Using the Content Literacy Continuum as a Framework for Implementing RTI in Secondary Schools[1]

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The University of Kansas Center for Research in Learning has developed a Content Literacy Continuum [CLC] (Lenz & Ehren, 1999, Lenz, Ehren, & Deshler, 2005) to provide a framework for organizing school wide literacy efforts at middle, junior and high schools. The CLC involves five levels of literacy support that should be in place in every secondary school. The five different levels in this continuum offer a structure to conceptualize and implement a comprehensive initiative to make literacy a priority in secondary schools to meet the challenges of high literacy that **all** adolescents face in today's world. The CLC emphasizes the importance of infusing literacy instruction throughout the secondary school curriculum and of involving a host of secondary educators with different types of expertise to address the broad array of needs presented by adolescents.

CLC has been implemented in secondary schools since 1999. Its use predates the current movement in education toward a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. However, in considering the intent and structure of the CLC it is apparent that the framework dovetails nicely with the essential nature of the RTI framework. A few components of RTI may need amplification within a CLC context, but the structure works well as an RTI initiative. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the CLC as a framework for conceptualizing and implementing RTI at the secondary level – why it is a good fit, how levels and tiers relate, and what should be considered in moving forward with adopting the CLC as an RTI initiative.

UNDERSTANDING THE CLC AND RTI FRAMEWORKS

The Content Literacy Continuum

The CLC is a framework designed as a school wide approach to address the content literacy needs of students in middle, junior and high schools. Content literacy is defined as the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and strategies needed by students to learn in each of the academic disciplines. The CLC is a comprehensive approach to narrowing the achievement gaps experienced by many adolescents, often related to lack of literacy proficiency, while maintaining curriculum rigor for all students. It involves the packaging of research-validated literacy practices with tools of the Strategic Instruction Model (Deshler, et al., 2001) as anchors. It is organized around 5 levels of instruction/intervention that increase in intensity to be responsive to diverse student needs. Planning and adoption are rooted in school improvement processes and revolve around high quality professional development.

Level 1: Enhanced Content Instruction addresses the mastery of critical content in academic subjects for all students utilizing the listening, speaking, reading and writing access skills necessary to manipulate subject matter. Tools such as Content Enhancement Routines (Bulgren, Deshler, & Lenz, 2007), graphic organizers, prompted outlines, structured reviews, guided discussions and other instructional tactics are used at this level to organize and enhance the curriculum content in ways that promote its understanding and mastery by all students.

Level 2: Embedded Strategy Instruction focuses on student use of content literacy strategies to acquire, manipulate and demonstrate knowledge in specific subjects as an integrated part of course learning for all students. At this level, teachers incorporate instruction on selected reading and writing strategies into their classes. On an ongoing basis, while teaching subject matter material, teachers look for opportunities to teach students particular strategies that would help them manipulate the information being taught.

Level 3: Intensive Strategy Instruction is for those students who need more intensive strategy instruction to master independent use of content literacy strategies. Some students who struggle with literacy have great difficulty mastering literacy strategies within the classroom as presented in Level 2. The instructional conditions may not be conducive to their learning (that is, the large numbers of students, little time for individual feedback, limited opportunity to ask questions for clarification, etc.). In Level 3, Learning Strategies (Schumaker & Deshler, 2006) are taught within an explicit 8-stage instructional model (Ellis, et al., 1991) designed for and validated with struggling learners. This intensive instruction is usually provided by someone other than a subject matter teacher.

Level 4: Intensive Basic Skill Instruction targets foundational language and literacy skills that students (usually below the 4th grade reading level) must acquire to be successful learners. Students receiving instruction in Level 4 learn fundamental content literacy skills through specialized, direct, and intensive instruction in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Work in reading decoding and fluency, as well as basic comprehension skills are examples of targeted instruction at this level.

Level 5: Therapeutic Intervention involves intensive therapy in language underpinnings for those students whose language impairment thwarts learning. In Level 5 interventions, students with underlying language disorders learn the linguistic, metalinguistic, and metacognitive underpinnings they need to acquire the necessary content skills and strategies. Generally, at this level, speech-language pathologists deliver small-group, curriculum-relevant language therapy (Ehren, 2002) in collaboration with other support personnel teaching literacy. They also assist content teachers in making appropriate accommodations in content instruction for students to promote their success.

Response to Intervention

RTI has received widespread attention across the country from all educational sectors. Yet there is still some confusion about what it is. Essentially, RTI is the practice of (1) providing high quality instruction/intervention matched to student needs and (2) using learning rate over time and level of performance to (3) make important educational decisions (Kurns & Tilly, 2007). It is a multi-tiered approach to providing academic and behavioral supports to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity. The goal of RTI is to ensure that all students have access to high-quality instruction and that struggling learners are supported in meeting curriculum standards. According to the National Center on Response to Intervention (2008),

> Response to Intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities. (p. 1)

Many different iterations of RTI exist, including those that focus on literacy. The objective of all iterations is for students to receive what they need, when they need it. Although

the majority of research and development have occurred at the elementary level, efforts are increasing at the secondary level (Burns, 2008; Canter, Klotz, & Cowan, 2008; Duffy, 2007; Ehren, 2008; Johnson & Smith, 2008).

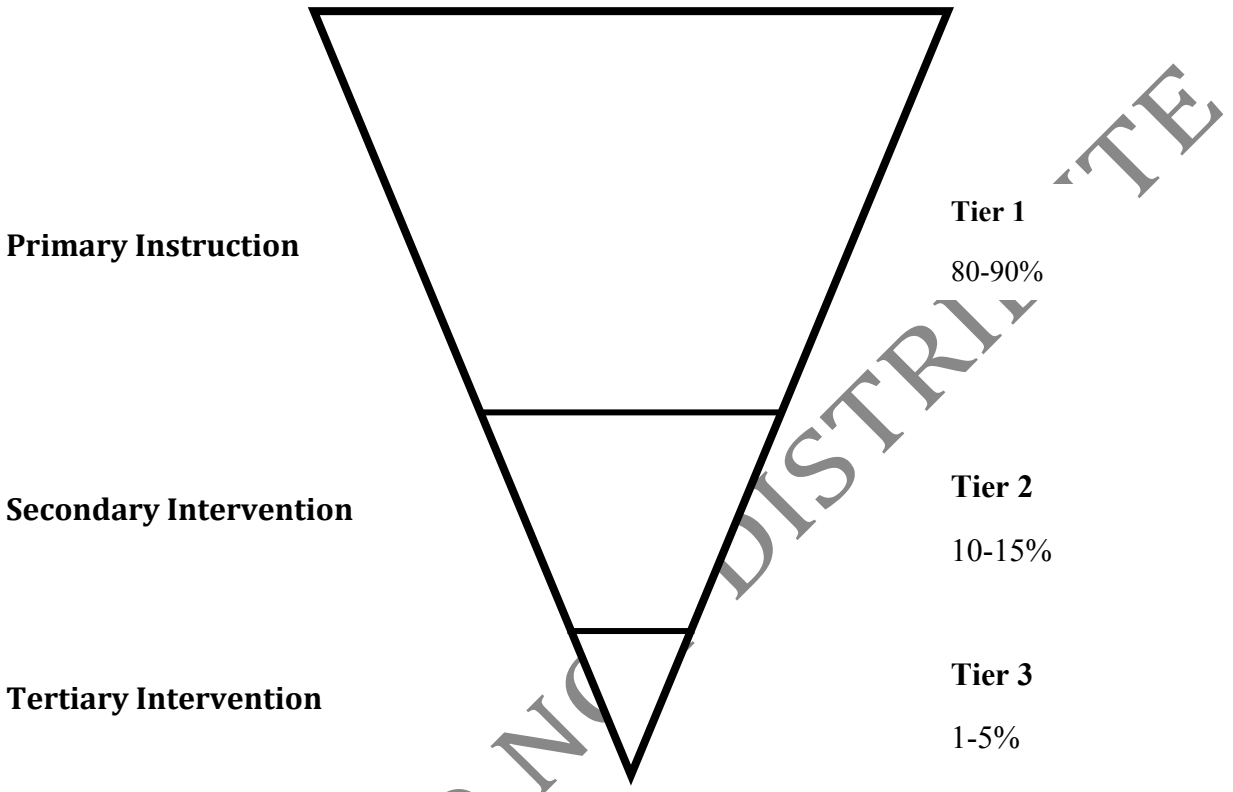
There are several essential components to RTI (Kurns & Tilly, 2007; NJCLD, 2005):

- High quality scientifically based core instruction.
- Universal screening to identify struggling learners who need additional support.
- Increasingly intensive instruction in a multi-tiered approach for struggling students.
- Frequent progress monitoring to examine student achievement and monitor the effectiveness of instruction and intervention.
- Databased decision-making regarding students' instructional needs based on multiple data points over time.

Some states and school districts do not use the term "RTI," although they have educational frameworks with the key features described above. Most RTI initiatives employ tiers, although they may not use that term. The term "tiers" refers to levels along a continuum of intensity for instruction and intervention. A typical configuration for RTI frameworks is a three-tiered structure even though processes and practices may differ from place to place. Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, and McKnight (2006) refer to primary, secondary and tertiary intervention within a three-tiered framework, while Ehren, Ehren and Proly (2009) use the same schema but refer to Tier 1 as "Primary Instruction" to highlight the importance of core instruction before intervention is even considered. In this framework, Tier 1 involves primary instruction for students in the general education classroom; Tier 2 includes secondary interventions, typically delivered in small groups for at-risk students; and Tier 3 focuses on individualized systems for students with intensive needs, including "specially designed instruction" in special education (Graner, Faggella-Luby & Fritschmann, 2005; Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

A common graphic to illustrate a three-tiered approach is the triangle. Ehren, et al. (2009) use an inverted version to highlight the importance of Tier 1 which should be the first tier to receive attention (see Figure 1).

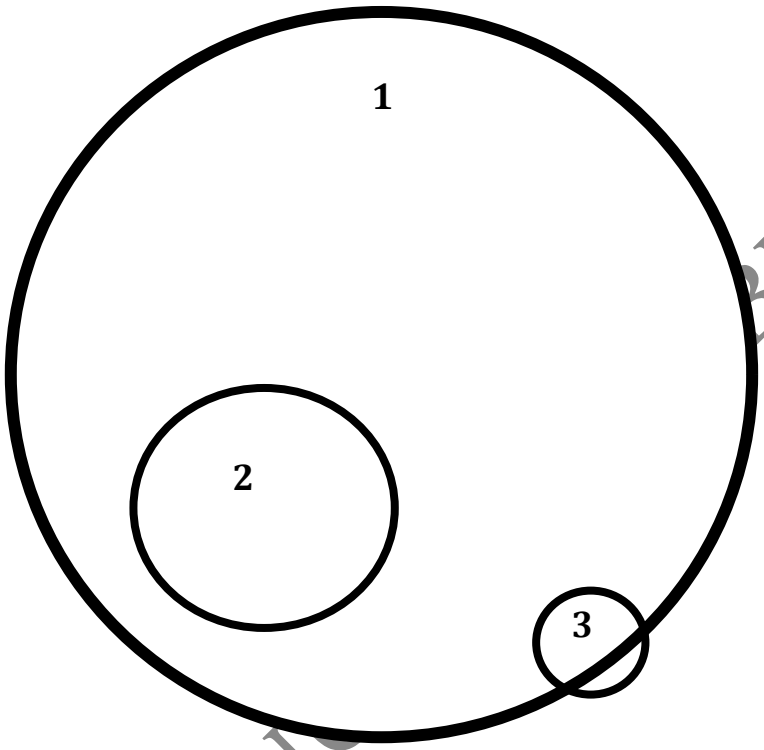
Figure 1. Inverted triangle to depict a three-tiered RTI framework



from Ehren, Ehren, & Proly (2009).

Although this graphic depicts a progression of intensity and the decreasing numbers of students who are addressed in the more intense tiers, Ehren et al. (2009) proffer another graphic (Figure 2) to show that RTI is not a linear process.

Figure 2. Alternative, non-linear depiction of a three-tiered RTI framework



from Ehren, Ehren, & Proly (2009).

The logic behind this graphic is as follows: Students do not drop out of Tier 1 when they move to Tier 2; students may not be participating in Tier 2 if they are in Tier 3; Tiers 2 and 3 take place within the context of Tier 1; Tier 1 does not end when Tiers 2 or 3 are initiated; a very small percentage of students in special education may not receive core instruction in general education (assuming that special education is considered as part of Tier 3).

CLC AND RTI - A GOOD FIT

Rationale

Secondary schools interested in embracing RTI as a school improvement framework may find the CLC to be a useful approach for several reasons:

- *The history of CLC implementation provides an experiential base for approaching a school wide literacy initiative within an RTI frame of reference.*
  Most RTI efforts have been directed toward elementary schools. As increasing numbers of secondary schools explore ways to operationalize RTI at that level, schools utilizing the CLC will be navigating charted waters. The CLC has a history at the secondary level.

The lessons learned about successful implementation over the years can be applied to adoption of a literacy focused RTI approach.

- *The literacy focus of the CLC helps schools respond to exigent needs in adolescent literacy.*
  RTI has many iterations, some literacy oriented, some more general problem solving in nature. The broad-based concern for the status of adolescent literacy in this country makes the CLC an attractive orientation for an RTI initiative. However, its use does not preclude the possibility of a more general problem-solving framework within which to operationalize the CLC.

- *Both the CLC and RTI share a focus on strong core instruction with opportunities for intervention when needed.*
  In any RTI framework, core academic instruction has to be differentiated and of high quality to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Further, opportunities must be present for increasingly intense interventions for students whose needs cannot solely be met within core instruction. The CLC is described in levels and RTI typically in tiers but the intent is the same. (See later section for the relationship of levels and tiers.)
  .
- *RTI rests upon the use of scientifically based practices in instruction and intervention that is foundational to the CLC.* The CLC employs research-validated tools from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning for Content Enhancement Routines and Learning Strategies for Levels 1, 2 and 3, along with other scientifically based tools at these levels. In Level 4 research based tools and practices from a variety of other sources are used. In Level 5 speech-language pathologists use evidence-based practices in language therapy with Content Enhancement Routines and Learning Strategies as a context.

- *RTI utilizes progress monitoring to target appropriate interventions*.
  Databased decision-making is central to CLC implementation at a school. "What kind of intervention does a student need? In what specific literacy areas? For how long? How intense does it need to be?" are all questions germane to deciding how to structure classes and support services in levels 3, 4 and 5 of the CLC.

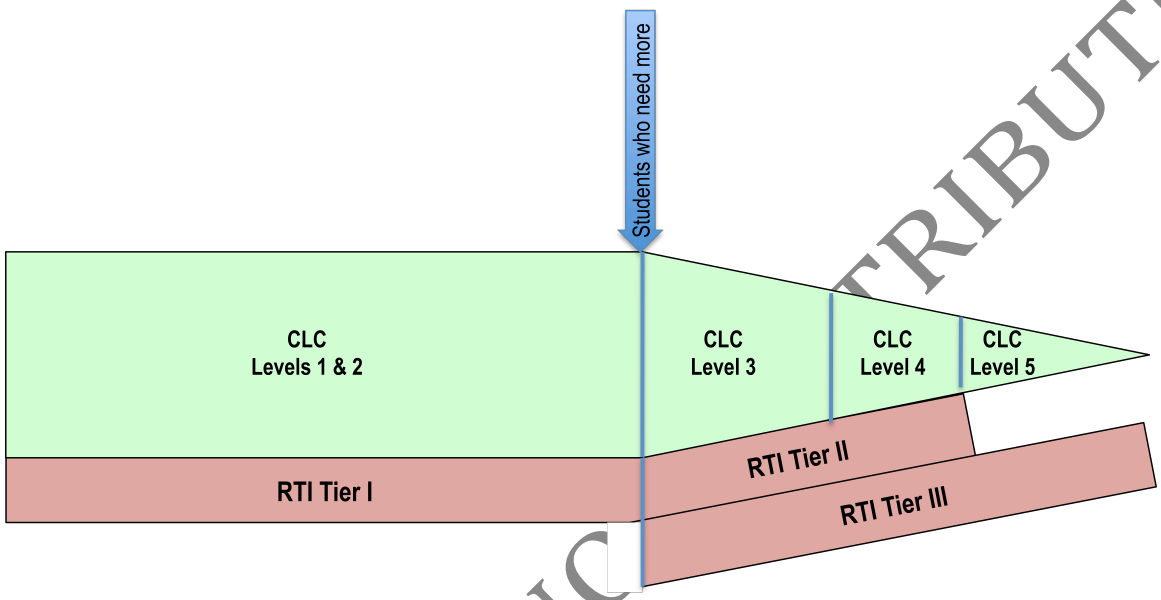
- *RTI interventions supplement universal instruction rather than supplant it*.
  Within the CLC framework, all students are involved in CLC Levels 1 and 2 which is where universal instruction takes place in RTI. For students who need more than the subject area teachers can provide, additional intervention is provided, usually by support personnel (e.g. reading teachers, special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, academic tutors) in levels 3, 4 and 5.

How CLC Levels Relate to RTI Tiers

Although CLC and RTI frameworks both involve increasingly intense instruction for students who struggle, it would be inaccurate to equate a CLC level with its corresponding numerical RTI tier. For example Level 2 is not the same as Tier II. In fact, Level 2 in CLC is

more of an additional layer of core instruction focused on teaching students how to learn. It does not involve intervention the way Tier II does within RTI. Whether Levels 3 and 4 are considered Tier II or Tier III depends on several factors, including the intensity, duration and degree of individualization of the intervention. Figure 3 depicts the relationship of CLC levels and RTI tiers.

Figure 3 – Relationship of CLC Levels and RTI Tiers



Another way to discuss the relationship is to position CLC levels within RTI tiers as in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Alternate view of relationships among CLC levels and RTI tiers

Primary Instruction (Tier I)
- CLC Level 1 - Enhanced Content Instruction
- CLC Level 2 - Embedded Strategy Instruction

Secondary Interventions (Tier II)
- CLC Level 3 - Intensive Strategy Instruction
  - (short term, less intense, may be standard treatment protocol)
- CLC Level 4 - Basic Skill Instruction
  - (short term, less intense, may be standard treatment protocol)

Tertiary Intervention (Tier III)
- CLC Level 3 - Intensive Strategy Instruction
  - (longer duration, more intense, more individualized)
- CLC Level 4 - Basic Skill Instruction
  - (longer duration, more intense, more individualized
- CLC Level 5 - Therapeutic Intervention
  - always "specialized instruction"

Both CLC Level 1 and Level 2 address content instruction in general education classes for all students. In Level 1 the concern is with mastery of content standards in academic areas such as science, social studies, math and language arts/English. In Level 1, teachers use instructional tools to focus instruction on critical content in a way that promotes manipulation of language processes to enhance content learning. Visual devices serve as anchors to explicate the relationships among ideas. Therefore, in Level 1, content instruction is enhanced for all students. Level 2 is an added layer of content area instruction in which teachers embed the strategy instruction needed to help students master the content. At this level, integrally delivered with Level 1 instruction, teachers teach students how to take responsibility for their own learning by activating strategies to help themselves access the content and demonstrate what they know. Within these levels instruction is differentiated insofar as feasible for secondary teachers to do within their responsibilities to meet content standards. RTI Tier I is universal core instruction and therefore encompasses both Levels 1 and 2 of the CLC.

In the CLC, Levels 3, 4, and 5 are for students who need more than the general classroom teacher can provide alone. Level 3 is Intensive Strategy Instruction for those students who need more than the Embedded Strategy Instruction they receive in Level 2. In Level 3 the instructional methodology differs from that in Level 2, although the strategies may be the same. The more intense version involves a specific research validated instructional sequence implemented with smaller groups of students. It most likely requires support personnel for delivery, because secondary content teachers would not have the time to provide this kind and intensity of instruction, given the demands of teaching their subject area. In RTI terms, CLC Level 3 could be either Tier II or Tier III, depending on its intensity, duration and the degree of individualization needed for student success. For example, if a student struggling with identifying multisyllabic words becomes part of a small group of students who receives 6 weeks of instruction in a Word Identification Strategy we would consider that as an RTI Tier II

intervention. Another student who is struggling in many areas of reading comprehension may need to take a semester (or year) long course where he learns a variety of reading comprehension strategies where a good deal of individualization will take place. We would consider that an RTI Tier III intervention. Assuming that a student needs ongoing intensive intervention, this practice may constitute "specialized instruction" that occurs in special education.

In Level 4 of the CLC, struggling students, usually those below a 4th grade reading level, receive the basic skill instruction they need in reading and writing as prerequisite to using strategies effectively in reading and writing. They may work on decoding, fluency, reading comprehension skills, spelling, vocabulary, writing composition or other language skills, including those in listening and speaking. If they have skill gaps that can be filled in small group instruction of limited duration, then we would think of this work as RTI Tier II work. On the other hand, students who need long-term intervention in basic skills, for example an intensive reading course, we would think of as receiving Tier III intervention.

Students with language impairment who need therapeutic intervention on the language underpinnings of listening, speaking, reading or writing would always be considered as receiving "specialized instruction" or related services in special education. This intervention would occur at Level 5 of the CLC. Some school districts would classify work in special education as part of RTI Tier III and some as Tier IV (See further discussion about The Role of Special Education below.)

An important note is that interventions in the CLC and RTI should not be bound by time or defined by location or personnel. Specifically, intervention may occur outside of the school day or school year (e.g. after school programs or summer programs employing Strategic Tutoring). Most importantly, intervention can be implemented in a variety of settings and by a host of personnel; for example: (1) Level 5 services can be provided by an SLP in a classroom; (2) special education teachers may provide Tier II, Level 3 support to students who do not have disabilities.

The Role of Special Education

Where do special education services fit into the scheme of things in RTI and CLC? Some confusion exists in this regard. In trying to emphasize the role of general and compensatory education within RTI, special education is frequently discussed outside the parameters of RTI, as in this example: "We try RTI and if that doesn't work we look to special education." This is an inaccurate characterization. RTI, like the CLC, involves a continuum of instruction/intervention with increasing intensity. Within that continuum, special education services play a role when students need specialized instruction or related services of greater intensity, duration and individualization than is provided in either general or compensatory education and students are eligible for those services under state and federal law. So, in an RTI framework, progress data gathered throughout a student's involvement in preliminary tiers provide information that becomes part of the comprehensive evaluation that must occur prior to a student's placement in special education. In essence then, special education is part of the continuum. Therefore, it would be more accurate to say, "Special education is our most intense option within our tiered framework of RTI." Of course, specific procedures, consistent with federal and state regulations must accompany the use of this option.

Within the CLC, Levels 3 and 4 may be implemented with special education services for students with disabilities (SWD). For example, Learning Strategies may be taught intensely by a special education teacher within a special class for SWD (Level 3). However, Levels 3 and 4

may also involve support for struggling students outside of special education. For example, a reading specialist may teach Learning Strategies to small groups of students without disabilities within a special reading class or as part of a Language Arts class in middle school (also Level 3).

An important note is that this discussion regarding special education has focused on the services provided, not the place in which they occur. Special education services can be provided in many different locations, including general education classes. Further, within RTI approaches, it is common for special education teachers to provide intervention in tiers other than those involving special education.

MOVING FORWARD WITH CLC AS RTI

For schools and school districts to move forward in adopting the CLC as an RTI initiative, several considerations are essential, including the unique characteristics of secondary schools, fully leveraging school-wide resources, building on the existing foundation, ensuring balanced strength within and across RTI tiers (or CLC levels), and amplifying specific CLC elements.

Unique Characteristics of Secondary Schools

Successfully implementing an RTI framework in middle or high school settings is, in part, influenced by the degree to which the unique characteristics of secondary schools are understood and taken into account by practitioners. Among other things secondary schools are different from their elementary counterparts in terms of mission, how they are organized, and the professional preparation and mindset of their teachers and administrators.

- Mission of secondary schools – Secondary schools require students to master increasingly large amounts of content as they progress from 6th through the 12th grades. The successful completion of a host of subject matter courses and the accumulation of required credit hours significantly impacts how instruction is organized, how time is spent, and how priorities are set in secondary schools. Obviously, the emphasis on subject matter mastery becomes more dominant as students progress from their early middle school years into high school – but regardless of the grade level, there is an unmistakable shift to a subject matter orientation. This shift assumes that once students enter middle or high school they possess the necessary skills and strategies to enable them to navigate the rigorous curriculum demands in subject matter courses.
- Definition of core instruction at the secondary level - As stated previously, literacy has been at the center of efforts at the elementary level to implement RTI. When Tier 1 and "core instruction" is discussed in elementary school literacy is at the heart of the concern for academic achievement, not necessarily to the exclusion of other areas, but with a decided emphasis especially on reading. However, when secondary educators think of core instruction they are likely to include math, science, social studies and language arts or English as essential. Perhaps in middle school in the context of language arts, content literacy is highlighted as part of the core, but in high school, English as a core subject is more about literature than literacy. Literacy is not typically thought of as part of the core of instruction in every subject area. Therefore, for the CLC to be conceptualized as a fitting implementation framework for RTI, secondary educators will have to redefine core instruction to include literacy as part of every academic subject.
- Organizational structure of secondary schools – The organizational structure of the vast majority of secondary schools is markedly different from how elementary schools are

structured and run. Most secondary schools are organized according to academic departments (e.g., history, science, mathematics, etc.) as opposed to grade level teams. While this structure facilitates collaboration among professionals in terms of subject matter issues, it is not conducive to conversations about student performance across content areas and teachers. This lack of opportunity for teachers to collaborate with colleagues from all subject matter areas greatly hinders the ability of teachers to coordinate their instruction across disciplines. A consequence of this is often a fragmented, uncoordinated instructional plan and learning experience for students. This is especially detrimental to those students who have not acquired the foundational skills and strategies and who need individualized attention.

- Professional preparation and role – Most secondary teachers receive their professional preparation primarily in a subject matter discipline. Relatively little or no attention is given to the acquisition of competencies in how to teach students who lack literacy competencies. As such, secondary teachers see their role as a being a subject matter expert whose primary responsibility is to ensure that their students will acquire the necessary information in a subject matter area so students are sufficiently prepared to succeed in subsequent courses in the content area and/or to prepare them with the necessary competencies to successfully pass end of course or state mandated examinations in the subject area. The professional preparation and their perceived role as educators can be potentially problematic when secondary subject matter teachers are expected to assume some of the responsibilities inherent in RTI systems (e.g., progress monitoring).
- Size of the achievement gap – The size of the achievement gap for many struggling adolescent learners is well documented. One of the great challenges in closing this gap is the shortness of instructional time available to teachers. Because of this, it is imperative that the instruction that is provided to these at-risk learners be exceedingly well designed and delivered. One of the most significant things that can be done to ensure the greatest return on instructional investments is to carefully monitor the quality of instruction provided to struggling learners. All successful RTI systems have in place procedures to monitor the fidelity with which evidence-based practices are implemented. In the absence of doing periodic fidelity checks, instructional practices may drift away from preferred protocols and, in turn, have less chance of helping students make the kinds of gains that are needed to close the achievement gap.

These defining attributes of secondary schools can directly or indirectly impact how successfully CLC or any other RTI-like framework can be implemented in secondary schools. Certainly, none of these factors presents an insurmountable barrier to the successful implementation of tiered intervention systems. However, each must be carefully considered when administrators and teachers are evaluating whether or not to adopt and/or implement an RTI approach. Because of these unique characteristics of secondary schools, care will be required to put in place measures that will allow the full benefits of an RTI approach, like CLC, to be fully realized.

Fully Leveraging School-wide Resources

Most secondary schools have a broad array of people, programs, and practices designed to support students and to ensure their successful adjustment to and academic success in school. When RTI systems like the CLC are conceptualized for secondary schools, it is important to carefully inventory all of the people, programs, and practices that can be tapped as a part of an overall tiered system of supports. In short, RTI supports should be seen as consisting of *not only* direct instruction in classrooms with evidence-based practices *but also* other assets within the

school or district. Some of the *people* with special expertise that can be tapped include: instructional coaches, counselors, social workers, speech-language pathologists, school librarians, and community volunteers. Among the *practices* that can be used to advantage are double programming (i.e., two periods of English or math that are designed to assist students who need extra instruction to overcome skill deficits), common assessments, rapid-response interventions for at-risk students (i.e., when at-risk students move into a secondary school, their academic and behavioral performance is carefully monitored – interventions are done at the first sign of difficulty to minimize failure and optimize chances of success), and carefully designed transition planning that enables students to move with an important array of supports in place when students move from elementary into middle/junior high school or from middle/junior high school into high school. Among the *programs* that can be leveraged to buoy student performance are: before- and after-school and summer tutoring programs, positive behavioral support programs, peer tutoring programs, home-work support programs, online academic programs to supplement face-to-face classes (e.g., AVID), guided study halls, and support group programs (e.g., those that assist teen in dealing with peer and other pressures encountered in secondary schools).

In short, the CLC provides a potentially powerful framework for organizing and coordinating the array of resources, services, and personnel who can be tapped to enhance the successful performance of students. When RTI is conceptualized to include more than academic interventions it has the potential of facilitating discussions and planning among professionals who, in the past, have lacked a mechanism (or reason) to bring them together. The benefits that can accrue to students (especially those at-risk for academic failure) by viewing all resources, services, and expertise in a school within a single framework are obvious.

Building on the Existing Foundation

Schools wishing to embrace CLC as an RTI initiative may be overwhelmed by the prospect if they approach the process as a brand new "thing." It is more helpful, and in fact more accurate to conceptualize CLC/RTI as a framework for integrating the good things they are already doing to meet students' needs and for guiding improvement efforts (Ehren et al., 2009). Looking at the effective educational practices employed at the school and the productive beliefs upon which the educational approach is based helps set the stage for moving forward with the CLC as an RTI approach. Ehren et al. (2009) identified eight practices and eight beliefs that provide a foundation on which to build an RTI framework.

<u>Practices</u>

1. *Teachers use sound instruction.*
2. *Fidelity of scientifically based methods is ensured.*
3. *Options are offered to meet learning needs.*
4. *A committee or team coordinates supports.*
5. *A data management system exists.*
6. *Data are used to inform instruction and service delivery.*
7. *Teachers, support personnel and administrators work together to meet the learning needs of all students.*
8. *Teachers and administrators participate in going professional development*

Beliefs

1. *All students can learn.*
2. *One size does not fit all in learning.*
3. *Waiting for students to fail is not a good approach.*
4. *Research has value in guiding education.*
5. *Assessment is crucial to instruction.*
6. *Education is a partnership.*
7. *There is no quick fix.*
8. *The system will change only if I change.*

Ensuring Balanced Strength Within and Across RTI Tiers (or CLC Levels)

The common adage "A chain is only as strong as its weakest link" is a potentially useful metaphor when thinking about a tiered intervention system like CLC within a school. In short, if every tier of an RTI system is not solidly conceptualized and implemented with integrity, the system will not realize its full potential to help all students and it may, indeed, ultimately collapse. If a tiered intervention system is graphically represented by links of a chain with each link of the chain representing an instructional tier or level, we can see how the metaphor can be applied by considering three separate scenarios.

Scenario 1: In this scenario, instructional programming is characterized by general education teachers readily "referring students out" of their classes to support services (e.g., special education, Title 1, supplemental reading programs) as a primary means of dealing with academic or behavioral problems. Thus, in this scenario, when limited efforts are made to meet the needs of struggling students within the general education classroom, there tends to be an overreliance on support education services. This overreliance may cause the number of students served by support education (in this case, depicted by the third link in the chain) to grow and for those services to become "oversubscribed" (This scenario is depicted in Figure 5 with the larger sized or stronger link in Tier III and the smaller or weaker links in Tiers I and II). However, overtime, the quality or effectiveness of services provided in Tier III will likely become compromised (because of growing teacher/student ratios, burned out teachers, etc.) and the overall system will begin to fail. Thus, what was at one time a strength (i.e., high quality services in Tier III) becomes weakened; additionally, because teachers in the lower Tiers I and II never built their capacity to provide more intensive and/or individualized instruction to struggling students, all tiers under this scenario gravitate to a state of overall low quality services in which all links of the chain are relatively weak (Figure 5a)

FIGURE 5

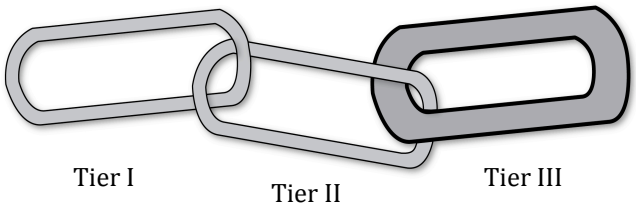
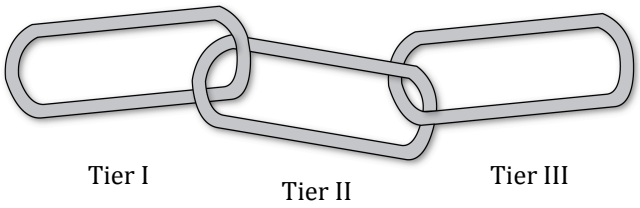


FIGURE 5 a



Scenario 2: In this scenario, instructional programming is characterized by general education teachers assuming major responsibility for meeting the needs of struggling learners within their classes. In some instances, these schools/teachers philosophically believe that the primary source of instructional intervention should be designed and provided within the context of the general education classroom. Thus, because limited efforts are made to meet the needs of struggling students with professionals or services outside of the general education classroom, Tier III services may be marginalized or seen as not being central to the overall instructional program in the school. In short, there may be an overreliance on the skills and capacity of the general education teacher to meet nearly all of the instructional needs of students who are struggling. Just like in the first scenario, an overreliance may cause the number of students and complexity of the problems presented by those students to overtax or exceed the skills and wherewithal of the general education teacher to adequately meet all of their needs. This scenario is depicted in Figure 6 with the larger sized or stronger links shown in Tiers I and II and the smaller or weaker link in Tier III. However, overtime, the quality or effectiveness of instruction provided in Tiers I and II by the general education teacher may become compromised (because of growing teacher/student ratios, increased complexity of student needs that exceed teacher skills, burned out teachers, etc.) and the overall system will begin to lose effectiveness and may ultimately fail. Thus, what was at one time an area of strength (i.e., high quality, differentiated instruction in Tiers I and II) becomes weakened; additionally, because Tier III was somewhat marginalized or undersubscribed, its role was not defined and operationalized as being central to the goal of improving academic outcomes for all students, its capacity was not developed. Over time, there is a risk that all tiers will become weakened and ineffective in providing effective, differentiated instruction to students by teachers with varying skill sets (see Figure 6a).

FIGURE 6

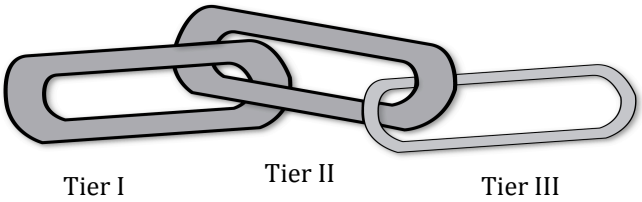
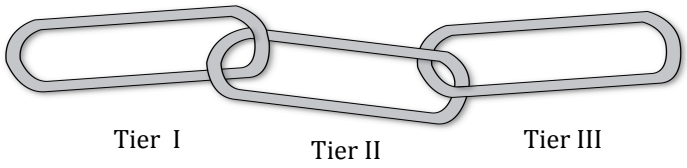
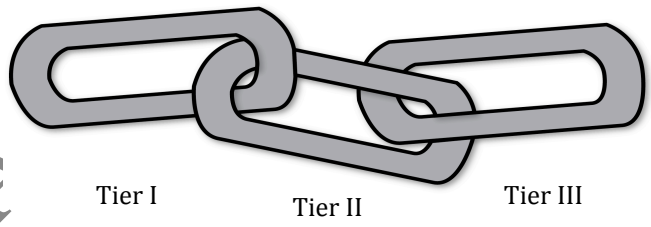


FIGURE 6a



Scenario 3: In this, the ideal scenario, there is recognition that each tier or level in an RTI system (like the CLC) represents a vitally important and unique component of instructional options for students. Each tier is differentiated from the other tiers by (1) what is taught; (2) how instruction is provided; and (3) the role that the teacher plays. Additionally, specific steps are taken to ensure close collaboration across the tiers (or levels). Unless steps are taken to ensure coordination across the tiers (or levels), it is likely that a system of silos will evolve in which the planning and instruction deal only with what is occurring within one level of instruction without attention being given to the larger picture and how all components of the system can be effectively leveraged to improve student achievement. Because of the diverse and complex needs of students, an effective RTI system like CLC requires distinctly unique instruction or intervention at each tier. The skill sets of the teachers are, by definition, also unique and important to the overall effectiveness of the system. If one component fails to do its part, it puts undue pressure and burden on the other tiers. This eventually leads to overtaxing and breakdown in the system. In short, CLC like a successful RTI program requires integrity within and across each of the tiers. Each needs to a strong link in the chain in order for the overall chain (or RTI system) to be strong (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7



Like any improvement effort in education, it is unrealistic to think that a full-blown CLC framework can be put in place over night. Our experience tells us that successful implementation of CLC, takes time. Plans should be made to phase in different instructional levels over several years. There is not necessarily a best place to begin when establishing a tiered intervention framework. Some schools choose to build on an area of strength as a point of departure; whereas, others choose to focus on an area of greatest need. For example, if a school has a well-established supplemental reading program in place that might serve as an anchor for level 3 services, a logical expansion strategy might be to focus on ways to bridge the specific reading

strategies taught in level 3 into instruction that is being done in the general education classroom. By doing so, the successful transfer and application of those strategies in subject matter materials will be facilitated. On the other hand, if a school is especially concerned about the poor performance of some of its subgroups in meeting AYP and that opportunities for these students to receive explicit, intensive instruction are lacking (hence, a weakness), it may choose, as a point of departure, to focus its energies on building or bolstering intensive, clinical-type instructional options for students.

Amplifying Specific CLC Elements

As described earlier in this paper, there is a great deal of congruence between the structure and operation of most RTI systems and the CLC framework. There are, however, some areas in the existing CLC framework that require additional development or amplification to make it a fully functioning RTI system. Four areas are highlighted below:

- Universal screening – Although the CLC has consistently included processes to identify students with reading difficulties, screening for a wider range of literacy problems, including writing, has been more problematic. In a comprehensive approach to literacy as it relates to improved academic achievement, all important literacy areas will have to be addressed. Further, screening for more general behavioral problems that may affect literacy performance, among other areas, may be important to consider.

- Progress monitoring – One of the hallmarks of any RTI system is the presence of effective progress monitoring protocols. Given the breadth of subject matter courses that must be considered and the great variance in academic performance among adolescents, an array of progress monitoring tools needs to be developed for practitioners. While some of these measures exist for the CLC, additional ones need to be developed and field-tested.

- Decision-making teams – Another hallmark of any effective RTI system is the operation of well functioning decision-making teams. Among the functions performed by these teams are the following: (a) review of student data, (b) targeting areas of instructional focus, (c) directing staff development efforts to improve instructional effectiveness of teachers working at different levels of the continuum, (d) recommending instructional intervention targets, (e) reviewing effects of implementing new interventions, (f) reviewing data on individual students and recommending instructional solutions. The work of decision-making teams in RTI systems at the elementary level has been become quite sophisticated during the past decade. While there are similarities in how these teams can operate in secondary settings, some of the unique features of secondary schools (e.g., the departmental rather than grade level focus, the scheduling complexities of large secondary schools to build team meetings into the schedule, etc.) will necessitate some modifications in the ways these teams are structured and function within the context of secondary schools.

- Fluidity of movement between and among tiers – Successful RTI systems provide fluid movement between instructional tiers. That is, students can readily move from Tier I instruction to Tier II and so on. This movement occurs when student progress and academic need calls for a different instructional focus. In many elementary applications of RTI systems, fluid

movement from one tier to the next (forward or backward) has been clearly demonstrated. Achieving fluid movement in secondary schools is significantly more challenging because of the period structure (that is, students have a different teacher every period of the day unlike elementary school where students typically have one teacher) and students typically change teachers and classes at the end of semesters only. Achieving sufficient flexibility in grades 6 through 12 so students can move with ease from one tier (or level) of instruction to another in a seamless manner will require creative planning and strong leadership. This fluid movement only happens when teachers and administrators have a clear understanding of how important it is for students to move from one tier (or level) to another *and* there are structures in place to support fluid movement (e.g., an active literacy leadership team that frequently monitors student performance on key skill/strategy indicators and makes placement decisions accordingly). Other structures/mechanisms that facilitate fluid movement are protocols for observing, analyzing, dialoguing about, students and the instruction that they need. Finally, in a growing number of secondary schools, speech language pathologists (SLPs) have been very effective in facilitating communication of professionals across levels in the CLC. SLPs have used their expertise in language to help teachers at all CLC levels to view instruction through a "language lens" thus creating a common denominator for making instructional decisions about students. Through this process, SLPs can orchestrate the transition of students across levels.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this paper was to discuss the CLC as a framework for conceptualizing and implementing RTI at the secondary level. Our experiences with secondary schools implementing CLC and with others seeking to put an RTI system in place have prompted the articulation of the link between the two constructs. After careful analysis, it is our belief that the CLC offers an excellent RTI implementation framework to secondary schools interested in addressing literacy in the context of improved academic achievement as a school wide effort. It is also important to note that other school improvement targets, for example behavioral issues, need not be abandoned in the adoption of the CLC and that CLC implementation can be accomplished within a general problem solving approach to RTI. However, as discussed in this paper, a few components may need amplification for the CLC to become a comprehensive RTI system: Universal screening will have to address all the important aspects of literacy, including writing; schools will have to develop a broader approach to progress monitoring; they will have to pay closer attention to the scope and function of decision-making teams; although fluid movement across levels has always been an important component of the CLC, for RTI to work, greater attention to this aspect is needed.

As with any school wide initiative, utilizing the CLC as an RTI framework requires sustained effort over time. It will not happen overnight. The adoption process for the CLC, already developed, provides a concrete structure with a track record for middle, junior and high schools wishing to engage in RTI.

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