

TOPICAL BRIEF 2

Scientific Research-Based Interventions

Connecticut's Framework for Response to Intervention

COMMUNICATION AND SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS IN CONNECTICUT'S SRBI PROCESS



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This topical brief is the second in a series designed to clarify and assist the work that Connecticut educators are presently engaged in while implementing Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI). The term SRBI was adopted by the Connecticut State Department of Education in August 2008 (*Connecticut's Framework For Response to Intervention*) and is synonymous with the term Response to Intervention (RTI). Response to Intervention (RTI) is a term used nationally to describe the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student needs, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying data to inform educational decisions (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2008). The purpose of RTI or SRBI is, of course, to ensure that all students learn and acquire the behavioral and academic competencies that they will need to be successful in our schools and in society.

Throughout the SRBI trainings, numerous questions have been raised regarding specific aspects of implementation. The focus of this particular brief is on the role of school-family partnerships in the SRBI process. The terms parent or family may be used interchangeably and are intended to mean a natural, adoptive or foster parent, or other adult serving as a parent, such as a close relative, legal or educational guardian and/or a community or agency advocate (Connecticut State Board of Education Position Statement on School-Family-Community Partnerships for Student Success, 2009).

First, let's answer the most basic question: why do we need to partner with parents in the SRBI process? Thirty years of research clearly demonstrates the significant benefits of a well-planned partnership among families, school and community members for everyone involved. No matter what their incomes or background, students with involved families tend to have higher grades and test scores, better attendance, and higher rates of homework completion. They enroll in more challenging classes, have better social skills and behavior, and are more likely to graduate and go on to college. Families engaged in partnerships become more supportive of teachers, more confident in helping their children to learn and are more likely to continue their own education. Finally, teachers report higher staff morale and greater job satisfaction (Connecticut State Board of Education Position Statement on School-Family-Community Partnerships for Student Success, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009).

As a result of the unequivocal research results, education law now requires districts to develop partnerships with parents in the education of children. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind), for example, states that families are "full partners" in their child's education, and must be "meaningful participants" in the educational process. Schools that receive Title I funds must develop a written school-parent policy, including a written compact agreement that outlines the shared responsibility for improved academic achievement. These requirements require a subtle, but critical shift in the thinking and actions among school personnel and families, **moving from the concept of parent involvement to the concept of real school-parent partnerships**. The Connecticut State Department of Education has clearly defined the roles and responsibilities of all members in such a partnership in the Policy Guidance for Position Statement on School-Family-Community Partnerships for Student

Success (November 2009), which can be accessed on the web at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/LIB/sde/pdf/board/SFCPPolicyGuidance.pdf>.

Now that we have established the rationale for school-family partnerships, let's get back to the more specific question as to how to integrate the partnerships into the SRBI process. When people first receive training and information about SRBI, a frequent reaction is, "Oh no, another new initiative!" It may be more helpful to conceptualize SRBI, not as something new, but more as a comprehensive system to ensure successful student learning and an opportunity to refine and improve much of what districts are already doing.

TIER I

The first tier of this comprehensive system, Tier 1, refers to the general education core curriculum and instruction (including differentiation), the overall school climate, and the system of school wide social-emotional learning and behavioral supports for all students, including special education and English language learners in the general education classroom. Tier I is basically everything you do for all students and families in the district. With regard to school-family partnerships, the Connecticut State Board of Education recommends that schools and districts develop a comprehensive approach to building school-family partnerships that address six state standards: 1) parent education, 2) communicating and creating a welcoming climate, 3) volunteering, 4) supporting learning at home, 5) decision-making and advocacy, and, 6) collaborating with the community (Position Statement on School-Family-Community Partnerships for Student Success, November, 2009). The work to create this partnership should be considered an essential part of the work of SRBI in Tier I, and will undoubtedly have a significant impact on how successful you are in improving student outcomes in Tiers 2 and 3.

As districts, schools and teachers communicate with parents at the Tier I level, certain basic messages need to be conveyed repeatedly in multiple modes (e.g., verbally, in writing, in web communications, and perhaps most important through adult actions). All of these messages will form the foundation of parent relationships in the SRBI process. Parents need to know that education is viewed as a shared responsibility, that families are considered equal partners, and that students achieve more when families and schools work together. A caring, culturally responsive environment needs to be established as these messages are being conveyed to ensure that they are understood by all families. For example, communications need to be conducted in the language(s) of the family, and in some instances volunteers may be needed to translate and to identify potential areas of cultural conflict or confusion. Finally, all families must have an easily accessible, identified vehicle of communication so that they can ask questions, express concerns and share ideas ensuring a true two-way communication.

It is also at the Tier I level that the district, the school and teachers have a responsibility to familiarize parents and community members with the key components of the SRBI process. Multiple sources such as district Web sites, district and school publications and letters, Open Houses, family compact agreements, and parent-teacher meetings all can and should be used for this purpose. Some districts have already put an SRBI system in place, or at least many of the

components, and would prefer not to introduce a new term to the parent community. It does not matter what you call it as long as the essential components are in place and the appropriate work is being done. However, it is important to know that many parent organizations are providing parent information and parent training in RTI and SRBI (e.g., SRBI A Family Guide by CT Parent Information and Resource Center www.ctpirc.org). Consequently, the district may have parents who will use those terms and come to meetings with expectations that the district is implementing the process. It would be advisable for administrators and teachers to be familiar with the terms RTI and SRBI and have a comprehensive understanding of the parallels to the district's system in order to respond knowledgeably to parent questions and or concerns.

The "big ideas" that should be communicated to parents regarding SRBI are:

- All students will be provided with a high-quality core curriculum and a positive and safe school climate
- Students will be assessed on a regular basis to monitor the teaching and learning process.
- Some of the assessments will be formal district-wide tests; others will be developed by classroom teachers to provide more frequent and specific feedback on student learning.
- The results from these assessments will be reviewed by grade level or content level teams of teachers to help them select the most effective and high quality instructional materials and strategies.
- The information from the assessments will also be used to provide specific interventions matched to individual student needs, when needed.
- Parents will be kept informed of their child's progress and will be an active participant in the teaching learning process

If there are aspects of the process that are new to staff, there is no shame in sharing this with families and explaining that they will be working and learning together to ensure their children's academic and social success.

In addition to the "big ideas," there are a variety of more specific pieces of information that may be helpful for parents to know so that they can more fully understand the school's teaching learning process and its relationship to SRBI. For example, it might be helpful to let parents know that their children may not always be doing the exact same thing at the exact same time as their neighbor's child in the same class (differentiation). If their child is struggling with a specific concept, or skill the child will receive additional short-term assistance in small groups (flexible grouping). If their child continues to struggle with academic or behavioral challenges, other small group and/or individual interventions will be provided and the progress will be carefully monitored (Tiers 2 and 3). These interventions may be provided by specialists other

than their child's teacher (e.g., reading specialists, teachers of English language learners, school counselors, school psychologists, speech and language specialists and/or special education teachers), however the interventions are part of the regular education system provided to all students, regardless of which specialist provides the services. Parents are likely to appreciate knowing that they will be kept informed of their child's progress through various kinds of communications (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, report card, notes home), and that they will be encouraged to actively participate in a team problem-solving process to identify interventions that will be most effective given their child's particular strengths and needs.

What you most want parents to understand is that the SRBI process ensures that their child will have a continuum of academic and behavioral supports available to them when they need them. For the majority of children, these interventions are short-term and will not be continued once the child's learning has been accelerated. The ultimate goal is for SRBI to become a transparent part of the cultural norm with no surprises. If a strong, trusting relationship between school personnel and family is established at the Tier 1 level, the school will essentially have "deposits in the bank" to draw upon if more specialized communication is necessary to address student achievement and/or behavior challenges at Tiers 2 and 3.

TIERS 2 and 3

Tiers 2 and 3 are obviously the newest part of the process for parents and for many teachers. While the frequency and intensity of the collaboration between school and parents increase at these levels, it is important to remember that the characteristics of good communication established in Tier 1 are a constant. Such communication is characterized by creating authentic two-way communication; using plain language; focusing on strengths; remaining positive, upbeat and success oriented; building on families' desires for their children to succeed; and, perhaps most important, recognizing the invaluable funds of knowledge that families can bring to the school.

This last point is a critical one. In the past, we educators have often assumed that we know best what should be done for a struggling student, and have conveyed that information to parents expecting agreement. Obviously, we do have considerable expertise and we should not hesitate to bring that expertise to the table. However, parents, too, have a depth of knowledge about their child, their family culture and their community that we are often not privy to. Encouraging parents to share their knowledge and perceptions can be invaluable when developing plans of actions, and can ensure parents as partners in the process. The potential impact of establishing this kind of communication on a child's progress at Tiers 2 and 3 cannot be underestimated. It does, however raise some procedural questions. While we will attempt to answer some of the most frequent questions that have arisen in trainings, it is important to remember that all situations are different and professional judgment will need to be exercised.

Do parents need to be notified of every meeting and attend each of these meetings?

Remember that we have been talking about parents as partners! While formal notification is not required when a child enters Tiers 2 or 3, parents cannot contribute to the process if they do

not know it is happening. If parents have had an understanding of the SRBI process and have been kept informed of their own child's progress, starting new interventions at these levels will not come as a surprise. Parents do not have to attend every meeting, and, in fact, many would probably find it a very burdensome requirement. It is suggested, however, that parents be included in the early meetings of Tiers 2 and 3 so that they can be a part of the planning process and, when appropriate, participate in implementing strategies at home that will reinforce the in-school plan. Parents should leave these meetings with a clear understanding of their role and the school's role in the intervention plan, the kind of data that will be collected to determine progress, the frequency of the data collection, how the progress will be communicated to the parent, and an agreement as to how the team will know if the plan is effective (i.e., what is the anticipated rate of progress as a result of the planned intervention). It would be helpful to designate a particular person on the team to act as a communication liaison between the parent and the team as the plan is implemented and adjustments are made. Good practice would suggest that a follow-up meeting with the parent be planned, with the knowledge that the meeting could be cancelled by mutual agreement if the intervention is successful and sufficient progress is made. The time between these meetings with parents present will vary depending on the parent, the team and the intensity of the student problem.

What if parents do not agree with the school's intervention recommendations? Again, remember this is a partnership. It is critical to listen to the parent and to try to understand the parent's reservations and/or alternative suggestions. Sometimes the parents may have alternative suggestions that have not occurred to the school team. If these ideas can be integrated with the school team ideas, a partnership will have been formed. At other times, if feasible, it may be wise for the school team to start the process with an intervention that is comfortable for the parent, even if the school would like to do something different. It is ultimately the data that will let everyone know whether the intervention is working. If the parent's ideas work, all the better. If not, working together will give time for the parent and the team to develop a more trusting relationship and, hopefully, each will become more receptive to the other's ideas, beliefs and opinions for future planning.

Is parent permission needed? There is no legal requirement for parent permission in order to implement interventions in regular education. Nevertheless, everything that was stated above also applies to this question. Clearly, any intervention plan has a higher likelihood of success when it has the full support of the parent

What if parents want to skip Tiers 2 and 3 and move directly to an evaluation for eligibility for special education services? Federal regulations allow a parent to request an evaluation at any time (34 CFR §300.301[b]). Once a request has been made, a planning and placement team (PPT) meeting must be convened to discuss whether an evaluation should be conducted. If the school personnel who comprise the PPT agree with the parent that the child may be a child who is eligible for special education services, the district must evaluate the child. If the PPT does not agree that an evaluation is appropriate, it must issue what is called a prior written notice (34 CFR §300.503[a][2]). The district's special education staff should be familiar with the processes required to respond to the request. The parent always has the right to challenge the

decision by requesting a due process hearing to resolve the dispute regarding the child's need for an evaluation.

Obviously, the chances for such a dispute to arise are greatly diminished if an effective school-parent partnership has been established and the parents have a comprehensive understanding of SRBI. It is important to remember that parents frequently make such a request because they believe that the only way for their children to receive high quality interventions designed specifically for their child's needs is through special education. In the past, this was often true. In many districts throughout the United States, students have had to fail for long periods of time before they could receive services.

When parents request evaluations prematurely, it may be helpful to explain just how different the SRBI approach is from previous educational practices. It would also be helpful to explain to parents that the information collected through the SRBI process will provide critical information to the PPT if their child does not make the expected rate of progress. The data collected may become part, or all, of the evaluation for special education eligibility, depending upon the PPT's determination. Furthermore, if the child is determined to be eligible for special education, the data collected from SRBI will be invaluable in the development of an individualized education program (IEP). As parents become engaged in a team process that focuses on their child's learning, the development of interventions, the sharing of progress monitoring data and the participation in collaborative decision making, it is likely that they will understand why moving directly to a PPT to request an evaluation is not the best course of action.

Do we really have to involve parents in the SRBI process at the secondary level too? Even though it may be more challenging to get parents involved in a collaborative process such as SRBI at the secondary level, research strongly suggests that personal contact and parent outreach can have a significant impact on student success at this level as well (Simon, 2009). So the response to the question is a resounding yes! It is just as important to engage parents in effective partnerships at the secondary level as it is at the elementary and middle school level. In fact, students, too, should be included in the team meetings at the middle and secondary levels (and at the elementary level, as appropriate), as the more ownership and responsibility students take for their own learning and behavior, the more likely the interventions will be effective.

How do we involve families who do not speak English in the SRBI process? Reaching out to families who are just learning English is yet another challenge in the SRBI process. It is helpful if the district and schools develop an identified process to mobilize resources for families who are English language learners. For example, all forms and informational literature should be translated if at all possible; cultural or language liaisons (e.g., ELL teachers, community volunteers, bilingual relatives or siblings) should be identified to help establish trust and explain the process and concerns of both parents and school personnel; and when possible, such liaisons should assist school personnel in obtaining relevant educational, cultural and social history information which might help inform the decision-making process.

Summary

In spite of the increased emphasis on the importance of family involvement and school-family partnerships, realizing the kind of partnership we have been discussing is a rarity in educational practice. The barriers are many and have been discussed extensively elsewhere in the professional literature. Nevertheless, we know, without a doubt, that an effective partnership can have a significant impact on a child's academic success. SRBI offers a new and structured opportunity for shared accountability, for parents and school personnel to work together to establish measurable goals, to use data to monitor progress, and to determine what works for each individual student. Establishing a real partnership will take time, patience and a willingness to be open to new learning.

It is hoped that SRBI will be embraced by both school personnel and parents as an opportunity to make a substantial change in a child's learning when needed. Clearly additional questions will arise as schools and parents become increasingly experienced, sophisticated and proficient in their implementation of SRBI. Most often, there will not be one "right answer" to these questions, as resolutions are often situation specific and there may be many paths to the same goal. Ideally, as productive and meaningful school-parent partnerships are established, the teams themselves will generate responses and effective solutions to the questions through the collaborative problem-solving process they have established. Additional school-family partnership resources can be found on the Connecticut State Department of Education Web site at <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2678&q=320732&sdePNavCtr=|45493|#45544>.

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