Response to intervention (RTI) may sound complicated, but it’s based on a fairly simple idea. Early in the year, your child’s school can start looking at everyone’s skills in reading, writing and math. They can provide targeted teaching—called interventions—to help struggling students catch up. A big part of the RTI process involves closely monitoring student progress. That way the school can see which kids need more academic support.

# **What is RTI?**

If you look inside any general education classroom, chances are good that you’d see different students struggling for different reasons. Some kids may have undiagnosed learning and thinking differences.

“The goal is for the school to intervene, or step in, and start helping before anyone falls really far behind.”

Others may be trying to pick up English as a second language. And some students might be shaky on certain skills due to frequent absences or inadequate teaching.

It’s often hard for a teacher to tell right away which students are struggling or why. RTI aims to identify struggling students early on and give them the support they need to be successful in school.

The word *intervention* is key to understanding what RTI is all about. The goal is for the school to intervene, or step in, and start helping before anyone falls really far behind. RTI isn’t a specific program or type of teaching. It’s a proactive approach to measuring students’ skills and using this data to decide which types of targeted teaching to use.

# **How does RTI work?**

The RTI process begins with your child’s teacher assessing the skills of everyone in the class. These assessments help the [school’s RTI team](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/rti/at-a-glance-whos-on-the-rti-team) tell which students need [instructional interventions](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/instructional-intervention-what-you-need-to-know). That’s the term for focusing on specific skills in an effort to improve them.

Interventions can be part of classroom-wide instruction. The teacher may break students into small groups tailored for different skill levels or learning styles. This is also known as [differentiated instruction](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/differentiated-instruction-what-you-need-to-know). Students who don’t make enough progress getting this kind of help during class may start to work on skills in small groups that meet during enrichment activities like music or art.

As part of the RTI process, schools help struggling students by using teaching interventions that researchers have studied and shown to be effective. Many research-based interventions deal with reading. But there are also some scientifically proven methods of improving writing and math skills. Some schools also use research-based behavior interventions.

# **How do teachers track student progress?**

Another essential component of RTI is [progress monitoring](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/rti/how-rti-monitors-progress). The school frequently assesses your child’s skills to determine whether an intervention is working.

During an intervention, your child’s teacher or another member of the RTI team uses an assessment tool that research has shown to be an effective way to measure certain skills. This tool is used to assess your child’s skills every week or every other week. That may sound like a lot of testing. But each assessment only takes a few minutes to complete.

For example, let’s say your child’s school is using curriculum-based measurement (CBM) to assess spelling skills. During each test or probe, the teacher asks your child to spell words that are at the appropriate grade level. In total, your child will only spend a couple minutes writing down these words.

After each assessment, his score is plotted on a graph. This makes it easy for the RTI team to see if he’s improving at the expected rate or if he needs additional support.

# **How much support do students receive?**

There is no single way of doing RTI, but it’s often set up as a [three-tier system of support](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/rti/at-a-glance-3-tiers-of-rti-support). Some school districts call this framework a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) instead of RTI. One way to understand this tiered system is to think of it as a pyramid, with the intensity of support increasing from one level to the next.[1]

Tier 1: The Whole Class

In the general education classroom, the teacher measures everyone’s skills. This is known as a universal screening. The screening helps the teacher work with students in small groups based on their skill levels. All students are taught using methods that research has shown to be effective.

The school will let you know if your child is struggling and will update you on his RTI progress. In some schools, the majority of students need Tier 1 instructional support because their reading and math skills are not at grade level.

During the intervention, the RTI team monitors students’ progress to see who might need additional support. Many students respond successfully to Tier 1 support and achieve grade-level expectations.

Tier 2: Small Group Interventions

If your child isn’t making adequate progress in Tier 1, he’ll start to receive more targeted help. This is *in addition* to the regular classroom instruction, not a replacement for it. Tier 2 interventions take place a few times a week during electives or enrichment activities such as music or art so your child won’t miss any core instruction in the classroom.

During these extra help sessions, he’ll be taught in small groups using a different method than in Tier 1 because the first method wasn’t successful. The teacher may also ask you to work with your child at home on certain skills.

The school will monitor your child’s progress so it’s clear whether the Tier 2 intervention is helping.

Tier 3: Intensive Interventions

Typically, only a small percentage of the class—perhaps one or two students— will require Tier 3 support. In many schools, though, that number is much higher. If your child needs Tier 3 support, it will be tailored to his needs. Every day he’ll receive one-on-one instruction or work in very small groups. The groups may include some students who are receiving special education services and who need to work on the same skills.

Your child will continue to spend most of the day in the general education classroom. If he doesn’t make adequate progress in Tier 3, it’s likely that the school will recommend [an evaluation for special education services](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/evaluations/evaluation-basics/understanding-evaluations). This can open the door to individualized teaching, assistive technology and other resources provided at no cost to you.

# **How is RTI related to special education?**

Even though RTI isn’t a special education program, it can help general education teachers pick up on early signs of learning differences. It can also play an important role in helping schools determine who qualifies for [special education services](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/special-education-basics/understanding-special-education).

Federal law says that when deciding whether a student is eligible for special education, the school district can use a “process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention.”[2] That’s one of the reasons many states have started to use RTI.

If your child qualifies for special education, the interventions used during RTI can help the school decide which types of services and supports to include in his [Individualized Education Program](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/ieps/understanding-individualized-education-programs) ( IEP).

There are a few other key things to keep in mind about the relationship between RTI and special education:

* RTI can’t be used to reduce your child’s workload. That kind of modification may be used for some special education students, but it shouldn’t be used for general education students.
* Just because your child is getting extra help through the RTI process doesn’t mean you have to wait to [request a special education evaluation](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/evaluations/evaluation-basics/download-sample-letters-for-requesting-evaluations-and-reports). You have the right to ask for that at any time. The federal Department of Education has stated very clearly that RTI cannot be used to delay or deny an evaluation.[3]
* As part of the evaluation, the school can gather information from the RTI process, such as screening, progress monitoring and instructional adequacy data. But the school still needs to follow the time frame of completing an initial evaluation within 60 days of receiving your consent.

# **How many schools use RTI?**

According to a study published in 2013, 17 states require schools to use RTI to help determine [which students are eligible for special education](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/special-education-basics/finding-out-if-your-child-is-eligible-for-special-education).[4] All states mention RTI in their regulations. And most states offer schools guidance on how to use this kind of framework to decide which students have learning disabilities that qualify for special education.

RTI is more commonly used in elementary schools. But it can be used all the way up through high school.

“The RTI process can help schools focus the use of special education resources on kids who truly need them.”

One reason advocates like RTI is because it can increase the number of students who are successful in general education classrooms. It may also reduce the number of students who are referred for special education evaluations. That’s because many students performing below grade level do *not* have learning disabilities.

With the right teaching methods, these students can make progress without getting accommodations or individualized teaching, which can be expensive to provide. In other words, the RTI process can help schools focus the use of special education resources on kids who truly need them.

# **What are the benefits of RTI?**

RTI is a fluid process. At any time during the school year, you can talk to the teacher and find out which interventions are available to help your child. (If the school doesn’t use RTI, you can still [ask for extra help](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childs-school/working-with-childs-teacher/10-ways-to-be-an-effective-advocate-for-your-child-at-school). But it might not be provided as extensively or as systematically as it would in a school that uses RTI.)

RTI is designed to take kids from where they are in terms of skills and help them move toward grade-level expectations. That means adjustments can be made to your child’s instruction based on his individual response to an intervention, not the response of the whole class or even a small group.

Here are some other reasons why some parents like RTI:

* Students continue to receive their core instruction in the general education classroom.
* The increasing levels of support mean that if the first intervention method doesn’t work, there are other options before special education.
* With RTI, the school isn’t taking a “wait and see” approach to your child’s learning. Your child can start to get extra help before he falls so far behind that he needs to attend summer school or repeat a grade.
* Progress monitoring means that if your child is referred for special education services, there’s already documentation about which type of instruction has not been helpful for your child.

# **Will the school give us a written intervention plan?**

Your child’s school isn’t required to give you a written intervention plan. Interestingly, all the school needs to tell you about RTI is that your child is getting extra support and that you have the right to request an evaluation for special education services at any time. However, many schools provide much more information because they know that parental involvement plays such a big role in a child’s success in school.[5]

A written intervention plan can be a handy way to let you know what’s happening and to inform you when your child gets more support. Some schools are already in the habit of giving parents a written intervention plan. If your child’s school doesn’t automatically give you a written plan, you can ask for one. It might include:

* A description of the skills your child is having trouble with and documentation about these weaknesses, such as assessment results or samples of your child’s work.
* A description of the research-based intervention your child is receiving.
* Details about how often the intervention will be provided and for what length of time—how many minutes per day over how many weeks.
* Details about who will be providing the intervention and in which schoolroom.
* The criteria for determining whether the intervention is successful.
* A description of how progress monitoring works and how often your child’s progress will be measured.

# **How can parents participate in RTI?**

Requesting a written intervention plan can help you take an active role in RTI. There are others ways you can be involved in the process:

* Ask the school for more information about the intervention your child is receiving, such as which studies show it is effective.
* Ask the school to give you a copy of your child’s progress monitoring graph after every assessment.
* Give the intervention time to work. To know if it’s helping, the school needs data. Wait at least a few weeks before you ask the school if it’s time to try something different.
* Ask the school how you can help your child at home.
* If you think your child’s skills aren’t improving, you may want to request an evaluation for special education. Remember that you can make this request *at any time.*

RTI is not a replacement for special education. But it can help many struggling students make progress. The more details you have about [your school’s RTI process](https://www.understood.org/~/link.aspx?_id=AEAE537D1EB744B99C69B3FF6BCBD9C8&_z=z), the more you can help your child get the kind of support he needs to succeed.

## **Key Takeaways**

* RTI is a process that aims to identify kids who are struggling in school and uses targeted teaching to help them catch up.
* RTI isn’t a specific program or teaching method. It’s a systematic way of measuring progress and providing more support to kids who need it.
* You can ask for a special education evaluation even if your child is getting extra help through RTI.

## **About the Author**

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