

Acting on the Moral Imperative

How to Implement Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning



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RIGOROUS LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

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How to Implement Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning

Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning (SSRL) ensure high levels of learning for all students at all readiness levels through the integration of elements from the most important and impactful initiatives within public education: response to intervention (RTI), multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), professional learning communities (PLCs), positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), universal design for learning (UDL), special education, gifted education, and differentiated instruction.

Most directly and significantly, SSRL build upon RTI, a proactive, coordinated, and systemic approach to providing academic and behavioral supports for all students. SSRL are among the most-research-based initiatives with which educators can engage (Bloom, 1968; 1984; Burns & Symington, 2002; Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000; Gersten, Compton, Connor, Dimino, Santoro, Linan-Thompson, et al., 2009a; Gersten, Beckmann, Clarke, Foegen, Marsh, Star, et al., 2009b; Hattie, 2012; Swanson & Sachse-Lee, 2000; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007).

Within SSRL, collaborative teams of educators ask:

- What student needs can we anticipate?
- For what supports can we proactively plan and prepare?

SSRL are, fundamentally and foundationally, a framework, a way of thinking, in which teams continuously ask, “To what extent are students *responding* to *instruction* and *intervention*?”

When students with significant deficits in foundational skills are not closing the gap, adjustments are made. When students who enter a course or grade level with significant levels of existing knowledge and yet are not progressing adequately and appropriately, adjustments are made. In this way, serving students using the principles of SSRL represents everything we do on behalf of students and staffs in schools. And, given the importance of complexity of this work, a coordination system is required.

While SSRL represent a set of supports for *all* students—one of the most highly-effective and researched-based practices in which schools can engage—response to intervention and SSRL entered the educational discourse most prominently through the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) in 2004.

IDEA 2004 altered the landscape for schools. Whereas practitioners previously used the IQ-achievement discrepancy model to identify children with learning disabilities, the reauthorization allowed schools to employ a lack of “response to intervention” as an alternative method for determining eligibility for special education and as a rationale for providing early intervention to children at risk for school failure.

While the reauthorized law seems, at first glance, to relate to eligibility determinations for special education, using a lack of response to intervention for such determinations has obvious implications for all of education. Systemically and successfully implement RTI with a SSRL requires that we *intervene* and monitor the extent to which students are *responding*. IDEA 2004 encourages this intervention and monitoring to be done early—both early in a student’s school career (in grades K–3) and early upon the

identification of a difficulty or deficit—and permits districts to use as much as 15 percent of their special education monies to fund these early intervening services.

A SSRL is a school-wide construct that provides high-quality instruction and research-based systematic interventions for all student needs—academic, pro-social, and pro-functional.

From struggling students striving to meet minimum proficiency levels to gifted students striving to reach their potential, SSRL invite a collaborative effort among students, teachers, parents, and the community to prioritize students achieving positive outcomes.

Challenges remain in our well-intentioned efforts to realize the full potential of this important endeavor, and they are largely due to a lack of clarity about the positive impact of a well-constructed approach to SSRL that can be realized by all schools. The critical components of an effective SSRL are:

- High-quality instruction and learning opportunities for all students
- Timely, proactive identification of students struggling to meet grade-level expectations
- Attention to the learning rates and levels of performance of all students
- Increasing the targetedness and intensities of future instruction and intervention based on student response to present instruction and intervention
- Evidence-informed decision-making using the skills of school teams to solve problems

SSRL are equally impactful for students who are not identified as struggling, but who are considered gifted or above level, and whose needs are not being met. SSRL can and must be applied to *all* students; educators must work to ensure that every student has access to engaging learning experiences.

All students can and must benefit from core (Tier 1) and more (Tier 2) instruction and intervention. Core supports must be differentiated so that all students can access the essentials. More supports must provide additional time and alternative supports based on evidence of need. Highly specialized supports for all (Tier 3) represent intensive supports to ameliorate significant deficits in foundational skills or opportunities for students to exercise choice over the *what* and *how* of the passions into which they will dive deeply.

Interventions *supplement*—they do not *replace*—the core. And, student response to intervention is used to determine further course of action. If students are responding to intervention, supports are continued until gaps are eliminated. If students do not respond in a timely manner, they are provided with a different, more intense, more diagnostically targeted set of supports. Their progress is again monitored and further actions determined.

Unfortunately, part of the confusion about SSRL has occurred because of a lack of clarity around the definitions and functions of each level of support for both academics and behavior.

Core Supports are *differentiated*—i.e., 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. Key points include:

- Quality, not quantity
- Depth, not breadth
- Mastery, not coverage
- Scaffolded, differentiated, respectful
- Skills/content; verbs/nouns
- Pro-social and pro-functional skills, e.g., self-regulation, executive functioning, social-emotional
- 21st century skills, e.g., creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication
- Rigorously designed and focused units of instruction
- Engaging, differentiated instruction for *all* students
- Common formative assessments to plan for instruction and inform interventions
- Daily small group supports to more homogenous groups of students based on need
- Use of data teams to collaboratively inform professional practice

More Supports are *individualized*, i.e., 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 they 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. Key points include:

- Benjamin Bloom
- Time + Support = Learning
- Informed by short-cycle assessments
- More time—for both alternative supports and to gain mastery of the priorities
- Buffer time
- Teacher-directed small groups
- Intervention and enrichment
- Intended to prevent students from falling behind or falling further behind
- More time and differentiated supports for students who have not mastered the essentials, as measured by common formative assessments
- Enrichment experiences with tasks of more depth and complexity, for students who **HAVE** demonstrated mastery
- Interventions are provided during daily flex times or during “buffer” days
- Students are grouped more homogeneously, based on specific skill needs

- Interventions are provided to smaller groups, from the teacher who has had the most success, as measured by the common assessments
- Other school staff may join grade-level and course-specific teachers, to reduce teacher-student ratios
- The purpose of Tier 2 is for students to further master prioritized grade-level or course content

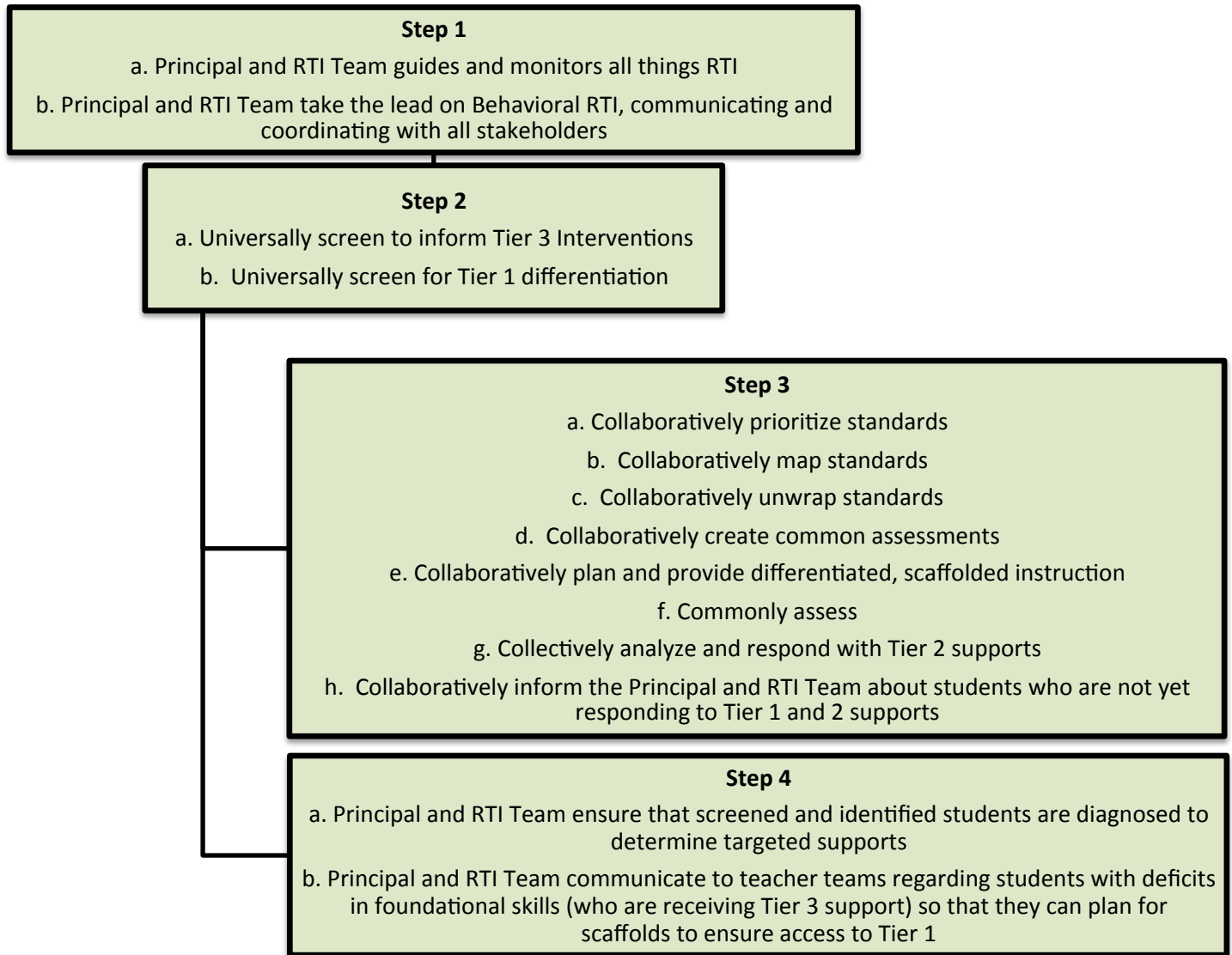
Highly Specialized Supports are *personalized*—Intervention and enrichment to meet students at the forward edge of their zones of proximal development; intensive supports to meet significant deficits in foundational skills AND opportunities for students to exercise choice over the *what* and *how* of 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. Key points include:

- Proactive and immediate
- Diagnostically-driven and targeted
- Intensive
- Coordinated
- Address and improve significant deficits in foundational skills
- Provide personalized learning plans, giving students opportunities to exercise choice over the *what* and *how* of the passions into which they will dive deeply
- For students who have been screened to be multiple grade levels behind their peers in foundational skills and for students who have not responded to Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports
- Intensive supports provided in addition to Tier 1 and 2
- Must be as targeted as possible, e.g., on phonemic awareness, single-syllabic phonics, or multisyllabic phonics
- Supports should be adjusted to match student needs and revised until the student is adequately responding to intervention.

Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning are appropriate for all students and all educators who support and inform effective practices. Success is dependent upon the enthusiastic and committed collaboration of all adults who are connected to students. Ultimately, SSRL are something you do and not simply a collection of things that you buy.

The graphic representation below provides schools with a visible representation of the key elements of SSRL. The complete graphic organizer (available through the International Center for Leadership in Education) guides schools in building the capacities of schools and staffs to bring SSRL to life.

Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning



For every element within the graphic organizer above, the Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning organizer provides explicit guidance and resources to lead staffs toward meeting the goal of high levels of learning and college and career readiness for all.

The Roadmap

As with any important journey, several factors need to be taken into consideration when using the SSRL roadmap:

- What's our destination?
- What's our starting point?
- Who's "driving" (the change or desired outcome)?
- Who's with us on the trip?

This roadmap provides guidance that enable educators to make midcourse adjustments and bring context to the journey. To ensure successful implementation of SSRL requires the educators within a school or district to make a commitment to:

1. a redefined set of tools to help students learn
2. a new way of thinking about their responsibilities

The SSRL roadmap is structured around key sections, as follows, of a successful journey.

Where Are We Going?

School leaders often implement new approaches based on a success someone has heard about, read about, attended a conference about, or experienced in a previous role. At ICLE, we advocate the use of a model or exemplar to help schools with planning at this stage of the journey; we believe that models can serve as targets from which staff members can backward plan and from which they can learn. Through the analysis of a mature SSRL model, schools will launch their efforts by responding to these questions:

- What are we currently doing *well*?
- What are our **targets** and **goals**?
- What's a **next step**?

We recognize that presenting schools with a mature SSRL model of another school—a school that has spent years refining and improving their processes—is both a blessing and a potential curse. It is a blessing because it confirms for schools that it can be done—that schools can design a sustaining system, build capacity, collaborate professionally, focus curriculum, adjust schedules, repurpose staff assignments, acquire resources, administer assessments, and analyze data to improve all students' learning. But examining models can provide an overwhelming negative sensation for some. Educators may feel that they lack the resources to build such a system. They worry that they are far away from the practices represented in the model. They fear that they do not have the commitment or the expertise to successfully transform practices. They feel as though the model represents the *only* way in which an SSRL-based system can be built.

At ICLE, we believe in the power of models and strongly encourage school leaders to avoid the pitfalls that can sidetrack staff members when they are presented with a model that might seem to be

impossible to emulate. The truth is that *every* school can successfully ensure that all students learn at high levels. The liberating news is that there are many pathways toward this goal.

Where Are We and What Are the Next Steps?

Every school has some method of supporting students in their academic, pro-social, and pro-functional growth. Before embarking on a new practice, it is important for educators to take a detailed look at what they are currently doing. A school's starting point can be established by using a data- and evidence-based self-assessment of a school's current realities and states of readiness. This "current status" report will help to reveal gaps and overlaps and initiate the collaborative approach that will be necessary to refine current practices. Building and sustaining an SSRL involves multiple processes, including:

- Guiding staff through the change process, including discussions about why the change is necessary, what the change will involve, how the change will be supported, and how the success of the change will be measured
- Reflecting upon and refining core Tier 1 instruction for both academics and behaviors.
- Identifying students in need, and diagnosing the causes of their difficulties
- Researching, acquiring, and gaining competency with intervention strategies and resources as well as monitoring student progress
- Developing systems for a cyclical problem-solving process

Determining which of those elements have not yet been addressed, which have been initiated, which have been established, and which have been successful is the first step of the System of Support for Rigorous Learning roadmap.

Initiative fatigue is a very real condition in our experiences. School teams that attempt to tackle too many challenges or attempt to implement practices too quickly can anticipate difficulties. A collaborative examination of evidence can help guide schools in their first steps, or in their next steps. There are several questions that can guide this examination:

- In what areas do our students need the most support?
- In what areas would our staff members benefit from more support?
- Which initiatives would most significantly benefit students and most impact multiple content areas and domains?
- For what initiatives are we most prepared, both in terms of culture and structures?

Determining in which direction to take the first steps of the journey is a critical decision for schools following the SSRL roadmap. Building in early "wins" ensures an ongoing commitment to the journey and energizes educators to tackle some of the bumps on the road.

How Are We Going?

Successful school change requires check-ins and the capacity to adjust to unforeseen difficulties and opportunities. What is the plan we should follow to initiate, monitor, revise, and sustain SSRL improvement practices? Just as students sometimes experience difficulties with executive functioning skills such as planning, organization, and time management, school teams can become stalled or sidetracked in their improvement efforts if the initiative is not nurtured. By following a systematic plan, one that prompts staff members to check in on progress and one that anticipates pain points, school leaders can ensure success. Success will not be achieved without obstacles emerging along the way. Yet, if the intent at the start of the initiative is to look for reasons why it won't work, brick walls will materialize. If the intent is to persevere because it's the right work, was co-created, and will positively impact student outcomes, walls will only represent temporary obstacles. When progress is transparently and frequently monitored, when evidence is analyzed and revisions are made, improvements to student learning can be achieved and sustained.

What Does Student Evidence Reveal?

External accountability measures have caused some educators to become fixated on numbers without much meaning being attached to them. Educators sometimes get caught up in gathering data but do not convert it into information. We must face a paradox: we assess too much and yet we need more information. Evidence, provided through formal and informal assessments, is the engine that drives education and SSRL. But, it has to be the right evidence gathered with the right tools.

What evidence formats do we need?

- 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 *common formative assessments*.
- What are the antecedents 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.

Evidence, when gathered accurately, analyzed collaboratively, and used to guide decisions, can motivate students and staff members to expect more from themselves and to persevere through the difficulties that will arise.

What Is the Most Important Tier?

In education, and specifically in a well-defined SSRL, there exists a most significant element—the element that determines whether or not efforts will lead to success. In SSRL, this piece is the school's core or Tier 1 instruction and assessment practices for both behavior and academics. An outcomes-

based, well-defined, “unwrapped” core informs the entirety of an SSRL. A deep understanding of mapping, instruction, and assessment within academic and behavioral domains will ensure more students learn at deeper levels during core blocks of instruction. Without addressing equity and access in core programs; without focused, viable, and well-defined curricular units; and without collaborative, cognitive planning, we will neither make significant gains in the number of students adequately responding to core instruction nor ensure all students learn at the levels of depth and complexity necessary to graduate from high school ready for college and a skilled career.

What Are the Critical Structures of Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning Model?

Educators looking to effect change in their schools need to know who’s with them, what skills that staff possess, and how much money and time there is to work with. Logistical questions related to school processes must be proactively addressed to ensure that the knowing-doing gap is closed:

- Which students and student needs require more attention?
- Which staff members are best positioned to provide supports?
- When will these supports be provided within the school day?
- Where will these supports be provided?
- What resources, strategies, and/or programs are necessary to meet needs?

The Journey Awaits

Systems of Support for Rigorous Learning involve an exciting and dramatic redesign of general and special education. Both need to change and the entire way in which we educate children requires our attention if schools are going to meet their lofty goals. Tweaking will not be sufficient; it is virtually impossible to list every intervention educators will need to meet the unique needs of every student. Each school has local, contextual needs—it’s own DNA, if you will—that require local, contextual responses. Educators must combine the principles of SSRL with new ways of thinking. School leaders will need to apply research and proven practices to meet the individual needs of students using the distinct talents and resources of the professionals who serve those students. The SSRL roadmap transforms schools’ abilities to serve students in both academic and behavioral domains. The journey awaits!

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