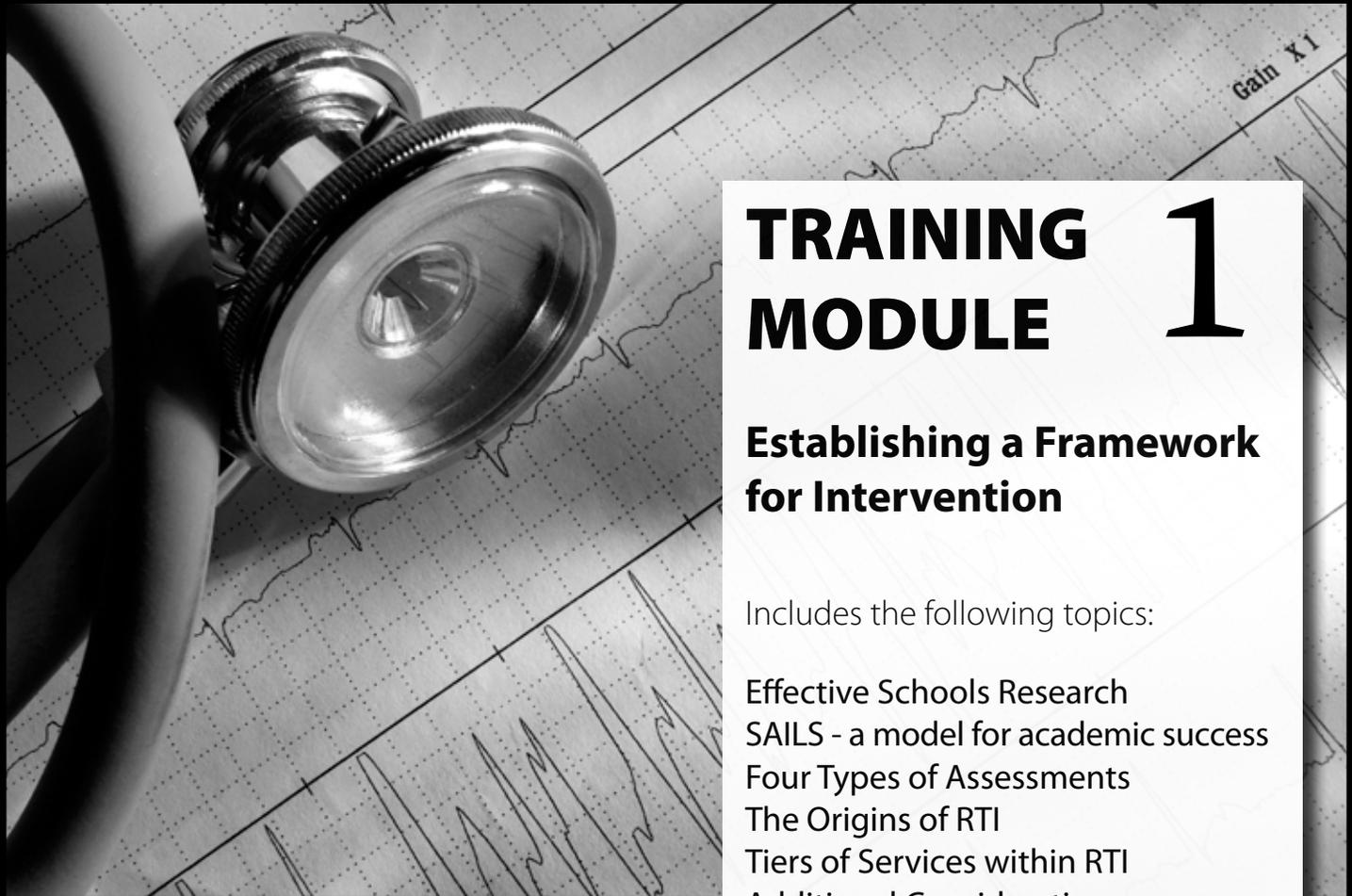


Using RTI Data for Effective Decision-Making

Educators as Physicians



TRAINING MODULE 1

Establishing a Framework for Intervention

Includes the following topics:

- Effective Schools Research
- SAILS - a model for academic success
- Four Types of Assessments
- The Origins of RTI
- Tiers of Services within RTI
- Additional Considerations
- A Professional Parallel

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Module One: Establishing a Framework for Intervention

Introduction

Increasing numbers of schools across the county are realizing that their students' academic achievement could be improved. Some might say this growing interest has been motivated by accountability requirements of AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress), the No Child Left Behind legislation, or the Race to the Top federal initiative. Regardless of the reason, many schools are seeking to improve their students' outcomes. The important questions that many schools are asking include:



Set your SAILS for Success

As professional educators we are obligated to turn to well-conducted, quality research when seeking to answer questions about our professional practice. To address questions regarding how to improve our schools, we can look at studies often referred to as “effective schools research”. My colleague, Dr. Carolyn Denton, and I carefully reviewed this body of research as we began to write a handbook for reading coaches (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005; 2009). We initially began that work by reviewing the existing research on coaching. Several studies we reviewed had been conducted by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers. Everyone associated with coaching would recognize those two names. Joyce and Showers are the folks that some say invented the concept of coaching that is so popular today.



In one of the articles we read, Joyce and Showers stated that their research had shown that coaching was effective in helping teachers improve their instructional skills. However, they also cautioned that coaches alone cannot “fix” a struggling school.

They recommended that coaching be implemented within a context of general school improvement (Showers & Joyce, March, 1996).

Once we read that, Carolyn and I had a choice to make while writing our handbook. We could quote Joyce and Shower’s research and simply state that the folks reading our book should implement their coaching services within a framework for success, but leave it to them to find this “framework”, or we could suggest a specific framework for school-wide improvement. We decided we really needed to investigate the latter.

This is when we turned to the research base on effective schools. We reviewed this research looking for significant **PATTERNS** in the results. If we could find components that were found in every single study of effective schools, we could then determine a framework, or roadmap, for success. We set out to discover whether there were, in fact, some components that every school described by the researchers as “effective” had implemented. We rolled up our sleeves and read and read and read.

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We were excited when we realized that there were in fact five components present in every single study of effective schools that had achieved high levels of academic success with at least 90% of their students. We were even more excited when we realized that the first letter of these five components formed an acronym: SAILS! (Where would we be as professional educators if we didn’t have acronyms?!) Of course, it is the components, not the acronym or the cheesy sayings, that are important. In every study of effective schools that we reviewed, we found that effective schools pay attention to the following: Standards, Assessments, Instruction and Intervention, Leadership, and a Sustained, System-Wide Commitment. The five-component SAILS model emerged as a research-based framework for academic success that schools may use as a roadmap for improvement.

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SAILS - Standards

The first letter of the acronym SAILS is “S” for *Standards*. Standards define what students should know and be able to do at each grade level and at key developmental benchmarks. State education agencies develop standards to inform schools and the public what the instructional focus should be at each grade level. These days almost every school is paying close attention to their own state’s standards because of increasing pressures for accountability from federal level agencies, including the *No Child Left Behind* legislation with its goals for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

The difference between how highly effective schools use Standards, however, compared to less successful schools involves their commitment to application. In other words, highly effective schools don't just "know about" the standards—for example, how to locate them on their state's education website or where they stored the thick, three-ring binder containing the standards for their grade level. Highly effective schools *study* the standards, *discuss* the standards at grade level and across grade levels to establish instructional focus, and *apply* the standards to set high performance goals for all their students, including students in special education.

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Most of the studies of effective schools focused on schools that had achieved their goals despite significant challenges. One of the realities these schools face is simply not having enough available resources to do the work. They live with serious limitations in time, money, and personnel. So one of the common conversations that occur at these schools involves teachers and administrators (and even parents) discussing which of the standards are essential and deserve special focus and commitment, while others will be addressed but relegated to lower priority in terms of time and energy.

Standards help teachers and administrators develop and maintain instructional vision and direction.

For example, a school may decide that: "All of our First Grade and Kindergarten teachers have agreed to focus on teaching the literacy standards that address the key elements identified by the National Reading Panel: phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. We will do our best to make sure every student—including those with learning disabilities—achieve the benchmark standards for these skills by the time they leave First Grade." Other standards may then be relegated to lower priority so that personnel and resources may be focused on selected goals.

Standards help teachers and administrators develop and maintain instructional vision and direction. Effective schools research indicates that highly effective schools study and apply standards, adapting them to their own unique pool of students, personnel, and resources, to ensure success for every student.

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SAILS - Assessments

The next component of the SAILS framework that highly effective schools attend to involves *Assessments*. Once we know where we need to go with our instruction (the information provided by Standards), the next concern of professional educators is to determine the instructional needs of the students. In other words, Standards define the goal or *end* of instruction whereas students' needs indicate where instruction must *begin* in order to reach those goals. Students' instructional needs are determined through Assessments.

Today, most schools are investing significant time and resources assessing their students. Many educators, as well as parents and members of the general public, are questioning the amount of testing that is going on in schools. Some suggest that perhaps schools are spending *too much time* assessing students. I would definitely agree that this

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may in fact be the case, at least in some schools. I would also agree that conducting assessments is NOT the most important thing that we, as educators, can do with our limited time and resources. I believe the majority of educators would agree that the MOST important thing we do is to provide high quality and effective instruction to our students. So where do assessments fit in?

As professional educators, we must be certain that we have gathered sufficient, appropriate information to both plan and deliver good instruction and intervention for each individual child. Furthermore, once instruction has been initiated, we must continue to collect information that lets us know whether or not our instruction has been effective. A professional educator must not rely simply on "cardiac assessment," that is, "In my heart, I know what is right for my students."

Good teachers utilize their experience, their knowledge about their students, and their intuition to make decisions in their classrooms. However, professional educators also embrace the information provided by four different categories of academic assessments.

Educators in highly effective schools collect and use assessment data from these four types of assessments to:

- (a) **Screen** students for academic need
- (b) **Diagnose** specific academic concerns
- (c) **Monitor** student progress continuously
- (d) **Evaluate** student outcomes toward the achievement of academic standards

Understanding the Purpose of Assessments

If *all* schools are conducting lots of assessments, what distinguishes the highly effective schools from the less effective schools? Clearly just assessing our students is not enough or every school would be highly effective! One difference is that teachers and administrators in highly effective schools have been provided with sufficient, quality professional development to help them understand the *purpose* of the assessments they are using. In less effective schools there were many teachers and even administrators who, when asked why they gave certain assessments to their students, responded, “Because they told us to!”

Some educators may shy away from trying to understand the purpose and rationale for administering the assessments they are giving because they may mistakenly believe

What is important to understand is that assessments are designed to provide information that can be used to answer significant questions and guide key decisions.

the topic would be too complex to understand. They may have unpleasant memories of some coursework taken during their teacher preparation that dealt with psychometric assessment issues such as reliability and validity. Some aspects of assessment are in fact very complicated. However, the good news is that it is not necessary for all educators to delve deeply into these rather heavy topics.

What is important to understand is that assessments are designed to provide information that can be used to *answer significant questions* and *guide key decisions*.

In the case of the four categories of academic assessments used in effective schools, each category is designed to answer simple but important questions. We will identify these four categories and the questions they address as follows:



1. Benchmark/Screening Assessments

These assessments are designed to help educators answer the question:

Which of our students might possibly need some extra assistance in order to be successful academically?

Schools use these types of assessments to ensure that no student is allowed to fall between the cracks and thus not receive the help he/she may need. The schools studied in effective schools research achieve the astounding goal of 90% (or higher!) success for their students because they are unwilling to write off or ignore *any* student. By applying benchmark/screening assessments, these schools systematically evaluate the instructional needs of all students on a regular basis, looking for students who may need some additional help.



2. Diagnostic Assessments

Once schools have identified students that might need additional academic assistance, teachers then turn to a set of individually administered diagnostic assessments to answer the question:

What are this student's academic strengths and instructional needs?

Diagnostic assessments, in this context, are not the same assessments used by special educators to “diagnose” a disability. Rather, these assessments are typically informal skills assessments that can be administered by classroom teachers. Educators at highly effective and highly challenged schools know that they have no time to waste. They must design instruction that builds on what the student already knows and immediately addresses any gaps or holes in each student's skill set. Diagnostic assessments help provide specific information to plan effectively differentiated and appropriately focused instruction.

Using the Standards (which define what needs to be taught to *every* student) and the results of benchmark/screening and diagnostic Assessments (which define the type of instruction or intervention that an *individual* student may need), educators can design and provide high quality, effective, and appropriate instruction to all students.



3. Progress Monitoring Assessments

Once instruction has begun, educators rely on progress monitoring assessments to answer the question:

Is learning happening?

Educators in highly effective schools understand that looking for clear answers to this question is imperative to ensure that every student be academically successful. Simply watching a student move through a curriculum and appear to understand is not sufficient. The end of a school year or even a semester is too long to wait for information that determines if the student is *actually* learning.

Thus, highly effective schools implement progress monitoring assessments periodically throughout the semester and year to measure instructional effectiveness. This category of assessment includes the commonly used quizzes and chapter or unit tests that are included in most commercial

programs. It also includes observation of students' performance on their assignments and daily work in class. For students who are receiving additional, supplementary instruction, or more intensive intervention because of greater academic needs, progress monitoring may also include the use of more frequent assessments, setting specific performance goals, and actually graphing progress toward those goals. Progress monitoring assessment at this level typically involves a process called "curriculum-based measurement" (CBM), which will be further discussed in Module 2.



4. Outcome Assessments

The final category of assessments, called outcome assessments, is designed to answer the question:

Did our students make progress toward meeting the standards?

This category includes the high-stakes assessments designed by individual states to assess students at certain benchmarks, starting in the early elementary years and concluding near the end of high school. The results from these assessments are used for making decisions regarding school accountability and are increasingly reported to the public in local newspapers and on various internet sites, so that parents and others may determine the quality of their local schools. Outcome assessments are often seen as more valuable to the administrators, other school leaders, and the general public than they are to teachers at the classroom level. However, they are part of the complete assessment tool-kit that is used by highly effective schools to guide professional decision-making.

Understanding the purpose of the assessments in each of these four categories is essential. Educational leaders at effective schools find a way to provide necessary professional development to their teachers and administrators that equips them to understand why assessments are administered and which questions are answered by data obtained from the four types of assessments. Only with such foundational knowledge can professional educators select and use assessments in a manner beneficial to students.

Effective schools research indicates that highly successful professional educators don't only know *why* assessments are administered to their students. There are at least two additional factors that distinguish effective schools from less effective schools regarding assessment. Educators at these schools also know how to both *share* and then ultimately *use* student assessment data successfully to inform their professional decision-making.