Create Your Implementation Blueprint: Avoiding Implementation Pitfalls

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Implementing a Response-to-Intervention (RTI) approach is a major undertaking. Even with careful planning and adequate buy-in, there are potential pitfalls that can hinder progress. Luckily, this is well-trodden ground by now and the pitfalls, once you are aware of them, can be avoided.

Pitfall 1: Underestimating the Magnitude of Change
It is easy for a school’s leadership team to fail to see the full range of new practices that need to be installed and sustained for success. Reading articles and books about implementation can help, and visiting other schools that are in the full implementation stage of RTI will also help. But perhaps the most effective way to avoid thinking this is simple is to complete a self-assessment that includes a list of processes that need to be in place for full implementation.

Pitfall 2: Taking on Too Many Grade Levels, Tiers, or Buildings in the First Year
This is perhaps the most common mistake schools make. Some schools decide to implement RTI across the entire elementary building, or even K–8, all in the first year. A better approach is a phased one in which the implementation plan is limited to only some grade levels in the first year, is designed to expand to more grades in the second year, and so on. Taking on a limited number of grade levels gives staff time to be focused on learning it with a more limited scope initially, and then the scope can be broadened to include other grades once there is more of an experience base on what’s effective.

Pitfall 3: Jumping in Without a Comprehensive Implementation Plan
Often a school that is enthusiastic about implementing RTI launches the initiative without enough thought about the entire process. Thorough planning is crucial for ensuring success. Reading articles such as those on this Web site is an important step in that direction.

Pitfall 4: Failing to View the Implementation as a Systems-wide Change
Implementing RTI involves major changes to specific practices and techniques, so it is also important to view RTI as systems-wide. The changes to the master schedule and a high degree of collaboration among and between grade levels means that the process affects the entire school, not just a couple of teachers. Administrators can avoid this pitfall by staying involved in decisions about how to organize a tiered service delivery model, staffing the intervention groups, and planning professional development on data analysis and grouping techniques.

Pitfall 5: Failing to Designate an Intervention Block Time in the Master Schedule
Teachers already feel that their daily schedule is full, and finding time to provide intervention to small groups of students is difficult. However, the importance of this must be stressed. Providing the intervention instruction daily is critical to obtaining improvements.

Pitfall 6: Focusing Too Many Resources on Administering and Collecting Assessment Data Rather Than on Helping Staff Learn to Use the Data
Sometimes schools spend the majority of their budget on the assessment and reporting system; this leaves limited funding for professional development and coaching to teach the staff how to interpret the data. Collecting data with a curriculum-based measurement tool is an important initial task, but it is merely the first step. It almost seems as if some principals purchase the easiest way to get the data collected to keep teachers happy, even if it means spending 3–10 times more on one data reporting system versus another system that provides the same information in a different way. This pitfall can be avoided when administrators focus on data analysis processes and the effectiveness of intervention instruction as well as data collection and reporting.

**Pitfall 7: Viewing Purchased Instructional Programs as Silver Bullets Rather than Aids to Help Well-trained Teachers Make Informed Instructional Decisions**

Good programs save teachers time in lesson planning and assembling materials for instruction. Programs can’t assure that instruction will be perfect. Some schools want a quick and easy solution and they are too easily convinced that a perfect program will lead to results. These schools misunderstand that intervention must be differentiated even more than with core programs. Too often when teachers follow scripted programs they aren’t encouraged or taught how to differentiate instruction for individual students. Investing in professional development to improve the analytical and instructional decisions made by teachers will get schools better results.

**Pitfall 8: Forming Groups Based on a Surface View of the Data**

Grouping by instructional recommendation level rather than pinpointing skill deficits is not effective. Schools using this approach are failing to look at error pattern analysis to see which students cannot complete the skill.

**Pitfall 9: Over relying on Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) Data Instead of Organizing an Assessment System of CBM Data Plus Informal Diagnostic Screeners to Pinpoint Needs**

Thinking that a tool like the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) will provide everything needed for assessment is to overlook the importance of using informal diagnostic screeners in conjunction with a CBM tool.

**Pitfall 10: Confusing Awareness Training with Implementation Training**

Schools sometimes fall into the trap of providing a great deal of awareness-type training and not following it with other types of training. These schools leave it to the teachers to try to figure this all out on their own without training and coaching. There is too often not enough professional development and coaching on how to use data, how to schedule intervention time, and how data analysis techniques lead to tight focused groups.

**Pitfall 11: Using Ineffective Approaches to Training Teachers That are Mismatched to the Practices That Have to be Changed**

The most effective models of professional development are job-embedded and are sustained with a focus on coaching. One-shot workshops will not work in helping teachers learn to implement the processes and practices of RTI. Teachers will need to learn to analyze data through a continual process of professional development and coaching. Appointing a peer coach who understands how to interpret data and model effective instruction is an important step in implementation.