The St. Croix River Education District Model: Incorporating Systems-Level Organization and a Multi-Tiered Problem-Solving Process for Intervention Delivery

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The provision of the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) that allows school districts to identify learning disabilities (LDs) by measuring student response to scientifically based instruction/intervention (RTI) will undoubtedly make the LD classification process more instructionally relevant. Another goal of RTI in the larger context is to prevent large numbers of students from ever becoming labeled LD in the first place (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly and Vaughn, 2004). With new legislation mandating scientifically based reading instruction and an accountability scheme for ensuring that all children learn to read effectively (No Child Left Behind Act; No Child Left Behind, 2001), it seems that the pendulum is swinging towards requiring effective reading instruction as a way to prevent LD identification (President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

The St. Croix River Education District (SCRED) has been involved in promoting these RTI “preventative” practices for the past two decades. SCRED serves five school districts in east central Minnesota with a total population of approximately 9000 students. SCRED manages special education services for all of its member districts and provides leadership and guidance to regular education in a variety of areas, including basic academic skills instruction. There is a long history of data-based decision making through problem-solving processes within the district. In fact, SCRED was one of the initial pilot sites for examining the efficacy of curriculum-based measurement (CBM) in the early 1980s (Tindal et al., 1984). For the past 10 years, SCRED has worked with its member districts to implement a model that coordinates three critical elements: (a) frequent and continuous measurement using general outcome measures (CBM), (b) evidence-based instruction, and (c) schoolwide organization to ensure the most effective instruction possible for each student.

24.1 Importance of the Issue: Key Elements to Improving Reading Achievement

Recent research has identified the three basic elements of the SCRED model as important for improving reading achievement in particular (Kameenui and Simmons, 1998). Each of these elements are critical to student success, but none affects student achievement adequately on its own. Within the
Saint Croix River Education District model, measurement, instruction, and problem-solving organization are visualized as three sides of a triangle. Additional information regarding each component is provided in the following sections.

24.1.1 Measurement

The first requirement in the triangle of critical elements is measurement. The federal government mandates that all students must be assessed by at least grade 3 (No Child Left Behind, 2001). While the goal to have students reading proficiently by grade 3 is admirable, schools cannot afford to wait that long to assess student reading. Educators must know from the earliest possible moment who is and who is not succeeding and intervene accordingly.

SCRED uses data-based measurement practices, including CBM, that allow for evaluation of instruction for each student during learning. CBM is a general outcome measure that allows teachers to formatively evaluate their instruction for individual students on an ongoing basis (Deno, 1985; Deno, Marston, Shinn, and Tindal, 1983; Deno, Mirkin, and Chiang, 1982). Such frequent measurement prompts teachers to adjust instruction as needed to affect more progress for each student (Deno and Fuchs, 1987). Further, schools can use the same measure to evaluate their overall instructional programs regularly (Deno, 2003).

SCRED schools follow a protocol in which students are measured on three schedules: benchmark for all students grades K-8 (three times a year), strategic for students of some concern (once a month), and intensive for students of great concern (once a week). All districts use general outcome measures of reading (i.e., oral reading fluency), early literacy measures (letter naming fluency, letter sound fluency, nonsense word fluency, and phonemic segmenting and blending tasks), and mathematics (math fact fluency, and math concepts and applications).

24.1.2 Scientifically Based Reading Instructional Practices

The second side of the triangle of critical elements is instruction. In the area of reading, three syntheses of reading research are available to guide us. Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print (Adams, 1990) and Preventing Reading Difficulties (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998), both commissioned by the US Department of Education, give the field a common and trustworthy path for reading instruction. The final and most recent synthesis of beginning reading research is the report of the National Reading Panel’s review of the last 30 years of research in reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

In addition to the research on what should be taught to beginning readers, a synthesis on effective teaching principles gives us information on how to teach. Students learn best when, among other things, they are actively engaged, have high to moderate success rates, have multiple opportunities to cover content, spend most of their time being directly taught by the teacher, have instruction that is scaffolded, have strategic instruction, and have explicit instruction (Swanson, Haskyn, and Lee, 1999). SCRED has incorporated the three syntheses of reading research in assisting member districts with curriculum adoption and the incorporation of research-based instructional practices.

24.1.3 Schoolwide Organization

The third critical element in the triangle is schoolwide organization. Although the National Reading Panel has research-based suggestions for assessment and instruction in beginning reading, it is silent on the topic of school organization. Without a school-level system of implementation, it is nearly impossible for assessment and instruction best practices to be put into place effectively. The school as the “host environment” must be organized to ensure that research-based practices can thrive and be sustained (Coyne, Kameenui, and Simmons, 2001). At SCRED, five elements of school organization are promoted to ensure that effective instruction can be provided to every student: continuous measurement, grade-level team meetings, flexible grouping, grade-level scheduling, and concentrated resources. These elements will be described in further detail later in the chapter.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe a multi-tiered problem-solving process for intervention delivery. First, we discuss the necessary conditions in which the problem-solving process can thrive. Second, we describe a specific approach to the problem-solving process. Third, we provide data demonstrating the effectiveness of the SCRED model. Fourth, we discuss elements that must be in place prior to