Schools, Families, and Response to Intervention

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A lot has been said and written about family involvement in schools. Definitions of family involvement are varied, ranging from participating in school-defined activities (e.g., fundraiser, volunteer) to the establishment of partnerships among families and educators (Christenson, 2004). It is not surprising that different types of involvement at school, or ways of supporting learning at home, are linked to different outcomes. However, it is clear a) that family processes and practices are strongly related to students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes while students are in school and beyond, and b) that when schools and families collaborate to support student learning, student outcomes are improved (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Given this link between families, family–school collaborations, and student outcomes, many educators desire greater family involvement and collaboration in supporting learning at school and in the home. Indeed, the increasing priority given to family access and involvement in student learning and schools is apparent in national initiatives, general and special education legislation, and the statements and goals of countless education-related professional organizations (Reschly & Christenson, in press). Further, a high level of family involvement is one of the common characteristics of high-performing schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and family involvement and collaboration are critical aspects of many comprehensive school reform efforts (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Reschly & Christenson, in press). The purpose of this paper is to highlight the necessity and promise of including families and family–school partnerships in the comprehensive educational reform initiative Response to Intervention (RTI).

Families and Schools are the Primary Contexts for Student Learning

Although schools are charged formally with the task of educating students, families clearly have a significant impact on student development, learning, and behavior—inside and outside of the school doors. Indeed, it is estimated that students spend as much as 90% of their time from birth through age 18 outside of schools (Walberg, 1984). Student learning cannot be described or assessed as a product of either schools or families in isolation (Christenson & Anderson, 2002). Further, there is commonality in the factors that promote student competence in homes and schools (Chall, 2000; Christenson & Peterson, 2006; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993), such as standards and expectations, structure, opportunity to learn, support, climate and relationships, and modeling (Christenson & Peterson, 2006). Student competence is enhanced when there is congruence among the two primary contexts for learning—home and school (Reschly & Christenson, in press).

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Family-School Interventions and Partnerships

Recently, there have been attempts to examine the effectiveness of family interventions (e.g., parent tutoring interventions, parent training programs) and school–family collaborative interventions (e.g., consultation, family–school partnership programs) for improving students' academic performance and/or behavior at school (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2007). Although empirical evaluation and synthesis of such programs is relatively recent and more work is needed, results of these initial examinations may serve to inform practice in schools and are relevant to educators as they endeavor to work with families to support student learning in RTI models.

One synthesis, undertaken by the Task Force on Empirically Supported Interventions in School Psychology, found moderate to large effect sizes across family intervention domains (i.e., parent education, parent involvement, family/parent consultation, family–school collaboration/partnerships, family systems therapy/family training, and early childhood family-focused interventions; Carlson & Christenson, 2005). Across these areas, certain intervention components stood out: those that stressed collaboration and dialogue between families and schools and joint monitoring of student progress; parent interventions that focused on specific, measurable outcomes; family involvement interventions that emphasized the role of parents as tutors in a defined subject area; and school–family consultation (Christenson & Carlson, 2005).

This information is useful to districts as they look to implement evidence-based practices to improve student achievement and other positive outcomes. Furthermore, some of these components—collaboration, shared monitoring, and dialogue—are directly applicable to educators as they seek to establish relationships and work with families to support student learning in general (Christenson & Carlson, 2005) and within RTI models (Reschly & Christenson, in press). In addition, there is even some evidence of poorer outcomes for students and family functioning when families are excluded from counseling and other therapeutic interventions (Szapocznik & Prado, 2007); and finally, working in either home or school, rather than across the two, misses an opportunity to pair the power of prevention and early intervention services inherent in RTI with the two primary socializing agents of our students—families and schools (Reschly, Coolong, Christenson, & Gutkin, 2007).

There are a number of ways schools and families may work together. There is a difference, however, in involving families to meet goals and activities defined by the school and working with families to support student learning. The latter requires positive, engaged relationships (Reschly & Christenson, in press) and collaboration among educators and families. Definitions of family–school partnerships highlight the need for shared accountability, goals/priorities, responsibility, and contributions (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Jordan, Orzco, & Averett, 2001), as well as the need for student-focused problem solving (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Structured problem solving is the central to both RTI (Marston, Reschly, Lau, Canter, & Muyskens, 2007) and the creation of partnerships among families and educators. In other words, problem solving is the orientation and set of activities that brings families and educators together to support student learning and competence in RTI models.

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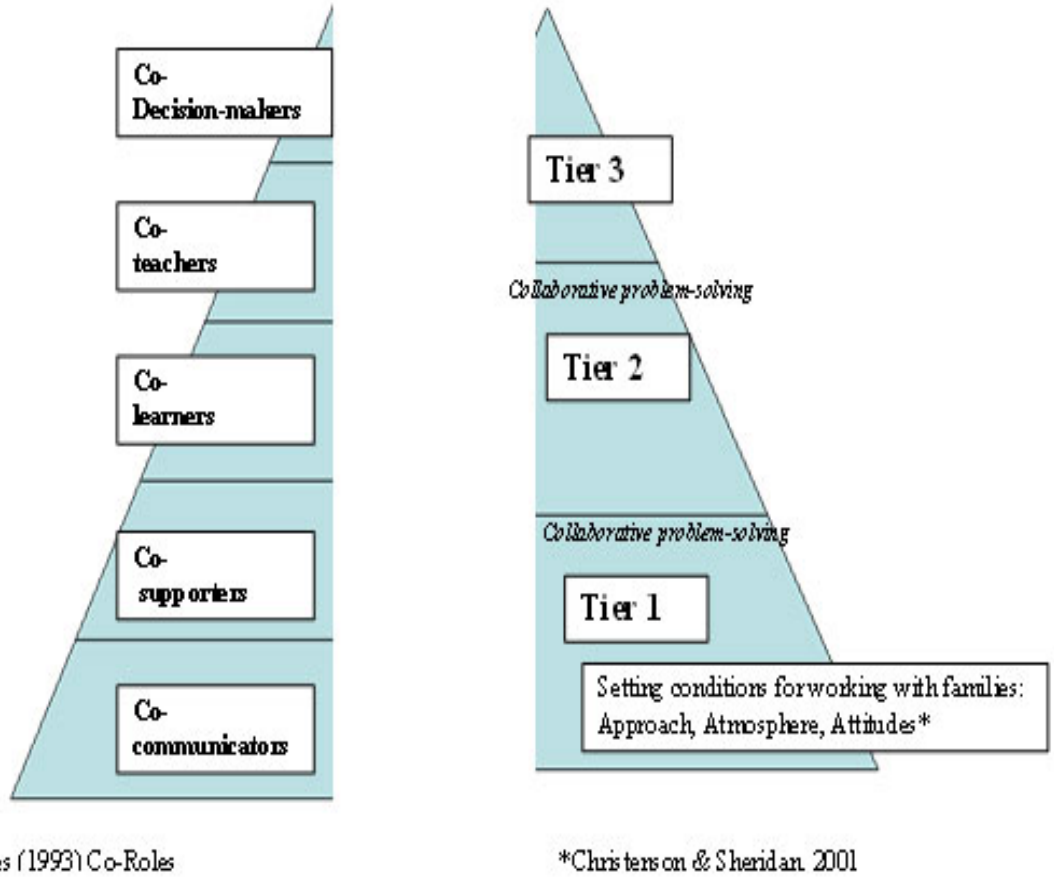
Family-School Partnerships and RTI

RTI represents a significant change in educational practices. Several of these changes, such as the focus on prevention, screening, and early intervention; frequent, systematic data collection; and the change in focus from "where to teach students" to questions of "how," "what," and "is this working" to produce optimal student learning (Reschly et al., 2007), segue to the creation of engaged, positive relationships and problem-solving efforts across families and schools—sharing information, goals, and responsibility.

Each tier of the RTI model represents a greater intensity of services and problem solving and more frequent data collection. When family–school partnerships are included as part of RTI, each subsequent tier also represents greater frequency of communication and joint problem solving among families and educators. The idea of leveled or tiered family–school collaboration and partnerships is not new. Moles (1993) described a series of roles for families and educators that represented shared responsibility and participation. These "co-roles" were represented in the form of a pyramid, much like the tiers of RTI (see Figure 1). In addition, just as in RTI, each subsequent level "co" role for families and schools required greater amounts of time, commitment, and contribution on the part of families and educators.

Figure 1. **Family-School Co-Roles and Partnerships in RtI**



In Tier 1 of a family–school RTI model, conditions for engaged, positive relationships among families and educators should be in place. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) described these conditions in terms of 4 A's. Three of the A's, Approach, Attitudes, and Atmosphere, refer to setting conditions for engaged relationships and problem solving between families and educators.

- Approach is the structure for family–school interactions and relationships. This condition revolves around shared goals, expectations for involvement, and valuing the diverse ways in which families support learning, and the recognition that relationships and congruence across families and schools enhance student competence.
- Attitudes are the values and perceptions held about relationships between families and educators (e.g., perspective taking, sharing of information, respect).
- Atmosphere is the climate in schools for families and educators.

The fourth A is collaborative Action or behavior across families and schools to promote student

competence across academic, behavioral, and social domains (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). It is important for these conditions—or relationships—to be established prior to signs of student difficulty, as these relationships facilitate the intervention-oriented problem solving that is the basis of RTI.

In Tiers 2 and 3, the intensity of collaborative efforts and problem-solving activities between families and educators increases. What occurs with families in each stage of the model will vary depending on the family's strengths and needs, school personnel, and local context; however, there are a variety of family and family–school interventions that may considered in addition to those schools already use across the tiers. Conjoint behavioral consultation (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007) is one example of an intensive family–school problem-solving intervention.

Regardless of the role taken by family members, families and educators inform one another and share their expertise and knowledge about the student to support learning and promote competence. Enhancing student competence is the goal of family–school collaboration and relationships within and across the three tiers (Reschly & Christenson, in press).

Families, RTI, and Special Education

For years, there have been calls for greater parent access and participation in special education. Although parents' rights have been spelled out from the point of referral, this is often late in the trajectory of students' difficulties at school. Further, all too often parents are passive in the special education process (Harry, 1992) or worse, by the time their student is referred or placed in special education, acrimonious relationships between families and schools have developed. RTI is an exciting reform for several reasons, including the opportunity to engage and work with families at the first sign of student difficulties. If the model is functioning well, by the time a student reaches the point of a comprehensive evaluation or is in need of Tier 3 interventions, families and educators have long-established, positive, engaged relationships that center around supporting student learning, sharing of data and decision making, interventions, and collaborative problem solving.

Conclusions

The rationale for working with families to support student learning is clear: When families and schools work together, student outcomes are enhanced. Despite all that has been written about family involvement, however, partnerships among educators and families are still largely an unmet national priority (Carlson & Christenson, 2005). RTI is an opportunity to bring about meaningful change in family–school relationships, allowing for the creation of engaged partnerships between educators and families through collaborative, structured problem-solving efforts.

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