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Advocating for Instructional Reform: Navigating Politics and Policy as an Intern School

Psychologist

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Author Note

Ryan McGill is currently completing his PhD in education (with an emphasis in school psychology) at Chapman University while serving as an intern school psychologist in the Orange Unified School District. He earned a BA from Westmont College, an MA from Point Loma Nazarene University, and an EdS from La Sierra University. While at La Sierra he served two terms as a NASP student leader from 2007–2009. His current research interests are response-to-intervention implementation and decision making, evidence-based assessment, and test construction.

Although the field of school psychology has abundant literature on systems level change and implementation strategies for response-to-intervention (RTI) models (Kratochwill, Clements, & Kalymon, 2007; Reschly, Tilly, & Grimes, 1999), there are few guidelines for practitioners who find themselves employed in states and school districts that have not yet passed regulations and adopted policies and procedures which allow for RTI frameworks to be used in high-stakes educational decisions. Although many school psychology students and interns are well trained in such evidence-based practices, many will find themselves working within institutional cultures that are resistant to needed instructional reform. This article will highlight my journey during my internship year as I engaged in the process of instructional reform at a school that had not yet implemented RTI procedures.

As I began my internship, the conditions at my elementary school indicated the need for systems change and instructional reform. Despite efforts by staff and faculty on multiple fronts, there were still several academic concerns that had not been adequately remedied—most notably, overrepresentation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special education and the continued achievement gap between English language learners (who represent 61% of our total enrollment) and their classmates.

California is one of the few states that continue to rely on the establishment of a cognitive processing deficit along with a traditional aptitude–achievement discrepancy in order determine eligibility for special education services for a specific learning disability (SLD; Reschly, Hosp, & Schmied, 2003). Existing state regulations fail to specify the psychometric properties needed to determine what a significant processing deficit is, which has led to inconsistent decision making across practitioners. For example, one clinician may define a processing deficit by a base rate cut point on a norm-referenced processing assessment (i.e., a score below the 10th

percentile), while another clinician may define a deficit as a significant discrepancy (i.e., 2.5 standard deviations) between a child's processing score and a global score of cognitive ability.

During my training in assessment and intervention I was led to believe that the application of traditional norm-referenced methods would seamlessly lead to consistent categorical determinations that would eventually serve the best interests of the student. However, in practice I found that established assessment practices lacked the requisite reliability and validity for high-stakes decision making. After consulting the assessment and intervention literature I put together a plan to deliver targeted tiered interventions with existing school resources and schedules to students who were identified as at-risk. Only one problem remained: convincing a staff of seasoned professional educators to implement a comprehensive reform effort that amounted to a fundamental paradigm shift in total service delivery while still trying to establish initial credibility within the organization as an intern.

The first step that I had to take was to try and fill that professional gap by becoming as much of an expert as I could in RTI. It was no small task considering I was trained primarily in traditional assessment techniques. I devoured books, articles, policy papers, and procedural manuals from districts around the country that had implemented RTI. I purchased and trained on curriculum-based measurement tools and other alternative instruments. I began attending local conferences and training sessions specializing in instructional reform, peppering presenters with questions whenever I got the opportunity. However, the most important step I took was to become familiar with curriculum, instructional methods, and the literature on the process of reading so that I could build credibility with teachers when the need for instructional consultations arose.

After conducting a needs assessment to determine existing resources, I arranged to present my proposal to the school principal who was immediately receptive to the change. Convinced that the hard part was over, I envisioned the ensuing faculty presentation as nothing more than a formality. By gaining the support of the principal I assumed I would naturally do the same with the faculty. I had failed to account for the fact that the first year principal might still be viewed as an outsider within the organization. My fears were confirmed when despite a pleasant reception at the faculty presentation no teachers volunteered to run intervention groups the following year and the few that did soon found reasons to withdraw.

Despite developing initial consensus through personal consultations with teachers around the need for instructional reform, the hardest part about moving forward with scaling-up implementation was recognizing that it is impossible to engage in systems change without the support of other professionals. For the next couple of weeks I was resigned to the belief that moving forward would be impossible until, out of desperation, I e-mailed a well-known RTI researcher seeking advice on how to proceed. I was advised that in order to gain consensus I would have to take on pilot intervention groups myself so that other faculty members would see that I was not asking them to take on anything that I had not yet done personally.

After consulting with the principal, we constructed an upper grade intervention group ($n = 4$) and a lower grade group ($n = 5$). The group members were selected from Student Study Team referrals that had been received previously in the school year, all for reading deficits. I planned on meeting with each group for an hour once a week. I would have preferred multiple times per week, but it was the maximum time I could obtain from teachers and still maintain intervention integrity. After surveying the literature, I decided to utilize intervention materials (Greene, 1997) that demonstrated good effects with English language learners in a research

setting (Healy, Vanderwood, & Edelson, 2005). Baseline assessments were conducted on every group member using grade level fluency probes. Individual fluency growth goals were determined for each group member according to guidelines outlined by Deno, Fuchs, Marston, & Shin (2001). The pilot program was designated for 6 weeks and students were administered a progress monitoring probe after each session. Individual student response was monitored in Excel using single-case design methods.

At the end of the intervention, outcome data were compiled revealing moderate group effect size ratings ($ES = .34$). However, individual student outcomes were more varied, with several students demonstrating significant fluency gains. The results of the pilot intervention groups were then presented at a faculty meeting and enough support and teacher buy-in were established to begin planning a school-wide RTI model for the following school year. I am happy to report that we have just completed our first school-wide universal screening and have created Tier 2 groups (now staffed by dedicated part-time intervention teachers scaled-up to three times a week), using state approved intervention curriculum guidelines (i.e., SRA, Language!, Read 180) for each grade level.

I believe that my experiences advocating for instructional reform at my internship site demonstrate that such efforts can be led by school psychologists and trainees of all levels of experience. However, for such efforts to be successful, school psychologists must demonstrate both professional and technical expertise as well as an ability to navigate through the political and cultural structures of various institutions. While eligibility determination for SLD continues to remain the same in California (processing with discrepancy), with our model we now utilize RTI, CBM, and other academic skills data as a major focal point of every assessment (now conducted after a Tier 3 intervention) and in our high-stakes decision team meetings at my

internship site. I believe that individual school psychologists can help lead systems change efforts like this one, which will eventually build capacity for larger scale reform at the state level.

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