

AN APPROACH TO HELP STUDENTS AT THE FIRST SIGN OF TROUBLE IS GAINING ACCEPTANCE IN EDUCATION

BY MICHELLE EXSTROM

Picture a school doing everything it can to help struggling students succeed. No child falls further and further behind. And no child falls through the cracks.

It's a place where teachers are trained to step in as soon as students begin to struggle and help them get back on track. The number of kids in special education drops because staff members intervene before, not after, the student falls too far behind.

If only the education system worked that way. In the real world, teachers lack the training, tools, time and data to regularly monitor how students are doing so they can adjust their instruction. Even when a student's early struggle is recognized, teachers and parents sometimes have to wait for students to fail badly enough to get the help they need.

"Many just weren't behind by enough, so we had to wait until they failed to get them the assistance they needed," says Colorado Senator Suzanne Williams, who spent 20 years as a special education teacher. "It was very hard on them to be labeled as failing, and on their parents, too. It just didn't make sense."

Some schools are using a relatively new approach to try to eliminate some of these obstacles. Known as Response to Intervention, it was born out of years of research on assessments, special education, learning disabilities, measurement of student academic growth and the achievement gap among certain groups of students. In 2004, the federal government first encouraged the approach by letting states use it as an alternative to placing students in special education classes under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It has now become a tool to iden-

Michelle Exstrom tracks teaching quality issues for NCSL.

BY THE NUMBERS

44

The number of states with a Response to Intervention framework.

6.5 million

The number of children receiving special education services.

\$11.5 billion

Federal money appropriated in the FY 2010 budget for special education.

tify and deal with academic and behavioral problems before students fail.

SCHOOLWIDE APPROACH

Under the approach, all students receive regular monitoring and assessment. Those who aren't doing well and are at risk of failing receive extra help, which can include small-group instruction, customized curriculum and counseling. The few students testing significantly below grade level are put through drills in areas where they are weak. Their performance may be monitored daily to make sure they improve. Other students with serious behavior problems may get an individual plan to manage their misconduct, also monitored daily by teachers.

Broad goals and requirements are similar across states. Typically these include screening and assessments for all students, monitoring student progress with interim testing and developing a plan to establish the approach in the school. State education



SENATOR
SUZANNE WILLIAMS
COLORADO

agencies provide a broad framework that is flexible and adaptable so it can be customized for each school.

State legislators can include the approach in legislation that sets out the rules schools use to identify those with learning disabilities. They also can enact legislation giving schools more flexibility in staffing, curriculum and scheduling to help in using the approach.

Legislators also play a role in funding. Currently, two sources of federal money—the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—can be used for putting this approach in place and for training teachers and principals. Some lawmakers also are trying to ensure districts are using that money in the most productive manner through legislation and by working with their local school districts.

Only six states—Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, Oklahoma and Vermont—and the District of Columbia don't have a framework developed by the state education agency for this kind of early intervention.

A variety of research backs up what many intuitively believe: The approach works if used correctly. In 2008, researchers Charles Hughes and Douglas Dexter published findings from 11 field studies of programs. Despite different approaches, all identified some improvement in student test scores.

CHECK OUT a longer version of this story at www.ncsl.org/magazine.