

**Integrating RTI With School Counseling Programs: Being a Proactive
Professional School Counselor**

Melissa S. Ockerman, Erin C. M. Mason, and Amy Feiker Hollenbeck

DePaul University

Abstract

With the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) across many states, the school counseling profession must be proactive in establishing its critical role in this process. This article outlines the three essential and shared components between RTI and comprehensive, developmental school counseling programs. Each of these integral and overlapping constructs are discussed and linked to practical applications, implications, and recommendations for professional school counselors' future practice and research.

Integrating RTI With School Counseling Programs: Being a Proactive Professional School Counselor

The profession of school counseling has continuously evolved, its survival largely predicated on its ability to address educational reform movements and to redefine its role accordingly (Baker & Gerler, 2004; Gysbers, 2001; Herr, 2002; Leuwerke, Walker & Shi, 2009; Paisley & Borders, 1995). As asserted by Paisley and Borders, the professional school counselor's role continues to be mandated and determined by numerous sources, few of which have a solid understanding of the responsibilities of the school counselor. Often because of their propensity to "pitch in and help," (Whiston, 2002, p. 148), professional school counselors can be their own worst enemies as they try to manage multiple tasks with no clear boundaries or job guidelines. In addition, professional school counselors have rarely been seen as decision-makers in the school; thus, their role has historically been viewed as ancillary rather than central to the mission of the school (Paisley & Borders, 1995; Sears, 2002). Responding to the need of role clarification and educating the public about the appropriate responsibilities of the professional school counselor during significant shifts in educational reform is imperative (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Galassi & Akos, 2004; Paisley & Hayes, 2003).

Professional school counselors in many districts and states are currently trying to navigate the complexities of role and responsibility redefinition as compelled by a recent educational reform: Response to Intervention (RTI). Spurred by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 13 states legally required RTI as of May 31, 2010 (i.e., Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida,

Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, and West Virginia); all others states (with the exclusion of three) provide state-developed RTI guidance documents on their websites in support of implementation (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Whereas other professions, such as school psychologists, have grappled extensively with the implications of RTI for practitioners within their field (e.g., Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007; Hawkins, Kroeger, Musti-Rao, Barnett, & Ward, 2008; Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007), professional school counselors have yet to directly address this issue beyond a few case studies describing specific implementations (e.g., Ryan & Kaffenberger, 2011). It is essential for the profession to establish its critical roles in relation to developing and successfully implementing RTI models; furthermore, it is incumbent upon professional school counselors to understand how RTI affects their students as well as how they can integrate their services strategically and effectively.

Upon review, the models of RTI and comprehensive developmental school counseling programs (CDSCP) can both be described as proactive, collaborative, data-driven, multi-tiered and whole-child focused (Smith, Kinard, & Lozo, 2008). Furthermore, it can also be argued that both models emphasize equity and access to quality instruction and behavior support for all students, with the goal of promoting student achievement. As such, the authors assert that RTI and CDSCPs share three interconnected and key components: a tiered service delivery model that strives to serve all students, data and use of empirically-based assessments, and a foundation grounded in social advocacy and equity. Each of these integral and overlapping constructs points to practical applications for the professional school counselor.

In this article, the authors first reviewed relevant literature focused on the fundamental components of RTI as well as its historical foundation. Second, the three essential and shared components between RTI models and CDSCPs are presented. The authors posit that the complementary pairing of RTI and CDSCPs has the potential to work in seamless and effective ways for students and their families. Additionally, current research as it relates to the role of professional school counselors within the RTI implementation is discussed. Finally, implications and recommendations for future practice and research are presented.

RTI and The School Counselor's Role: A Review of Literature

RTI, a multi-tiered intervention framework for struggling learners, has its foundation in special education reform movements beginning in the late 1970s (Newell & Kratochwill, 2007). It was not until 2004, however, that RTI gained national attention with reference in the reauthorization of the IDEA in relation to the identification of students with learning disabilities (LD). Specifically, federal law stipulated that states were no longer required to apply the traditional discrepancy-based formula in identifying LD. Historically, students with LD have been identified via documentation of a significant difference between an individual's level of potential, as measured by cognitive assessments, and level of performance, as found through current achievement test data. The rapid rise in the identification of students with LD over the past 35 years, paired with the over-representation of minority students in the national population of students with LD, prompted some to advocate for alternatives to the discrepancy model (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Speece, 2002; Gresham, 2001; Speece & Case, 2001). In such, the IDEA reauthorization gave states the right to employ "a process that determines if

the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures" (20 USC § 1400) when determining LD eligibility: the process commonly known as RTI.

Since the IDEA (2004) reauthorization, states have moved at a rapid pace to define and regulate RTI. In 2008, a survey of special education directors found that roughly half of states had not legally defined the use of RTI in LD identification (Zirkel & Krohn, 2008). Just two years later, however, review of websites of all state departments of education identified that all but three states have legal requirements or concrete guidelines for RTI in place (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). A 2007 website review found that 14 of 15 states with RTI implementation plans included both academic and behavioral interventions (Berkley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009), indicating the importance of the professional school counselor as a potential interventionist. Therefore, an understanding of the foundations of RTI, and how it intersects with, and informs, the role of the professional school counselor is critical. Interestingly, RTI and CDSCPs share important core components that allow the professional school counselor to work alongside other school-based professionals in a seamless and impactful way. These key pieces include: a tiered delivery system, data and use of assessment, and a foundation in social justice and advocacy.

Tiered Service Delivery Models as a Shared and Essential Element

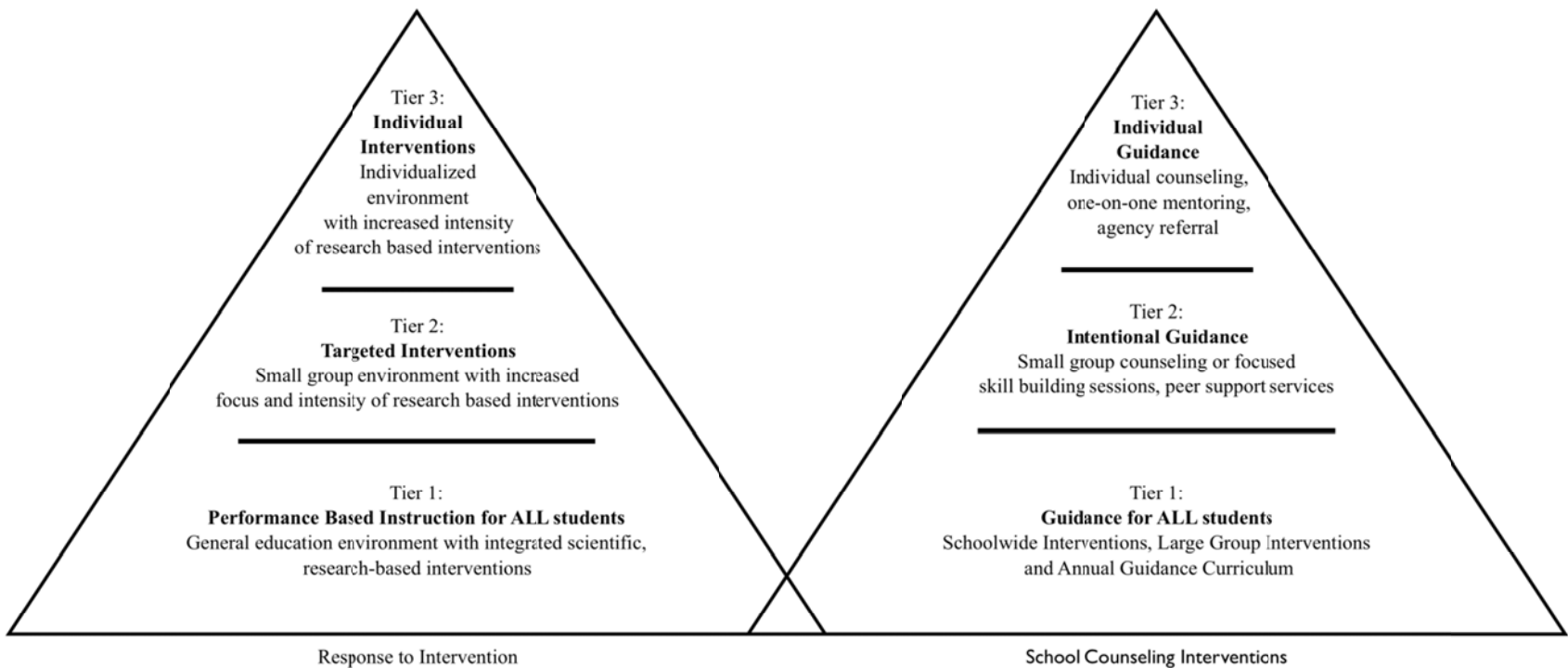
While RTI models may vary in individual implementation, a tiered service delivery method is central to all frameworks; the most common conceptualization utilizes three tiers of increasing instructional intensity, as discussed next (for further elaboration, see the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD], 2005). Tier one is

considered the general education environment, into which "scientific, research-based intervention[s]" (IDEIA, 2004, 20 USC §§ 1,400) are integrated. It is important to note that tier one does not represent the status quo in general education; rather, instructional practices must include scientifically-based instruction for all learners, a research-based core curriculum. If a child does not thrive in this instructional milieu as determined through ongoing assessments, he or she enters tier two: small group intervention. Tier two instruction may occur in the general education classroom, presented by the general educator or a specialist, or as pullout instruction. Regardless of where tier two services occur, instruction is characterized by increased intensity (typically, three to five small group sessions of 20-30 minutes per week) and research-based interventions, selected based on previously gathered assessment data. Finally, if the child remains non-responsive to tier two intervention he or she moves to tier three, intervention of an increased frequency (typically 30 minutes, five days a week, presented 1:1 or 1:2). Instruction in tier three must likewise be research-based and highly specific to the learner's individual needs as determined through ongoing assessments. In some states, tier three concludes with assessment for special education services if the student remains non-responsive to intervention (e.g., Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003), while in others, students receive special education services without disability identification (e.g., Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003). It is important to note that movement between tiers in an RTI framework should be fluid; students move between tiers, receiving intervention when necessary, without requiring special education labels (e.g., O'Connor, Harty, & Fulmer, 2005; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003).

Tiered Structure Within School Counseling Programs

The ASCA National Model© (2003; 2005) is currently the most proliferated framework for comprehensive, developmental school counseling programs (CDSCPs) within the field. The National Model helps to establish a mechanism in which school counselors can design, organize, coordinate and evaluate their work. The philosophical underpinnings of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change are central to the development and implementation of the school counselor's CDSCP (ASCA, 2003; 2005; Bodenhorn, Wolfe, Airen, 2010). The model consists of four interconnected components: the foundation, the delivery system, the management system and accountability. Specifically, the delivery system component of the ASCA National Model includes school counseling interventions that directly serve students such as the guidance curriculum, individual student planning and responsive, group-based services (ASCA, 2003; 2005). The overall tiered structure of RTI can be applied to interventions within a CDSCP whereby the tiers represent the levels and intensity of school counseling interventions, as well as practical division of professional school counselors' time in direct service to students (see Figure 1).

Tier one is that which provides school counseling interventions to all or most students at a school wide level. Tier two may serve those students identified as having greater needs through targeted interventions with increased intensity and additional focus. Tier three provides interventions through the CDSCP at an individual level and is tailored for each particular student. With regards to the school counselor's division of time, the tiered framework of the school counseling intervention model demonstrates



Adapted from Smith, Kinard and Lozo, 2008

that the greatest amount of time should be spent in direct service at tier one, school-wide interventions and implementation of the guidance curriculum. This deviates from older, mental health models of school counseling in which more time is spent in individual counseling (i.e., tier three). In contrast, this model advocates for greater attention to tier one services, as they are the most efficient means for serving the greatest number of students. The use of tier one services as a monitoring ground for students who are potentially struggling and thus in need of more intensive services is also consistent with the philosophy of RTI.

Just as is the case with RTI, this tiered model of school counseling interventions should be seen as flexible based upon the identified needs of each school and/or each student. School counseling interventions within each tier should change over time based on school data, evaluation of the overall school counseling program and supporting research from the field. Students themselves may move between the tiers at various times based upon their needs; for example, a student may require more intensive services when transitioning to middle school, but only receive tier one services once adjusted to the challenges of a new environment.

The RTI framework and the school counseling intervention model presented here have the potential to work well together. The tiered model for school counseling interventions is a natural fit with RTI, as it requires professional school counselors to serve in a proactive, accountable manner and to provide needed interventions based on school improvement goals, as outlined by the ASCA National Model (2003). Through the processes of RTI, interventions within the school counseling program should be defined and refined as data is examined by a collaborative team of educators.

Additionally, interventions provided through the CDSCP, e.g. classroom guidance, small group sessions, and individual counseling, should be identified by the team as appropriate interventions within the RTI framework. For both RTI and the CDSCP, interventions at each tier require the use of data in order to determine the most appropriate and efficacious services.

Data and Assessment as Shared and Essential Elements

Data-based interventions for struggling learners prior to referral for special education lie at the heart of RTI. A successful RTI implementation requires the following components to support tiered instruction: a) universal screening, b) ongoing progress monitoring, c) a system for organizing and disseminating assessment results in a timely manner, and d) professional development to ensure knowledge of, and fidelity to, research-based practices (NJCLD, 2005). Universal screening measures a student's performance in comparison to a previously established norm or standard; such testing, typically occurring in the fall, winter, and spring of the school year, is most commonly used to indicate which students are unsuccessful in tier one, the general education environment (Shinn, 2007). Progress monitoring, a method of curriculum-based assessment consisting of short, formal assessment probes, is used to measure students' ongoing progress in tiers two and three (Ysseldyke, Burns, Scholin, & Parker, 2010). A computerized management system is therefore needed to organize all data on a school-wide basis, as the results of ongoing assessments should be used to determine students' movement between tiers. Finally, it is essential that teachers and specialists are well-supported in implementing evidence-based practices with fidelity;

such methods, as well as specific research-based strategies and curricula, may be unfamiliar to current practitioners in the field.

Data and Assessment in School Counseling Programs

Based on the premise that "to evaluate the program and to hold it accountable, school counseling programs must collect and use data that link the program to student achievement" (ASCA, 2005, p.16), professional school counselors are trained to track and examine the efficacy of their work. Additionally, professional school counselors, if trained in providing a CDSCP, understand the nature of delivering academic, career development and personal/social interventions at the individual, group and school-wide levels based on a variety of data sources (ASCA, 2003; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Dimmit, Carey, & Dimmitt, 2008; Carey & Hatch, 2007; Dahir & Stone, 2009). Utilizing their assessment skills, professional school counselors can first help identify the needs of all students by assisting the RTI team with selecting, modifying and/or creating various assessments for their schools.

School counselors may generate data related to their own interventions through the use of school-wide needs assessments, delivered to students, parents/caregivers and/or school staff. School counseling needs assessments can provide school counselors data at the pre-intervention phase about which school counseling standards (academic, career, or personal/social) require the most attention. During intervention, school counselors may deliver pre- and post-tests or curriculum based measures to assess the learning of particular standards and skills. Post-intervention, or at the end of the year, school counselors may evaluate program interventions through the use of surveys given to students, staff or families. Such practices of formative and summative

assessments and progress monitoring are consistent with the RTI process and can be useful in determining the effectiveness of school counseling services rendered.

Additionally, the school counselor should play an instrumental role in interpreting assessment results, with careful attention paid to historically overlooked and marginalized populations. As noted in the next section, both RTI and CDSCPs serve as conduits for social justice and equity within schools.

Social Advocacy and Educational Reform as Shared and Essential Elements

RTI represents more than a means of providing services to struggling learners. Rather, it was conceptualized as a means of educational reform (Buffom, Mattos, & Weber, 2010) advocated to address over-representation of minority students in special education (Newell & Kratochwill, 2007). The implementation of RTI, with its focus on data-based decision-making, may support the elimination of teacher bias in special education referrals; in fact, early research indicated that students placed in special education in an RTI framework represented the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of classrooms and schools (Speece, Case, & Eddy, 2003). Furthermore, school staff implementing RTI should aim to eliminate poor instruction as a variable for all learners by emphasizing scientific, research-based practices in general education, with the goal of reducing inappropriate referrals to special education (Fuchs et al., 2003). This emphasis on improving practices across general education necessitates a change in how educators and professional school counselors view struggling learners, described as a "seismic shift in beliefs, attitudes, and practice" (Fuchs et al., 2002, p. 40). Long-standing RTI implementations have done more than change the means by which students receive instruction and qualify for special education; they have also changed

core beliefs about instructional roles and responsibilities (Tilly, 2003), fostering joint accountability for student learning on a school-wide basis.

Social Advocacy, Educational Reform, and School Counseling Programs

Concomitantly, professional school counselors are undergoing a similar "seismic shift" (Fuchs et al., 2002, p. 40) within their foundational philosophies and professional functions. Recent school counseling reforms including the *Transforming School Counseling Initiative*, (Education Trust, 1996) have been designed to move the role of the school counselor from the periphery into a position of action and social advocacy for all students, especially those who have been underserved and underrepresented (Martin, 2002). This new vision of the professional school counselor involves mastering five core functions in order to be effective in schools: (a) leadership; (b) advocacy; (c) teaming and collaboration; (d) counseling and coordination; and (e) assessing and using data (Sears, 1999; Perusse & Goodnough, 2001).

In alignment with RTI's core underpinnings, professional school counselors can play a critical role in helping to dismantle systemic policies that discriminate against certain types of students while simultaneously supporting others (Bodenhorn, Wolfe, & Airen, 2010; Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Sears, 2002; Martin, 2002). Advocating for the rights of students, as well as calling for systemic investigation of such practices, are within the realm and responsibility of school counselors. For example, school counselors can combat inappropriate special education placements and over-identifications of social and emotional disturbances by collaborating with teachers, school psychologists and special educators.

Therefore, both the implementation of RTI and CDSCPs require a change in accountability: Every educator, specialist, and school counselor must accept responsibility for helping all students succeed, regardless of their individual strengths or challenges. This is a change in perception from the traditional deficit-based model, in which struggling learners are "referred out" to specialists for small group or private instruction, often as a means of shifting responsibility from general educator to specialist or counselor. Just as RTI's fundamental tenets perpetuate movement away from deficit-finding and towards asset building, it has thus been suggested that school counseling include more action-oriented or activist counseling (Sears, 2001). The promotion of resiliency-based school counseling and tiered interventions that promote proactive engagement and strategies for overcoming adversity is in accordance with this mission.

Current Status of the Role of the School Counselor in Response to Intervention

While RTI and CDSCPs connect in the aforementioned important ways, professional school counselors have been challenged to recognize these affinities and subsequently, to enact change. Certainly, RTI has the potential to create positive changes in educational practices; to do so most effectively, implementations must proceed in thoughtful and flexible manners. Professional school counselors have a unique opportunity to align their roles within an RTI framework, to establish themselves as valuable contributors during this time of transformation.

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) has responded to the latest IDEA reauthorization (2004) by asserting that professional school counselors are "stakeholders" (ASCA, 2008, p. 34) in the development and implementation of RTI within their school buildings. ASCA posited that professional school counselors' data-

driven, comprehensive, developmental school counseling programs seamlessly align with the tenets of RTI. Additionally, it is noted that professional school counselors should be instrumental in addressing students' academic and behavioral concerns via the universal, supplemental and intensive tiers (ASCA, 2008).

To date, limited research exists regarding how professional school counselors have upheld ASCA's position on RTI. Canter, Klotz and Cowan (2008) asserted that the effective implementation of RTI involves a realistic time line, strong teaming, well-organized data collection, administrative and staff support and training, an understanding of the legal regulations, and the integration and coordination of existing scheduling and intervention programs. Santos de Barona and Barona (2006) postulated that professional school counselors should play a pivotal role in the implementation of the RTI process. The RTI Action Network (2009) provided several examples of how professional school counselors nationwide have played an integral part in the RTI process. In most cases, professional school counselors were charged with leading and coordinating Student Support Teams (also under the monikers of Child Study Teams, Behavior Intervention Team, RTI Team, etc.) comprised of teachers, intervention specialists, and parents. Serving as the gate-keeper of this team, the school counselor monitored academic and behavioral interventions for each tier of RTI. Additionally, in some cases, professional school counselors assisted teams in analyzing data to determine the efficacy of their interventions and to identify students needing additional supports.

These examples help to develop the groundwork for the school counselor's role within RTI. Yet, in order to assume the necessary roles of contributors and advocates

within this movement, a clearer understanding of how to systemically integrate key responsibilities of the professional school counselor is still urgently needed.

Implications

As RTI is adopted across the country, all educators, including professional school counselors, will ask, "What is my role in RTI?" For professional school counselors, who have long struggled with defining their roles, this is a particularly significant question, one to which practitioners and their advocates must establish a proactive, clear answer. In an effort to aid in this process, practical implications for professional school counselors are offered in the following section. The authors believe that a CDSCP design and the school counselor's role present significant value to both the processes and the outcomes of RTI (Table 1).

Table 1

School Counselor Roles and School Counseling Program Elements in Response to RTI

		School Counselor Role	
		Supporter	Intervener
School Counseling Program Element	Tiered Model	Highlight at RTI team meetings the evidence-based counseling interventions at various settings that already serve the goals of the team and the needs of identified students, as well as those that could contribute.	Provide evidence-based counseling interventions in school-wide, classroom, small group and individual settings to address academic and/or behavioral concerns.
	Data	Share data collected from counseling interventions with the RTI team to document student movement through the tiers.	Collect and analyze data regarding all interventions used to meet the goals of the RTI team and to serve student identified by the team.
	Social Advocacy	Highlight specific data from needs assessments that demonstrate academic and/or behavioral issues identified by students, staff and/or parents. Bring to the team's attention issues of social justice and the needs of marginalized populations while connecting these issues to the RTI team's goals.	Design and implement needs assessments for students, staff and/or parents to give them a voice in identifying needed academic and/or behavioral supports. Create and deliver specific counseling interventions based upon the needs of underserved populations.

Utilizing this framework, specific recommendations for practice and research are delineated. Additionally, the case study (see Appendix) highlights these implications and further elaborates upon how school counselors can be proactive partners given the overlapping and essential elements of CDSCP and RTI.

Implications Related to the Shared Tiered Structure Model

Connecting counseling interventions to the RTI structure. As discussed previously, professional school counselors are delivering their services to students in a tiered fashion. Professional school counselors strive to reach the greatest number of students through school-wide interventions (i.e., tier one). Such interventions may include drug and alcohol prevention activities; behavior management systems; academic incentive programs; career development events and the annual guidance curriculum covering academic, career and personal/social student competencies as outlined by the ASCA National Standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). The second level of intervention involves more targeted counseling services. Interventions at tier two may include intentional guidance through small groups, sessions for reinforcement of skills, group-based tutoring, mentoring activities or seminar-like activities for identified groups. Finally, professional school counselors provide more intensive, concentrated tier three interventions when the other two levels have failed to achieve desired results. Activities at this tier may include solution-focused individual counseling, one-on-one mentoring, behavior or academic improvement plans, crisis intervention, regular parent consultation or community agency referral.

Professional school counselors would benefit from examining their existing comprehensive services within the context of the RTI structure in order to highlight to

other educators how counseling services may already, or can potentially, meet schools' academic or behavioral RTI needs and goals. It is imperative that professional school counselors make this link transparent to other educational professionals, many of whom may not fully understand the robust nature of counseling services rendered and their alignment with students' learning and achievement outcomes.

Seek a Balanced Role Between Intervener and RTI Team Member. The authors recommend professional school counselors be considered in the supportive role of RTI team member *and* in the active role of RTI intervention provider. In other words, school counselors can support the overall process of RTI by being at the table during RTI meetings and school counselors can actively provide interventions to individual students or groups of students who are identified through the RTI process. Professional school counselors should be an integral part of the RTI team, with their background in the connections between the academic, personal/social and career development of children and adolescents; their training in the use of data; as well as their knowledge of prevention and intervention programming. Serving as a team member in the RTI process is an appropriate and useful role for the school counselor given the collaboration that is required with administrators, teachers, specialists and students' family members. Furthermore, serving in the role of service provider is an equally important role for the school counselor given the variety of student needs that present themselves and the ability of professional school counselors to provide direct service to students. The authors advocate for a practical balance between the roles of RTI team member and intervention provider in order to maximize the professional training and knowledge base of professional school counselors. Professional school counselors

should be cautious not to absorb full responsibility for the team and should be clear about how their services contribute collectively to RTI's objectives and implementation in direct service to students as well as the team.

Implications Related to Data and Use of Assessment

Use of data to identify needs and evaluate effectiveness. As previously discussed, professional school counselors are skilled in assessing the needs of their stakeholders as well as the effectiveness of their efforts. In order to determine needed school-wide and group based interventions, school counselors may examine overall trends within standardized test scores, course enrollment patterns, attendance data, district "report cards," school improvement plans, or disciplinary reports. Additional sources of data may help school counselors develop necessary tier three and tier two interventions, including career interest inventories given to large groups of students and student or parent school satisfaction surveys. To determine needed individual student interventions, school counselors may examine a student's permanent file, course grades, work samples, disciplinary records, and patterns of attendance, or they may complete observations of the student.

Furthermore, school counselors should generate data related to previous interventions within their programs to further develop and refine future interventions within the school, group and individual tiers. Pre/post-tests may be adapted to assist general educators and other RTI team members in measuring student learning and progress with instruction. The professional school counselor should use data to drive services across all tiers, in alignment with the accountability component of the ASCA National Model (2003), and model its use for other educational professionals.

Implement research-based programs and interventions and contribute to evidence-based practices within the field. RTI requires the use of "scientific, research based interventions" (IDEA, 2004, 20 USC §§ 1,400)). However, in the field of school counseling, the need for an increased pool of research-based interventions is evident (McGannon, Carey & Dimmit, 2005; Whiston & Sexton, 1998; Whiston, 2002). There are countless programs available to address academic, career and personal/social standards but few of them have been broadly accepted across the field or have a solid research base. School counselors and counselor educators must address the "significant dearth of research in school counseling" (Whiston, 2002, p. 157) if the quality of services to students is to improve and the profession of school counseling is to advance in the new millennium.

Fortunately, in response to this need, both the American Counseling Association (2006) and the American School Counselor Association (2010) have chronicled studies that support the effectiveness of school counseling interventions. Additionally, The Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation (CSCORE) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst has taken a frontrunner role in conducting research on the impact of school counseling interventions and curricular programs such as *Student Success Skills* (Brigman & Goodman, 2001) *Career Targets* (Durgin, 1998) and *Second Step* (Committee for Children, 2010).

School counselors are encouraged, as they engage in the RTI processes, to be able to speak to the research that exists and to capitalize on those programs and interventions that do have a research base. By utilizing evidence-based interventions and programs identified in the field that appropriately fit unique school needs, school

counselors can contribute to the canon of needed research in our field. Practitioners must become action researchers who collect data on the effectiveness of their interventions and then share that data with others. Furthermore, the authors encourage partnerships between school counselors, district supervisors and counselor educators with the goal of measuring school counseling interventions and their effectiveness.

Implications Related to Social Advocacy and Educational Reform

Serve as an advocate for historically underserved populations. As discussed, professional school counselors should take an active role in the evaluation process, in coordinating efforts, and in ensuring proper communication between all parties of the evaluation team. Moreover, it is the duty of the school counselor to routinely collect and review school-wide data and assess placement patterns in order to ensure equitable treatment of all students. Importantly, the authors assert that professional school counselors should be at the forefront of asking difficult yet critical questions around the administration of RTI and the demographics of the students receiving advanced tier interventions. As noted previously, the core underpinnings of RTI aim to decrease the over-representation of minorities receiving special education services (Newell & Kratochwill, 2007; Speece et al., 2003). Professional school counselors have been trained in acquiring the knowledge, awareness and skills related to multicultural competent counseling (see Sue, 1991), and therefore must challenge systemic practices that perpetuate inequitable educational practices. As postulated by Santos de Barona and Barona (2006), school counselors should call attention to patterns of disproportionate distribution of services and "use culturally appropriate procedures" (p. 8) in all facets of their work. Thus, it is incumbent upon professional

school counselors to promote culturally relevant and fair practices throughout the implementation of RTI and serve as an advocate for all students during this process.

Use RTI as a vehicle for better serving all students. Professional school counselors must view RTI as a mechanism for supporting their school counseling program in order to better serve all students. Like many educational professionals, it is understandable that professional school counselors see yet another mandate as an obstacle, rather than an opportunity. The authors postulate that professional school counselors can utilize this movement for the advantage of promoting their programs and for effectively servicing more students. By advocating that CDSCPs are an integral part of the RTI structure, stakeholders may come to view counseling services as more necessary and relevant to the mission of the school. Furthermore, professional school counselors would be wise to highlight their unique expertise in serving all students so as to have greater access and impact in students' lives. As is true with earlier educational reforms, it is in the best interest of the professional school counselor to move with the tide of transformation in meaningful and intentional ways rather than to form an adversarial relationship with its inevitable arrival.

Implications for Future Research

Given the increasing implementation of RTI nationwide, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of RTI models and interventions on students' academic achievement and behavior. The school counseling field itself would benefit from future research that specifically examines the role of the school counselor as it relates to RTI. While some initial research exists specific to school counselors (Ryan & Kaffenberger, 2011) much more is needed. Support for the connection between RTI and

school counseling programs could be strengthened by examining various models of RTI and how school counselors are involved, as well as how evidence-based counseling interventions support and align with known evidence-based academic and behavior strategies used to meet RTI goals.

Conclusion

Operating as both an integral RTI team member and a skilled interventionist, school counselors play a critical role in ensuring the success of RTI within the educational system. Professional school counselors' expertise in advocacy, leadership, counseling, collaboration and utilizing data for systemic change positions them as influential contributors to the RTI educational reform movement.

Comprehensive developmental school counseling programs and the tiered structure of RTI should be viewed as seamless, interconnected, processes that align with the mission of the school. It is incumbent upon professional school counselors to ensure that their counseling services are in concert with the RTI structure and that they are viewed as valuable contributors in the school. As more states institutionalize RTI, the time is upon the profession to establish its roles and responsibilities. Professional school counselors and directors of guidance must be proactive in asserting their expertise and creating their niche during this transformative period. Counselor Educators must also be vigilant about teaching new school counseling students how to connect their comprehensive developmental school counseling services with the RTI tiered structure. During this pivotal time of RTI development and implementation, the school counseling community must ensure that professional school counselors are not relegated to repeat their past history and become reactive; rather, we must respond

swiftly and effectively to the challenge at hand. The ability to do so will help to advance the school counselor as a central and indispensable professional within our rapidly changing educational system.

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Appendix

Case Study

Inspire High School (IHS), located in a large Midwestern urban district, recently adopted RTI as a means of supporting students' academic and behavioral development. In addition, the four IHS school counselors have been proactive in aligning their school counseling program within a CDSCP framework. Inspire High School is comprised of 900 students from predominately low income and minority backgrounds. Currently, grade-level Student Support Teams (SST), consisting of the grade level school counselor, a special educator, reading specialist, school psychologist, ELL teacher, parent liaison, general education teacher and an administrator meet monthly to monitor tiered academic and behavioral RTI interventions.

The 9th grade SST has been particularly concerned about Shanice Hanley, an IHS African American ninth grader. Shanice's single mother, Donna, recently lost her job with the local manufacturing plant, and struggles financially to support Shanice and her two brothers. No longer able to pay rent for their two-bedroom apartment, the family has moved several times in the last nine months and currently resides with friends. During this transitional period, Shanice's grades and attendance have decreased and her discipline referrals have increased. Her teachers report that she is often off-task during class, does not turn in assignments on time if at all, and generally has a "bad attitude" when working with classmates.

As part of the school-wide RTI and CDSCP implementation, Shanice participated in assemblies and school counselor-led guidance activities related to classroom expectations, school rules and evidence-based strategies designed to promote positive student behavior. While typically amenable to school-wide expectations during the first two months of school, Shanice's behavior started to shift soon after her mother lost her job. Shanice's teachers attempted to provide direct and immediate feedback to encourage and elicit appropriate behavior, but Shanice's noncompliant behavior continued, resulting in discipline referrals. Concurrent with Shanice's problematic social behavior, class test results indicated that she was

failing English. Further assessment conducted by her English teacher indicated a reading-based deficit causing difficulty with comprehension of her English assignments. In addition, Shanice often neglected to turn in homework assignments. Progress reports at the end of the first nine weeks indicated a steady decline in behavior and academic performance.

Utilizing benchmark data, teacher reports, and student discipline referral records, the SST employed tier two behavior and academic interventions. Specifically, after three discipline referrals, and at the suggestion of the school counselor, Shanice was referred to a girls' small group school counseling intervention already in place in the school counseling program. Along with eight of her peers, Shanice met once a week with the school counselor during lunch to focus on developing healthy coping strategies, conflict resolution skills and higher levels of self-esteem. Shanice also qualified for pullout instruction, where she met with an intervention specialist three times a week for twenty-five minutes to increase her reading abilities. The school counselor contacted Shanice's mother who was supportive of these efforts and agreed to encourage Shanice to attend and actively participate in the small group interventions.

After ten weeks of tier two interventions, progress monitoring data indicated that Shanice's reading were not advancing in a sufficient manner. Furthermore, the school counselor noted that her pre and post-test scores for the Phenomenal Women group demonstrated little improvement in conflict resolution skill development, and Shanice had received two additional discipline referrals during the quarter. In response, the SST met again to discuss the case and the school counselor agreed to contact Shanice's mother to inform her of a transition to a tier three intervention. The school counselor began meeting with Shanice individually on a weekly basis for solution-focused brief counseling sessions. To capitalize on Shanice's natural athletic ability and love for sports, the counselor referred Shanice to Girls in the Game, a local nonprofit agency designed to foster leadership opportunities through year-round fitness and nutritional programs. Shanice also received mentoring from a successful African American college student through the school counseling program's partnership with a local university.

Academically, Shanice received intensive reading instruction five days a week for forty minutes from the reading specialist. The reading specialist chose culturally relevant reading materials and engaged Shanice in evidence-based reading and writing practices. At the culmination of the quarter, academic assessments indicated increases in her reading skills. The school counselor helped to coordinate teacher reports, which corroborated Shanice's increased academic engagement and progress. Teachers also noted Shanice's interactions with peers had improved and no additional discipline referrals had been made. Both Shanice and her mother reported a positive change in Shanice's overall behavior and attitude. Based on Shanice's success both academically and behaviorally, the SST gradually reduced Shanice's academic supports, while the school counselor helped her to maintain her outside mentoring and community involvement. Shanice was clearly the benefactor of all systems (RTI and an ASCA aligned CDSCP) working seamlessly together.

Biographical Statements

Dr. Melissa S. Ockerman is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Program at DePaul University. Her research interests include school counselor leadership and effective school counseling interventions and training.

Dr. Erin Mason is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Program at DePaul University. Her research interests include leadership identity and development and comprehensive school counseling programs.

Dr. Amy Feiker Hollenbeck is an Assistant Professor in the Special Education Program at DePaul University. Her research interests include reading disabilities, comprehension instruction, Response to Intervention and collaborative professional development.