

# An Alternative to the School Psychologist Role: RTI Coordinator

By Chris Birr

A few years ago, I often asked the question, besides being a school psychologist, what else can I do? As school psychologists, we have fairly broad training but that same training often leads to narrow career options. Typically, the options involve pursuing additional degrees and training to become a director, principal, or obtaining a Ph.D. to enter academia. Using our current credentials typically does not leave many options.

However, I am midway through my second year serving as an RTI coordinator for a suburban district with just over 7,000 students. I have been able to do this through careful planning, research, and alliance with district decision makers. As a school psychologist, monitoring progress, selecting high quality interventions, and relying on research always resonated with me and it was how I tried to practice at all times. By continuously reviewing research and then feeding that information up to principals and directors, I worked my way into a niche as an advisor and purveyor<sup>1</sup> of research. I always brought information or research to decision makers with accompanying recommendations how this information could be used along with reasons why it would improve outcomes.

Through repeated outbursts of “DBR ‘em ASAP” or “I’d use CBM”, my director proposed the development of a job description to scale up practices related to RTI and MTSS. At the time, our district like almost every other district, was beginning RTI implementation and deployment. There was much to do and many varying opinions, the need for one person to coordinate the RTI process appeared to be the best option to make progress. The resulting job description is one of the most updated in our district and one I am happy to share upon request.

The developed job description is a fusion of RTI Coordinator roles from Florida, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Oregon, and a few other states. A selling feature to the senior leaders was use of the stages of implementation from the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) while incorporating how the stages would look within the context of our district. The job description and subsequent action plan were used to make a fairly convincing case for the creation of the RTI Coordinator. The main responsibilities established for the RTI Coordinator position were staff training, technical assistance, data collection and management, and facilitation of the problem solving process.

My director used Early Intervening Services (EIS) funds to create the RTI Coordinator position without the reduction of a school psychologist in the district. This has been critical and worth replication in my opinion. Use of EIS funds requires serving students who are in need of support but have not been identified with special education needs. We all know that RTI frameworks are only as strong as the core or

tier one. Due to the emphasis on core instruction or tier one, I was initially hesitant to plan for an entry at tier two. However, that provided a clear entry point and rationale for my immediate presence in district discussions and decisions.

RTI or MTSS frameworks need to be implemented completely in all ‘tiers’ whether it be tier one, two, or three. Where implementation begins, becomes less important than an emphasis or expectation that continual progress must be made. One of the most important discoveries I made is that where you start is less important than the fact that you have to pick a direction and keep going.

During a typical week, I estimate my time is divided in the following manner:

- 25%- technical support regarding CBM, interventions, and data analysis
  - We adopted aimsweb 2.0 this year, and at times, up to 30-40% of my time is spent on technical support
- 25%-consulting with district school psychologists, coaches, and teachers
- 25%- development of process guidelines and document creation to increase fidelity of measurement and interventions
- 10%- data review and consolidation- more time to be dedicated as fidelity of monitoring improves
- 15%- researching practices related to intervention, problem solving process, delivery of services, at times this increases depending on need or requests

From school psychologist friends in and outside my district, I receive plenty of chides and comments how they wish they had a ‘choice’ job, the ability to spend time researching topics of interest, and most importantly, freedom from IEP requirements. I admit that the expectation that RTI/MTSS is my main focus and responsibility is an incredible position to be in. However, if asked to argue for or against the creation of district RTI Coordinators, I could win either argument. In the end, I would advocate for the establishment of more RTI Coordinator positions, filled by school psychologists. Our training, knowledge of assessment and data, along with our child development knowledge provides us with skills necessary and beneficial to district coordination of RTI/MTSS.

Reasons FOR districts to create RTI Coordinator Positions:

- Ability for one individual to focus only on RTI/MTSS research, practices, and keep an ear to the ground regarding surrounding practices
- With clearly defined job duties, school psychologist training related to assessment, data analysis, child devel-

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<sup>1</sup> Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M. & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231).

opment, and behavior change allow for a smooth transition to consulting and supporting instructional staff

- Serving as a point person for staff to contact for technical support- consistency is critical
- Prevention of ‘dangerous hybridization’ of district process and best practice, one person can help maintain fidelity and high quality practice
- Ability and time to research best practices to find practical applications to meet district needs
- Providing a bridge between core instruction, supplemental instruction while aligning to SLD requirements (if needed)
- Involvement in practice and policy creation at the district level
- Outside or district support to school psychologists who may encounter resistance (friendly district level support)
- Background and training to evaluate programs using valid and reliable measures and methods

Reasons to **OPPOSE** creation of the RTI Coordinator Position:

- School Psychologists do not have instructional training or experience
- Potential de-emphasis of the knowledge or impact of the school psychologist within schools
- Possible FTE reduction to have a coordinator or staff support rather than a school psychologist with direct student contact/impact
- Loss of connection to practical application and ‘doing’ the hard work involved with RTI framework development and implementation. I have less ‘stories’ to tell how practices were implemented for individual students.
- Due to the observed school psychologist shortage, RTI coordinator positions could be created then filled by individuals who may lack adequate training or background

- Difficulty documenting improvement resulting from the work of an indirect coordinator
- Substantial investment in a process that requires at least 4-7 years to observe substantial results

Reflecting on the past couple years, I would describe my learning curve as being more of a vertical line than curve. I can confidently say that I have the most unique view of the district through my work with each and every level. From the district leaders to classroom teachers to coaches to directors to interventionists, I have exposure to all levels of the organization. That variety of exposure provides unique experiences and challenges but the experience has been professionally challenging, engaging, and most importantly, I hope beneficial to the staff, students, and parents I serve.

I am aware of a few similar RTI Coordinators in neighboring districts. Most of these positions are combined school psychologist and coordinator roles. I have not seen many full time equivalent RTI Coordinators with school psychologist training within Wisconsin. In my district, two more school psychologists have also transitioned to full time coordinator roles for students who are Gifted and Talented. Once again, the unique training and background of school psychologists allow for generalization to other positions within school districts. For school psychologists who do not presently have the capacity or opportunity to move to an expanded role, it is my hope that this information provides some new ideas how we can expand our influence and range of practice.

For more information, feel free to email me at [birrc@elmbrookschools.org](mailto:birrc@elmbrookschools.org).

**Suggested Resource:**

Shapiro, E. S., Zigmond, N., Wallace, T., & Marston, D. (2011). *Models for Implementing Response to Intervention: Tools, Outcomes, and Implications*. United States: Guilford Publications Inc.

**Wisconsin School Psychology Leaders  
Are Needed!**

Now is the time to nominate yourself or a fellow school psychologist for the Wisconsin School Psychologists Association board. An on-line election for WSPA Treasurer and President-Elect will take place in February 2015. WSPA board membership is an excellent way to help lead school psychology’s growth in Wisconsin.

WE ARE MAKING THIS EASY...Nominations for the following officers can be submitted through a simple email or phone call to Scott Woitaszewski at the contact below. When sending an emailed nomination, please include your full name at the bottom of the email and identify yourself as a WSPA member.

- **Treasurer.....2-year term**
- **President-Elect.....1-year term** (followed by a 2-year presidential term and a 1-year past-president term)

The terms for these offices will begin on July 1, 2015. Elected WSPA officers typically meet quarterly to address the needs of the organization.

Questions about these positions may be directed to  
Scott Woitaszewski,  
WSPA Nominations and Elections Chair  
[scott.woitaszewski@uwrf.edu](mailto:scott.woitaszewski@uwrf.edu)