RtI Adapted to Meet the Needs of ALL Students

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Response to Intervention (RtI) as most of us know it, is a general education initiative to support struggling students. According to Doug and Lynn Fuchs (2005), the "Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA; P.L. 108-446) permits educators to use responsiveness-to-intervention (RtI) as a substitute for, or supplement to, IQ achievement discrepancy to identify students with learning disabilities (LD). Policymakers have high hopes that RtI (a) will encourage and guide practitioners to intervene earlier on behalf of a greater number of children at risk for school failure, and (b) will represent a more valid method of LD identification because early intervention will decrease the number of 'false positives,' or students given a disability label who are low achievers because of poor instruction rather than an inherent disability."

Using basic principles of RtI in combination with the Three-tiered Model (Haager, Vaughn, and Klingner, 2007) for struggling readers, a team of Department of Education and Area Education Agency Consultants in Iowa created the Instructional Decision Making (IDM) Framework. The original intent of IDM's authors was to create a proactive, early intervention framework inclusive of all students; however, in supporting the needs of our gifted population, it fell short in language and interpretation. During the 2007 school year the Iowa Department of Education IDM Lead Team invited a handful of experts in the field of gifted education to collaborate with the state IDM coaches in addressing areas of concern. Over several days of conversations, this team identified philosophical discrepancies and inconsistencies and made exciting progress. Realizing that RtI was designed to address the needs of struggling students, the first step was to address vocabulary in IDM that was not respectful of gifted students or the way they learn. Both RtI and IDM stress the importance of starting with a robust Core Cycle (curriculum, instruction, and assessment) that meets the needs of a majority of learners at a given grade level. When students are deficient in foundational skills required to be successful in Core, the second tier of intervention is Core Plus, also referred to as Supplemental. In a student's area of giftedness, it would be very rare that he would ever *need* Core Plus. Instead, gifted learners might need Core at a higher grade level or Core at a faster pace.

The team had great conversations about the need for appropriate pace, curriculum that allows for in-depth learning with greater complexity and abstraction, strategy instruction, and the need to provide appropriately challenging content for gifted students. Proficiency is the goal of so many special education initiatives. A serious concern ought to be that "proficiency" has been established as the lowest acceptable standard. Across the nation and over time, the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores of our advanced proficiency learners have been on a serious decline. What is the message? Have policy makers and educators been putting so much energy into the needs of one group, that another—the gifted—have been left to "make it on their own?" This myth—that gifted kids can make it on their own—could be a dissertation on its own.

Gifted children, like all students, have the right to learn something new every day.

Heartland Area Education Agency (AEA) is an intermediate agency serving 129,000 students in 11 central Iowa counties. The Heartland Instructional Decision Making team has made a concerted effort to add language and perspective in IDM trainings offered to District Leadership Teams that are more inclusive of advanced proficiency students. IDM training consists of six full days, and two of those days offer a focus on advanced proficiency/gifted students. During those two days, participants are asked to consider strategy use. The principles of Project CRISS are foundational to good teaching, and the strategies that activate the principles should be considered strategies for life-long learning. Students learn them in school and can use them throughout life as they problem solve, capture important information, or organize and transform information.

In the classroom these strategies can be used as quick, informal pre-assessments or as formative assessments to aid student goal setting and to help teachers guide instruction. In a matter of moments, teachers can collect information about what students already know and can do, leading to the next logical step: placing students in appropriate settings and curriculum. Susan Winebrenner (2001) says, "Learning is forward progress from point of entry," and advanced and gifted students need an environment that will allow them to continue learning. The fact that some students don't need certain sections of curriculum is not an indictment of the teacher—until or unless that teacher knows the needs of the students and does nothing to change curriculum or instruction. Instructional and curricular pacing adjustments for high achieving or gifted students

might mean cluster grouping, curriculum compacting, or moving students into a higher level of curriculum.

One way that we can assess students' correct placement is to find that place in the curriculum where students *need* to use strategies. It is imperative to identify curriculum, complex, abstract, and challenging enough that students need to slow down and organize their thinking. Advanced learners need opportunities to practice and see the value of being metacognitive and reflective as learners. If they are successful without knowing why or how, if they are not challenged or required to work hard, then the curriculum and instruction they are receiving is not appropriate.

Gifted children typically learn in one to three repetitions what it takes the average student ten or more repetitions to learn. In more extreme cases, they learn it when the teacher says it—or they already know it! MOTS (More of the Same) is a waste of gifted students' time and is inappropriate and disrespectful of them as learners. In fact, research has shown that unnecessary repetition and inappropriate pacing may impede learning for the gifted. (Rogers, 1999) This concern has its basis in brain research. According to David Sousa (2003) the gifted brain takes in and routinizes new information in less time with fewer exposures than the average brain. Barbara Clark (2003) identifies ways the brain of a gifted child is physiologically different: the neurons fire faster, more frequently, and with greater intensity. She says the gifted brain is changed as a result of more dendritic connections compared to age peers. Gifted children, like all students, have the right to learn something new every day. Iowa's Instructional Decision Making Framework inclusive to all children is a step in the right direction to ensure that all children will have access to appropriate learning opportunities in every classroom every day. The inclusion of best practice instruction, such as the CRISS principles and strategies in a framework designed to better match curriculum and instruction to student need, will bring differentiation to life for all students—including the gifted!

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