Did You Know?

In the past, identifying learning disabilities involved examining a student's IQ and achievement discrepancy (i.e., the difference between a student's performance and typical grade level performance). However, these practices led to many misdiagnosed learning disabilities and created difficulty in remediation due to the limited information available to practitioners (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). To address these limitations, new language was incorporated into the 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), stating that districts "may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention" as part of its evaluation procedures for identifying learning disabilities (IDEA, 204, 614[6] B). IDEA 2004 also stipulates that up to 15% of federal special education funds can be used to provide early intervening services for students prior to their identification as having a learning disability.

Why it Matters:

This shift in policy language opened the door to alternative means for identifying students with learning disabilities, and Response to Intervention (RtI) as a multi-tiered, collaborative, school-wide preventative approach (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2013) quickly became a widely adopted and supported framework for capitalizing on this new option in IDEA. According to the model, high-quality grade-level instruction and screening assessments are provided to all students at the first tier, and identified students move to the second tier or third tier when interventions are needed. This model shows some promise for addressing equity issues like misidentification and disproportionality; however, the manner in which it is appropriated in schools and districts may or may not lead to improvements in these areas and could even exacerbate inequities, as when all English Language Learners are moved to second or third tiers or teachers do not follow through with or document interventions (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009; Thorius & Sullivan, 2012). Furthermore, our association of the RTI model with the response to intervention language in IDEA policy may foreclose other possible innovative methods for early intervention. Therefore, it is essential to become educated about IDEA and to keep equity at the forefront when adopting and implementing a particular framework.

For Equity Now:

- Read up on IDEA and ask critical questions about the policy intent and the opportunities it affords and constrains
- Use the critical questions in our newsletter on multi-tiered systems of support to assess your own system at your next staff meeting
- Engage in an online professional learning module on culturally responsive RTI
- Visit the National Center on Response to Intervention website and the RTI Network website to learn more about RTI frameworks and implementation
- Invite families to learn more about RTI from engaging videos like these and to participate at all levels of the system
References:

