

# Foundational Principles of Instruction and Intervention Systems



**Chris Weber, Ed.D.**

Senior Fellow, International Center for Leadership in Education



**International Center for  
Leadership in Education**

A division of  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

## Foundational Principles of Instruction and Intervention Systems

We have written that response to intervention, or RTI, is a verb (Hierck & Weber, 2015), as in, “To what extent are students responding to instruction and intervention? To what extent are students RTI’ing?”

To extend the metaphor, RTI is not a noun. There are multiple methods and approaches to designing Instruction and Intervention Systems for each and every student. Each school has local, contextual needs that require local, contextual responses.

While response to intervention is the most significant element of Instruction and Intervention Systems, we employ this new term to integrate the powerful features of RTI, MTSS, PLCs, UDL, Special Education, Gifted Education, and Differentiation into a cohesive whole that is great than the sum of its parts, with efficiencies and without duplicated or uncoordinated efforts.

And while the many important elements within which schools must exercise their professional judgment when designing their “System,” there are also non-negotiables—the 16 foundational principles below—that must guide our efforts of behalf of all students’ learning at high levels within these Instruction and Intervention Systems.

### 16 Foundational Principles

1. Instruction and Intervention Systems operationalize our schools’ mission statements: “We believe that all students can learn and we’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.” Designing structures that ensure that all students receive the supports that they need is a [moral imperative](#). And education is a civil right. It’s social justice. Instruction and Intervention Systems are the concrete representations of the imperative.
2. When can predict the types of supports that students will need: Some students will require differentiation and scaffolds to access learning opportunities, to optimally succeed and grow within core environments (what is commonly known as Tier 1); some students will need additional time and alternative supports at the completion of units of instruction, as revealed by evidence, to master core priorities and others will be ready for greater levels of complexity and will greatly benefit from opportunities to delve into priorities at greater levels of depth (what is commonly known as Tier 2); some students will be in desperate need of immediate, intensive, and targeted supports to ameliorate significant deficits in foundational skills and other students will benefit from opportunities to dive deep into a passion – highly specialized supports to meet students’ at, and nudge them from, their zones of proximal development (what is commonly known as Tier 3). **If we can predict it, we can prepare for it.** Instruction and Intervention Systems represents our proactive preparation for predictable needs.
3. We passionately subscribe to the practice of **teach less, learn more**. Students deserve more rigorous and relevant learning opportunities. They deserve opportunities to practice 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. They deserve differentiated, individualized, and personalized learning paths. To give students what they deserve—to meet the mission statement of so many schools (“We believe that all student can learn

and we'll do whatever it takes to make that happen.”), we must challenge the inch-deep, mile-wide mentality of our curricular programs. We must favor:

- Depth over breath;
- Verbs (skills) over nouns (content);
- Integrated disciplinary tasks over tasks related to singular content areas;
- Quality over quantity; and
- Mastery over coverage.

4. Don't bother with Instruction and Intervention Systems if you don't believe high levels of learning for all students are inevitable. Don't go through the motions so that you can compliantly satisfy a policy or mandate. There is compelling experiential and neurological evidence to confirm that all students can learn at high levels and it's our professional obligation. There is no one else who can or should serve students academic, pro-social, and pro-functional skill needs. We must simply continue to adjust and revise—to identify the causes, antecedents, or explanations—we just need to find the right support. **High levels of learning for all are inevitabilities.** And all means all—if a student will be expected to live a happy and productive adult life without accommodations and modifications (which is the case for 99% of students, including the majority of students with IEPs), then they are in the ALL category.

5. **All students receive all levels of support:**

***Differentiated:*** Teaching and learning cycles for grade-level and course-specific behavioral and academic priorities for all students. Teachers respond to a student's unique learning needs by making adjustments to process, content, product, and environments based on a student's interests, learning profile, and readiness levels. These supports are often described as Tier 1.

- Quality not quantity
- Depth not breadth
- Mastery not coverage
- Scaffolded, differentiated, respectful
- Skills/content...verbs/nouns
- Pro-social and pro-functional skills
  - Self-regulation, executive functioning, social-emotional
- 21<sup>st</sup> century skills
  - Creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication

***Individualized:*** Timely and targeted supports for greater levels of student mastery of academic and behavioral priorities, so that students don't fall behind (or further behind) and so students can achieve reach greater depths of understanding. If differentiation is the *how*, then individualization is the *when*. Learning progresses at different speeds; some students may need to review previously covered material, while others may be ready to immerse themselves in a certain topic. These supports are often described as Tier 2.

- Benjamin Bloom
- Time + Support = Learning
- Informed by short-cycle assessments
- More time:

- for alternative supports
- to gain mastery of the priorities
- Buffer time
- Teacher-directed small groups
- Intervention & enrichment
- Intended to prevent students from falling behind...or falling farther behind

**Personalized and Specialized:** Intervention and enrichment to meet students' at the forward edge of their zones of proximal development; intensive supports to meet significant deficits in foundational skills AND opportunities for students to exercise choice over the *what* and *how* of passions into which they will dive deeply. Extending the metaphor, if differentiation is the *how* and individualization is the *when*, the personalization is the *where*—as in, where are students in their learning journey. Students who are not yet performing at expected levels, due to significant deficits in foundational skills, receive targeted and intensive supports at the leading edge of their zone of proximal development to close the gap. Students who are meeting and exceeding age and grade expectations dig deeper into areas of interest. All students' experiences are tailored to preferences and interests; support is paced to students' unique needs. Students are involved in the creation and monitoring of their learning path. These supports are often described as Tier 3. Tier 3 supports:

- Are proactive and immediate
- Are diagnostically driven and targeted
- Are intensive
- Are coordinated
- Ameliorate significant deficits in foundational skills
- Include personalized learning plans

When all students receive the supports that we have predicted and proactively planned, high levels of learning for all and readiness for college and career will be a reality.

6. Students need not fail within core environments for six weeks and then receive core and more supports (Tier 1 + Tier 2) for six more weeks before they received intensive and targeted supports; students at great risk for experiencing failure and frustration immediately receive highly specialized (Tier 3) supports. When we identify a student with a significant deficit in foundational skills, must act with a **sense of urgency** and provide immediate intervention. Students can also be provided with highly specialized supports if core and more are proven insufficient; if students are not adequately responding to a combination of core and more supports, then we should strive to diagnose a likely cause and provide a targeted, intensive intervention. Student study teams should become involved earlier; they should not be the gatekeepers to a formal evaluation. These expert teams should collaboratively inform highly specialized supports. Students should not need to rely upon a specific teacher to advocate for their success. We have all the data that we need to identify students who are at grave risk of failure. We must act. And, documentation, or lack thereof, should never be the gatekeeper to a child receiving support.
7. It's not about—it's never about—moving students through the tiers. **Students aren't in tiers; needs and supports are in tiers.** We do not move students through the tiers for the purposes of justifying a

referral for a formal evaluation. We support students with tiered supports because they *will* be effective.

8. There is no Instruction and Intervention System if we cannot measure the extent to which students are responding to instruction and intervention. We must proactively plan for efficient and effective assessments to fulfill the following evidence-gathering needs:
- Which students have significant gaps in the foundational prerequisite skills of literacy, numeracy, or behavior? We gather this information using *screeners*.
  - To what extent are students learning the core content we teach during initial, differentiated instruction? This evidence comes to us via short-cycle *common formative assessments*.
  - What are the antecedents of, and/or the reasons that explain, the difficulties of students who are at risk? *Diagnostics* are utilized to gather this information.
  - To what extent are students responding to supplemental supports? We call this *progress monitoring* and use various methods to gather feedback.

We must measure the efficacy of our efforts on behalf of students.

**Assessments are evidence-gathering opportunities.** Evidence is the engine that drives Instruction and Intervention Systems. The only Instruction and Intervention System is an effective Instruction and Intervention System—it's a self-correcting system. In other words, we should not hear, "We tried PLCs (or RTI or MTSS) and it didn't work." We gather evidence to validate the appropriateness of instruction and intervention. We make changes if students are not responding appropriately. And we continue to help all students gain ever-increasingly successes in schools and to prepare them for a productive future.

9. There must be no general education and special education divide, regarding neither students nor staff. **We support students based on their needs, not a label.** Staff support students based on the staff members' availabilities and expertise, not their job title or funding source.
10. **We refuse to allow special education to be a destination.** Instruction and Intervention Systems (and RTI/MTSS) are not pathways to special education; special education is simply the most intensive set of supports that we can provide. But the plan must be to intensively and successfully support students and then exit them to less restrictive environments. Students are exited from receiving the supplemental supports of special education services when:
- Skill deficit has been ameliorated.
  - Successes within interventions have transferred to core environments.
  - Coping mechanisms to ensure sustained success have been developed.
  - There is a belief that students will continue to experience success in the absence of supplemental supports.

Success is inevitable; exiting is the goal.

11. **Behavior is as critical as academics.** We have not encountered many students with significant deficits in foundational academic skills for whom years of academic failure and frustration have not

led to significant behavioral needs. We have not encountered many students with significant deficits in behavioral skills whose behavioral challenges have not contributed to academic difficulties. And for all students, the behaviors, habits, and attributes known as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, self-regulation, or executive functioning are as critical to success in college, career, and life as academics.

**12. The best intervention is a targeted intervention.** An effective intervention will never be represented by a group for students in a classroom working independently on a packet of worksheets with an instructor available to answer questions that may arise. Interventions are intensively delivered and intensively targeted. We strive to address the causal factors and most important areas of need. The sense of urgency is too great; there is not a moment to lose.

**13.** Culture is king, but structures are critical too. We must proactively, i.e., well before the beginning of the next school year, address the following questions:

- Which students are in need of specialized supports due to significant deficits (screening)?
- In what areas do these students most need (and first need) support (diagnosing)?
- When will interventions take place?
- Which staff will provide interventions?
- What are the best resources for interventions?
- How will we determine the extent to which students are responding to intervention (progress monitoring)?

**Structures with Instruction and Intervention Systems are the foundations upon which staff serve students successfully.**

**14.** Instruction and intervention must be intensive, differentiation, engaging, with sound pedagogies, strategies, and practices, and with a “growth mindset” approach. **How is more significant than what.** We are the most important variable. We cannot blame the program or the student. The manner in which we use the time and resources that we dedicate to supporting students represents the difference between success and frustration. There must be efficient and effective processes for communication, collaboration, and coordination to inform the continuous improvement of all students within Instruction and Intervention Systems. Staff must regularly talk with colleagues in organized sessions. There must be frequent times for teacher (PLC) teams to collaborate in support of Instruction and Intervention Systems. There must be frequent times for schoolwide teams to collaborate in support of Instruction and Intervention Systems. And there must be procedures for teams to communicate with teams to ensure coordinated and successful services to students.

**15.** For a highly vulnerable student with significant deficits in foundational skills, the following are non-negotiable:

- They must successfully and fully participate in **inclusive and scaffolded core and more experiences.**
- They must receive immediate, intensive, and targeted **specialized supports.**

We must commit to resolving logistical challenges to meet these dual requirements. Solutions exist. There are schools around the world that have designed and implemented effective Instruction and Intervention Systems.

**16.** There will definitely be students for whom special education supports are necessary and appropriate. And yet, we have historically over-identified and mis-identified students for these supports and the success receiving special education services has been lower than desired. To ensure greater successes for students who may receive special education services, we ask the following before requesting permission to conduct a formal evaluation to determine eligibility for supports:

- What will we be doing differently if and when an eligibility determination is made? Could we be doing that (or could we begin doing that) now?
- What's the exit strategy—what will it look like and sound like when (what evidence will reveal that) students no longer need special education supports.

**Preparing for the success of special education supports will make the likelihood of success much greater.**

There are innumerable forms that successful Instruction and Intervention Systems may take. The size of the school, the needs of staffs, students, and communities, and the realities of resources will all contribute to the logistical characteristics of core, more, and specialized supports, including but not limited to:

- Which staff performs which roles, and when?
- How and when are core, more, and highly specialized supports scheduled.
- How and with what tools and processes are students screened to determine who is most vulnerable and immediately in need of supports?
- Which resources will we need to meet student needs?
- How will allocate human, fiscal, and material resources?
- How and with what tools and processes will we monitor the progress of students and the efficacy of our efforts?

We must address these questions and others, and our answers will undoubtedly be distinct. However, the 16 foundational principles described above must be the same for all schools that commit to building an Instruction and Intervention System.