RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION: THE PRINCIPALS’ ROLE IN
MANAGING, IMPLEMENTING, AND EVALUATING THIS
EDUCATIONAL REFORM FOR STUDENTS IN NEED

BRIAN E. CULOT

BA, University at Buffalo, 1993
MA, Loyola Marymount University, 1994
MS, Baruch College, 1999

Mentor
Bruce S. Cooper, PhD

Reader
Gerald Cattaro, EdD

DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION OF FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK

2011
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my former colleagues in Manhattan, NY, especially Ms. Daria Rigney, Superintendent; Dr. Mara Koetke, Elementary School Principal; Dr. Aimee Terosky, Elementary and Middle School Assistant Principal; and my colleagues in South Orangetown, NY, Dr. Kenneth Mitchell, Superintendent; Lynn Gorey, Assistant Superintendent; Ann Vaccaro-Teich, Deputy Superintendent; Mark Soss, Interim High School Assistant Principal and former principal; and Karen Ramirez, Elementary School Assistant Principal for their support throughout this process. Each of these educators contributed to creating a school culture where adult learning is highly valued. Without their positive influence, encouragement, and support this experience would not have been possible.

I also thank my colleagues at Fordham for joining me in the first Urban Leadership Cohort of Principals, my mentor and professor, Dr. Bruce S. Cooper, and my professors, Dr. John Lee, and Gerald Cattaro for guiding and teaching me over the course of the past four years.

This program has helped positively shape my educational philosophy and leadership style as a public school principal. I am greatly appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the Ed.D. program at Fordham, along with my colleagues.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Kelly, for without her love and support it would not have come to fruition. She worked hard as a health care professional and wonderful mother of our two daughters, Courtney and Molly, while I attended school, studied, wrote papers, and conducted this research.

Our two daughters, Courtney and Molly, who know a little too much about the dissertation process at five and seven years old have made many sacrifices in helping me to reach this goal. I hope this accomplishment serves as an example of perseverance, determination, courage, and to work hard to achieve your personal and professional goals.

To Louis Culot, my brother, who always took me with him skiing, biking, and to play tennis. His wisdom and knowledge about all things in life helped me stay the course and complete this degree.

To Adam Miller, my best friend and life mentor, who always encouraged me to keep learning and pursue my dreams.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Carol and Louis Culot, who instilled in me the confidence to pursue the field of education and this degree. They are the best parents and grandparents to my children. I could not have done this without them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter/Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOTICE OF COPYRIGHT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth in Special Education</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Need for Response to Intervention</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Special Education in the United States</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Laws and Policy</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emergence of Response to Intervention</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding Sources, Incentives, and Efficiency</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Advocacy</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible Fiscal Management</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Capital Theory</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Theory and Practice</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Background</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for RTI</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysis</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Sample Principals</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Principals</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Procedure</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. MAKING RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION EFFECTIVE IN SCHOOLS</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

| Establishing the RTI Model                     | 78 |
| Principal Leadership and Autonomy             | 78 |
| Professional Development for RTI              | 81 |
| Staffing and Funding RTI                      | 84 |
| The Three Tiers of Service: Consistency in Approach | 87 |
| Special Education Referrals and Classification| 90 |
| Teachers’ Perceptions of RTI                  | 92 |
| Principals’ Role in the RTI Process           | 93 |
| Sustained Professional Development for RTI    | 94 |
| The Role of Technology and Student Progress Monitoring | 96 |
| Measuring the Cost Effectiveness of RTI       | 99 |

### CHAPTER V. FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

| Introduction                                     | 103 |
| Summary of Major Findings                       | 104 |
| Implications for Principals                     | 105 |
| The Future of Response to Intervention          | 105 |
| Recommendations for Future Research             | 106 |
| Recommendations for Practice                    | 107 |
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Table Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Key Variables</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Characteristics of the Eight Principals Interviewed for the Study</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Overview

Special education is a fast growing area of American public education, as measured by both numbers of students and overall funding. As more children are classified with disabilities in categories requiring mandated special education services, and more funds are devoted to support these children, school districts in the United States are paying even more attention to this area of education. The field of special education has lurched forward in a seemingly never-ending series of reforms and initiatives. Although this may be true for many fields of human service, the speed of reform in special education has been extraordinary, and these reforms seem to have a negative impact on the very students they are designed to serve (McEneaney, Lose, & Schwartz, 2006).

One approach that has gained much attention and is aimed at reducing over classification and rising special education costs is called Response to Intervention (RTI). According to Samuels (2008), “Response to intervention—an educational framework that promises to raise achievement through modification of lesson plans based on frequent ‘progress monitoring’— is one of the most-discussed education topics today” (p. 28).
Observers have contended that educational leaders must understand that the adoption and successful implementation of any innovation begins at the individual level. The RTI provision of the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 is such a policy and innovation (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).¹ According to Gersten and Dimino (2006),

These reforms invariably have a profound effect on students with reading difficulties, because the largest groups of special education students are those with Learning Disabilities, and the vast majority of these students demonstrate serious difficulties in reading. RTI is the latest of such innovations. (p. 100)

The RTI approach runs on the ability of the principal to organize and support this reform. Today’s principal is charged with working closely with regular and special education teachers, parents, psychologists, and students to effectively manage the process of referrals for RTI and special education. Although every principal may not have an extensive special education background, they still need to have an understanding and ability to manage both processes, while facilitating in ways that allow each to work in an integrated and seamless way for the benefit all students.

RTI has been examined and evaluated to some extent; an extensive search of the Fordham University Library Catalog and the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), for example, yielded 1,100 results for the search term, response to intervention. Yet, a similar search on the role of the school’s administrator (principal or headmaster) in the RTI process returned only 20 results;

¹Because IDEA is cited very frequently in this dissertation, the source for information about IDEA will not be included again in the reset of this manuscript.
therefore, this topic has not been thoroughly explored. Therefore, this study examined the principals understanding of RTI, their role in managing the process, and how this reform is being implemented in their schools.

This study focused on the following:

1. Ascertained understanding of the RTI process among principals in New York City suburban districts.
2. Provided guidance for administrators in organizing and implementing RTI.
3. Explored how RTI is supported and funded at the district and school level.
4. Described how the process is currently evaluated by principals.
5. Determined principals’ beliefs about the future of RTI and its effectiveness in meeting the needs of identified students, some of whom may be eventually classified as requiring special education.

**Research Questions**

This study examined RTI as a relatively new phenomenon of education through the lens of the principal at the school-building level using a qualitative research methodology. The researcher interviewed a sample of elementary and middle school principals in schools that practice RTI.

Principals were asked:

1. What is their understanding of RTI?
2. How was the RTI program and process established in their school?
3. What is their role in managing the process of identifying students to provide targeted short-term RTI interventions?
4. How do they currently evaluate the RTI process?

5. How do they perceive its effectiveness in meeting the needs of diverse learners within the regular classroom?

6. What is their perception of the effectiveness of RTI in reducing referrals to the committee on special education?

7. What is their perception of the effectiveness of RTI in classifying students with special needs?

8. How are they using additional special education funds for RTI in a climate of nationwide budget cuts?

9. How do they manage the 3 groups of students: those who enter RTI and are never classified, those that are in RTI for a period of time and have a decreased need for this service because of improved student performance, and those who are eventually classified as special needs?

**Growth in Special Education**

RTI is specifically targeted at reducing the over-classification of students as *learning disabled* (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). The authors add that the purpose of RTI is not only to provide early intervention for students who are at risk for school failure, but also to develop more valid procedures for identifying students with reading disabilities. The approach involves identifying and serving students with short-term targeted intervention in the specific area of identified need prior to a referral for special education. Further, if a child is ultimately classified as requiring special education services, information gathered during this initial RTI
process can be used to help determine the child’s classification. The goals of RTI are to promote early action, in the regular classroom, and to provide the classroom teacher with help in delivering a targeted, often research-based, intervention for identified students. According to Gersten and Dimino,

RTI allows teachers to judge which students need special education instruction in reading based on whether or not the student can respond to either typical classroom instruction, or the type of support that is possible in a typical classroom (e.g., brief but intensive small-group intervention on key skills). It seems much more direct and logical than relying on discrepancies between IQ scores and reading achievement scores. (p. 100)

As a result of over classification, our nation’s schools have continued to experience an increase in enrollment in special education classes. In the decade from 1991 to 2001 special education enrollment grew from 10.6% to 12.3% of all students nationally (Greene & Forster, 2002), and to 13.8% as of 2007 (Winters & Greene, 2009). Greene and Forster report that in a 2002 survey, 33 states and the District of Columbia had bounty-type funding systems, which create financial incentives to place children in special education, while 16 states had lump-sum funding systems (which do not create such incentives). They note that one state, New Hampshire, had no state funding system until 1999. They further comment that “If all bounty states had switched to lump-sum systems in 1994–95, their special education enrollments in 2000–01 would have been lower by an average of 0.82 percentage points. This represents roughly 258,000 students and over $1.5 billion dollars per year in extra spending” (p. 11).

In a further analysis, Winters and Greene (2009) conclude that these incentives have caused the growth in special education, rather than any increase in
need among the student population. “A growing body of evidence indicates that much of the tremendous growth in special-education programs across the United States is the result of financial and other incentives, rather than a true increase in disabilities” (p. 26). They continue,

Much of this growth has come in a single category known as Specific Learning Disability (SLD), which includes conditions such as perceptual handicaps, developmental aphasia, and dyslexia. In the last 3 decades, SLD diagnoses have increased from 1.8% to 5.4% of all public-school students. They now account for 40% of students in special education. Since special-education students cost more to educate, growth in special education rolls has been blamed for a substantial portion of the increase in public-education spending. For instance, New York State spends an average of $14,413 per year more to educate a disabled student than a regular-enrollment student. (p. 26)

In most states, schools receive additional resources for each student placed into special education. Schools therefore have an incentive to label marginal students as learning disabled if doing so will bring in more money than it costs in additional student services.

Research suggests that schools respond to such incentives. The University of California’s Julie Berry Cullen found that financial incentives to diagnose students as disabled explained as much as 40% of the growth in special education in Texas during the early 1990s (as cited in Winters & Greene, 2009). Financial incentives are particularly important in low-level disability categories like Specific Learning Disability (SLD), where a diagnosis is easily fabricated. As Winters and Greene note, while you need solid evidence to diagnose a child with a traumatic brain injury or other severe disabilities, schools have plenty of leeway on SLD. They comment that studies dating as far back to the 1980s found that SLD students
are indistinguishable from low-achieving regular-enrollment students, with one study estimating that over half the students identified as SLD in Colorado did not fit either federal or state definitions for SLD. The national commitment to educate disabled students, especially as evidenced during the latter half of the 20th century, is a laudable education-policy goal. Before federal law required schools to educate them, many disabled students simply went unschooled. However, special education is now being used for purposes its originators never imagined. By removing the financial incentives to mislabel students, we can continue to make sure that disabled students get the resources they need, and better address the problems of general education students who fall behind because their school is failing them due to funding asymmetries, assert Winters and Greene.

**The Need for Response to Intervention**

School leaders face the problem of continuing to provide high-quality education to their students while facing unpredictable, and sometimes declining, annual budgets. While school districts still receive some state aid and short-term federal aid for the number of special needs students they serve, the rising costs to districts to provide these services is a significant driving factor in the effort to reduce special education costs, while maintaining academic performance. School leaders may view the RTI model as a means towards this end.

RTI is a method of academic intervention, designed to provide early, effective assistance to children who are having difficulty learning. Response to intervention was also designed to function as a data based process of diagnosing
learning disabilities. Researchers developed the RTI method as an alternative to identifying learning disabilities with the ability-achievement discrepancy model, which requires children to exhibit a severe discrepancy between their IQ and academic achievement.

The RTI model requires using decision-making methods that use gradual increases or decreases in intensity and duration to demonstrate on-going need for special services. However, when a child is classified for special education, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is formulated and serves as the legal document requiring the school to provide the prescribed services for an indefinite period of time.

Furthermore, the RTI process brought more clarity to the SLD category of the 2004 IDEA, which has been referred to as a residual category for children with moderate learning problems. Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz (2004) suggest that traditional special education placement decision making is plagued by a number of serious problems, including the static nature of assessment that guides classification decisions, the lack of demonstrated technical adequacy (reliability and validity of decisions) for both single and combined measures in making classification decisions, and the failure of the process to lead to defensible, and useful categories. (p. 67)

Burns and Riley-Tillman (2009) believe that “the specific requirement to classify a child as SLD seems to remain fuzzy in practice” (p. 10). The authors argue that school psychologists are fed up because of frustration resulting from using the wait to fail discrepancy model for learning disability identification (p. 10). In addition, clinicians are frustrated with the lack of consensus about how to best use RTI models to determine student eligibility for classification. However, as the authors
note, many school psychologists are eager to adopt an RTI model because it is seen as a faster way to get students help.

The traditional means to identify children with learning disabilities has been through the discrepancy model, which looks at the difference between a child's scores on both an IQ (such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) and an Achievement test such as the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT III). According to Gresham and Witt (1997), “Each year, between 1.5 and 1.8 million intelligence tests are administered by school psychologists. The typical school psychologist spends approximately two-thirds of his or her time in special education eligibility determination” (p. 249). The authors further state, “Intelligence tests contribute little reliable information for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of instructional interventions for children and youth. Further, we review evidence showing that IQ tests are not particularly useful for diagnostic and classification purposes for students with mild disabilities” (p. 250). They conclude that, “although these are compelling reasons to reconsider how classification decisions are made, the most important issue is the failure of traditional methods to be directly linked to effective, ongoing intervention planning and, thus, to positive outcomes for children” (p. 264).

The RTI philosophy encompasses the following principles: a method to gather student data prior to a child being referred for a special education evaluation; and a process by which school leaders and teachers could deliver early intervention services in more flexible ways. For example, an array of intervention
services could be provided sooner to at risk students for a specific period of time, often in the regular educational setting.

The RTI model includes three tiers of service: (a) Tier I involves an intervention provided early in the child’s classroom by the classroom teacher, (b) Tier II services are delivered when specialists, such as reading teachers, push-in or pull children out of class in a small group for an intense intervention in the area of need, and (c) Tier III services are usually delivered in a 1:1 or small group teacher to student ratio by teaching specialists, such as reading teachers. Tier III is typically the last step prior to a student referral to the committee on special education.

RTI seeks to prevent academic failure through early intervention, frequent progress measurement, and increasingly intensive research-based instructional interventions for children who continue to have difficulty learning. However, many criticisms are now associated with this model. For example, the primary argument against RTI is that it does not allow for early identification for special education services to begin, and thus delays needed treatment. Barnett et al. (2007) state that RTI is also criticized because it does not offer a consistent definition or specific criteria regarding the identification of a significant IQ-achievement discrepancy for students with learning disabilities. Yet, RTI has the potential to prevent the use of the wait-to-fail method by schools by suggesting how interventions can be put into effect as soon as they find that a child is exhibiting difficulty.
The premise of the RTI approach is that students who do not show a response to effective interventions are likely to have biologically-based learning disabilities and to be truly in need of special education services. A known criticism of the RTI method suggests that it is really a means for limiting access to special education services. The intervention model puts the onus on individual teachers to prove that they have done everything possible in the classroom before the child can be evaluated and classified. In some cases, the RTI model can be implemented over a number of years. Therefore, the assessment and classification of a student can be delayed or never provided (Barnett et al., 2004).

Some critics charge that requiring an extensive and lengthy paper trail prior to evaluation of a child is primarily used as a bureaucratic means for delaying that evaluation. They point to the rising cost of special education services as a powerful incentive for districts to systematically delay services to as many children as possible, for as long as possible. However, as stated earlier, public schools tend to receive more federal and state dollars the more students they identify as qualifying for special education. As school districts across the country continue to deal with multi-year anticipated budget cuts through at least 2012, the RTI model is becoming a more critical and appealing component of how school leaders can manage the reduction of student referrals and the delivery of early intervention services in their schools.
Significance of the Study

The RTI approach has been in place for several years; however, some states and districts have only recently begun to refine the model and put it into practice. The major focus of this study is to examine how school administrators are implementing the RTI process, and if it has given educational leaders more autonomy and flexibility to provide struggling students with early intervention, while reducing special education classifications and ultimately, costs.

This study examined principals as leaders of RTI around the following issues:

1. How RTI was organized in the school, either by the principal or their predecessor. The interviews determined what their understanding of RTI is, the sense of the benefits, their understanding of the method, and how it is organized.

2. How the principals operate the RTI program, fund it, staff it, and coordinate it, in terms of use of personnel, space, and time.

3. How effective principals felt RTI is at helping students earlier, reducing costs, and meeting students’ needs in a general education classroom.

4. The types of technology applications that are being used to provide students with academic intervention services and monitor student progress.

5. How the cost effectiveness of RTI is being assessed.

6. What type, level, and frequency of professional development are being provided to staff on RTI.

7. The future of RTI in public education in the United States?
The method of this study was to conduct in-depth interviews with a small sample of elementary and middle school suburban principals who are using an RTI model in their school. They were selected based on their background, gender, race, and experience as school leaders, providing a wide view of leadership and RTI at the school building level.

Ultimately, RTI may be about money, and how funds are managed at the school level. Times are tight. In New York State, funding for education has been frozen, while Governor Patterson is proposing a 5% cut in state funding for the 2010–2011 school year. Yet, districts are still under pressure to raise test scores for all students under the guidelines of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation (reauthorization, 2002). In addition, school leaders and teachers must find ways to serve more children with more severe and complex needs with less money. The dynamic relationship between placement and costs has prompted some school leaders to embrace the RTI model as a means of providing targeted interim interventions to students in need.

According to Barnett et al. (2004),

Using a student’s response to intervention as the basis for making special education decisions is not a new practice. Early models (e.g., Deno & Gross, 1973) defined many critical elements of a response-to-intervention model:

1. Criteria for ensuring that students had critical deficits in basic skills for which special services were required and defined by the degree to which they were behind expected performance on socially important repeated measures.
2. Goals for intervention efforts that would represent significant progress toward typical classroom expectancies.
3. The need for special education based on the failure of a student to profit from structured pre-classification efforts aimed at significantly
reducing the deficit and demonstrating a trajectory toward a successful outcome.

These strategic elements provide common threads that appear across models that have been appearing in the literature (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Speece & Case, 2001; Vellutino et al., 1996). They involve providing meaningful services prior to special education, employing systematic decision making, and demonstrating that special education would be necessary for further progress. (pp. 67–68)

This research focused on an analysis of how school leaders strategize to meet the needs of at risk students through means other than classification for special education services. The researcher interviewed principals and administrators at the elementary and middle school level to determine how they are continuing to address the needs of all students in a declining school budget economy. The school leaders that were studied are in the initial 2 to 3–year stage of implementing and refining the RTI process in their schools.

This study took a qualitative in-depth look at each school leader’s ability to manage the RTI process within their school and to control the rate of student referrals and classification to special education. The study examined the type and frequency of services offered through the RTI model of services within their schools, and their beliefs about the RTI process, and how it is affecting their ability to meet the needs of their students. At the core of this study, is how school leaders perceive these problems, and what are doing to manage meeting the needs of diverse learners through the RTI model, while controlling special education costs in a declining economy for education. This study also examined whether school leaders are utilizing technology to deliver RTI support and to help achieve ambitious goals.
The set of financial contingencies that tend to influence the special education identification and referral policies of educators have yet to be fully documented and researched. First, the process or results of RTI are rarely documented in a manner that allows for the evaluation of the RTI process. We know little about the implementation, integrity and effect of RTI, and the financial gains of not classifying students with special needs. Some arguments have been made about reducing the number of classified special education students to save money. The slowing down of federal and state aid to support special education students is serving as an incentive to reduce the number of classified students. Some have argued that RTI can be used as a budget management tool.

An additional criticism of RTI is associated with the model of special education student identification or classification that it replaces. The previous model of special education classification cast a net to students who could be said to possess areas of relative strength. However, the body of relevant research suggests that students learn at different paces, in different areas, and that slow learners benefit from early-targeted intervention services. According to Lose (2008), some students require additional time and instructional modifications to keep up with their peers. The author contends that

One-way to do this is to implement response-to-intervention (RTI) approaches within the revised Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that are evidence-based and responsive to children. As the school's instructional leader, the principal is perfectly poised to respond to this important challenge facing schools. (p. 22)

According to Lose, IDEA, offers principals two options for addressing the needs of their schools’ most at-risk learners and to reduce the number of learners
inappropriately identified as learning disabled. The first option is that school
districts can use up to 15% of their special education funds to pay for early
intervening services and to provide teachers with professional development to
deliver instructional interventions to their lowest-performing learners. The second
option offered by the IDEA is RTI, which can be used to provide early
interventions without labeling learners who are at risk for school failure as
learning disabled. RTI promotes early identification and pre-referral intervention
to determine if a learner responds to the intervention.

In this regard, RTI is not simply a set of interventions, but a systematic
model that principals need to understand and manage within both general
education and special education. In addition, RTI should be viewed as a systematic
process for providing preventive, supplementary instructional services to students
who are having challenges meeting benchmark levels. RTI may be superior to the
mathematical discrepancy approach in that it takes the focus away from within-
child deficits to issues relative to the context of instruction or the extent to which a
student has had the opportunity to learn. The assumption that a student cannot
learn is typically attributed to some neurological or processing disorder residing
within the child (Gresham & Witt, 1997). This assumption fails to account for the
possibility that interacting variables such as the lack of good instruction, the lack
of an opportunity to learn, cultural variables, and/or language proficiency levels in
the second language might be reasons for the lack of academic progress. The
authors believe that the literature is clear about the traditional psychometric
discrepancy model—that it does more harm to students and actually has created a
special education system that serves a disproportionate number of minority and English language learners (ELL) or second language learners.

Although student needs are supposed to drive special education classification and type and level of services, in many districts, costs determine the types of programs a district is willing to offer. The average cost for students with special needs is approximately two and-a-half times greater than the cost of educating regular education students. In extreme cases, costs can rise to as much as 7 to 12 times that of regular education students (Nathanson, 1998). The number of students with individualized education plans varies greatly from district to district and there is limited research in analyzing how school leaders are managing the changing number in student classifications coupled with a reduction in funds for educators to meet these students’ needs. Furthermore, school leaders are responsible for delivering early intervention services in their schools, and RTI is a method that gives them more autonomy to do so.

The need to allocate these cost-savings for preventative resources is essential in improving student performance. Recent changes in federal and state accountability measures hold school leaders accountable for student subgroups, including special education. These measures are aimed at ensuring that students pass reading and math tests in Grades 3 through 12. However, if fewer students qualify to receive special education services under IDEA, some school leaders have used these cost savings for the RTI model, which provides more flexibility in addressing struggling students’ needs. The RTI process of early identification,
intervention, and appropriate classification that school leaders are implementing in each of the districts were studied at the elementary and middle school level.

As school districts face long-term budget woes, politicians, superintendents, principals, and teachers are paying closer attention to an RTI approach to effective early intervention models and programs for students that are exhibiting academic, social, and emotional deficits. This study explored the critical role of principals in their understanding, management, and effectiveness of implementing RTI.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction
This chapter presents the published literature related to the history of special education policy in the United States, the increase in special education costs, the allocation of funds for education, the emergence of RTI, organizational theory, and school leadership.

In the review of the literature, a historical timeline of special education in the United States, including legislation, laws, costs, and types of student services, along with the materialization of RTI is presented. The literature encompasses how previous laws that resulted in costly mandates and poor student performance for students with special needs prompted more recent legislation that paved the special education reform and Response To Intervention. The literature is complex, diverse, and embedded in the history of education and the economy in the United States.

History of Special Education in the United States
By the end of the 19th century the United States had developed several specialized institutions for disabled students, such as the Connecticut Asylum at Hartford (est. 1817), and the New England Asylum for the Blind (1827). In 1848,
the first publicly funded institute for students with developmental disabilities was founded as the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feebleminded Youth, now called the Walter E. Fernald State School. The movement in the latter part of the 19th century was, at least in part, born out of a spirit of optimism concerning the student (Osgood, 2007). As Osgood notes, inspired by movements in England and France, the residential and custodial care was seen as intertwined with education, and a more appropriate setting for education and treatment than prisons, workhouses, almshouses, and lunatic asylums. By the mid-20th century, however, institutions for developmentally disabled students (as opposed to institutions for the deaf and blind) had degenerated into warehouses for devalued persons, with overcrowding and increased confusion as to the purpose and mission of these organizations. The first advocacy groups for quality special education services date to 1933. These groups were made up of parents whose children were marginalized and segregated in many ways from their normal counterparts. Initially, families lobbied to help pass laws that provided training for teachers who worked with the deaf and mentally retarded. Prior to this legislation, it is estimated that more than 4.5 million people with disabilities were denied services (see Osgood).

At the same time, a movement towards mainstream education equality was gathering steam, and in 1965 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Public Law 89–10) was passed. The following year, marking the convergence of special education and mainstream education legislation, the law was amended to include provisions for students with disabilities (Public Law 89–750). Following this, several additional pieces of legislation were successively passed, continuing a
movement to provide students with special needs an appropriate education in the
least restrictive environment. Perhaps the legislators did not anticipate the soaring
costs of special education in the U.S. But as the nation continues to grapple with a
reduction in funds for education, school leaders are being called upon to reduce the
number of referred students, and therefore special education costs, while
continuing to improve the academic performance of all students.

While many changes have occurred in funding for education, the biggest
changes have resulted from the federal legislation (Section 504 of the
Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Public Law 93–112) that mandates states and local
school districts provide services to all children with disabilities from 3 to 22 years
of age. However, the law did not provide adequate funding to help states and local
school districts meet these new mandates. On the instructional side, the growing
trend over the past quarter of a century has been to educate and include children
with special needs with general education students who have not been classified
(Swanson & King, 1997).

In 2001, The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act was passed as the
reauthorization of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. NCLB
mandated adequate yearly progress for all subgroups of students (Title I, ELL,
African American, Latino, Special Education). This law helped special education
evolve from a model solely focused on compliance with mandates to an equal
emphasis on student achievement for this subgroup of students.

A few years later, on December 3, 2004, President George W. Bush signed
the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (H.R. 1350),
a major reauthorization and revision of Public Law 94–142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the primary federal program that authorizes state and local aid for special education and related services for children with disabilities. The new law preserved the basic structure and rights of IDEA but also made significant changes to how students were classified for special education, and mandated that students with special needs were taught by highly qualified special education teachers. This legislation paved the way for school districts to shift from focus from educational and psychological student test data, to examining efficiency of instruction and intervention services (delivered in the general education classroom) through scientifically research-based intervention programs.

In the early 1900s, our country’s urban schools were confronted with overcrowding, neglect of African American students, scarce resources, and inadequate school facilities. Coupled with the rise of Taylorism in business and industry, school systems faced pressure to implement the fundamentals of scientific management in its schools (Callahan, 1962). From 1840–1900, there was a flood of immigrants from poor European Countries to the United States, typically the eastern European cities. According to Daniels (2002), by 1900, 13.6% of the U.S. population was foreign born. There was a significant increase in funding for schools that accompanied the growth in population, which resulted in added responsibility for school educators. Thousands of additional teachers and classrooms were needed resulting in increased taxes for school funding. Meanwhile, the public wanted to cut costs due to the 30% increase in the cost of
living. This inflationary period and growing criticism of the public schools caused administrators to respond, yielding both positive and negative results, citing that these responses often resulted in an abandonment of responsibility for sound education.

Special Education Laws and Policies

In 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students, such as children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded from attending public schools. One of the most significant pieces of legislation that followed was Public Law 94–142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which was amended in 1997 as the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997). During IDEA’s reauthorization, the law emphasized the use of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Instead of mandating the least restrictive environment, students were given the opportunity to participate in as many regular education activities, while still receiving services from special education teachers. This legislation prompted a steady stream of mandates and laws, which presented opportunities for students with special needs. From that point forward, the quantity and quality of special education services has consistently evolved from providing students with limited or no services, to providing an array of services in an integrated or general education classroom environment.

Another significant piece of legislation that affects this issue is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) that was signed into law on January 8,
2002. This legislation was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the original primary federal law affecting public education from Grades K–12. NCLB is based on five principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater freedom for states, communities for more local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on using proven education methods based on scientific research. Despite some criticism that NCLB was a grossly underfunded mandate for education, since enactment in 2001 Congress increased federal funding of education from $42.2 billion to $54.4 billion in 2007. No Child Left Behind received a 40.4% increase from $17.4 billion in 2001 to $24.4 billion, and funding for reading quadrupled from $286 million in 2001 to $1.2 billion in 2007.

In 2004, The Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was again reauthorized by Congress to enable school districts to intervene earlier rather than wait until a child fell considerably below grade level before becoming eligible for special education services. Barnett et al. (2004) state, “with the release of the final regulations of IDEA, 2004, school districts are no longer required to follow a discrepancy testing model, but are allowed to find other ways to determine when a child needs extra help” (p. 66). This approach to early, targeted intervention is being implemented throughout the country through a process or approach called RTI.

The implementation of NCLB and IDEA set the stage for states and districts to implement RTI. NCLB and IDEA both called for improving student achievement using scientifically based research interventions before a child is
referred to a committee on special education for an educational evaluation. This RTI approach to special education eligibility, early intervention, and student improvement gave school leaders and teachers the ability to look at intervention strategies and classroom instruction, rather than solely at a child’s psychological and educational evaluation. With the implementation of IDEA in 2004, the law changed about identifying children with specific learning disabilities. Schools will “not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability” (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 97). According to Cummings, Atkins, Allison, and Cole (2008), the NCLB as well as IDEA have bestowed on school districts the right to include RTI systems. Now that IDEA was reauthorized, states could legally discontinue the use of IQ achievement discrepancy formulas and use RTI criteria as a part of the special education identification process.

During the past decade, several aforementioned laws, such as the reauthorizations of IDEA in 1997 and other initiatives, have been aimed at integrating special education students into general education classrooms.

One such initiative was the recommendations in the Report on the Special Commission on Special Education, State of Vermont (Vermont State Department of Education, 1990), which suggested that school districts that have merged special education into regular education should be publicized. Furthermore, they suggest that there should be a mandate for all schools to put into effect State Board rule 3262, according to which before students are placed into special education settings, they should first receive remedial and supplemental help. In short, it was
a plea for *mainstreaming* as the first step prior to considering special education for disabled children. These were some of the first in a series of nationwide education reform efforts in the mid to late 1990s to rethink the way that students with special needs were served, including through a process called, mainstreaming.

The term mainstreaming is commonly used to describe the model of delivering services to special education students in a general education classroom. With the implementation of RTI, the model is enhanced by providing *mainstreamed* students with Tier I regular classroom interventions and supports to ensure each student’s success. These models, along with the aforementioned CTT model, were introduced in the early to late 1990s are still prevalent today; however, there are still special education models within regular public schools, such as self-contained classrooms, that were designed to provide special education students with instruction by a special education teacher, segregated from the general population, typically in a smaller class of no more than 12 students. Other related special education services include speech, occupational therapy, counseling, and physical therapy.

With the abundance of these types of RTI and special education programs and services available today, it is important to consider how recent our country’s advancement in this area has been.

**The Emergence of Response to Intervention**

RTI has recently come to fruition for improving special education classifications and to alleviate some of the burden our educational system is facing.
in tougher fiscal times. Since special education laws do not provide funding to help district and school leaders meet demanding IEP mandates, school districts and states have begun to adopt the RTI model and put it into practice. The resulting IDEA regulations required states to adopt SLD criteria that must not require severe discrepancy, must permit RTI, and may permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining SLD eligibility (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This legislation enabled districts to use a process that determines if a child responds to scientific, research-based interventions; hence, an RTI model to provide early intervention prior to special education classification.

The professional literature concerning RTI approaches for determining eligibility for SLD is abundant (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). The authors state as follow: “In recent years, special education and school psychology journals have been replete with articles concerning RTI” (p. 57). They further contend that the experts in the field are on a continuum, ranging from support for replacing the severe discrepancy model with RTI to re-conceptualizing the model to identify students with learning disabilities. Several experts suggest a combination of the two approaches. According to Zirkel and Thomas, the legal definition for specific learning disabilities (SLD) has been a long-standing source of controversy, conflict, and crisis. This long term debate concerning the eligibility criteria for SLD reached a high point with the emergence of RTI as purportedly more effective than the traditional severe discrepancy approach.

However, the only comprehensive analysis specific to SLD eligibility prior to IDEA enacted in 2004 found that school districts won the majority of cases
where severe discrepancy was the most frequent basis for the outcome, and the need for special education was a distant second (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). This analysis did not include cases based on RTI due to the time lag in the relevant effect of IDEA 2004. When the regulations went into effect in 2006, states had a choice among three approaches: require or permit the use of RTI; permit of prohibit the severe discrepancy model; and to permit or omit the use of other alternative research-based procedures (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). According to Zirkel and Krohn (2008),

State-by-state regulations found that for the 49 responding states, 26 were still only at the state of planned or proposed, rather than finalized, regulations. For the states that reported finalizing regulations, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, and West Virginia reported requiring RTI. For the remaining states, all but three appeared to be in the permissive category for allowing RTI and the third researched-based alternative. Only Florida and Indiana reported proposed regulations that would require RTI and prohibit severe discrepancy. Delaware and Georgia use the RTI model exclusively for SLD eligibility. (p. 72)

The major findings of the study conducted by Zirkel and Krohn were that 12 states have adopted RTI as the required approach for SLD identification. Delaware, New Mexico, and New York find themselves in their own category as partially allowing RTI to be used to determine SLD eligibility. The overlapping lack of clarity in terms of specific choices that are required by states makes it difficult to distinguish between policy and educational recommendations. However, the regulations require states to choose among the aforementioned three approaches, just as long as RTI is at least permitted.

These various states provide deadlines ranging from past dates (e.g., Connecticut, Delaware, and New Mexico) and those in the near future (e.g.,
Florida and Illinois) to New York’s more cautious July 2012 deadline for Grades K–4 (Zirkel & Krohn, 2008). Therefore, this study was limited in focus to interviewing elementary and middle school principals where the major focus of RTI training seems to be taking place, particularly in New York suburban districts. For the purposes of this study, it should be noted that New York State allow both approaches, the severe discrepancy model and RTI model for determining specific learning disability (SLD) eligibility.

**School Leadership**

For decades, leadership has been defined in a myriad of ways. Northouse (2007) primarily defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. He also discusses the trait approach as one of the earliest attempts to study and define leadership. The trait theory involved the study of great leaders and suggests that they have innate characteristics that make them great. Some of the qualities first used to identify leaders included a person’s physical factors, personality features, and ability characteristics. According to Northouse, trait theory researchers focused the study of historical leaders and their innate qualities or characteristics possessed by great social, political, and military leaders.

Over the past century, the trait approach theory was used to identify characteristics that made an effective leader. Several of the characteristics identified include: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability. According to Northouse (2007) “intelligence can be demonstrated
through strong verbal ability, reasoning, and perceptual ability, and is also
considered to be a positive attribute for leadership” (p. 21). Northouse describes
self-confidence as a sense of self-assurance and the belief that one can make a
difference and the ability to influence others.

Leaders of organizations, corporations, businesses, and school systems
have been studied in the context of operating as change agents, again with the idea
that the leader and follower are working together toward a common goal. More
recently, literature on leadership has been used by educators to learn about the
process of change as the need for nationwide school reform takes root. The results
of more recent studies and publications have begun to redefine and clarify more
traditional perspectives of leadership (Northouse, 2007).

Leone, Warnimont, and Zimmerman (2009) identified emerging trends and
their implications for school leaders in the context of 21st-century learning. The
authors state, “These perspectives position the principal to meet challenges in the
future of student populations that are increasingly ethnically and economically
diverse in a context of governmental accountability” (p. 86).

Northouse (2007) describes leadership as process oriented, where leaders
can learn to effect change through positive human interaction with their followers
for the collective goals of the members. In the skills approach to leadership the
focus shifts from innate personality characteristics, as with the trait approach, to an
emphasis on skills and abilities that can be learned and developed. The skills an
effective leader must possess are broken down into three personal skill categories:
technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills, notes Northouse.
Contemporary principals are expected to maintain the roles of their predecessors, particularly that of the talented educator, manager, and politician. The 21st century is a very different landscape for the typical principal. The present era is referred to as the Information or Digital Age, as the global economy continues to transition from an industrial base to the manipulation of information, led by technology. The principal continues to be confronted with reform initiatives; only now they are being asked to prepare students to compete in a new global economy with less funding to support programs.

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence released its report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which Kowalski (2005) suggests, “sounded an alarm that public schools were not sufficiently performance-based with respect to preparing students to be competitive in a global economy” (p. 11). The Commission’s findings and recommendations served as a catalytic event in public education, prompting educational reform efforts throughout the country. The Commission had the forethought to recommend that,

Principals and superintendents must play a crucial leadership role in developing school and community support for the reforms we propose, and school boards must provide them with the professional development and other support required to carry out their leadership role effectively. The Commission stresses the distinction between leadership skills involving persuasion, setting goals and developing community consensus behind them, and managerial and supervisory skills. Although the latter are necessary, we believe that school boards must consciously develop leadership skills at the school and district levels if the reforms we propose are to be achieved. (pp. 14–15)
One example is the situational approach to leadership, which suggests that leaders have to be able to adapt their style to meet the needs of their subordinates (Northouse, 2007). There are four leadership styles that can be applied. Depending on what a situation calls for leaders can be highly supportive without giving a lot of direction, highly directive and very supportive, provide little support and little direction, or provide a lot of direction with little support to his or her employees. Northouse states, “The style approach differs from other approaches to leadership because it focuses solely on what leaders do and how they act, including the actions of leaders towards subordinates in various contexts” (p. 69). He further contends that,

These styles of leadership are described as falling into five categories: Country club management, team management, middle of the road management, impoverished management, and authority compliance management. These leadership styles are described on an x and y-axis grid that vacillates between being concerned with people and/or results. (p. 74)

One theory on ethical leadership suggests that this type of leadership falls within two domains; character and conduct. Northouse contends that “a leader’s conduct takes into account what is best for the organization (self interest) and what is in the best interests of others” (p. 76). He also refers to self-interest as egoism and the interest of others as altruism. He further explains that a leader’s character has to do with their virtues rooted in the heart of the individual’s disposition.

This study involved interviewing principals to determine the major type of leadership approach being utilized to implement RTI within their schools. Principals are dealing with various competing forces, including teacher layoffs, particularly in the area of special education teachers, assistant teachers, and aides.
How they manage this reduction in classification, and ultimately teachers, while continuing to provide targeted measurable short-term interventions is the key to doing what’s in the best interests of children.

Callahan (1962) chronicled how school administrators, particularly in the period from 1910 to 1930, sacrificed educational progress to the demands of industry. In Callahan’s words,

The immediate result of this drive was that American education was pushed further into the training of clerks and factory workers and by that much away from the liberal education of free men. It also made school administrators more aware of the power of business in American society, and it served to condition them to the pattern of capitulation, which was to become prevalent in educational administration between 1911 and 1925. (p. 14)

Principals face pressure, particularly from teacher unions, to do what’s in the best interests of the organization. Continuing to classify students for special education at the school level will necessitate mandated teaching staff to serve the students with special needs. Therefore, it is incumbent upon school leadership programs and superintendents to provide appropriate training for aspiring principals in ethics, fiscal management, early identification of struggling students, and research-based intervention programs for all identified students.

Brundrett and Dering (2006) suggest that the notion of school leaders being helped to develop leadership and leading rather than merely being administrators or managers has only recently been introduced and acknowledge. They also commented about how the role of principals is viewed since the 1980s and 1990s, compelling principals to acquire new skills, such managing finances and resources and keeping up with the many changes in the environment. They further suggested
that many countries have decided to imbed their school leadership development programs in universities while others have created their own programs from within their school districts. Brundrett and Dering also suggest that these changes in principals’ roles and concepts about leadership have been modeled on frameworks from the corporate world. Despite the various types of leadership development programs, most are focused on two major areas of development; curriculum and instruction and management or administrative practices.

Bandura (1986) contends that self-efficacy can be defined as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 391). He believed that when people positively perceive their abilities to influence others or their environment, they are more motivated to act and more likely to persevere. If principals are experiencing push back from classroom teachers among pressure to meet the needs of struggling students within the context of the regular education classroom, the belief that these leaders can have a positive influence is critical in implementing the RTI process.

Levin (2006) writes,

There is a wide consensus among educators that improved schools depend largely on the quality of teachers and school leaders. These two areas dominate national, state, and local efforts at building capacity to meet new educational standards and are also central to the efforts of universities and philanthropic foundations to improve education. (p. 38)

In his article, Levin also suggests that “efforts by universities and foundations to improve education are aimed at ensuring that quality school leaders and teachers are working in schools” (p. 40).
Funding Sources, Incentives, and Efficiency

From 1903–1925, prominent business publications began publishing efficiency studies and subsequently efficiency experts, middle and upper management positions were created in all industries, including education. A 1909 publication that seemed to propel this shift in our schools was *Laggards in our schools; a study of retardation and elimination in city school systems* by Leonard Ayres, an American educator. Ayres compared age of children to grade and determined school districts’ efficiency in 58 cities. According to Callahan (1962), Laggard found that “the best district spent $24,003 or 6.5% on remediation and the worst school systems were spending $120,584 or 30.3% of their budget on students” (pp. 16–17). He had no data on when the children started school or the varying levels of assessment from district to district. The only confounding variable Ayres noted that could have affected the validity of his study was the overcrowding of schools. He cited an average elementary class size of 100 students or more and made the assumption that the schools were spending more money on struggling students who were failing.

Rees (2001) refers to Fredrick Taylor who was elected President of The Engineering Society in 1906. In 1895 he published *A Piece Rate System, A Step Towards the Partial Solution of the Labor Problem*. A few years later, the railroad industry proposed a plan to cut costs and raise wages. Taylor gained worldwide recognition because of his engineering ability to improve the efficiency of cutting steel, also known as *high speed steel*. He went on to lecture at Harvard on Scientific Management. What followed was an attempt to apply the principles of
scientific management to many aspects of American life. In 1903, the *Atlantic Monthly*, (as cited in Callahan, 1962), a prominent business publication published an article bashing administrators and calling for a business model solution. A new business term, industrial Management, also known as scientific management or The Taylor System, was coined. Callahan refers to Fullerton, a highly acclaimed educator, put scientific management to the test. He was well versed in Taylorism and realized that problems in education were more complex. Callahan notes that James P. Munroe and Frank Spaulding, the superintendent’s of Boston and Newton, Massachusetts, led efforts to incorporate this model into their schools. According to Callahan (1962), Spaulding suggested that “the development of attitudes and appreciation of learning were not measurable . . . no single adequate measure of the efficiency of a school either absolute or relative . . . [and that] he knew of no combination of measures whereby the exact superiority of one school over another can be expressed in a single term” (p. 69). However, Callahan goes on to identify numerous areas, which could be measured to determine a school's level of efficiency. Some examples include: the percentage of each year of age in the school district that the school enrolls; the average days of attendance; the amount of time it takes a child to complete a definite unit of work; the percentage of children who desire to continue their education onto high school.

Callahan (1962) reports that Spaulding gave his final scientific report, which showed unequal funding and resources for schools. According to his calculations, the higher performing schools were spending less money and were doing 17% better than the lowest performing schools. He made this finding based
solely on relating the amount of money a school was spending on low performing students to a school’s success. He also pointed out that a superintendent needed to be the head of finance and education. He believed that these two responsibilities had to be held by one person and that financial and educational aspects of an administrator’s job are inseparable. At this time in America’s public schools it was common to have them separate. Callahan stated, “others believed that the superintendent should be freed of dealing with budgetary issues and be able to focus solely on education. Spaulding criticized this view and stated, ‘Two functions be joined in one man’” (p. 76).

Laws and principles of equity, adequacy, and politics guide the four levels of funding, federal, state, district, and school. Samuels (2008) suggests that school officials have complained for years that the federal government hasn’t met its obligation to fully fund the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, which governs the education of 6.7 million students with disabilities. Furthermore, cost is not a defining or limiting factor in relation to the number of students that are referred and classified to receive special education services. The increase in spending for special education is well documented. As special education costs continued to rise through the 1990’s and into the next decade, some scholars attempted to study the root causes of this costly phenomenon.

This research demonstrated that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between bounty funding systems and growth in special education enrollment. Bounty funding results in an additional enrollment increase of 1.24 percentage points over 10 years. Greene and Forster (2002) also point out that the
effect of the bounty system accounted for 62% of the enrollment growth
experienced by bounty states during the 10–year period. This represents roughly
390,000 extra students in special education, resulting in additional spending of
over $2.3 billion per year. At the time, several states adopted new funding policies
that eliminated bounties for new special education students; while a larger number
of states adopted testing policies aimed at improving student achievement. Greene
and Forster definitively concluded that funding systems had a dramatic effect on
special education enrollment. As states across the nation are facing unprecedented
budget cuts, more educators and politicians are paying attention to the costs
generated by the programs and services that are delivered to the more than 6
million special education students each year.

The increase in percentage of special education students has been
exacerbated by the increasing cost to educate a child with special needs. As a
result, in the late 1990’s costs became increasingly concerning for Congress which
sparked an effort by politicians and educators with the reauthorizations of IDEA in
1997 and 2004, to reduce the number of classified students with special needs.
This made it complicated for school leaders to effectively manage meeting the
needs of their student populations. As school leaders have been quietly challenged
to reduce the number of students classified with special needs, there has been a
growing willingness for parents to want their children classified.
Parent Advocacy

A Supreme Court decision in May of 2007, gave parents the right to challenge their public school district’s individualized education plan (IEP) for their child without an attorney (Winkelman v. Parma City School District, 2007). A team of professionals comprised of teachers, a child study team, and parents makes the decisions about IEPs. For decades, it was often considered a stigma for a child to be labeled with a disability. However, with more families willing to classify their children, and a movement towards serving students with special needs in a more inclusive setting, the stigma has dissipated. Therefore, one plausible explanation for the costly increase in special education is that families became less reluctant to have their children classified. Other possible causes that have been long debated include: greater incidence of actual disabilities (such as the rise in autism in the United States) and standardized state testing. NCLB mandated that all students in Grades 3–12, including those with special needs, participate in high-stakes testing in reading and mathematics.

Another phenomenon has been the push towards integrated settings and an increase in the number of students classified to receive special services. The creation of co-teach classes and mainstreaming opportunities for students with special needs has helped to dissipate the stigma on students who are classified with a disability. As a result of this increase and changes in programs, school leaders are often struggling to provide the array of services dictated by each child’s IEP. However, parents would rather have more support for their child; and in some
cases they will challenge their school district to get the services they believe their child needs.

**Responsible Fiscal Management**

As school leaders faced the challenge of lowering the rate at which students were identified for special education, they also had to grapple with new parent demands and how to continue to meet the individual needs of their at risk students amidst reform. However, portions of the American Recover and Reinvestment Act of 2009 that apply to education may have given some school leaders and teachers a new incentive to classify students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The federal plan directed a huge portion of those funds to districts to help meet the demanding mandates of effectively serving special education students. According to Samuels (2009) “The federal tap will open up, releasing an extra 6.1 billion for districts to use for special education, with another 6.1 billion to come later this year” (p. 6). This increase was on top of the 11 billion appropriated for special education in 2009. However, these funds were short-term two-year allocations that would not provide long-term incentives for school districts to continue an increase in special education identification.

According to Klein and McNeil (2009),

States and districts are also warned not to expect the hefty sums for K–12 programs in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to become part of a new baseline for federal aid. The guidelines advise recipients to use the extra money coming over the next two years for short-term expenditures that could have longer-term benefits for student learning. (p. 1).
Some school leaders followed this advice; they realized that although these temporary funds were being given to districts in a declining economy to prevent massive teacher layoffs, they still needed to focus heavily on short-term investments and reducing the percentage of classified students. One of the districts that are a part of this study chose to utilize the federal stimulus money to invest in technology in concert with saving some teaching positions, but chose not to add any positions that were unlikely to be sustained in the future. All of the schools in this study have been implementing a RTI model for at least two years.

Although federal funds for education have increased in recent years, state and local revenues for education have declined nationwide. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act) was signed into law by President Obama on February 17, 2009. It is an effort to jumpstart our economy, create or save millions of jobs, and put a down payment on addressing long-neglected challenges so our country can thrive in the 21st century. This historic legislation seeks to immediately stimulate job creation during these challenging economic times by cutting taxes and investing hundreds of billions of dollars over the next two years in critical sectors such as energy, health care, infrastructure, and education. Within the education sector, the Recovery Act will provide an immediate stimulus to the economy by saving or creating hundreds of thousands of early childhood, K–12 and higher education jobs in states across America that are at risk of state and local budget cuts (U. S. Department of Education, 2009). It will further create thousands of additional construction jobs related to school modernization projects. In the long-term, the Recovery Act will strengthen the
economy by raising Pell grants and tuition tax credits to help more young people attend college. Klein (2009) contends that

The education aid of up to 100 billion in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has always had two purposes: to help cash-strapped states weather the current economic storm, and to prod states to pursue broad-based improvements to education. Now that the federal stimulus money is beginning to flow to states, it is clear that the still-bleak economy is heightening the tension between those goals. In a number of states, massive deficits threatened to swallow a hefty portion of the stimulus aid. (p. 1)

In the same article, Republican David R. Obey, D-Wis, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and its subcommittee on education funding, stated, “schools face a devastating storm just in terms of economic conditions” (p. 24). Also in the same article, Charles Berone, the director of federal policy for Democrats for Education Reform stated, “The stabilization fund is pretty much a wash, given the dire condition of most states’ budgets” (p. 24). Therefore, this study examined what impact the rising costs of serving students with special needs have had on school leader’s ability to cope with record state budget deficits.

However, none of these lawmakers or politicians commented on the growing costs of special education. According to the book, Rethinking Special Education for a New Century, federal spending on special education has been the subject of little analysis, even though expenditures are estimated at 7.4 billion dollars a year for over 12% of America’s school children. Once state and local dollars are added to this budget, experts estimate that 35 to 60 billion are spent annually on special education in this country. Finn, Rotherman, and Hokanson (2001) found that by some estimates, 40% of all new spending on education over
the past 30 years has flowed into special education. The conundrum for districts has been how to grapple with rising costs in providing services to students with special needs, an inability to control the increasing number of student referrals and classifications, and disparate academic performance.

In New York State, Governor Patterson spent a large portion of the two-year stimulus money for education in year one in order to offset shortfalls in state funding and prevent teacher layoffs. However, school districts across the state and country are facing a gloomy budgetary deficit for the 2010–2011 school year and beyond. Other states find themselves in similar predicaments and are in the process of laying-off a great number of educators. In Delaware, lawmakers face an 800 million deficit in a statewide budget of 3.2 billion, which meant that districts were likely use their share of the state stabilization money to backfill cuts. According to the article, Stimulus Patching Budgets, Governor’s are desperately grappling for 39.8 billion dollars in federal stimulus aid that was earmarked for propping up the budgets of school districts to patch their states’ financial gaps in other areas (McNeil, 2009b). McNeil suggests that “vague language and loopholes in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act are sparking discussions with how much discretion states have over education stimulus funding” (p. 3). Sawchuck and Maxwell (2010) write,

States are also clambering for additional federal funds for education called, ‘Race to the Top’ funds, which total 4 billion dollars in funding to states that prove they are doing innovative new education initiatives that include revisions in teacher and principal evaluations, tying at least 50% of these evaluations on improved student performance. (p. 16)
Human Capital Theory

One of the most compelling of these historical events was the development of human capital theory by Theodore Schultz that dates back to 1961. Schultz conducted the first successful study that focused educators and politicians on the idea that an investment in education is essential for a healthy future economy. This study helped him develop Human Capital Theory, which focused educators on looking at inputs and outputs in funding. His research quantified the factors of production, including the exponential growth of the economy. Shultz contended that the explanation for two-thirds of the economy’s growth from the 1930s to the 1960s was directly related to investment in education. Economists had originally measured only the quantitative aspects of the two factors of production (aggregate hours for labor and aggregate hours for equipment used in production). He also claimed that it is essential to see the heterogeneity of labor and capital and how they complement one another in production. He describes human capital theory as taking into account three factors of production: land, labor, and capital. Prior to Shultz’s research, land was considered a constant and not factored into accounting for economic growth. Shultz describes labor as representing the human resources and capital as the produced means of production.

Swanson and King (1997) state, “The human capital approach assumes that schooling endows individuals with knowledge and skills that enable them to be more productive, and thereby receive higher earnings” (p. 4). The idea is that higher earnings equal higher taxes, and infrastructure grows, improving the benefits available to all, such as roads, transportation, healthcare, welfare
programs, and public education. Human capital theory provides a rationale for keeping education high on the public policy agenda, especially in today’s economy.

In addition to the evolution of funding for special education, special education teaching preparation programs have also played a significant role in changing the way services are provided for students under the law. The adoption of these laws, particularly Public Law 94–142, and section 504 of previous legislation passed only two years earlier in 1973, carried costs that would exponentially increase over decades. The issue of school funding came to a head at the beginning of the 21st century as the United States economy went into a recession. In 2008, this major recession prompted Congress to allocate an unprecedented amount of money for education, including special education. The federal government gave over 200 billion dollars to states over two years in an effort to offset looming budget cuts that would result in increased class sizes and mass teacher layoffs. At the core of the school budget deficits, special education costs and services once again became the focus of politicians, lawmakers, and educators.

Schools have had federal aid since the middle of the 19th century, when states gave land to states to open universities. The amount of federal aid available to schools has dramatically increased over the past few decades and even more so in recent months. In 2009, a debate took place in congress over the government’s stimulus package that initially included 140 billion dollars in spending for education. The bill was eventually reduced when the House of Representatives
wanted 79 billion in aid and the Senate didn’t want any money in the stimulus
package to be earmarked for education; and there were additional billions in the
package that allocated discretionary funds for the new Secretary of Education to
partially be used to reward successful schools. A portion of this huge bill was a 79
billion dollar allocation earmarked for states to maintain the level of 2008 funding
for education, called the State Fiscal Stabilization Act.

In the article, “Stimulus Scale Seen As Issue,” Vic Klatt (as cited in Klein, 2009a), a former aide to Republicans on the House Education committee, said of
proposed increases in federal spending, “I absolutely think this redefines the
federal role in education. Not in all bad ways, but in ways that haven’t been fully
thought through” (p. 10). Cited in the same article, Jack Jennings, the president of
the Washington-based Center on Education Policy, said, “such a substantial
injection of aide could pave the way for the federal government to think more
expansively about its role in improving struggling schools” (p. 11) and Senator
Tom Harkin (2009), D-Iowa, suggested that “this not be the vehicle to reauthorize
the No Child Left Behind Act” (p. 11). Mary Kusler (as cited in Klein, 2009a), the
assistant director of government relations for the American Association of School
Administrators said, “The reality is that school districts are in a position right now
with nowhere else to turn to prevent them from cutting hundreds of thousands of
staff positions and programs. We see (the stimulus plan) this as an overdue
recognition of the role that our schools play in the overall economy” (p. 11).
Organizational Theory and Practice

Senge is a pioneer of systems theory that is grounded in the idea that people must learn to view complex organizations as a whole in order to engage in a healthy change process. Senge (1990) suggests that complexity can often undermine confidence and responsibility because individuals can often view things linearly and fail to see the structure that underlies complex issues. Therefore, when complex situations arise individuals that see the organization as a whole are more likely to foster health. Senge states:

All are concerned with a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future . . . The essence of the discipline of systems thinking lies in a shift of mind: seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains, and seeing processes of change rather than snapshots. (pp. 441–442)

Shafritz, Ott, and Jang (2005) claim that Chester Barnard, an organizational theorist, wrote the book, The Function of Executives in 1938 because he:

sought to create a comprehensive theory of behavior in organizations that was centered on the need for people in organizations to cooperate, to enlist others to help accomplish tasks that individuals could not accomplish alone. (p. 89)

According to Shafritz et al., in Barnard’s view, cooperation holds organizations together. Therefore, the responsibility of the executive is to create and maintain a sense of purpose and moral code for the organization, to establish systems of formal and informal communication, and to ensure the willingness of people to cooperate. Barnard also believed strongly in the need to provide people with incentives to accomplish goals. However, he points out that when an organization
is unable to provide incentives adequate to the personal contributions of its members, it must provide persuasion. Barnard defines persuasion as the creation of coercive conditions, the rationalization of opportunity, and the inculcation of motives.

As a school leader, it is often necessary to utilize the elements of persuasion to start any change initiative. The RTI initiative exemplifies specialization where teachers, parents, and school leaders were directed to their specific areas of expertise to work towards a clearly defined goal. In his article, “Proverbs of Administration,” Simon (1946/2005) said,

For ‘specialization’ is not a condition of efficient administration; it is an inevitable characteristic of all group effort, however efficient or inefficient that effort may be. Specialization merely means that different persons are doing different things-and since it is physically impossible for two persons to be doing the same thing in the same place at the same time, two persons are always doing different things. (p. 113)

He added that administrative efficiency is increased by providing specialization of the task for the group in the direction, which will lead to greater success.

**Legislative Background**

In the article, Legal Victory for Families of Disabled Students, Greenhouse (2007) reported that the Supreme Court’s 7–2 decision involved an interpretation of the federal law that gives all children the right to a free appropriate public education, regardless of disability. Prior to this decision, most federal appeals have ruled that parents in dispute with a district cannot proceed without a lawyer. Greenhouse wrote noted that through this ruling parents were able to use the
federal courts. The court’s analysis was based on one of the oldest laws on the
books, derived from the original Judiciary Act of 1789, states that in all courts of
the United States, parties may plead and conduct their own cases personally or by
counsel. Today, in some districts, parents merely have to threaten to go to court in
order to get the services they believe their child is entitled to.

The trend among suburban parents is that a child classified with a disability
is no longer considered a label. This is largely due to the fact that these services
can be provided in a general education classroom setting called an integrated
classroom or collaborative team teaching (CTT). In CTT classrooms, instruction is
provided with a philosophical approach and model known as inclusion. In the
inclusion model, students with special needs are provided with additional push-in
services in regular classrooms that also serve students without disabilities. In this
model, a special education teacher works collaboratively with a general education
teacher to plan and deliver differentiated instruction to both student populations in
a heterogeneous classroom. Each special education child’s IEP plays a significant
role in how they are provided with additional support. The RTI model can be
applied to both groups of students.

For almost 40 years, special education services have been mandated by law
and provided in accordance with each child’s individualized education plan (IEP).
The purpose of the IEP is to ensure that all students with disabilities individual
needs are met with special services and programs. The IEP serves as a legal
document, which entitles classified students to the services depicted in the plan,
which is developed, by a school psychologist, teachers, and parents of the child
being evaluated. The type of disability and the specific kind of program and services the child must receive in school are written with clear measurable academic, social and emotional goals. All districts have a cap on the number of students with IEPs in each team teaching class; however, the general rule is a 60-40 split, which means that no more than 40% of the students in a class could have an IEP. Even students with IEPs are considered a part of the RTI process if they are continuing to struggle in school. The same type of interventions can be delivered through the RTI model to these students to remediate deficits and/or prevent a more restrictive special education program recommendation.

As laws and policies have changed to help schools manage the growing number of students with special needs, teacher education programs have paid attention to the latest research and trends in effectively supporting students with special needs and non-disabled students in a general education environment through early intervention strategies to remediate academic deficits and prevent misclassification. These teacher preparation programs have played a significant role in changing the way services are provided for students under the law. In the article, Is the Development of Family/School Partnerships Promoted in the Nation’s Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs, the author discusses the idea that special education has historically been seen as *child centered* and primarily *teacher directed* (Knight & Wadsworth, 1999). The authors also reported that the roles of families have been given varying levels of emphasis, depending on the age and disability of the student.
The Reauthorization of IDEA and the application of Section 504 to the least restrictive learning environment have placed additional importance on integrating students into the general education classroom and in utilizing special education trained teachers to provide early intervention services through the RTI approach. If the theories of human development, legislation, costs, and research are examined, support is found for the importance of early intervention, inclusion and collaboration with families in the total education process, regardless of age or type of disability of the student (Knight & Wadsworth, 1999). The RTI process includes an emphasis on family involvement and ongoing communication between the school and home.

**Support for RTI**

According to Klinger and Edwards (2006), “RTI models hold promise for preventing academic failure by providing support for culturally and linguistically diverse students before they underachieve” (p. 109). The authors suggest that one of the goals of the RTI model is to offer quality literacy and math instruction in the general education environment; again, shifting the focus from the disability of the child to classroom instruction. In addition, this approach is aimed at decreasing the number of students who are inappropriately referred to and placed in special education. With a shift towards instructional practices, culturally responsive literacy instruction is defined by Moje and Hinchman (2004) as “making connections with their students as individuals while understanding the socio-cultural historical contexts that influence their interactions (p. 109).
A closer look at the RTI model may give school leaders hope that they can deliver interventions to any student that has been identified as at risk, without a rush to classification for special education. While we know a lot about special education and school building leadership, little research has been done on the actual principals role in understanding, organization, supporting, and evaluating the RTI approach in the elementary and middle school.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Although numerous researchers have explored the history of special education and RTI, the role of the principal in managing these processes has received little attention. This chapter presents the design of the study, the research questions, method, and sampling, along with some limitations. The purpose is to shed light on how school leaders are implementing and evaluating the various RTI models, and the effectiveness of RTI in providing students with early intervention while reducing the rate of special education referrals and classification in suburban public elementary and middle school. The researcher evaluated how principals are managing and evaluating the RTI programs and models of services within these schools and districts in an effort to establish an effective model or design for implementing RTI.

As school systems have had grapple with the sharp increase of students with special needs over the past two decades, districts have also had huge increases in funding at the federal, state, and local levels to help meet this need. However, over the past two and a half years districts have experienced major budget cuts at the state and local level despite a sharp increase in federal funding.
for education. At the same time, some districts have begun to see a decline in the rates of referrals and classification of students for special education. As the United States wrestles with a deep recession, the federal government has stepped in to offer much needed support for our nation’s schools.

However, many school districts are still facing tough fiscal times for several reasons: they may have run their budgets into deficit over the past few years; the federal stimulus money is one time type of funding stream that is earmarked for specific groups of students and will disappear altogether in two years; and in New York State, the Governor spent much of the Federal Stimulus money for 2010–2011 in 2009–2010. As the costs for educating students with special needs slows or declines, some districts have taken this opportunity to invest in implementing the RTI Model that includes three-tiers of intervention services. Tier II and III services are typically provided to students by RTI staff, which can include reading specialists, math intervention teachers, and teachers who are licensed in special education.

As federal stimulus begins to dwindle, school districts may face even tougher challenges in the years that lie ahead. In New York State, funding for education continues to decrease as the state contends with declining tax revenue. One possible way to combat this issue is to utilize the stimulus money for intervention and prevention programs that will significantly lower the number of referrals and students classified to receive special education services. NCLB calls for states and districts to implement a RTI process aimed at preventing districts from over-classifying students, while giving them a medium to deliver measurable
intervention services without a referral to the Committee of Special Education (CSE). New laws enable school districts to use up to 15% of special education funds for RTI early intervention programs.

**Research Design**

The first step in this study is to understand the background, training, and experiences of the principal in the areas of special education, and particularly RTI. The researcher gathered data on the school leaders and their schools, including their background, years of experience as a principal, their training, personal demographics, special education background, and role in implementing RTI in their school. Before doing so, permission was sought and granted by the Fordham University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). This study focused on the key variables presented in Table 1.

The intervening variables in the study are the critical activities of leaders in the RTI process, including their leadership style, approach to managing resources and staffing, use of space and time, the types of interventions being used with students and their relationships with staff, parents, teachers, and students to make the RTI process effective.

The dependent variables or outcomes include data on how well principals know and understand the RTI process, funding levels for special education and RTI in particular, and their perceptions of their satisfaction with the RTI model within their school. The actual interventions over which the principal is supervising are three main types: the regular classroom teacher delivering Tier I
Table 1

*Key Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Intervening Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. When were the principals first introduced to RTI?</td>
<td>1. Leadership style</td>
<td>1. Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Principal’s background</td>
<td>2. Approach to managing resources</td>
<td>2. Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Principal’s experience as an administrator</td>
<td>3. Approach to managing staff</td>
<td>3. Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Principal’s training</td>
<td>4. Staff / administrator relationship quality</td>
<td>4. Knowledge of RTI process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Use of space</td>
<td>5. Funding for special education (aggregate and as a percentage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Types of interventions used</td>
<td>6. Funding allocated to RTI (aggregate and as a percentage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Relationship with parents</td>
<td>7. Change in RTI staff funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Relationships with students</td>
<td>8. Effectiveness / annual percentage of special education referrals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. RTI Activity</td>
<td>10. Principal’s perceptions of the future of RTI (Increase, decrease, or maintain current allocations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


interventions in the regular classroom; the intervention teacher or specialist that uses well-developed approaches to deliver Tier II interventions either in the regular classroom or in a separate location; or Tier III interventions also provided by a specialist, typically in a 1:1 setting in a separate location. In this model, Tier III is ideally the last step prior to referring a child for a special education evaluation. Principal may say we have no money for intervention specialists. Most intervention teachers that are fairly experienced are being pushed into these relatively new teaching roles; and often they are special education teachers.

Ultimately, the study was designed to answer to what degree RTI is being managed by the principal, is it increasing or decreasing the number of referrals and classifications of students in special education, and is the process serving the needs of their students. The study concentrated on case examples of specific students and teachers, and how they’re managing the RTI process within their school and classroom.

The design of this study focused on the input, output, and throughput model in assessing each of the three areas of interest. In this case, Input is the federal, state, and local sources of funding for special education and RTI; Output is the how principals are managing the resources; the effectives of RTI, and what changes the principal would make to the process; the Throughput are the leadership activities, the organization of the RTI process, the staffing of RTI, use of professional development, and the relationships between the principal, teachers, parents, and students. A significant factor is the budgetary and staffing strategies
each school leader employs to meet the needs of struggling students. The
Throughput underpinned this study by examining how school leaders are grappling
with the challenge of implementing and managing RTI, reducing costs for special
education, while maintaining a high quality instruction and intervention programs
for RTI students.

Research Methodology

The best way to collect the data needed for this study is through a person-
to-person interview (Merriam, 1998). The exact wordings of the questions were
tested with a practice group of the researcher’s peers, who were excluded from the
study. Importantly, the intervening variables were difficult to measure if the
question was posed directly (e.g., “do you have a good relationship with your
staff?”), and would be considered leading questions. So although this question may
be asked directly to gauge the administrator’s perception of their relationship,
several other follow-up questions were asked, and other data collected, to assess
the actual state of the relationship.

Positive epistemologists believe that one can discover what truly happens
within an organization through the categorization and scientific measurement of
behaviors. The quantitative aspect of this study was approached from a positivist
perspective, since the way in which districts fund students with special needs, the
rate of special education referrals and classification, and the number of students
receiving special education and RTI services is tangible, measurable, and easily
quantified. For positivists, developing a hypothesis against reality can enable them
to make predictions about the future. This study is aimed at analyzing how school leaders strategize and plan for the implementation of innovative RTI models for delivering services to students who have been identified by their teachers as needing additional support. The researcher also examined how district’s funding allocations for RTI have changed over the past two years as their rate of referrals for special education have either increased or decreased. More specifically, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected on how funds for special education staffing have affected each of the school leader’s budgetary and instructional strategies.

The nature of this topic, how school leaders are managing to meet the needs of all learners through the RTI process in a declining economy, lends itself to a qualitative study. Although there is a clear quantitative undistorted reality that can be applied to specific schools in-district expenditures for RTI and special education, in order to capture the full story of this relatively new phenomenon of the RTI Process, school leaders were interviewed about how they are managing these changes in budget and models of implementing this approach.

As districts rates of student referrals for special education have changed over the past two years, this study examined whether schools have been given sustainable resources to provide earlier intervention services through the RTI Process in a declining economy.

Additional analysis includes the relationship between principals’ perceptions of RTI, various RTI models (i.e., percentage of Tier I, II, & III), and the cost-benefits of RTI in lieu of special education expenditures. This research
took a qualitative approach as the data gathered were descriptive in nature and seek to determine meaning in terms of looking at how school leaders are managing the delivery of RTI services in their schools. An ethno methodology serves as the basis for the study. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define ethno-methodology as the study of how people understand their everyday life. Ethno-methodology focuses more on the subject than other methods of qualitative research. In this case, the ethno methodology was used to study how school leaders manage and deliver an array of RTI services while managing costs and effectiveness in a climate of school budget reductions.

Finally, a case study methodology is employed as this study is a detailed examination of a small group of principals at the elementary and middle school level, which may have implications for other school leaders looking to closely analyze their school model of the array and efficiency of RTI services within their schools.

A qualitative approach enabled the researcher to study the process of how school leaders identify students, organize support services, and deliver an array of RTI Tier I, II, and III intervention services and programs within their schools. The qualitative lens for this research exemplifies specialization where educators are implementing specific models to provide the most effective services to students with specific needs. Simon (1946/2005) said,

For “specialization” is not a condition of efficient administration; it is an inevitable characteristic of all group effort, however efficient or inefficient that effort may be. Specialization merely means that different persons are doing different things—and since it is physically impossible for two persons
to be doing the same thing in the same place at the same time, two persons are always doing different things. (p. 113)

Simon further suggests that efficiency is increased by providing specialization of the task for the group in the direction, which will lead to greater success.

Callahan (1962) contended that the development of attitudes and appreciation of learning were not measurable. He began the presentation of his work by saying, “There is no single adequate measure of the efficiency of a school either absolute or relative” (p. 69), and that he knew of no combination of measures whereby “the exact superiority of one school over another can be expressed in a single term” (p. 69). However, he goes on to identify numerous areas, which could be measured to determine a schools level of efficiency. King, Swanson, and Scotland (2003) suggest, “Improving our understanding of relationships of inputs and outcomes is one of the most important educational issues before us. Incorporating this understanding into decisions about allocation of resources would greatly improve the internal efficiency of our schools” (p. 504).

For the purposes of this study, school leader’s strategies and self-determined level of efficiency in meeting the needs of struggling students was qualitatively measured through interviews and coding of the data. Some examples for this study may include: the percentage of in-students enrolled in special education; the rate of referrals and classification over the past two-years; the rate at which children are identified to receive RTI services, and what various models are employed to deliver these services to students.
The methodology of this study enabled the researcher to examine the leaders of 6 schools, 3 elementary, and 3 middle schools, located in the greater metropolitan area of New York City. The purpose for only studying elementary and middle schools is due to New York States deadline of implementing RTI in Grades K–4 by 2012. However, most districts are being pro-active in adopting this model at the middle school level in anticipation of latter mandates and to ensure that students who continue to struggle can benefit as they move up through the grades.

Data were collected quantitatively to determine the average cost at the elementary and middle levels for special education students over the past two years, and the array of programs and services as related to serving students through the RTI models within their schools. The study assessed the various models, including push-in and pull-out programs, as well as each school leader’s strategies for staffing and delivering RTI intervention services to students. The administrators that participate in the study were asked questions about their background as an educator, including length of experience, their understanding of RTI, their involvement in professional development, the RTI model used to deliver an array intervention services within their schools, and their ability to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions being provided to students.

The collection of special education enrollment along with RTI data in each school helped the researcher formulate further questions to guide the research. Some of these include: How are districts handling budget cuts in relation to
meeting the needs of students with special needs? How can districts measure the effectiveness of delivering an array of RTI services?

This study is important because it takes into account the infusion of federal stimulus money for special education that is a onetime only allocation. The study also examined how these districts are using the earmarked special education one-time funding to continue to meet needs of their diverse learners in a declining economy.

**Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysis**

This study gathered quantitative data on the number of special education students enrolled in each school, along with qualitative data on the interviews with principals. This was a purposeful, convenience sample to compare how principals organize, prepare, implement, and evaluate RTI in their schools. The principals were selected from districts that are somewhat similar in levels of federal, state, and local funding formulas, per pupil expenditures for students with special needs, special education population, demographics, and geography. However, each school may differ in size and the various strategies and models of their RTI models.

Hehir and Gramm (1999) stated, “In some schools, keeping up with special education compliance can overtake the quality of instruction as the focus of IDEA” (p. 48). Today’s school leader must weigh placement decisions on what is best for the child, the cost, and if a special education placement decision will affect the overall student performance of the special education sub-group, as measured
by Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the guidelines of No Child Left
Behind. RTI may provide principals with the ability to address specific learning
difficulties with increasing or decreasing levels of intensity for a specific period of
time.

**Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited to 8 principals and schools in a greater metropolitan
area to learn more about school leaders’ work around RTI. The study did not
involve any other personnel in the school or district and was done only at one point
in time. High schools were not involved in this study because RTI is geared
towards providing struggling students with early intervention. As aforementioned,
New York State has set a timeline of successfully implementing RTI in its schools
by 2012, but only in Grades K–4. Since interviews were done in-depth, a limited
number of 8 principals were questioned. School leaders in the study were selected
based on their knowledge and involvement in RTI; thus, the results cannot be
generalized to all principals. The sites for these 8 schools were suburban;
therefore, the findings may not be easily generalized to inner-city urban schools
and school leaders. This study focused on school leaders and did not involve any
interaction or observation of students in these schools.

**Selection of Sample Principals**

In general, the school principals are all based in New York City suburban
schools in relatively middle class areas. The principal’s schools share similar
demographics in terms of being located in the Lower Hudson Region of New York
State and the percentage of special education student population. However, schools differ somewhat in terms of per pupil expenditures on students with special needs, ethnicity, and Title I status. Because this study was aimed at interviewing principals who lead schools that are implementing RTI, the researcher’s primary goal was to identify principals that are using funding and staff to support this initiative.

Therefore, this study involved a purposeful sample of 8 principals of different backgrounds. Of the 8 principals interviewed, 6 lead elementary schools, while 2 are middle school principals. More of an emphasis was placed on elementary schools because of the New York State deadline of implementing RTI in Grades K–4 by 2012. However, examining middle school leaders was also important because many districts have started to implement RTI at the upper grades. There is a distribution of male and female principals with varying levels of experience. The study analyzed 8 principals on their understanding, managing, implementing, and evaluating RTI in their schools.

The size of the interviewees’ schools and districts, established in terms of student enrollment and demographics varied. Each principal was selected based on the efforts in their district and school towards implementing RTI. District websites and interviews were used to determine which school leaders are implementing RTI and their years of experience in the position.

Once school leaders were selected by level, experience, and gender, the researcher took into account the total number of students in each school, the number and percentage of students with special needs, total in-school spending,
and the rate of referrals for the RTI Committee before making a final selection of potential interviewees. Each school’s percentage of students that qualify for free and reduced lunch (Title I Status) and other district characteristics were studied to determine if any are tied to changes in the number of students receiving RTI services.

The data analysis of the interviews yielded comparisons of the differences among the school leader’s styles and role in the RTI process and model established within their schools. Designs of qualitative studies involve the combination of data collection with analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). An additional data collection strategy in this descriptive study was a systematic review of publicly available documents addressing formal models of RTI. The analysis consist of four activities: classifying documents by document type, coding interview responses, developing a summary description of the models of RTI services in each school, and categorizing documents and interview responses by themes derived from literature and analysis of RTI.

**Interview Questions**

1. What do you understand about the various models of RTI?

2. How did the RTI model get established your elementary school, and what role did you have in that process?

3. How do you as a school leader manage the delivery of the array of RTI services, including staffing, space, materials, time, professional development, and at the same time, we’re facing budget reductions across the country?
4. As a principal, how do you assess the cost-effectiveness of RTI within your own school?

5. How are funds that were originally earmarked for special education being used to support RTI and is there a net cost savings when you factor in the special education costs?

6. What budgetary and staffing strategies have you or your district employed to meet the needs of your identified RTI students?

7. What type of system is your school or district using to track and streamline RTI services?

8. What technology applications are your teachers using in reading, math, and writing, to provide the RTI intervention services?

9. What is your opinion of RTI and its role in future public elementary and middle schools in the United States?

**Characteristics of Principals**

Data on the principals’ backgrounds are presented in Table 2. Ms. Porter is a female principal with 7 years experience as an elementary school principal with the last 4 years focused on early childhood (K–1). Mr. Saunders is a male principal with 33 years of experience as an elementary school principal. Mr. Blick is a male principal with 9 years of experience, 3 of those years as a middle school principal and 6 as an elementary school principal. Ms. Catchem is a female principal with 7 years of experience at the elementary level. Mr. Lawson is a male principal with 5 years of experience at the middle school level. Ms. Tatem is a female middle
school principal with one and a half years of experience. Mr. Colbert is a male elementary school principal with 5 years of experience. Ms. Robuck is an elementary school principal with 3 years of experience. All of the principals schools had implemented RTI at the time of this study.

Table 2

*Characteristics of the Eight Principals Interviewed for the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
<th>Years in School</th>
<th>Special Education Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Porter</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Blick</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Saunders</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Catchem</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Lawson</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Tatem</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Robuck</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Colbert</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Procedure**

The principals were studied through a series of interviews that led to practical implications for school leaders to effectively phase-in and evaluate RTI. The findings tell their stories about the onset of RTI, how each principal got this
federal mandate initiated, how they organized their schools and staff to deliver RTI services for identified students, how they funded it, the level, frequency, and type of professional development provided for teachers, support staff, and administrators, and the influence of technology, ranging from student progress monitoring to direct web-based academic intervention programs for students.

First, principals’ perceptions of the RTI model were examined, along with their opinions of its effectiveness in providing students with academic and social/emotional targeted intervention services. Next, the study uncovered the difficulties principals encountered over the past few years with regards to the enactment of this legislation. And finally, principal interactions and perceptions about working with teachers and staff were explored, including the identification of teacher leaders, and the advancement of an educational philosophy about how to best meet the needs of all students.

After interviewing 8 principals, 6 at the elementary and two at the middle school level, the research findings are delineated among the following categories: Principals’ understanding of RTI; how principals organized and prepared for RTI; how principals delivered professional development to teachers and staff in the RTI process; how the three tiers of academic intervention services are delivered; how the pre-existing child study teams (CST’S) transitioned to, or worked in concert with RTI teams; how referrals to the Committee on Special Education are handled; how special education funding is being used to support RTI; how each school is using technology to provide targeted intervention services to students; whether
referrals and classifications increased or decreased over the past few years; and principal leadership and autonomy.

This study examined these domains further through an in-depth look through interviews at 6 elementary and two middle school principals in their role in organizing and preparing, implementing, and evaluating RTI within their schools. The study also examines the principals understanding of RTI, the management of budget and staffing related to RTI, and the use of technology to support intervention services and progress monitoring.

Chapter IV presents the research findings categorized into two phases: preparation, organization, staffing, and funding for RTI, and the actual implementation and evaluation of the RTI program by the 8 principals studied.
CHAPTER IV
MAKING RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION EFFECTIVE IN SCHOOLS

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the principals’ role in preparing, organizing, funding, implementing, and evaluating RTI as a general education initiative. The themes that emerged among the 8 principals, with respect to organization, funding, preparing, implementing, and evaluating were the following: a shared understanding of RTI; methods for establishing a model in their school; funding, staffing and professional development; a focus on early intervention by the classroom teacher; an understanding of the three tiers of service; philosophical beliefs regarding the program among teachers; and use of technology in establishing the program.

The results yielded practical applications for school leaders in their ability to influence effective intervention models and strategies to address the students’ needs. Much of the effort to implement RTI has only taken place in the past few year, although, the IDEA legislation of 2004 was the impetus for this initiative. New York suburban districts are focused on complying with this federal regulation
by 2012. This federal mandate requires districts to achieve full implementation of RTI in Grades K–4 by 2012.

One of the key findings in this study was that districts and principals have become keenly aware of the rising level of classification and over-classification of students with specific learning disability, and the high long-term costs of providing these students with ongoing special education services. However, this study also examined the inner-workings of a school leader and teachers as the RTI initiative began to take root across the United States.

The interview subjects shared a common understanding of the principles guiding RTI and its philosophy. The subjects reflected the intention to provide students with various levels of academic intervention services, beginning with Tier I classroom intervention support provided by the classroom teacher, with possible progression to more intensive Tier II or Tier III model of support. In all cases the schools implemented Tiers II and III through a pull-out model for students in need of help by someone other than the classroom teacher. Each of the principals also understood the importance of staff development as a critical factor in moving their district and school forward in the implementation of RTI.

Although common in their basic understanding and philosophical underpinnings, this study also revealed differences in the 8 principals interviewed about their depth of understanding of RTI, how they went about implementing RTI within their schools, how they managed and selected staff to participate, and how RTI has affected funding in their schools and districts.
Understanding Response to Intervention

Indicative of the broad understanding of RTI’s foundational objectives among the principals, an elementary school principal, Ms. Catchem, when asked about her understanding of RTI, reflected a thorough understanding, and further, believed that her specific commitment to professional development was instrumental in bringing staff along in setting up the school to implement RTI. The interview cohort largely shared her observations. She stated,

I started in the school 3 years ago and the team had already gone to workshops at Northern Westchester BOCES (Board of Cooperative Education Services). So, that was in 07 - 08. They presented to staff using a PowerPoint on what RTI was, what it meant, and what they needed to do. I think that’s a big reason why the district hired me because I had already implemented RTI in my former district. I think our team kept moving forward and attending more training because I went to every meeting and was involved. I also arranged for teacher release time to work on our processes and structure and we made sure that every month or other month we presented to staff on the progress we were making.

Ms. Catchem believed that one of the chief reasons her school district hired her to be a principal was because of her previous experience implementing RTI and her special education background. She also believed that her level of commitment to professional development as the principal was critical in modeling for staff that RTI was an important initiative. She further stated, “Teachers have really learned Tier I interventions, that they really need to take some ownership first and we have resources on the common drive for them.” When Mr. Blick and Ms. Porter were asked about their understanding of RTI, they also cited the
importance of differentiated instruction in the regular classroom and the need for more intense interventions with specific students who were not responding to I support. Mr. Blick stated,

My understanding of it is that it starts with the idea that we want to differentiate in the classroom. As we buy into the concepts of mixed ability grouping in classes or heterogeneous classes, that it’s the job of the teacher to address children on certain levels. So, certain children are not going to progress as, based upon the guidelines we have set for them, and the teacher is intervening at that time doing best strategies in the classroom. It may come to a point in time where those strategies aren’t working well enough, and then we need to implement the RTI process so that if Tier II or more intervention services need to be put in place we would do that; however, the idea is that it really starts with best practice teaching in the classroom.

Ms. Porter’s and Ms. Tatem’s, one elementary and one middle school principals’ comments were in concurrence. Ms. Porter said,

kids that can’t access the curriculum in that would be given more targeted intervention in that as well, but it would be more targeted for instance, if the teacher typically confers or meets with a group of children one day a week or two days a week and we notice that a group of kids aren’t getting, moving in their understanding of reading. Then, those would be kids that I would expect a teacher to pick up more often. If not everyday, at least 4 out of the 5 days and those would be the kids that a teacher might even do office hours with. The re’s a vague line, is office hours really Tier II because it’s out of the classroom. It’s being delivered by the same teacher.

Similarly, Ms. Tatem said,

It’s a process by which we can support a student in achieving any of the academic goals he or she is struggling with. With the interventions starting in the classroom with a minimal impact to the students day, and then progressing to a Tier III level of service where it’s extended day or a pull-out program.

Both middle school principals, Ms. Tatem and Mr. Lawson, shared the beliefs of the elementary principals that the philosophy behind RTI is to keep
students in their general education classes as much as possible with more accountability placed on the regular classroom teacher.

Ms. Robuck and Mr. Colbert believed that RTI provided them with the ability to provide services to students in need right away without having to wait the typical amount of time a special education referral to result in any type of additional intervention services. They both explained that often times special education referrals resulted in no help for students in need. Mr. Colbert said,

I think it’s empowering to be able to receive an RTI referral, discuss the student the same week with the classroom teacher and other experts within my school, and to be able to come up with a plan to provide a 6 to 8 week intervention right away, particularly since we know there’s accountability now that we will review how the intervention went at the end of the 6 to 8 weeks.

Ms. Robuck stated,

It can be very frustrating to classroom teachers when they’ve tried many things in the classroom that they believe are not working, and so, in the past, the next logical step would have been to refer the child for a special education evaluation. Now, with RTI we are really taking a close look at the child right away and many of the interventions we are provided for students, particularly in math, are closing that gap without unnecessary special education referrals and classifications.

Interestingly, each of the 4 principals with backgrounds in special education shared a philosophical belief that RTI has enabled them to provide students with early intervention, often in the regular classroom, while helping to stem the tide of rising special education referrals and classifications.

All of the interview subjects shared these common themes: the importance of the model, the importance of early intervention in the classroom (Tier I intervention), prior to providing a Tier II or Tier III services, and the goal of RTI
in reducing the number of children referred for special education services and misclassification.

**Variations in Understanding of Response to Intervention**

All of the principals interviewed were expected to have an understanding of RTI, due to the implementation and training that took place in their respective regions. Surprisingly, the understanding of RTI among elementary principals was somewhat deeper and more thorough than the middle school principals. Although an increasing number of states are moving forward with RTI initiatives across Grades K–12 the research base for RTI is somewhat limited to elementary schools. Perhaps this, along with the federal 2012 K–4 mandate, is an indication that these particular school districts have placed more of an emphasis at the elementary level.

Mr. Lawson, a middle-school principal, cited a support model not consistent with the RTI framework. His organization seemed to focus more on pull-out (Tier II and III services) than in-classroom intervention. Yet his philosophical understanding is consistent with the goals of the program. For example, when speaking about the overall objectives of RTI, Mr. Lawson commented,

> It is a general education initiative, really to try to do everything possible to keep students with their general education teacher. I think we’d all agree that research shows that the best person to effect positive change in student learning would be the classroom teacher. So, the more we can do to prevent, well, to put in place, I would call them shots of penicillin, to try to maintain students in a regular education classroom before we refer them to the committee on special education.
In spite of this understanding, Mr. Lawson has organized and prepared his school more around a pull-out model than with an emphasis on in-classroom intervention and support. The programs cited below are typically implemented in a student pull-out model:

We use programs such as Read 180, Fundations, System 44, we are now investigating using a tool by Pearson called, AIMS Web as a tool to track data to see if our instructional practices to improve their skills.

All 6 elementary school principals shared that one of their major areas of focus for professional development was on Tier I classroom interventions that are provided by the classroom teacher.

When thinking about implementing measures, most of the principals in the study failed to indicate a wholistic view of student performance, possibly due to RTI’s emphasis on the classroom teacher. Although it is not conclusive that they were unaware of the statistical problems with evaluating student progress against small one-class samples, one principal stood out and recognized that although RTI was a classroom-focused intervention, each student needed to be viewed as part of the larger school population in order for measurements to be meaningful. Ms. Porter stated,

we tell teachers all the time, you’re isolated in the classroom, you’re saying your child is the neediest as compared to your class, but you have to look across the school and say where do they fall across the whole school. So, collecting data, universal screenings, to see where are they, where do we want them to move and where do they fall, not only within their class, but within the whole school.

All of the principals interviewed devoted a significant amount of time for professional development on all of the components and legal requirements of RTI,
including in some cases, assistant principals participated in out-of-building or
district workshops. However, there was a considerable difference in the level and
amount of training elementary school principals and teachers received in
comparison to the middle school principals and teachers. All 6 elementary school
principals reported dedicated staff meetings and professional development time to
RTI, while both middle school principals devoted less staff meeting time. Again,
this disparity between the elementary and middle school subjects may be due to
the federal mandate for the implementation of RTI in Grades K–4 by 2012.

In spite of some variation among the principals and faculties understanding
of RTI, all of the principals interviewed commented that they believed the process
was at least partially responsible for a decrease in special education referrals and
more accurate classification of students with special needs.

**Establishing the RTI Model**

**Principal Leadership and Autonomy**

Establishing the RTI model within a school takes time, thoughtful
planning, professional development, participation, and leadership. Although
principal’s responses varied when asked how they went about establishing the RTI
model within their school, there appeared to be consistencies in the development
of a common language to understand RTI, and the importance of devoting time for
professional development. There was an equal emphasis on organizing for RTI by
putting systems in place for referring students to RTI and monitoring the progress
of those students.
Each of the principals interviewed had a key role in establishing the RTI model within their schools. This included the development of a protocol from teacher referral to evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention. Typically, this was done on a 6 to 8 week cycle. Most principals felt that they could provide services to more students, earlier, without waiting for the process of evaluation for special education services and the granting or denying of services. Principals felt empowered that they had staff both in and out of the classroom that could reach students that needed academic or social and emotional interventions immediately.

The next step in the process of setting up the tiers of services was to identify key staff members who would participate in RTI meetings and deliver an array of services, including additional support in reading, math, writing, speech, counseling, occupational therapy, and classroom-based Tier I interventions. This initiative required staff in each of the 8 schools to undergo a paradigm shift in thinking about how struggling students could have their needs met in the regular classroom. Several principals reported that the biggest challenge was for classroom teachers to think that they needed to be the first line of defense in meeting struggling students’ needs. Mr. Colbert stated,

In the beginning, it was about the RTI committee, the paperwork we needed to reduce, and which staff should attend out of district workshops. But, as these key players came back from training it quickly became about what the classroom teacher was going to do differently to meet the needs of the student or students they had referred. This was hard for some teachers to come to grips with.
However, it was also important for the classroom teachers to recognize that they still had other out-of-classroom teachers to provide a Tier II or Tier III intervention for those students with an even greater need for support.

When principals were asked about how they established the RTI model within their schools, Ms. Porter said,

It started in our district and that was the model we started out with and it became an offshoot of the Child Study Team (CST) committee, and they said to form another committee, but how many people do you have that can serve on these committees. So, RTI/CST is the same people. We used to do it on different days. It started out with training. We used to send a core group of people to training. I participated in the training because I wanted to be on the ground floor coming in, and having the same understanding, I didn’t want them coming back and saying, well they said we have to do this, and we tried to get as much literature on it and read as much, and we try to use the terminology, evolving, we’re making it up as we go along, but it is evolving and it has changed over time.

In relation to establishing the RTI process she further commented,

Part of the big thing in the beginning was the forms because documentation is so important. So, we came out with these elaborate forms only to know that teachers aren’t going to fill out elaborate forms. So, we’ve since weened down the forms. And we had to come up with a process and different schools were calling it different things, but it essence we didn’t want every child to be brought to an RTI committee.

Mr. Blick also reported that his role in setting up the RTI model included being involved in training and helping to develop a system for referrals, progress monitoring, and communication among staff. He said,

We had an RTI team of teachers here that developed forms and a process to implement it and share with the faculty. My role has been one that has been helping the RTI team in developing the process and also to be in a position to relay that information to the staff, and then to monitor the whole process as we put it into place.
A major area of focus for professional development in all schools was on providing effective Tier I intervention services in the regular classroom. Mr. Lawson stated,

That was a big initiative for us to kick off what was a lower level ed RTI program to try to get away from a deficit model and move towards a strength based model. What could we do to work with kids to help them be successful without finding out everything they did wrong. Let’s find out what they can do and build on that.

**Professional Development for RTI**

Each of the 6 elementary school principals reported dedicating extensive staff meeting and professional development time to RTI. In some schools, principals reported that all of the RTI training and support from central office came from the office of special education, even though RTI is designed to provide services to all students. One principal shared that RTI is delaying the inevitable special education classification of students, while all of the others felt it was helpful in more accurate identification of students with special needs with a focus on early intervention through a systematic approach. Each principal reported that they attended out-of-district and district training on RTI with the premise being a turn-key approach to successful implementation in Grades K–4 by 2012.

The principal’s focus on professional development in each of the schools played an integral role in carrying out the implementation of RTI. While each principal spoke in depth about professional development in terms of identification of key staff, commitment from central office, and their own commitment to learning about RTI, only some talked in detail about their critical role in
establishing RTI and providing various types of professional development experiences for their staff. For example, Ms. Catchem, the principal of a K–2 school stated,

Its really hard and RTI will not be successful if an administrator is not leading it. Simply because of what you said with scheduling and staffing. It’s so important and also having another thing come down. i don’t think the teachers would move forward with it if someone wasn’t there evauluating with an expectation and questioning. we changed our whole IST process and i had to reassign faculty who became case managers. so you needed to have someone who had the authority to reassign people and that would only be a building principal.

Ms. Porter highlighted the importance of the principal being involved in receiving training along with staff as a critical piece in a successful implementation. She stated,

Initially, the first year it was, they’re taking something away from us. So, it was that loss. It was, they’re not going to be able to do this, cause we had lot’s of programs in place. It was, oh, i recommend, and athe child would go to that. There was no data, it wasn’t data driven at all, now i think they are to the understanding that they are not going to get these services unless it’s documented, unless we’ve met on them, unless we’ve exhausted other possiblities.

Further emphasizing the importance of professional development, Ms. Porter stated,

You have to think about the profesional development that you do for staff. You have to have a common understanding or a common language across the school. So, it’s a good thing we did start early because we’ve come a long way and they are getting an understanding of it.
Mr. Lawson, a middle school principal, also reported being directly involved in professional development. He stated,

I worked closely with a few people, I worked closely with the director of special education, although it’s a general education initiative, I worked with our executive director of student services, and of course, and our assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. About two years ago, the 4 of us starting attending all day workshops to learn about the implementation of RTI. Getting away from the middle school, since I was working with district level people they had already implemented certain things at the elementary level.

When Ms. Tatem was asked about how she established RTI in her middle school, she began by evaluating the program and coming to terms that her school had not been organized or prepared for implementing RTI. Ms. Tatem needed to identify key staff, provide professional development, and put a system in place for student referrals and progress monitoring. She said,

When I arrived here last year they really didn’t have a process in place. So, we started at the beginning. We put a team together, which was our school counselors and an assigned RTI staff member. We established everything from a basic road map on how to run an RTI meeting to what does the referral look like and how do we streamline it. We trained teachers in a staff meeting on how to fill one out, it would be submitted to my office with possibly being sent back for more information on the student, and then it would be sent to guidance. We had RTI meetings put into a rotational schedule in the school. This year we kicked off better with the referral process and regular meetings and we’re trying to use it more to gather data on students and progress monitor the interventions.

Mr. Blick commented,

It started with the support staff and a consultant going to regionalized training. Some of it was done by Jim Wright, who is an expert in RTI, to get a better understanding of what RTI was and the philosophy behind it.

At the elementary level, Mr. Saunders pointed out that his school had a process in place prior to the onset of RTI called a Child Study Team (CST). Some
principals reported setting up an RTI committee to handle all referrals for identified students while others continued to have a separate CST committee to handle special education referrals. Mr. Saunders commented,

The principal was always involved in the process, and I think it was taking your Child Study Team process and trying to tweak that to meet the RTI requirements a little bit. So it meant re-doing referral forms, who attended the meetings, all of those pieces, and you tried to do it as a principal in collaboration with your child study team.

Mr. Lawson reported his introduction to RTI,

When I went to my first training on RTI, it was a training that was done by a company. It was an educational workshop as well as a sales pitch, to be quite honest, but in that through my own research and the workshops I went to with the people that I mentioned before, we learned about the three levels and the pyramid that involves.

In understanding RTI, most principals had a firm understanding of the overarching philosophy to provide students with various levels of early intervention with an emphasis on regular progress monitoring each student’s academic or social and emotional progress. The differences in principals understanding of RTI also influenced the implementation and evaluation of RTI in addition to organization and preparation.

**Staffing and Funding for RTI**

IDEA 2004 provides school districts with the ability to use 15% of their special education funds for RTI (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In all of the schools examined at least some funds from special education were being used to support the RTI model, particularly in cases where principals noted a reduction in the number of special education referrals and classifications.
Staffing and funding RTI have been challenging for each of the principals interviewed for this study. Several reported identifying key lead teachers to help get establish RTI within their schools and how they were assessing the costs associated with implementing RTI. For example, Ms. Tatem commented,

I get a monthly update of all the RTI referrals so I can track from the beginning to the end. So, there were students referred, we applied an intervention and saw the need diminish so we can cycle a student out and make room to help another student in need. The way that I financially support it is that I look at the number of kids being serviced by RTI and the impact that has had through the use of data.

Mr. Blick commented,

We were fortunate when we started that we had reading specialists in place, and they continue to be in place. We’ve had some reductions in our special education population. I don’t know that it was necessarily a factor of the RTI process, but nonetheless. We’ve been able to use, the district has been willing to use the special education staff in an RTI fashion. So, we didn’t have to cut staff, we were able to use the staff in that way.

Each principal responded differently to the question about how they are funding and using staff to support RTI. Ms. Porter commented,

You’re not getting the funding for the special ed kids because they’re not classified. So, you’re not getting that money. We’re not cutting staffing. We’re just using staffing differently. We’re not increasing staffing. So, if you think about the other side of the coin. If every child that came through that’s getting RTI service went for classification, then our classes would be much larger. You don’t have a magic crystal ball to say, what would it have been like. You’re also building capacity with the teachers because you’re giving them more tools to work with and more strategies to use.

While Ms. Porter acknowledged that she did not receive additional funding for students that were not classified, she mentioned that she is using staff differently.

Mr. Lawson stated,

As far as staffing and RTI, they go hand in hand. What we’ve done over the past 3 or 4 years is really put the staffing initiatives that we have in
place have shifted. We have more integrated programs than we’ve ever had before, but that’s a special education initiative. So, what we’ve done is we’ve hired secondary reading teachers. We’ve never had reading teachers at the middle school until 4 years ago. We hired 3 secondary certified reading teachers that are certified 7–12 or K–12 and that we have found has really helped with the literacy piece, beyond the traditional English whole class novel model. So, from a staffing perspective we’ve moved away from some traditional type hirings and moved more towards RTI types of hirings. To clarify, something like a secondary reading teacher or an additional school psychologist. We’ve increased our school-based counselors. We went from 3 and half to 3 guidance counselors. So, we’ve done a lot of things in that realm. Part of RTI for us has been mental health of students.

Providing professional development for teachers was a critical step in establishing an effective RTI model. Ms. Cathem said,

It’s really hard and RTI will not be successful if an administrator is not leading it. Simply because of what you said with scheduling and staffing, it’s so important and also having another thing come down. I don’t think the teachers would move forward with it if someone wasn’t there evaluating with an expectation and questioning. We changed our whole IST process and I had to reassign faculty who became case managers, so you needed to have someone who had the authority to reassign people and that would only be a building principal. Again, gave up faculty meetings to talk about this. Also, professional development days, too.

Devoting staff meeting time for professional development on RTI was a key theme throughout talking with the 8 principals. There was a lot of up-front training provided both at the regional, district, and school level to get the RTI initiative off of the ground, and some principals reported providing teachers with on-going staff development in RTI and in research-based effective interventions that begin with the classroom teacher.
Three Tiers of Service: Consistency in Approach

In looking across the 8 schools, the principals were consistent in their approach to focusing on formalizing and streamlining a process using a 3–tiered model. Each school set up a system for teachers to refer students to the RTI committee, required teachers to provide classroom assessment information, and to monitor the progress of these interventions and students on a continuing basis. All elementary and one of the secondary principals said that they focused some teacher professional development on Tier I interventions (i.e., classroom interventions) to shift the focus from a child’s inability or disability to the classroom teacher’s instructional techniques and practices. It is this paradigm shift in philosophy and approach that makes RTI such an interesting and unique approach to early intervention for struggling students. Highlighting the importance of the classroom teacher’s role, Mr. Lawson stated,

I think we’d all agree that research shows that the best person to effect positive change in student learning is the classroom teacher. So, the more we can do to prevent, well, to put into place, I would call them shots of penicillin, to try to maintain students in a regular education classroom before we refer them to the Committee on Special Education.

While discussing the criteria for escalating a child to a II service, Mr. Blick stated,

I understand the Tiers, I, II, and III. So, as a building principal I look at the different services. For example, if a child is not progressing in reading according to our benchmark assessments, and a teacher is implementing strategies in the classroom and it’s not working, at a certain point in time a II intervention may be put into place.” So, what we’ve done is that we’ve set up a process of taking a first look and second look before a child goes from a Tier I to a Tier II service.
Ms. Porter said, “I think I have a pretty good sense of the tiered system. Tier I is core instruction with differentiation as a part of that core instruction.” She further commented about setting up her school with a systematic process for looking at student data and monitoring the progress of those students,

I think having the data, moving to a data team, that will actually analyze the data, and say, we’re going to give the supports to our neediest kids. What else can we do inside the classroom, and again that’s going back to professional development. If our teachers have a better knowledge of how they can support. They always see the reading teachers as the magic wand people that can fix them, and if teachers can see themselves as empowered, then we can support, they’ll be able to support the kids in the classroom.

Ms. Robuck shared a similar view. She stated,

I think defining what a Tier I, II, or III intervention has been at the center of a lot of the training we and our teachers have received. It’s not just about in-class or out of class, it’s about the type of intervention being provided. There are some interventions, particularly in reading for students who are reading far below grade level, that are best delivered in a small group in a separate location. But it’s also about monitoring the intervention, whatever the tier, and never losing focus of what the classroom teacher, the teacher who is with the child for most of the day, is doing to help a child progress.

Each principal believed in the three tiers of service necessary for effective implementation of RTI. Each of them understood the importance of Tier I, in-classroom, services and the relevance of staff development and their involvement to establish a successful RTI program. They described the 3 Tiers of service, the focus on quality classroom instruction, and the importance of providing identified students with effective academic intervention services. Ms. Porter underscored differentiation as a necessary component for quality classroom instruction. She mentioned that the classes at her school are heterogeneous, and require teachers to be skilled at differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students. When Ms.
Porter was asked about her understanding of RTI she immediately began speaking about the 3 Tiers of service. She said,

I think I have a pretty good sense of the system. That, Tier I is core instruction with differentiation as a part of that core instruction. The more intensive the intervention, the smaller the group, the higher the . Then, II could either be push-in or pull-out, and again it would be in a small group, if not one on one, and then moving up to III would be the most intensive intervention, which we have given to some children who after going through the s weren’t able, still were not showing growth.

Mr. Saunders, an elementary school principal with more than 33 years of experience also spoke about the 3 tiers of service, but was not as quick to purport a thorough understanding of RTI, acknowledging that it has taken several years for schools to fully grasp this initiative. Mr. Saunders stated,

I think that its taken a couple of years for us to have a better understanding of RTI, and we now understand the 3 tiers of the support services, we have a better handle on the process to use as you start to talking about students and how to support them as well.

His comments highlighted possible shortcomings in the length of time this initiative has taken to implement effectively. Mr. Blick’s comments further supported this notion,

I think that when the RTI teams went out for training and they kind of came back and did their own thing. I think it may have been better to send a team out to understand RTI better, and then to come back and talk about it in a more cohesive way across the district. I think we could have avoided, there may be differences between buildings about how you implement it and what you do, but it seemed like it wasn’t as coordinated an initiative as it could have been. I think that might have moved things along, i mean, we learned from each other, but i don’t know if central office, it was almost like let’s send them out and they’ll figure it out.
Special Education Referrals and Classification

The notion that the increase in special education costs over the past decade are crippling many school district’s budgets in tough economic times budgets is not new news. However, RTI may provide the first approach to successfully limit the increasing numbers of students classified for special education services. Mr. Blick also points out that it’s not just about reducing special education classifications, but that classifying the right students is something that RTI may be helping schools to accomplish. Mr. Blick said, “What may be related to the cost factor, particularly in special Ed, is that I think by implementing the process we feel more confident that the students that are ending up in special education are the right children.”

This study uncovered a new level of autonomy that RTI provides for principals to address students needs prior to the evaluation or classification of a student with a disability. The interviews yielded information about how RTI is being used to more accurately identify students with disabilities, which the principals believe has led to a decline in referrals and inappropriate classifications within their schools and districts. Some principals reported a decline in referrals and ultimately classifications for special education, while others believed that while their school has seen a decline, the district hasn’t experienced an overall decline as of yet. When asked about how RTI has effected costs and referrals for special education, Ms. Porter said,

Has it cut back on our costs for special ed, no, it has not. We have less referrals at our level, but they do start popping up in 2nd or 3rd grade. So,
across the district, i don’t see that we’re seeing the benefits of it right now. i think the paradigm is still shifting. i don’t think we’re there yet.

Ms. Tatem reported that RTI is a cost savings initiative that has led to a decline in special education referrals and classifications. She said,

The staff is really coming out of what have been cuts in special education. I do think that is the case, that students are getting less referrals at the elementary level so we have decreased in special education staffing, and we’re also seeing a shift away from self-contained special education classes and the kids are remaining in the general education classes.

Mr. Saunders stated,

I’m not sure if it’s a part of the process or its just a bi-product, but we’re finding that the number of referrals to the Committee on Special Educaiton have been dropping. And so, because the number of referrals have been dropping, and supports are dropping, we’re able to use special ed teachers who we now call RTI teachers, and those folks are picking up some of that slack.

Mr. Blick contended,

We’ve had some reductions in our special education population. I don’t know that it was necessarily a factor of the RTI process, but nonetheless. We’re also looking closely at students who have been in RTI for two years to see if services need to be increased, decreased, and in some cases students can be exited from the program. So, at this point in time we’ve been able to manage the needs of the kids with the staff that we have.

The number and percentage of special education students varied per school from 10% to 13% of the total student population. Some of these are below the national average (13%) and all principals reported a gradual reduction in the number of referrals and classifications for special education. Each of the schools were analyzed for special education statistics or percentages of students receiving special education services. The data on how many classified students were also receiving RTI services varied or the data were unavailable or unknown. However,
each principal was aware of the total number of students receiving RTI services within their school and these percentages varied slightly from school to school. For example, Mr. Colbert shared that approximately 80 students out of a total population of 600 students or 7.5% of his students had received RTI services the prior year. In all, the percentage of students receiving RTI services in the 8 schools varied from the lowest at Ms. Porter’s school of 6.9% to 11.5% at Mr. Lawson’s school. Ms. Tatem reported that 10.9% of her students received some level of RTI service the prior year. She projected that the number might be slightly higher this year, but couldn’t elaborate on the possible reasons for this increase. The percentage of students receiving RTI services at the middle school level was higher than most of the elementary schools studied.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of RTI**

Two principals expressed concern that their teachers were just going through the RTI process within their school without taking ownership over providing these students with monitored I services in the classroom prior to a referral to the committee on special education. Ms. Porter said,

> There is still a contingency that believes that, I’ll just wait the 6 to 8 weeks. Well, after 6 weeks then we’ll move to the next piece. There are still pockets of teachers that say, this is how I deliver instruction, not to my face, but I know it’s being said, and if they (students) don’t get it this way, that means they need something else.

Like Ms. Porter, Mr. Blick also believed that some teachers were going through the RTI process with the intent of getting students classified. He stated,
Because it is new, and that other major concept of the difference between RTI and special education. Some teacher’s feel that we need to go through the RTI process just to get a student classified. The focus should be on, ‘let’s go through the RTI process because we may be able to help a child achieve success without getting them classified.

In contrast, many principals who were interviewed feel that some teachers are taking more responsibility for these identified students in their classroom. Ms. Porter further stated,

but teachers are starting to think about what else they can do, and I think the PLC work has supported that because it’s changing your instructional focus. So, what can I do differently? I think they go hand in hand, the RTI and the Professional Learning Communities because teachers are starting to learn, well, maybe I could do something different.

**Principals’ Role in RTI Process**

The principals interviewed had a key role in establishing the RTI model within their schools, including the development of a protocol from teacher referral to evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention, typically on a 6 to 8 week cycle. In other words, most principals felt that they could provide services to more students, earlier, without waiting for the process of evaluation for special education services and the granting or denial of services. Principals felt empowered that they had staff both in and out of the classroom that could reach students that needed academic or social and emotional interventions immediately.

The principals expressed that the process of setting up the s of services was to identify key staff members to participate in RTI meetings and deliver or manage the delivery of an array of services, including additional support in reading, math, writing, speech, counseling, occupational therapy, and classroom-based I
interventions. This initiative required staff in each of the 8 schools to undergo a paradigm shift in thinking about how struggling students could have their needs met in the regular classroom. Of the eight principals in the study, 4 reported that the biggest challenge was for classroom teachers to think that they needed to be the first line of defense in meeting struggling students needs, rather than another member of the staff to provide a II or III intervention, which typically means a student is serviced outside of the general classroom.

**Sustained Professional Development for RTI**

All of the principals in this study were directly involved in receiving and delivering professional development on RTI to teachers and staff. The principals interviewed stated that they participated in RTI professional development both within and outside their school and district, along with teachers and support staff. Each school’s level and frequency of professional development was critical to the school’s success at organizing and implementing RTI. When Ms. Catchem was asked about how she established the RTI model within her school, she said,

So, as a team, we started to go to BOCES and get trained and we also had a consultant in our district and then we just started to meet as a team. I think the team kept going forward because I went to every meeting, I was very involved in the release time with substitutes so that they can meet and we made sure like [sic] every other month we presented to the faculty. so, we kept bringing along the teachers with what we were doing.

Although RTI is designed to provide services to all students, some principals said that all of the RTI training and support from central office came from the office of special education.
Each principal attended out-of-district and district level training on RTI, with the premise being a turn-key approach to successful implementation in Grades K–4 by 2012. One principal felt that it took a long time to get teachers to understand the RTI model, while the other 5 principals believe that teachers had a good grasp on the concept because their school had been practicing a similar model for years. Ms. Porter commented,

> we shared it with our K and 1 teachers and we’re also having teachers be able to see, well, what kind of supports have they gotten. We’re anticipating that when the kids get into 2nd and 3rd and 4th and 5th grade, the wealth of information that they’ll have in here will support their teachers in moving up.

This type of progress monitoring for academic, social, and emotional interventions in a systematic way has helped principals manage the array of RTI services being provided within their districts.

> Providing staff with ongoing professional development on the components and overall philosophy of RTI was a significant factor for elementary school principal Porter. She stated,

> I think in going back to it you have to think about the profesional development that you do for staff. You have to have a common understanding or a common language across the school. So, it’s a good thing we did start early because, ya know, we’ve come a little ways, they are getting an understanding of it. Initially, the first year it was, ‘they’re taking something away from us.’ So, it was that loss. It was, ‘they’re not going to be able to do this’ cause we had lot’s of programs in place. It was, ‘oh, i recommend, and the child would go to that.’ There was no data, it wasn’t data driven at all. Now, I think they are to the understanding that they are not going to get these services unless it’s documented, unless we’ve met on them, unless we’ve exhausted other possibilities.
Her answer to a follow-up question about professional learning communities referred to the benefit of re-doing her schedule to enable staff to collaborate around Tier I instructional strategies and discuss identified students without missing valuable teaching time. She commented,

Professional Learning Communities. That was creative scheduling. Not that you’re using more money, but that you’re changing your schedule. So, we’re allowing teachers to talk about instructional goals during class time, using other staff to cover them, developing a character ed program, which is being pro-active in the behavioral aspect of RTI, that’s being delivered during that PLC time. So that the kids are not just being supervised, they’re being instructed, and the teachers are engaged in professional conversations of their own choosing. So, that is, i think lifted the level. So, scheduling is one thing that you can do.

The Role of Technology and Student Progress Monitoring

When principals were asked about what systems their school or district were using to track and monitor RTI services, each reported setting up a systematic process that utilizes technology for gathering data to support the RTI model and to regularly track academic intervention services. All of these leaders utilized some type of student data management system to track and monitor academic progress as well as technology-based intervention programs. All of principals reported that it was important and found that they were just beginning to use it in their schools. As one principal said,

Teachers are using Lexia software to help students who are struggling with phonics. The Foundations Program has a technology piece that people have implemented. I think the Smartboard alone reaches different learning modalities because they are able to touch it, manipulate it, it’s a great visual aid for their learning.
Tiers I, II, and III interventions for students each provided time and support to train staff in the implementation of their system. The most sophisticated of these systems is called, AIMS Web, a product by Pearson Learning. Mrs. Catchem stated,

“We’re just starting with AIMS Web so I decided to start small. We’re doing a pilot with our II and III interventions because the classroom teachers would go into a total panic if they had to do this now. Our II and III people, like our reading specialists and special education teachers were actually having a hard time progress monitoring. So, they asked for this type of software or program to help. It got to a point where it came from them, not from me, which is good. However, it’s being paid for by a grant from special education so I’m not sure how we’ll fund it going forward.”

This student management database is unique because it is the only system that is fully-capable of tracking social and emotional behaviors that support learning.

Mrs. Catchem’s remarks support the idea that implementing RTI successfully takes time. Ms. Porter was in the process of implementing a tracking system called, Performance Tracker, to monitor the progress of students receiving RTI services. She stated, “We’re using Performance Tracker, which is a web-based system, uh, we input our Tier II interventions, we’re in the process of identifying baselines and benchmarks. Part of the Fountas & Pinnell work is helping us do that.” Mr. Blick is also using Fountas and Pinnell, a benchmark assessment to track progress and stated,

“We just started with the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments for all kids. The reading specialist are providing II students with leveled literacy intervention. With that, goes running records that take place every couple of weeks and ultimately ends into a benchmark assessment. So, the reading part of it has been easier to track because of the ongoing assessment that the teachers do.”
Similarly, Mr. Saunders is using a system to track student progress and looks forward to using it to better track RTI data. He stated,

> We’ve tried to put them all onto Powerschool, and put this information in, so we have a record of, what services when, how often were we giving those services to kids. I think we haven’t done as good a job as we can with actually reviewing them every 6 to 8 weeks, and looking at hard data. We really don’t have hard data yet. That’s another piece of what kind of testing, what kind of material you are going to use that will give you hard data of growth. We’re still in those infancy stages. And, some of the programs we’ve looked at are so costly, and so time consuming, that they’re not even practical.

Differing from the other principals’ responses, Mr. Lawson reported using a less sophisticated piece of technology, but he believed more practical method of tracking RTI services. He commented,

> We’ve been using DIBELS at the primary level. What we’ve been using is a balanced-literacy approach at the 6th–grade level, and what we’ve been doing is utilizing in-house kind of excel spreadsheets to track reading levels of students. So, when we benchmark assess students, which is usually, if it’s reading we’re benchmarking kids 4 times a year and that data is being put into spread sheets and we are articulating that data all the way up the line. One of the other tools that we’ve used with RTI are the built in data systems that come with programs like Read 180, system 44, and Fundations.

Technology has increased in the field of education both to help students learn as well as to provide teachers and administrators to track the progress of students. Part of the successful implementation and operation of RTI is using these technology applications to track progress and development and to provide students with quality academic interventions. Technology used as a data management tool and for providing intervention services is a growing phenomenon in K–12 education. The idea of good pedagogy revolves around a teacher’s ability to use
this technology to differentiate instruction for students and monitor academic progress.

**Measuring Cost Effectiveness of RTI**

Assessing the cost effectiveness of RTI was important to each principal as districts grapple with cutting costs, while the number of the students in need of or requiring RTI based on poor state test performance has been increasing. Among the 8 interviews we see differing perspectives on whether RTI is cost effective and how to measure it. On one extreme, Ms. Porter said, “Are we going to need less staff to do it, not at my level, I think K–1 you still have to provide that early intervention and that’s where you get your biggest bang for your buck,” stressing the importance of focuses resources on early intervention during the early years of schooling. However, Mr. Colbert suggested,

Yes, I think we are beginning to see that RTI is cost-effective because we are seeing a reduction in referrals and classifications for special education and that we are providing intervention services to students that are more targeted and better regulated around the duration of these interventions.

Another principal, Mr. Saunders, commented that he believed RTI was saving his school district money, particularly in the long-term. He said,

I think the bottom line is, no. You know, you don’t think about the cost-effectiveness, but you’re thinking about the cost of running it. Where am I going to get this RTI teacher, where am I going to get the space to put this service in. I don’t think we’ve reached the level yet, of looking at the analysis of what it’s costing us for the program, and hopefully, for the outcome of the program. I think we’re a few years away from that.
Chapter IV has shown that while the principals share some general beliefs about RTI, the 6 elementary principals seem significantly different than the middle school principals. The elementary principals devoted more time to professional development, were more directly involved in the RTI process, understood more about early intervention, and placed more an emphasis on the classroom as the primary area for intervention, while the middle school principals looked at a Tier II or III model with intervention programs that require students to be pulled-out of the regular class. While there were clear difference between elementary and middle, the difference among elementary school principals was not as apparent; however, as one elementary principal explained,

I guess because it’s a K–2 school and technically we don’t have AIS because we’re not taking state exams; however, we do provide a lot of early intervention in reading for a K–2 school that’s now in the low 5-hundreds i do have two reading teachers, full time reading teachers and a special education teacher who does an early intervention reading program. So, we do have to meet that and that’s helping us i think keep some of the staffing, financially we can’t get rid of it, but it does take up a lot of time and staffing time, and it’s also starting to be getting creative in your scheduling.

Another elementary principal commented,

Just the fact that you’re having teachers talk together about student growth, and what can they do, and how can they change their practice, you’re building their expertise. So, i think down the road you will start to see the savings. Kids with disabilities, the kids are going to be there. I don’t think that they are going to go away, but do they all have to be serviced in the same model, no. I think that the more that you can service; sometimes, our RTI support is much more intensive than if they did get special education services.

Mr. Blick’s comments were in concurrence with the other elementary principals.

He stated,
From a cost perspective it may prevent a needless referral to special ed and it may have an impact of the numbers of children in speical ed, but i think primarily it has helped proivde students with the appropriate services that they need. That’s been the major role in terms of cost.

Each of the principals interviewed were cognizant of the costs associated with implementing RTI and the potential benefits of long-term savings in the area of special education.

According to Hall (2008), the following categories are significant for the principal’s role in organizing, preparing, implementing, and evaluating RTI are as follows:

1. Why implement RTI?
2. Setting the Stage for RTI.
3. Delivering Intervention Instruction
4. Using Progress Monitoring Data
5. Effective Models of Professional Development
6. What the Future Holds for RTI

Hall contends that, “There is a strong relationship between RTI and special education, and with Title I as well. However, it is imperative that a principal position RTI as a general education initiative” (p. 9). She further states, “The staff knows that RTI is about prevention of reading problems, and the best way to prevent problems is to intervene as early as possible” (p. 9). All of the principals interviewed understood that they needed to be involved in the RTI process and that it was important to position RTI as a general education initiative, even though it is a federal special education mandate, a part of IDEA, 2004. Each principal and
their staff also understood that RTI is about early intervention, most often in the area of reading. However, principals' level of understanding of all of the components of RTI varied as did their perceptions about RTI's relationship to special education funding and its future role in public education.

In looking across the 8 schools, each principal was consistent in their approach to focusing on formalizing and streamlining a process using a 3-tiered model. As explained earlier, I services are providing to students by the classroom teacher, II services are typically provided by an out-of-classroom teacher or specialist (i.e., reading, math, writing), in a push-in or pull-out model, and III services are provided by an out-of-classroom specialist in a 1:1 setting, usually a pull-out program. Each principal was also consistent in concentrating teacher training on I interventions to shift the focus from a child’s inability or disability to instructional techniques and practices. This paradigm shift in philosophy and approach that makes RTI such an interesting and unique approach to early intervention for struggling students.
CHAPTER V
FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction
This chapter summarizes and reviews the major findings of the study, discusses implications for reform, and makes recommendations for future research and school improvement giving implications for reform and improvement of RTI as an integral part of general and special education and the improvement and treatment of students. The study discusses the importance actions taken prior to—and in lieu of—the need to be classified for special education services. The findings demonstrate that RTI is framed in an ideology that may lead to better classroom teaching and learning through its early intervention methods, assessments, instructional techniques, and progress monitoring attributes.

Three recommendations surfaced from the analysis of information gathered during this study. First, this study could lead to future research and a deeper understanding of managing RTI for principals. Second, this study could lead to further research on the specific methods of interventions as defined by Tier I, II, and III services and their effectiveness. Finally, this chapter gives practical useful advice to school leaders, school boards, about what can be done to improve
programs for students who are in need of academic and social and emotional support who may not or should not be referred.

**Summary of Major Findings**

An analysis of the interview responses, documents, and evidence of RTI student data revealed that all 8 principals clearly understood the goals and objectives of RTI—to provide early-targeted intervention to students in need without resorting to special education referrals and classification. They all shared a growing knowledge of RTI and were actively involved in the process of setting up data management systems to track and monitor the progress. They all worked with the classroom teacher to recognize the need for differentiation in the classroom whenever possible, and early intervention. During implementation, the elementary principals seemed more readily involved on a daily basis, while the middle school principals spent less time being directly involved in the process.

Based on the data in this study, it appears that the principal plays a critical role in the successful implementation of RTI. Most of the principals spent a considerable amount of time receiving training in RTI and turn-keying that training during staff and team meeting time. These principals also expressed optimism about the long-term cost-benefits of implementing and evaluating RTI effectively. Interestingly, only one principal out of 8 believed that RTI was not responsible for a decline in special education referrals and classifications.
Implications for Principals

Differences emerged in principal involvement and professional development as well as teacher participation and understanding of RTI. For example, elementary principals devoted more staff development time and team meeting time than middle school principals. Having a data management system to track student progress was a common theme among all 8 principals and an important component to evaluating the effectiveness of each principal’s RTI Program. Principals also need to be aware of rate of referrals to RTI and special education and the cost-benefits of tracking such data.

Given the differences found amongst the subjects in the deeper understanding of RTI, and in implementation, one concern is that the effectiveness of RTI may be clouded by variations in implementation. Therefore, it is important for principals to have a deep understanding of RTI before they begin to implement it in their schools.

The Future of Response to Intervention

Evaluating the effectiveness of RTI is a complex endeavor that most principals felt was still too far off to quantify. This study has implications for the way school leadership is understood and studied in schools, the methods used to train and provide academic intervention services to all students in need.

The principal’s efforts to implement RTI have mostly evolved around the organization and preparation of the structure and process for implementation. Each of the 8 principals interviewed believed that it is too soon to determine the long-
term effectiveness of this legislation; however, 5 of the 6 elementary school principals expressed that RTI had an effect on reducing the number of referrals and classifications for students entering into special education, an often long-term costly educational service. A few of the principals commented that RTI can sometimes provide better support for students than special education services. The reasons for this are that RTI interventions are short-term, 6 to 8 weeks, and evaluated on a consistent basis with more of a responsibility placed on the general education teacher.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Three recommendations for future research grew out of this study.

*Recommendation 1. Study RTI at the high school level.* A future study could examine the important role of the high school principals’ role of managing RTI. While the current study focused on elementary and middle school principals, a future study could analyze the role of the high school principals where apparently students are still being referred and classified for special education as the curriculum and standards continue to be raised across the country. High schools are more departmentalized, RTI’s federal mandate is not (yet) affecting high schools. As students who are receiving RTI services at the elementary and middle school level reach high school, these children will need to be supported as they make this transition.

*Recommendation 2. Study of teacher perceptions, understanding, and actions in the RTI process.* While the current study was primarily concentrated on
the role of the principals, an important study should also be done on the teachers role in understanding and implementing RTI process. Since the philosophical approach of RTI is classroom and teacher centered, future research should be done on the following: (a) The understanding of RTI; (b) Their responsibility in working with students; and (c) their ability to work with other teachers and the principal to best support students with academic interventions.

Recommendation 3. *Longitudinal study of student cohorts at different stages of RTI.* Future research should include a longitudinal study of students comparing cohorts of students who were referred and classified for special education compared a similar cohort of students who were referred for RTI and received early interventions to see to what degree each of these processes and services benefited student achievement. As more students that have received RTI reach the high school level this student data will be available to study. This study would look closely at the number of RTI students overall, and what percentage of them were classified for special education. This study could look even deeper at the student performance of this population.

**Recommendations for Practice**

After interviewing 8 principals about their role in managing RTI, 7 recommendations for improved practice are presented.

1. Involve principals in extensive professional development at the county and local level to enhance their understanding and practice of organizing, managing, and implementing RTI. Professional development workshops should be
held for central office administrators and school based administrators on the professional development on RTI.

2. Create district wide strategies for tracking academic interventions and student progress.

Since all 8 principals are at the beginning stages of implementing RTI and using technology to provide and track intervention services, school district leaders should become aware and involved in the process. Evaluate the three stages of referring, providing services, and monitoring student progress.

3. School principals and district administrators should actively evaluate the rate of RTI referrals, the types and levels of interventions being provided for students, and student progress should be tracked year by year and by subject area as students move from elementary, to middle, and high school. Comparisons should be made between those students who were referred to RTI and those who were not to determine what percentage of these students were eventually referred and classified to receive special education services.

Tracking the quantity and quality of instructional support for students who are in the RTI process can be a complex long-term task. School leaders would benefit teachers and students by putting systems in place to longitudinally monitor the progress of RTI students.

4. Track and compare students who were classified for special education versus those students who were referred to RTI and not classified to determine the effectiveness of early intervention in lieu of special education classification.
Over the past 40 years, special education referrals and classifications have climbed nationwide. Many of the school leaders interviewed for this study indicated that they have seen a decline in referrals and classifications of special education students, including using RTI as a process to more accurately identify students with special needs. Evaluating the effectiveness of RTI can be achieved by comparing the performance of students who were classified for special education and students who were referred to RTI and not classified.

5. Provide principals with mentoring opportunities to work with successful principals in implementing and evaluating RTI.

As districts and states rapidly comply with the 2012 RTI mandate school districts and principals could be identified to serve as mentors for other school leaders who are at an earlier stage in the RTI process. Several districts that are a part of the Tri-State Consortium, a group of school districts that visit one another to provide feedback around best practices in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, focused the visits on RTI. School leaders that have experience with implementing RTI conducted these visits.

6. Grant principals more autonomy in delivering an array of RTI services to their students.

School leaders are often restricted in their ability to deliver academic or social and emotional services to students in need because of district, state, or federal regulations. Granting principals with more autonomy over the schools budget would enable them to provide an array of RTI services to students at the school level.
7. Continue to target and test children coming into school to get them RTI services early to achieve the best results.

The RTI Framework is based around an early intervention approach. Initial and on-going assessments, along with a system to track the progress of students would enable districts to provide RTI services to students sooner, making those interventions more effective for a child over the long-term.

**Conclusion**

This study has contributed to our understanding of the critical role of principals helping students with academic or social and emotional needs. Of the 8 principals interviewed, 6 from elementary and 2 from middle schools, to learn about their feelings in support of RTI as a major new innovation in American education. As the number of students with special needs has grown over the past decade, RTI provides principals with a framework and method to deliver academic intervention services to students earlier, while often maintaining those students in the regular education classroom.

Based on this study, we found that principals who were more involved in the process of professional development were better able to implement and improve RTI for all students. In addition, these principals had a better handle on monitoring students’ progress and evaluating the overall success of their RTI model.

Each principal organized their school to support RTI by identifying staff, attending professional development at the district or regional level, allocating
funds and resources to support RTI, provided staff meeting and other times for professional development for RTI, and established a process that uses technology to monitor the progress of students and the RTI program.

Principals believed that it was important to be directly involved in the RTI process and professional development at the regional, district, and school level. They felt that RTI should not be left to teachers and staff to implement without their leadership. The principals believed that they needed to be involved in the RTI process to determine who gets services, who provide services at a Tier II or Tier III level, and how the services are delivered and evaluated. According to this study, all 8 of the principals expressed knowledge of RTI and an understanding of how it is intended to work. Finally, most of the principals believed that RTI was having an effect on reducing the number of referrals and classifications for special education.

The findings of this study may be beneficial to those interested in learning more about the principals’ role in RTI. It also sheds light on the need for more systematic training of school leaders and teachers in the area of RTI.

Northouse (2007) describes technical skills as “having knowledge about and proficiency in a specific type of work or activity and human skill as having knowledge about and ability to work with people, and conceptual skills as the ability to work with concepts and ideas” (pp. 46–47). How school principals are implementing RTI is dependent on their knowledge of the specific work, the ability to work with people, and the ability to work with concepts and ideas for
effective early intervention. Other approaches to leadership are also critical in this process.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT’S INFORMED CONSENT LETTER
PARTICIPANT’S INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Protocol Title: Response to Intervention: The principal’s role in managing, implementing, and evaluating this educational reform for students in need.

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study: While the majority of states and school districts across America are continuing to see a rise in special education costs, many have began to embrace Response to Intervention (RTI) as a means of providing students with early targeted academic and behavioral interventions in the regular education classroom prior to referral for a student special education evaluation. Little research has been done on examining this reform through the lens of the principal at the school-building level. This study employed a qualitative research methodology to interview a sample of elementary and middle school principals about their role in implementing Response to Intervention.

What principals were asked to do in the study: They were asked to respond to several interview questions in an in-person interview about their role in implementing and evaluating the Response to Intervention approach within their school.

Time required: approximately 20 minutes
Risks and Benefits: Your participation is voluntary; individual responses will not be shared with anyone, and cannot be identified directly to any respondent or district/school site. I anticipate no risk to you as a participant in this study.

Your responses during the interview may help us learn more about Response to Intervention and the principals’ role in managing the process. The findings will be useful to school leaders and schools of education in preparing educators for school district leadership positions. Six to eight principals that are implementing Response to Intervention will be interviewed for this study. There are no risks to you both professionally and personally from participating in this study.

Confidentiality: Your part in this study is anonymous to the researcher. There will be no connection between you and your responses. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you, your school, district, or any individual as being affiliated with this project.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions I ask you. I am asking you to participate in this study because you are a school principal working in a suburb of New York City implementing Response to Intervention. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.
Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence. Even if you begin the interview process, you can stop at any time.

Whom to contact if you have any questions about the study: Brian Culot. Phone (845) 365–0961.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study: E. Doyle McCarthy, Chair of the Fordham University Institutional Review Board, 113 W. 60th Street, New York, NY 10023–7484

IRB@fordham.edu

Agreement: I have read the procedure described above. Please print a copy of this consent form for your records.

Thank you for your time.

AGREEMENT:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description. [If research participants do not receive a copy of their informed consent form, they should then receive an informational sheet including at least the title of your study, along with the your name and contact information, along with the contact information for the IRB.]

Participant: ____________________________ Date: _________________

Principal Investigator: ____________________ Date: _________________
ABSTRACT
ABSTRACT

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION: THE PRINCIPALS’ ROLE IN MANAGING, IMPLEMENTING, AND EVALUATING THIS EDUCATIONAL REFORM FOR STUDENTS IN NEED

Brian E. Culot
Fordham University, New York, 2011
Mentor: Bruce S. Cooper, PhD

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of the school principal in managing, implementing, and evaluating Response to Intervention. This study also sought to investigate the influence school leaders had on their organization while preparing for the implementation of the RTI program. Principal and teacher perceptions about RTI and how to best meet the needs of students in need of academic or social and emotional intervention services were also uncovered. In addition, this study sought to provide school leaders with a practical approach to implementing RTI within their school that uses technology to improve the monitoring of student progress and the effectiveness of specific student academic interventions.
Eight suburban principals were interviewed to determine their understanding of Response to Intervention, how they used staff to implement RTI, how they provided professional development for teachers and staff, the cost-effectiveness of the RTI program, and how technology is being used to track and monitor the academic progress and interventions provided to students. Each of the principals were interviewed and asked questions about their role in managing, implementing, and evaluating Response to Intervention within their school and district. Six elementary and two middle school principals were selected for this study based on that their school and district has been implementing the RTI federal mandate for at least three years. They were also selected because New York State is required to implement RTI in Grades K–4 by 2012.

The results indicated that despite the level of experience each subject had as a principal, levels of understanding and methods of implementation and evaluation of RTI varied. The results demonstrated that professional development, the philosophy about intervention services being provided in or out of the general education classroom, and level of direct involvement by the principal are determining factors for the effectiveness of the RTI program. The use of staff and team meeting time was helpful in enhancing the collegiality and engagement of teachers and staff. In addition, this study found a consistent pattern of RTI having an effect on the reduction of special education referrals and classifications within each school.

The study concluded that the principals’ role is critical in successfully establishing an RTI model that has an emphasis on staff development, effective
academic intervention, and student progress monitoring. The results support the need for further study in the area of longitudinal student progress monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of RTI in every district and school in the United States.
VITA
# VITA

**BRIAN E. CULOT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>August 11, 1971</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth</td>
<td>Suffern, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Arts Psychology</td>
<td>University at Buffalo, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Arts School Counseling</td>
<td>Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters of Science Education Administration &amp; Supervision</td>
<td>Baruch College, New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Positions</td>
<td>PS 334, The Anderson School (K–8), Manhattan, NY, Principal 2006–2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Position</td>
<td>Cottage Lane Elementary School, South Orangetown School District, Principal September 2009–Present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>