

7-1-2010

RTI in a Middle School Culture: Fitting and Tailoring the Approach Through Leadership

Elizabeth Alderton-Manzi

Jean Erdmann

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alderton-Manzi, Elizabeth and Erdmann, Jean (2010) "RTI in a Middle School Culture: Fitting and Tailoring the Approach Through Leadership," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 38.

DOI: 10.58809/HXSW8792

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss3/38>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-Reviewed Journals at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu.

Academic Leadership Journal

RTI in a Middle School Culture: Fitting and Tailoring the Approach Through Leadership

Educational rhetoric often focuses on assessment, scores, and performance components which can be treated as being discrete. Response to Intervention (RTI) however, provides an opportunity for schools to look at sound, research based educational practices that support student learning through the use of tiered interventions. The tiers are interrelated and action driven. Assessment is one tool within the tiered approach to learning. One of the most important aspects of RTI is that it is meant to be a collaborative, school wide approach to education that brings together teachers, specialists, special education experts, and administration in an effort to help improve student achievement. Since RTI is not prescriptive, schools and districts across the nation are currently discovering how to implement RTI in a meaningful manner.

The purpose of this article is to show how one school, Badger Middle School, has seen positive results due to implementing RTI interventions in their school with a more holistic, common sense approach under the guidance of former principal Ted Neitzke and Assistant Principal Art Bergman.

Neitzke, will clearly tell you that he is who he is today because a teacher saw potential in him and found ways to help him develop that potential to the fullest. This teacher “intervened” when Ted was on the brink of making some poor educational choices. As a result, Ted thoroughly understands the impact on students of successful interventions, sometimes described as common sense interventions at Badger Middle School, and of those more formally implemented using a tiered approach. Neitzke exudes confidence while speaking from the heart about RTI, stating that he simply mirrors the attitude of the staff at Badger.

One common sense approach operating at Badger, for example, is the Good Friend Program (GFP) (see guidelines below). This approach makes sense to Neitzke because he had good friends who were teachers who did much the same things as the GFP encourages, but then it was all based on their instinct and good will for him. The GFP, which is an early and more informal process, moves children at Badger toward learning and success.

West Bend Middle level teachers take part in GFP with students who are experiencing difficulties of some kind at school. During the intervention, a specific teacher will become a deliberate “good friend” to a student. The goal of the program is to encourage, support, and pay special attention to a student who may be experiencing low self-esteem, academic or social/emotional concerns, and is not yet in any other support program.

Listed below are the Good Friend Program guidelines for teachers:

- Review and set up an intervention folder for the student containing data, interests, and previous interventions known to the teacher.

- Students should not know that they have been identified for special attention.
- There will be no write-ups, no assessments, and no specific number of minutes required to meet with each student.
- The student should have genuine reinforcement and encouragement. Ask questions about his/her interests. Engage in intentional conversations with the student about her/his interests. Example: "I heard you like...(interests found in folder). How did your team do last weekend? I noticed ..."
- Pay a bit more attention to the student, take an interest, and develop a genuine rapport.
- Spend a few extra minutes each day (or a few days per week) with the student (before class, after class, before school).
- Indicate in the folder whether the student responded to the reinforcements positively/negatively and how improvement might occur.
- Result of Good Friend Program: An informal statement is crafted about the indicators by the teacher. Further need is indicated and plans for the future are suggested. At times the GFP makes a very positive difference in a variety of ways that are important.

Neitzke is quick to point out that each school can develop a plan of operation and common sense approach to RTI that suits the culture and needs of the school, but the most vital thing is that all are participating together for the common good of all children. An informal beginning step, such as the GFP, supports the further development of RTI because it identifies the need for intervention and positions teachers to support children as a matter of routine. Furthermore, change in educator talk without change in action will not improve student learning (Edelman, 1977).

What is RTI?

RTI is a school improvement process that requires planning and preparation (Shores 2009). Setting the stage for RTI involves several steps to foster staff acceptance and ensure quality implementation. There needs to be an enthusiastic leader or leadership team that is well-informed about the process and how it will best fit into the school. This leadership assesses needs, develops a plan and guides implementation in the school or district. The leadership assesses and fosters readiness for change, develops a vision and promotes teacher buy-in. Neitzke has experienced and led this process.

Behavior Changes Must Occur in Administrators and Teachers if the Child is to Change

"It all comes down to one rule," said Neitzke: "If we change our behaviors and practice as teachers, the behaviors of our students change. If we leave things alone and keep on going as we have been, any learning gap that is growing has more of an opportunity to take hold. Change in others requires change in us." True transformation occurs when a teacher is willing to change behavior. Teachers need to actively process, develop, and grow as professionals; change is not a passive process. According to McCormick and James, "effective change depends on the genuine commitment of those required to implement it, and that commitment can only be achieved if those involved feel that they have control of the process... Teachers will readily seek to improve their practice if they regard it as part of their professional accountability, whereas they are likely to resist change that is forced on them" (1983, 27).

Change cannot be forced if it is to be long-term and effective. Instead, teachers need to see a need for the change. At Badger, teachers have been actively involved in the process of creating their RTI framework, they are committed, and they see the benefits.

Neitzke is frequently invited to speak about RTI because his school is successful with learning and all staff are known and admired for their passion about learning and achievement for all children. His particular life experiences tell the story of a young man who might have languished in school until those convening moments when teacher concern and focus was specifically on him. It became known that he could do more and when plans were applied to support this notion Neitzke achieved better learning results. He describes his own experience as having someone who believed in him and helped him to do things differently until he no longer was failing.

“We cannot afford to allow any child to languish, to drift, to pass on through the system. Today’s economy poses the question of the cost effectiveness of doing an educational system that has failure in particular districts as an expectation. The honorable profession of teaching cannot permit this and with RTI, we are on a roll,” said Neitzke.

Shores (2009) stresses that establishing the RTI structure entails education, leadership, fostering readiness for change, and a vision that promotes teacher buy-in. There is a need for high quality classroom instruction, tiered instruction/interventions, ongoing student assessment, and family involvement. To support ongoing student assessment, data about individual student learning must be used to make informed instructional decisions for all students. Technology should be used to provide educator easy access to outcome and process data. Strong staff development is needed in a variety of academic and behavioral areas. Finally, leadership teams should assess program effectiveness and develop and implement yearly action plans (Brown-Chidsey et al 2009).

Neitzke commented that what we know today as RTI is very congruent with his own learning experiences as a youth who was near failure in school. As he began on a path to success, more inner peace took hold, freeing him up to learn.

“Through the turmoil of my youth what got me through it all are these values: family dinner, family respect and intergenerational ties. I welcome my family and extended family to my table every Sunday, I prepare a meal-sometimes an Italian dinner, and we sit down together and take the time to talk. The essence of this model is what RTI is all about at Badger: a family of educators at a school coming together for the good of the child in a variety of familiar settings.

Each child matters, and all children at Badger expect to succeed. We invite all to the table of learning. No excuses. Learning and progress becomes the responsibility of everyone in this family. I value the school setting as the mirror of a family setting. Our school motto is: have a good day and make good choices. This is what any parent would tell their child on any day. Its just common sense.”

Interestingly, encouraging family partnerships is an essential RTI component (RTI Action Network 2009). It is believed that collaborating with families to improve learning at home, the school, and the community is key to student success. At Badger, families are considered important and as part of RTI, it is a goal that families remained informed and involved in the educational process. This is achieved through open houses, family nights, conferences, online technologies, and regular communication with parents.

The Standards are the Basis for Operation for Both Teacher and Administrators

RTI is based on sound uniform educational principles and in the State of Wisconsin these are the Department of Public Instruction Standards (DPI) (<http://dpi.wi.gov/tepd/stand10.html>). With the expectation that teachers can conform to and bring to life these standards at the point of hiring and through their teacher professional development plans, especially in the area of their discipline, strong scaffolding in support of RTI work is present. This coupled with the DPI Standards for the Administrator (<http://dpi.wi.gov/tepd/doc/pdslf7a.doc>) form the basis of a high-powered synergy, of interaction and collaboration with defined areas of responsibility focused on the success of the child. Nurturing and time for professional growth and development as a teacher uses RTI is an urgent administrative consideration that is part of the plan. This means budgetary and scheduling advances are made to provide the necessary tools for teachers as they grow in the provision of new learning opportunities for all children. Neitzke interjected when describing RTI outcomes, “the same thing never happens.” He meant that the school based team works together to change what they do to accommodate the learning needs of the child, they work together and support one another as they all take calculated risks. They are all in this together with the school administrator taking an active role in RTI.

Neitzke has been regularly invited to speak about Response to Intervention (RTI) from his perspective as an administrator. He believed he was good at it because his school operated within a well-crafted district wide framework and Badger is a place where a common sense approach to learning dovetails nicely with RTI.

What Ted thinks of as common sense, in RTI terms, is a three-tiered approach to instruction.

- Tier 1 students are students who are succeeding academically and behaviorally without additional substantial support. The classroom teacher may be differentiating to provide student choice for motivation, may be providing leveled materials, or have students groups for instruction based on needs. What makes the students who remain in Tier I distinctive is that without additional targeted instruction, they are succeeding academically and behaviorally. Individual student data of brief assessments weekly at the beginning of the year determine which students remain in Tier 1. For those who remain in Tier 1 assessment is perhaps monthly. Typically if students are having problems behaviorally, that interferes with academic success so there must be a behavioral component to RTI.
- Tier 2 students may or may not be receiving special education services. Tier 2 students are not succeeding academically, and thus need something different. Weekly brief assessments are provided, and student growth is recorded. Tier 2 interventions stay in place for those students who are not succeeding. Interventions typically mean more instruction (60-90 minutes weekly) in problem academic areas, specifically attuned to the individual child or small group.
- Tier 3 students may or may not be receiving special education services. Tier 3 students are not succeeding even with the additional targeted instruction. Different strategies and more intense instructional support is provided and tweaked until there is success. Weekly brief individual assessments continue.

The tiers are the mechanism but the heart of RTI success relates to how the teacher relates to each child or adolescent.

Neitzke believes educators need to make good choices about each child. He suggests that the classroom teacher has to be empowered to take risks and accept challenges so they can find out more about the child's world.

The point Neitzke frequently discusses the commitment that no child can be allowed to fail in an RTI school. A gifted and talented child cannot be allowed to come to a plateau and remain there when it is clearly understood that there is more territory to be conquered. The child in 4th grade, experiencing a low level of literacy development, is at a juncture through which he must pass no matter what it takes. Teachers cannot remain in a waiting modality but instead they must draw upon the school's plan to develop a process to respond this child. Teacher support is critical; there is no blame assessed for a child's failure, nor is there negative energy expended in critiquing a plan that may not have yielded success. The idea is to keep moving forward using the planned interventions the school has developed to address the problems at hand. Problem solving is a way of life.

Quality Instruction Melded with Interventions

At Badger Middle School, there is an obvious emphasis placed upon the instruction provided as well as the tiered aspects of the interventions. These components are essential and pervasive.

"Quality instruction is backed up by a can do attitude in schools adopting RTI," Neitzke said. Behavior problems are addressed at the time instructional intervention occurs. Have we ever heard of a child who is receiving more attention by staff to capitalize on his success, continuing to act out? It lessens the probability in the child when she/he becomes aware that success is growing closer, that someone or a team of people are concerned and that we all want to dispel the agony of learning math word problems in fifth grade has confronted him with for months or maybe years. A child will not be allowed to fail and continue to stagnate in math learning until the time of graduation is at hand. That is just not going to happen any longer in RTI schools.

The decline in in-school detentions was a rapidly noticed effect at the outset as RTI was formally implemented at Badger Middle School. Where is the time in the school day to provide time, space and supervision of a child? Who is to sit in detention? The answer is that none exists in this RTI school. It becomes obvious that time, space, and staff are utilized to grow success with the child. Detention is not a part of this system.

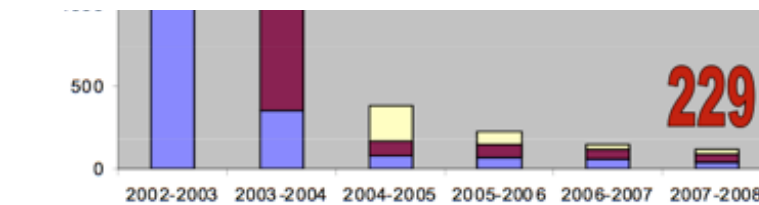
"There is an intensity linked to what we do at Badger and we sometimes give up the traditional lunch hour to form teams and develop solutions; we meet after school and could be meeting even on weekends if we need to. We meet regularly weekly, with mini meetings occurring daily to touch base with one another."

Ted continued, "Let me give you a Badger example of the effects of

Figure 1. Badger Middle School Detention Rates 2002-2008



intervention at Badger. Once our school integrated RTI lots of great things began to occur. One incident shows how far and wide the intervention took hold. Nicole Minor, a Badger second year teacher was paired with Amy Wiskirchen a long time veteran. They formed a team in which students on their caseload all needed interventions, had little prior academic success, and were generally disengaged.”



At the end of the 1st quarter Badger had the first set of parent teacher conferences. During the conferences parents were confronting the two teachers because they did not believe the grades. You see, these were parents who were used to coming to school and getting “yelled at” because their children were failing, disruptive, and/or disrespectful. Instead, Nicole and Amy had created an intervention-based environment that held kids accountable but addressed their individual needs. As a result, parents were in the conferences crying, calling their spouse or the other parent of the child and sitting at the conference in utter disbelief. Why? Because for the first time in a long time our teachers were positive, the students were succeeding, and the parents were proud. Intervention mindsets lead to success, ownership, and empowerment, not just for the child, but all the stakeholders. These two teachers created an environment that was based solely upon relationships and differentiating. The outcome: pride in learning.

Neitzke talked about the interrelatedness of the model components that Badger developed (<http://wbsd.bms.schoolfusion.us>) and suggested that each school can create a personalized operational plan. The basic components are the need for collaboration among staff, instructional creativity, continuous assessment and monitoring to inform thinking and craft periodic interventions along the way.

Coupled with this are the administrative responsibilities to support professional development plans of teachers deliver programming, mentor, and if time permits to also model best practices. The depth of the change that occurs when an administrator goes into the classroom to model, when asked to, cannot be underestimated.

Neitzke described the three-tiered response to intervention (adapted from www.RTINetwork.org), with Tier 1 as the time for universal and researched based screens, assessments; Tier 2 as the time to identify students who require additional strategic intervention especially but not limited to literacy and math, couples with progress monitoring; and Tier 3 as the identification of students who are not responding to the intervention given in Tier 2

Badger is developing their RTI plan through a set of rubrics that address each phase of intervention documenting progress and what is considered unacceptable. For the past five years they have employed a pyramid of interventions and are now evolving to match RTI requirements. There will be rubrics for gifted and talented, special education and other categories. All children are served by RTI. Data drives decision-making and progress and the sense of urgency in procuring the data and then using it is vital. To keep a child moving on the continuum, there must be a steady stream of data and information flow though the use of formative assessments that instantly gives teachers information

about student learning or gaps in learning. No longer are annual or semi annual assessments thought of as tools that can be used to inform thinking that tracks incremental progress. Thus, teachers will need to examine their tools for collecting and using data, with support from the administration for their professional development in this area. Once again, Badger has implemented the fourth essential component of a successful RTI program: ongoing student assessment (RTI Network 2009). Teachers at Badger understand the need and are reaping the benefits of implementing assessments that guide their teaching based on student learning and student needs (see Figures 2 and 3).

Badger has creatively woven a web of RTI that encompasses everything within the school. The collaborative endeavor that involved teachers, community members, experts, specialists, and administrators incorporates all 4 essential components of a successful RTI program:

- High quality classroom instruction
- Tiered instruction/interventions
- Ongoing student assessment
- Family involvement

These essential components have led to a school that is passionate about student learning and helping all children reach their fullest potential. Results indicate that their approach serves their students well. Tracking at Badger Middle is for the sole purposes of identifying student success, student needs, program enhancements and successes. As this article began with the mention of the great value we as educators place on assessment. It concludes with the best use of time given to assessing and tracking the activity of students. These data and results are intended to grow learning.

Informational Websites

To see more of Badger operations in RTI, visit the home page at:

<http://wbsd.bms.schoolfusion.us>

RTI Action Network – <http://www.RTInetwork.org/>

Figure 2. Tracking Reading Grades 6, 7, & 8 Over Time: 2002-2006

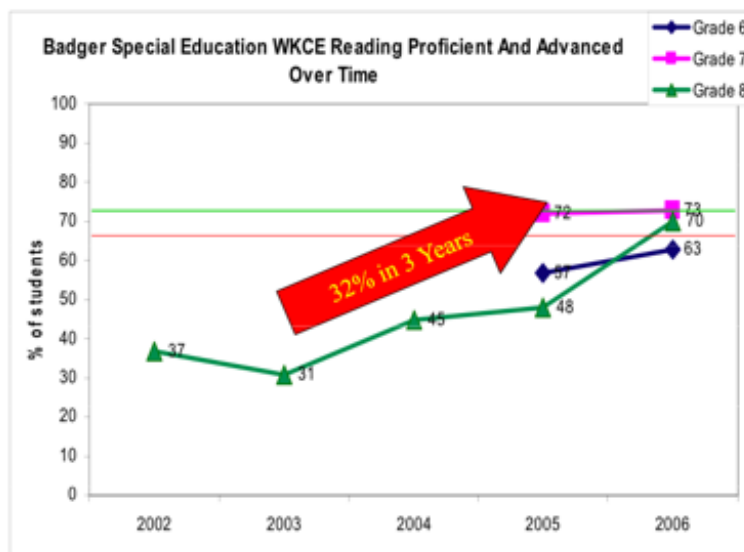
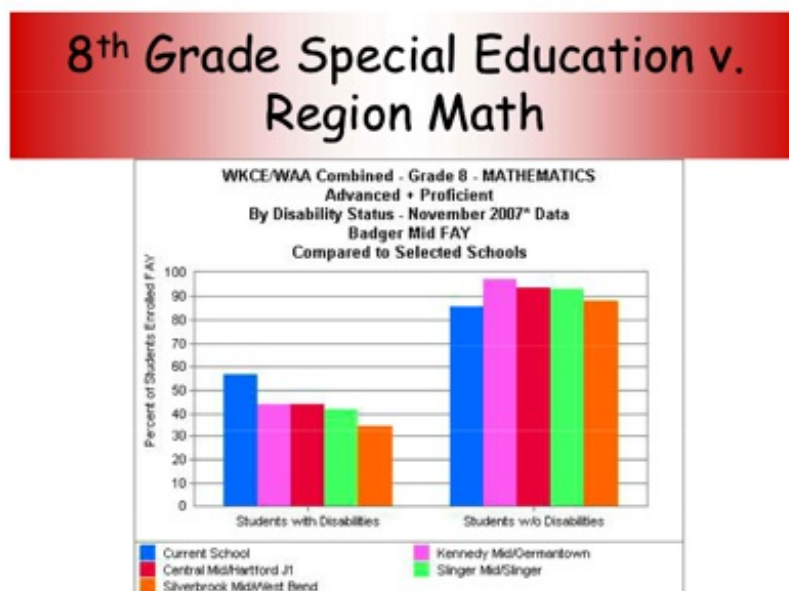


Figure 3. Tracking Math in 2007



National Center on Response to Intervention – http://www.RTI4success.org/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1

Vanderbilt University – Iris Center – <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources.html>

References

Brown-Chidsey, R. et al 2009. RTI in the classroom: Guidelines and recipes for success. NY: Guilford Press.

Edelman, M.J. 1977. Political language: Words that succeed and policies that fail. New York: Academic Press, Inc.

McCormick, R. and James, M. 1983. Curriculum evaluation in schools. London: Croom Helm.

RTI Action Network retrieved from <http://www.RTInetwork.org/> on January 25, 2010.

Shores, C. 2009. A comprehensive RTI model: Integrating behavioral and academic interventions. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin.

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]