Building Foundational Skills through Intervention

Educators have an important (and sometimes overwhelming) responsibility to meet the needs of students who require intervention. Intervention is not one size fits all. Educators benefit from having a toolbox of interventions and strategies to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Intervention is essential for many reasons. It can improve a student's foundational skills, positively affecting all subject areas and life skills. Effective and evidence-based interventions are necessary as part of the intervention process to determine whether a disability could be the underlying cause of a student's lack of progress. We must ensure that we do not over-identify students in special education due to a lack of evidence-based interventions that could have helped close a skill gap and increase foundational skills.

Let's examine the importance of intervention, the process, and how to help students increase foundational skills to support their success.

The Importance of a Multitiered System of Supports

A multitiered system of supports (MTSS) is an umbrella term that refers to the large framework for providing targeted interventions for students who are struggling in school. These students may need academic, behavioral, social-emotional, or another kind of support, such as help with improving school attendance. Schools who use the MTSS framework may call it the MTSS model or the MTSS process, but the big picture remains the same: it's an organized, systematic way to target the specific needs of students through tailored interventions.

Within the MTSS umbrella, educators and related service providers include both the response to intervention (RTI) models and positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) models. RTI is typically thought to address academic concerns and PBIS is typically understood to address behavioral challenges. But, MTSS is also broader than both RTI and PBIS. It also includes the kinds of support a student may need if her family is living in a hotel or shelter, if she is struggling with chronic absenteeism, food insecurity, or difficulty with transportation to and from school.

As school leaders continue to make plans to address the holistic needs of students, it is more important than ever to strengthen their MTSS framework and adopt evidence-based interventions that are proven to be effective. Doing so will help ensure the needs of all students—those with and without disabilities—are met.

Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Response to Intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) are approaches to teaching and learning that support students in need of additional assistance. The roots of RTI lie in the field of learning disabilities, though it grew in prominence with the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Preston et al., 2015). When IDEA was reauthorized in 2004, lawmakers allowed schools to qualify students for special education services in the category of specific learning disability using one of two models: the IQ-discrepancy model (previously the only model in place) or the RTI model. So, rather than qualifying students only by a discrepancy between their cognitive achievement score and academic performance data, school teams could also implement a series of tiered, evidence-based interventions to address the needs of students.

For example, in the general education setting, a student may have difficulty reading on grade level. Though a parent may request an evaluation for special education at any time for any reason, a teacher or school team cannot simply move this struggling reader to and through the special education eligibility process. Doing so is against the law and leads to over-identification of students with disabilities. Instead, the teacher must move through the RTI process to implement evidence-based interventions that support this struggling reader in his or her learning.

RTI: A Three-Tiered Model

TIER 1

High-quality classroom instruction for the whole class

Tier 1 of RTI assumes all students receive high-quality classroom instruction, so a student's learning cannot be due to a lack of instruction or poor instruction. Tier 1 is for the whole class and should be evidence-based, meaning supported by research that verifies the effectiveness of the curriculum and instructional methods. Typically, Tier 1 instruction works for most students (e.g., 80%) (Ervin, nd) most of the time. Tier 1 of PBIS for behavioral support includes classroom management strategies and behavioral systems that apply to all children. For example, modeling the desired behavior, encouraging/allowing students to take part in developing classroom routines and rules, offering specific praise, and using proximity and non-verbal communication to correct minor interfering behaviors are all examples of Tier 1 behavioral supports that apply to all students.

TIER 2

Targeted instruction and evidence-based interventions for small groups

Tier 2 targets small groups of students based on the academic or behavioral data gathered from different types of assessments, including both formative and summative assessments. Tier 2 interventions must also be evidence-based, and they are intended to meet specific, individualized needs of a smaller (e.g., 15%) (Ervin, nd). subset of students. Tier 2 interventions are not synonymous with special education eligibility or disability. In fact, for most students, the targeted intervention is the support they need to accelerate their learning and continue with grade-level instruction.

TIER 3

Intensive interventions and comprehensive evaluations for the individual student

Tier 3 interventions are highly individualized and intensive, and should meet the needs of a small subset of students (e.g., 2–7%) (Ervin, nd). A student is served in Tier 3 if the services provided in the previous tier are not resulting in significant progress. Tier 3 involves more individualized instruction with an increase in progress monitoring.

For example, a child who consistently elopes from (runs out of) the classroom and struggles with calling out and other disruptive behaviors during class may require daily check-ins in the morning, at lunch time, and in the afternoon. This child could have a personalized behavioral chart for teachers to complete each period of the day, and may be able to earn incentives at designated checkpoints throughout the school day for achieving behavioral goals. These kinds of supports are considered Tier 3 due to their intensive and personalized nature.

Why RTI Is Essential in Education

A robust response to intervention strategy is a critical part of any school's learning plan. Without a comprehensive strategy in place to address the layered needs of students, how can teachers even begin to plan effectively?

For example, what should teachers do if they discover more than half of their class is missing a prerequisite skill necessary for an upcoming learning objective? How might grade-level teams be creative with large-scale Tier 2 interventions, such as extended learning time through week-long acceleration academies and "double dose" math structures (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020)?

What options do teachers have if a few, or more than a few, students show ongoing signs of anxiety, isolation, low self-confidence, or fear? Challenges such as these require teachers to be resourceful and creative in meeting the needs of all their students.

While many districts already have strong RTI models in place, every system will do well to examine and refine its model to be sure it reflects the multifaceted strategies needed for students. Students are presenting academic and/or behavioral needs. And yet there is a pressing need to think more broadly than the labels that limit and track students. Single assessment scores don't tell the whole story. Teams need to be ready to respond with interventions that are proven to be effective and that address the needs of the whole child.

Challenges When Routines Are Interrupted

Many students with disabilities experience additional challenges as a result of the interrupted learning routines. During the COVID pandemic, interrupted routines were at an all-time high. Most special education experts, including researchers from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development, note that students with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Curran, 2021).

Students with disabilities have historically been at a greater risk for regression during extended breaks from school. One such example is summer break, which is a key reason that Extended School Year, or ESY, exists as a service on the individualized education program (IEP). While summer break is a common example of when ESY services are delivered, these services can be delivered year-round based upon student need as determined by the IEP team.

Learning recovery and learning acceleration efforts are especially important for students with disabilities. All or nearly all of the recommendations for school-wide and classroom-based learning recovery strategies are applicable to and effective for students with disabilities.

As school districts and local school leaders continue efforts to support learning recovery and acceleration efforts, they would be wise to adhere to the principle of universal design for learning (UDL). Universal design suggests planning solutions that meet the needs of the greatest number of students.

An example in architecture, where universal design for learning has its roots, is the idea of the elevator. The elevator is necessary for persons with mobility limitations, such as those who use wheelchairs. Yet, the elevator is also helpful and often necessary for all people. It is a more efficient way to travel up 15 flights of stairs, particularly if carrying suitcases. In a school setting, universal design for learning means planning curriculum and instruction that supports and optimizes the learning needs of all students—those with and without disabilities.

What's Next?

More than ever before, the essential role that teachers and schools play in the health and well-being of a community's children is being recognized and appreciated by parents, community leaders, and policymakers. So, now is the time to identify, invest in, and implement a strong intervention curriculum, to let go of what has historically been unhelpful to students, and choose resources that work, including:

- Social-emotional learning initiatives and school-based mental health services

- Relationship-based academic and behavioral interventions, such as high-quality tutoring and mentoring

- Whole-child initiatives, including those that address the physical and social-emotional well-being of students

- Evidence-based academic interventions that can be tailored to individuals and small groups of students

- Multiple sources of data to determine next steps for struggling students

- Project-based learning opportunities with multiple entry points to invite diverse groups of learners to make meaningful connections to their real-world environment

- Frequent, specific formative assessments to help inform instruction (alongside benchmark and standardized assessments)
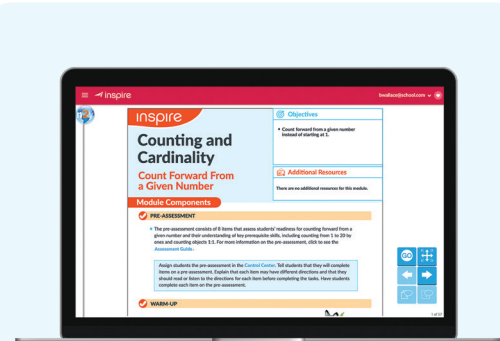
The passion and commitment that so many educators hold for their work and their students is nothing short of heroic. What better way to honor the resilience of our children and the tireless dedication of educators than to support them with an evidence- and research-based intervention curriculum?

Inspire is n2y's new intervention curriculum that guides students who need teacher-led intervention instruction to independent learning as they acquire the skills they need for success in school and life, unlike sit-and-get products.

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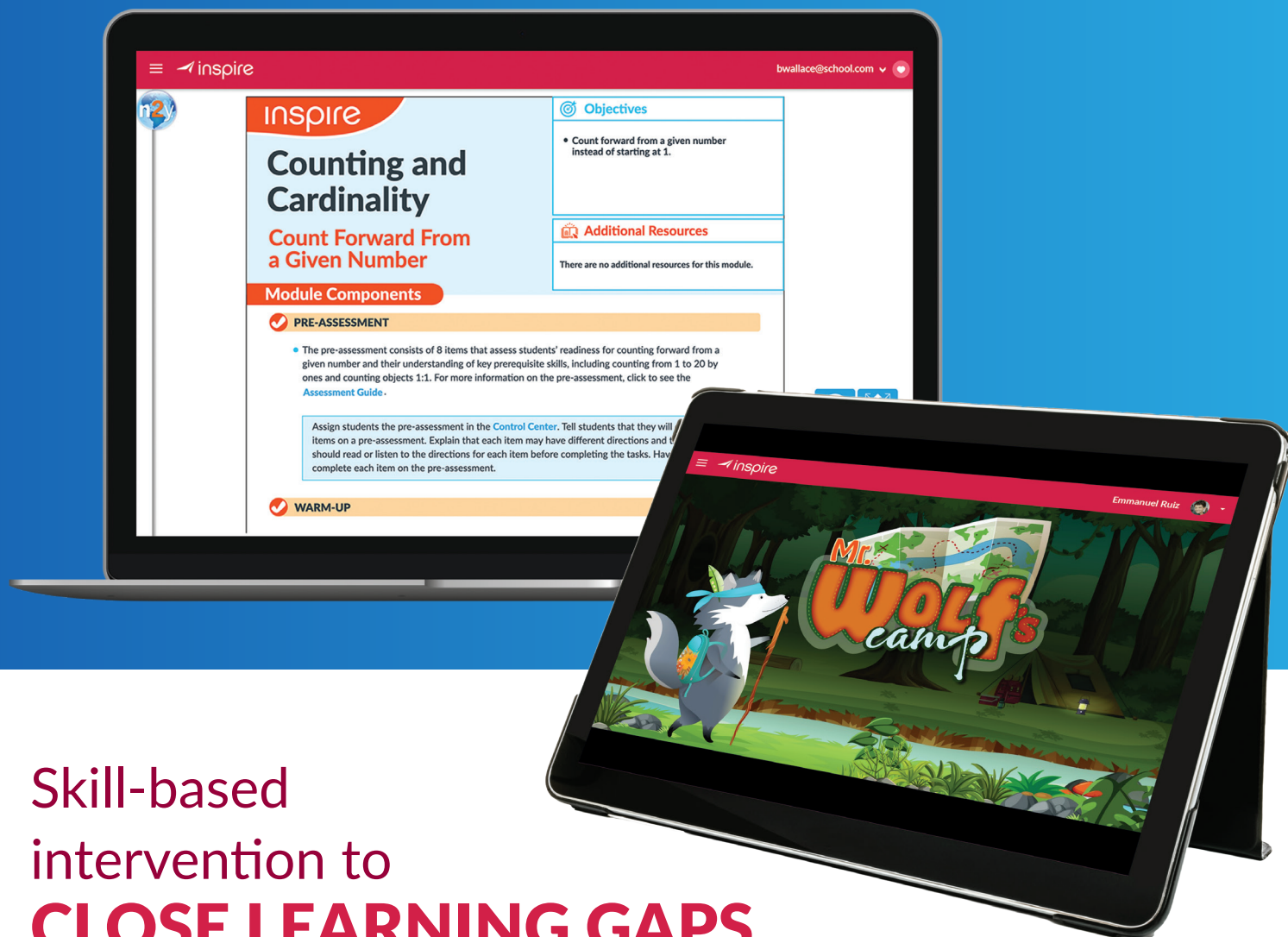
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