

RtI and Comprehensive Assessment: Are they opposed?

Some parents and teachers are under the misconception that comprehensive assessment for identifying learning disabilities is not allowed under the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. I want to explain how assessment works within RTI to help students with disabilities and to give some guidelines on how to understand this framework.

Response to Intervention, or RTI, promotes a well-integrated system connecting general, compensatory, gifted, and special education in providing high quality, standards-based instruction and intervention that are matched to students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. There are three levels to this framework. Tier 1 (or Universal) is at the classroom level, where research-based, first-time instruction and differentiation are delivered to meet the needs of all students. With high quality instruction plus appropriate differentiation, 80% of students will make progress, and their instructional needs will be met. About 15% of students do not make adequate progress in Tier 1, so they advance to Tier 2 (Targeted) instruction. At this level, students receive additional instruction in the specific area where skills are missing or adequate growth is not occurring. This instruction may happen in the classroom or in small group instruction with another teacher. Finally, approximately 5% of students require more individualized interventions, and they progress to Tier 3 (Intensive) instruction. Using this customized approach, teachers are able to scaffold material so that students with more complex needs can demonstrate adequate growth.

The main difference with previous assessment procedures and current practice is the purpose of the assessments. Previously, a battery of assessments was given, no matter what the problem seemed to be. Now, diagnostic assessments in the specific area(s) of concern are used to provide in-depth, reliable assessment of targeted skills. Their major purpose is to provide information for planning more effective instruction and intervention.

As a parent, you need to be mindful of this purpose when you request an immediate evaluation. If you have some data from a grade level cognitive screening, like the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) or the Naglieri Non-verbal Abilities Test (NNAT2), this can be used as part of the information. If the data is more than 3 years old, generally the school will want more current cognitive data. This cognitive data is important because most school districts require this data as part of their gifted identification procedures, even though it is not usually required for learning disability assessments.

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One of the most frequent concerns voiced by parents is that districts refuse this request. Usually, this would indicate the school does not suspect the student has a disability. However, you should know your rights as a parent, and one resource for you is the Wright's Law website at <http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/advo.index.htm>. Many times, parents will give up when they meet obstacles, but you should seek out support and make sure your questions are answered. As I told my sister when her son was having problems in school, "This may be the most difficult struggle you will ever have." You can't give up on your child, and your child cannot be left behind.

The purpose of RtI is to make sure that we don't wait until our students are two years behind before we can look at identifying a Learning Disability. As a parent, you need to know your rights and how to best advocate for your child. The best way to do this is to be informed of the policies and procedures in your district.

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