclusions

Schools are already encumbered by numerous policy initiatives, increasingly diverse student needs, and limited resources. RTI has the potential to help a school make better use of its resources for increasing overall student achievement and for serving students with learning disabilities by

- Allowing for early identification of at-risk students
- Aligning assessment procedures with instruction
- Providing multiple data points on which decisions are based
- Ensuring access to appropriate instruction through the use of progress monitoring and evidence-based instruction

However, these potentials cannot be realized if screening procedures, interventions, and progress monitoring procedures are not properly implemented. Initially, ensuring fidelity will be a fairly resource-intensive process; it will continue to require resources as schools receive new staff and students. We have described a framework and the tools and procedures that schools can use to develop a system of ensuring fidelity that supports but does not overwhelm schools as they implement RTI. As you read through the resources and references that follow, you should consider additional available resources that have not been discussed in this section.

Resources

Resources

The following is a list of resources that may be helpful in achieving fidelity of implementation.

THE CONSORTIUM ON READING EXCELLENCE

The Consortium on Reading Excellence (2006) has developed a number of reading-focused coaching and instructional implementation materials.

FUCHS, D., & FUCHS, L.S. (2005). RESPONSIVENESS-TO-INTERVENTION: A BLUEPRINT FOR PRACTITIONERS, POLICYMAKERS, AND PARENTS

Teaching Exceptional Children, 38(1), 57-61

This article identifies dimensions and recommendations for RTI implementation.

THE INTERVENTION VALIDITY CHECKLIST (TEXAS CENTER FOR READING AND LANGUAGE ARTS IN THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN)

This checklist (Vaughn et al., 1998) was developed by researchers for use to ensure (1) implementation consistency across teachers and (2) treatment fidelity.

OBSERVATION PROTOCOLS

Foorman and colleagues (2003, 2004) have developed observation protocols for measuring instructional effects on primary-grade literacy outcomes.

PRINCIPAL'S READING WALKTHROUGH PRESENTATION AND DOCUMENTS (NETTLES, 2006)

These materials were developed at the Florida Center for Reading Research, with individual checklists for kindergarten, first, second, and third grades.

ROWAN, B., CAMBURN, E., & CORRENTI, R. (2004). USING TEACHER LOGS TO MEASURE THE ENACTED CURRICULUM IN LARGE-SCALE SURVEYS: A STUDY OF LITERACY TEACHING IN 3RD GRADE CLASSROOMS

Elementary School Journal, 105, 75-102. Retrieved March 9, 2006, from <http://www.sii.soe.umich.edu/documents/EnactedCurr04.pdf>.

Rowan and colleagues (2004) use teacher logs to measure the curriculum in large-scale surveys.

SRA CHECKLISTS (MCGRAW-HILL COMPANIES)

These checklists are products developed by the McGraw-Hill Companies (SRAOnline, 2006) to help teachers with professional development and fidelity to the curriculum. Materials are available for various curriculum areas: reading, phonics, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and more.

WASHINGTON STATE K-12 READING MODEL IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE (GEIGER, BANKS, HASBROUCK, & EBBERS, 2005)

This guide provides details about assessment, intervention, and instruction.

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