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THE RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION APPROACH APPLIED TO READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION

Summary of research and recommendations

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Abstract

This summary aims to provide an overview of the theoretical and empirical foundations of the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach within the context of multi-tiered support systems. It offers a detailed description of its main courses of action, including universal instruction as the first level of prevention for reading and writing difficulties, the identification of students at risk of facing such difficulties, the intensification of instruction for these students, and the monitoring of their progress following this intensification. These courses of action are grounded in a set of guiding principles (e.g., equity, inclusion, prevention) and are only some of the strategies that can be implemented to support the educational success of all students.

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Introduction

Learning trajectories are established early in student' schooling, from the very first months of formal education. They tend to remain relatively stable over time, unless targeted or intensive intervention redirects them. Spontaneous recovery rarely occurs among students with severe learning difficulties in the absence of targeted or intensive intervention. Without appropriate support, the gap between struggling readers and their peers gradually widens throughout their schooling. The longer it takes to intervene with struggling readers and writers, the slower the intervention is to have an impact on learning trajectories, the greater the resources (e.g., human and financial) it requires, and the less effective the intervention becomes.

One approach to better addressing learner diversity and learning difficulties is the implementation of Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), including the response to intervention (RTI) approach. These systems have demonstrated their effectiveness for over a decade in North American schools and provide a preventive organisational framework addressing learning, behaviour and mental health.

MTSS is an educational model designed to provide **differentiated support to students based on their needs**, allowing for progressive and targeted intervention. MTSSs include the following essential components: a preventive teaching and intervention system, data collection for screening and progress monitoring, and decision-making based on multiple data sources. This approach is based on several tiers of intervention, each offering a more or less intensive type of support depending on the severity of the student's difficulties. MTSSs are structured around three main tiers (see Figure 1):

Tier 1 (preventive, universal): This first tier corresponds to high-quality teaching in the general classroom, with teaching strategies designed to meet the needs of all students. All pupils benefit from this foundational level of support, which includes effective teaching practices and inclusive approaches.

Tier 2 (targeted intervention): If a student experiences persistent difficulties, they can receive additional targeted support. This tier involves more individualised support, usually in small groups, with targeted interventions based on specific needs (e.g. in reading or mathematics).

Tier 3 (intensive intervention): When difficulties are more severe and resistant to interventions provided at previous tiers, intensive support is implemented. This includes more specialised programmes and tailored interventions, often delivered by other professionals, such as remedial teachers or school psychologists.



Figure 1 : The three tiers of intensity in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

The Response to Intervention (RTI) approach is one of the core implementations of MTSS. Under RTI, teachers continuously monitor student progress and adjust interventions based on students' responsiveness. This approach relies on periodic data collection, which allows for the personalisation of both the intensity and nature of interventions (such as those in Tiers 2 and 3). The goal is to ensure that all students, including those experiencing difficulties, receive appropriate and timely support, based on evidence-based practices and preventive strategies. It is accompanied by a coordinated set of action components designed to enhance the effectiveness of teaching, to identify students at risk of learning difficulties as early as possible, and to provide them support aligned to their needs. Finally, RTI stands in contrast to the so-called 'wait-to-fail' approach, which involves waiting until a student is in serious difficulty or academic failure before intervening (Brown-Chidsey and Steege, 2010).

The following four sections aim to describe the fundamental courses of action in the Response to Intervention approach: effective universal instruction (i.e., a Tier 1 intervention), periodic universal screening of students at risk of significant learning difficulties at Tier 1, the intensification of additional educational interventions (at Tiers 2 and 3), and progress monitoring at Tiers 2 and 3.

1. Universal Instruction as the first tier of prevention

Tier 1 instruction constitutes a **genuine preventive measure** when it is effective. To be considered effective, this instruction must meet three conditions:

- it must lead to increased learning outcomes for all students;
- it must reduce variability in students' learning outcomes;
- it must reduce the correlation between students' initial characteristics (e.g. their socioeconomic background) and their academic achievement (Bloom, 1979).

Within the response to intervention approach, an effective Tier 1 instruction should enable the vast majority (i.e., 80 to 85%) of students to achieve the learning outcomes specified in the curriculum without the need for additional intervention.

How can universal reading and writing instruction be made effective? The three key levers underpinning an effective reading and writing instruction are:

- the planning of learning activities,
- the management of learning activities, and
- the consolidation of learning.

The planification of learning activities

What should we teach students to enable them become proficient readers and writers? As shown in Figure 2, expert reading relies on two broad sets of skills: those associated with oral comprehension and those associated with word identification (see the summary by Sprenger-Charolles & Ziegler, "Learning to read: from decoding to comprehension", 2022¹).

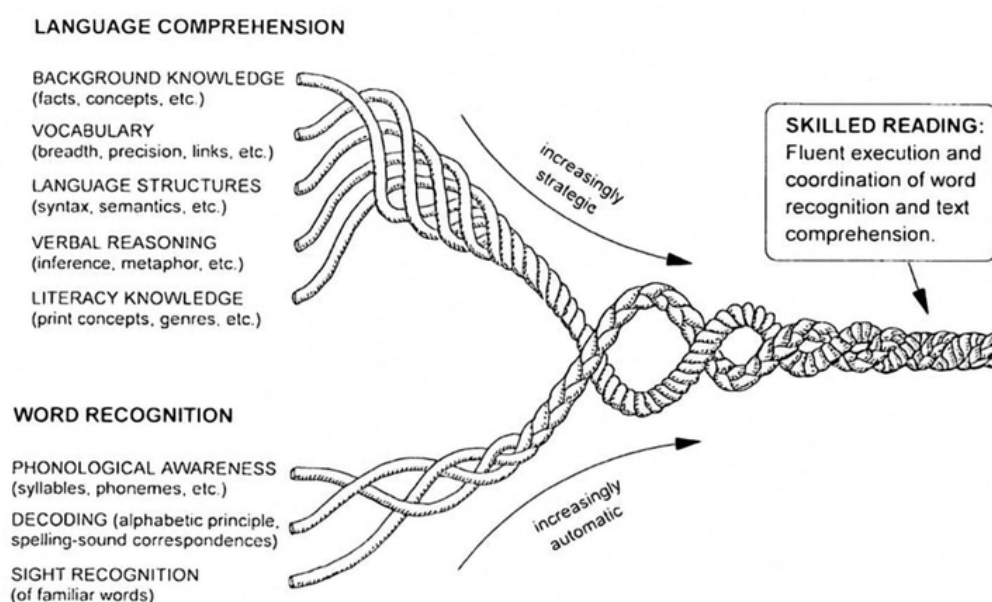


Figure 2 : Core cognitive components of expert reading. Source : Figure 1 of Scarborough, 2001, p. 98.

Each of these skill sets draws on several areas of knowledge or skills, and this list is not exhaustive. To support reading comprehension, word identification must become increasingly automatic. Word identification initially relies on decoding, which in turn is based on knowledge of the alphabetical principle, knowledge of letters, and phonemic analysis. Over time, automaticity is largely achieved through regular reading practice.

In parallel, comprehension must become increasingly strategic – that is, it must rely on the coordination between the processing of various clues and the actions undertaken to resolve semantic interpretation problems. Finally, the mobilisation of all this knowledge and skills must be coordinated, integrated and self-regulated to support reading comprehension, which requires systematic teaching and many hours of practice. Such instruction must address at least seven fundamental learning targets, listed below.

¹ https://www.reseau-canope.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Projets/conseil_scientifique_education_nationale/CSEN_Synthese_Apprendre-a-lire.pdf

Learning targets in reading and writing

1. **Academic language:** Differences between home and school languages can pose challenges for children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These children often receive less language attention, verbal stimulation and exposure to family literacy practices, which can hinder the development of their vocabulary, phonological awareness and reading and writing skills. However, appropriate educational practices implemented as early as preschool can help reduce these gaps and improve their skills.
2. **The alphabetical principle:** It is based on the understanding that letters and letter combinations represent the sounds of spoken language. Its acquisition relies on phonemic analysis, letter knowledge and grapheme-phoneme correspondences, often initiated at home and further developed at school. In national assessments conducted at the beginning and midpoint of Year 1, knowledge of the alphabetical principle is the strongest predictor of reading fluency in Year 2 (Gioia, Ziegler and Deauvieu, 2024).
3. **Word analysis:** It is based on the identification of sublexical units (graphemes, syllables, morphemes) and lexical units, which are essential for reading and writing. It relies on the decoding of graphemes, reinforcing learners' autonomy and their understanding of words. In French, syllables – predominantly of the CV or CVC type –, and morphemes, which carry meaning, play a central role. Word analysis also includes grammatical dimensions, such as word classification and syntactic assembly, to produce grammatically correct sentences.
4. **Vocabulary:** This refers to the words known by a speaker, and among students, it varies in breadth (number of words) and depth (the richness of information associated with each word). Exposure to increasingly complex texts at school increases the number of new words to be understood. Systematic vocabulary instruction and the teaching of strategies for inferring word meaning (definitions, morphological analysis, contextual clues) enhance text comprehension, especially when students are repeatedly exposed to the same words and develop a deep conceptual understanding of them.
5. **Oral reading:** It provides a means of assessing students' reading fluency. This term encompasses automatic word recognition, an appropriate reading speed for the student's grade level, expressive reading and accurate phrasing. Fluency reflects the efficiency and control of reading processes, favouring a rate appropriate to the requirements of comprehension, prosody and punctuation, rather than speed alone.
6. **Reading comprehension:** This relies on the construction of a coherent mental representation of the information in a text, incorporating linguistic clues, knowledge and inferences. It involves processes specific to written language (word identification) and shared with oral language (syntactic analysis) or more general processes (memory, reasoning). For beginning readers, word identification is essential, but as decoding becomes automated, other skills, such as vocabulary and morphology, become more important. To foster these skills, it is recommended to explicitly teach the cognitive components, structure learning, and devote regular periods of time to reading and writing practice.

7. Written expression: This is based on three main components: (1) mastery of graphemes and the motor movements required to produce them, (2) acquisition of orthographic and grammatical rules, and (3) organisation of sentences and relationships within a text. These skills engage motor, perceptual, memory and language abilities. Graphomotor training at school improves handwriting legibility and fluency, letter identification in reading, and spelling and writing skills. Written production, like reading comprehension, requires many complex operations, such as word identification, idea construction, and inference of implicit information. To support students, it is essential to plan a coherent learning progression, adapted to each school level, setting clearly defined targets and planning regular assessments to guide their development throughout their school career.

The management of learning activities

Students should be presented with challenges that are appropriate to their level and that they can overcome with the support of more knowledgeable others. These challenges should fall within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a concept introduced by Vygotsky that refers to the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can accomplish with assistance. Teachers should therefore:

- Take into account students' current level of performance and the skills required for further progress;
- Adapt learning activities to provide the necessary support while gradually fostering autonomy.

To manage this support, Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) introduced the concept of **scaffolding**. This approach involves:

- providing substantial support at the outset to enable students to successfully complete challenging tasks;
- gradually withdrawing support as students make progress, thereby strengthening their autonomy.

Scaffolding strategies for teachers include:

- temporarily simplifying complex tasks;
- modelling the steps to be followed;
- providing clear directions and appropriate explanations;
- asking guiding questions or offering cues to support students' thinking;
- providing immediate, constructive feedback focused on students' actions.

These strategies are central to effective instructional methods, such as explicit instruction, whose positive impact on student learning has been widely documented in the research literature (see the research summary by Pascal Bressoux, 2022²).

² https://www.reseau-canope.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Projets/conseil_scientifique_education_nationale/CSEN_Synthese_enseignement-explicite_juin2022.pdf

Within the context of reading instruction, these principles are reflected in multiple ways, including:

- Working on syllabic awareness prior to phonemic awareness;
- Explicitly teaching grapheme–phoneme correspondences before asking students to decode words that contain them;
- Prioritizing the reading of words that children can decode using the grapheme–phoneme correspondences they have already learnt;
- Following a rational progression of grapheme–phoneme correspondences, beginning with those that are easiest, most regular, and most frequent;
- Correcting students' reading aloud and writing errors as frequently as possible to prevent them from becoming entrenched and difficult to remediate.

The consolidation of learning

Students' learning does not consist merely of applying new knowledge on the day it is taught; it must accumulate over time and remain functional in the long term. However, newly acquired knowledge is fragile and susceptible to being forgotten. Several strategies have been shown to be effective in consolidating learning:

- Regularly reviewing previously taught content and reteaching it when necessary;
- Spacing practice over time to strengthen memory, rather than concentrating it within a short period;
- Varying application activities (e.g., practice exercises, projects, homework), always followed by feedback;
- Connecting new knowledge to prior learning by revisiting previously taught concepts, asking questions, and conducting regular assessments.

These methods help anchor learning more securely and promote its long-term retention and transfer.

Within the context of reading instruction, these principles can be implemented in multiple ways, including:

- Repeatedly practicing taught grapheme–phoneme correspondences across multiple syllables and words, using varied tasks;
- Gradually increasing the complexity of words and texts read to include all grapheme–phoneme correspondences taught since the beginning;
- Fostering the development of automaticity through regular and repeated practice with word lists and texts, as well as through the use of reading across multiple activities;
- Developing reading fluency by emphasizing both rate and accuracy.

2. Universal screening

Within the Response to Intervention framework, the general purpose of universal screening (e.g., national assessments) **is not to assign students to diagnostic categories, but rather to develop a profile of their strengths and weaknesses in order to better intervene** and support their learning (see the EvalAide document³). Universal screening is described as early when its purpose is to identify, at the beginning of schooling, early warning signs of future learning difficulties. The term periodic universal screening, in contrast, refers to the practice of collecting data at regular intervals to monitor each student's progress (e.g., three times per year: at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year).

- **The first function** of periodic universal screening is to monitor students' progress at school and, therefore, to verify each student's learning trajectory. Initial screening provides information about the level of learning achieved prior to the start of a new school year. To what extent are students ready to engage in upcoming learning? Should differentiated instruction be planned from the outset of the year for students who did not meet expected learning outcomes at the end of the previous year? This information is particularly useful for obtaining an overall picture of the classroom and for guiding lesson planning.
- **The second function** of universal screening, especially when conducted mid-year, is to **identify students who have not achieved expected learning outcomes** since the beginning of the school year, despite instruction or pedagogical differentiation that has been effective for the majority of students. Following an analysis of this classroom profile and any other relevant data, these students may be referred to Tier 2 intervention or directly to Tier 3, depending on the severity of their difficulties⁴. When Tier 1 instruction is effective for most students, the proportion of students identified as at risk for learning difficulties or already experiencing difficulties typically ranges between 15% and 20% (Spear-Swerling, 2015). When the percentage of students assessed as at risk or experiencing difficulties is significantly higher than 20%, the priority should not be the implementation of Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, but rather improving the effectiveness of Tier 1 instruction.
- **The third function** of screening is twofold: (a) to determine whether a student is likely to benefit from Tier 2 intervention or should instead be referred directly to Tier 3; and (b) **to guide the choice of intervention components** that are best aligned with the student's needs (e.g., fundamentals of word identification, reading comprehension, or written expression).

It should be emphasized, however, that universal screening does not constitute an assessment of students' overall competence, nor an in-depth evaluation of their knowledge and skills. Rather, it is a targeted assessment process focusing on fundamental skills, particularly during the early years of learning.

³ https://www.reseau-canope.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Projets/conseil_scientifique_education_nationale/15_EvalAide_CSEN.pdf

⁴ From Year 2 onwards, the student's performance in the previous year can be used as an indicator to justify the implementation of a higher level of intensification from the start of the school year

In the French context, universal screening for reading difficulties relies on students' performance on the Repères CP, Point d'étape CP, and Repères CE1–CM2 assessments. To reliably identify students in need of support, **it is therefore essential that teachers administer these assessments to all their students while strictly adhering to administration guidelines** (notably the timing requirements for time-limited tasks). Only under these conditions can teachers accurately compare students' scores with the thresholds provided in the Score Guide and benefit from the norming work conducted by the DEPP.

The Point d'étape CP assessments are a particularly critical step in identifying students who are already experiencing difficulties in learning to read and in providing them with interventions that enable them to catch up during the second half of the school year (see the Passeur brief).

3. Early intensification of educational interventions

Several reasons have been advanced to justify the need for intensifying interventions at higher tiers of support. At these tiers, intervention sessions are typically delivered to small groups of students or on a one-to-one basis. This form of tutoring aims to support learning by adapting educational interventions to students' specific needs and by focusing instruction on an ordered sequence of lessons and on skills that are essential to reading and writing: phonemic analysis, understanding of the alphabetic principle, mastery of phonological decoding, the automatization of word identification during text processing, meaning construction, vocabulary enrichment, and mastery of spelling and writing processes (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). For such interventions to be effective, five conditions must be met:

- 1. Alignment** refers to the extent to which the intervention targets the student's areas of difficulty rather than skills that are developing typically, and corresponds to the curricular expectations for the student's grade level. The adequacy of this alignment depends closely on the accuracy of the profile of each student's strengths and weaknesses, as well as on the inclusion of learning activities within lessons that directly address the identified deficient skills.
- 2. The composition of special needs groups** at higher tiers is optimal when members share **similar needs**. Vaughn and colleagues (2007) recommend forming small groups of three to five students at Tier 2 and one to three students at Tier 3, although research in this area shows slightly greater variability (i.e., one to eight students per group). The objective is to ensure that each student has frequent opportunities to actively engage in learning activities and to respond during intervention sessions (e.g., a minimum of six responses per minute at Tier 2 and eight responses per minute at Tier 3).
- 3. The choice of the pedagogical approach** is a decisive factor in the intensification of an intervention. The approaches whose effectiveness is best documented for both mainstream students and, especially, for students with learning difficulties include explicit instruction (Carnine et al., 2006; Stockard et al., 2018) and collaborative learning among students (Nietzel et al., 2022).
- 4. The choice of the best intervention provider** at higher tiers depends on the individual's level of expertise and on the demands of the intervention program. Tier 3 interventions are typically entrusted to remediation specialists or other professionals, given the nature

5 <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/conseil-scientifique-de-leducation-nationale-site-officiel/publications-et-ressources/lettre-le-passeur.html>.

4. and severity of students' learning difficulties and the complexity of the intervention programs designed for them. Tier 2 interventions can also be handled by specialists; however, current research suggests that classroom teachers can be equally effective when the intervention program is well defined and when its theoretical foundations and procedures are well understood by those delivering it (Nietzel et al., 2022).

5. **The duration and frequency of the intervention program** are also important factors at Tiers 2 and 3. The parameters chosen in studies examining the effects of these factors tend to cluster around the following values, although they are not necessarily optimal. Tier 2 interventions typically last approximately 8 to 16 weeks, with 3 to 5 sessions per week of about 30 minutes each, whereas Tier 3 interventions extend beyond 16 weeks, with 4 to 5 sessions per week lasting 45 to 60 minutes (Austin, Vaughn, & McClelland, 2017). Overall, experts agree that intervention intensity is a key ingredient of effectiveness: a short, intensive intervention is preferable to one that is diluted over a long period. For example, for an equivalent total intervention duration (e.g., 16 hours), it is more effective to provide 30 minutes per day, 4 days per week for 8 weeks than 15 minutes per day, 2 days per week for 32 weeks.

In the French context, Tier 2 interventions may be implemented either within the general classroom for a small group of students with similar needs while the rest of the class works independently, or during dedicated instructional time for students experiencing difficulties, such as Activités Pédagogiques Complémentaires (APC). The work with the special needs group may be carried by the classroom teacher, by other school personnel, or by taking advantage of digital tools that facilitate independent practice.

4. Progress monitoring at Tiers 2 and 3

Interventions at Tiers 2 and 3 are not intended to continue indefinitely for all students concerned. If we assume that, on average, 15% of students benefit from Tier 2 intervention, effective Tier 2 support should enable the majority of these students to reach the expected level of performance of their classroom group. Consequently, only about 5% of students (approximately one third of those receiving Tier 2 intervention) who do not respond sufficiently to Tier 2 support should require Tier 3 intervention.

Progress monitoring at higher tiers therefore plays a critical role in determining whether an intervention should be discontinued because it is no longer necessary, or whether its parameters should be adjusted because its effectiveness is insufficient. To be consistent with the Response to Intervention framework, data collection must focus on the specific deficient skills addressed in the learning activities.

The most common practice is to **allocate a few minutes at regular intervals to measure students' progress**, for example every two weeks at Tier 2 and weekly at Tier 3 (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2007). These recommendations are generally appropriate for skills that develop relatively quickly for most students (e.g., phonemic analysis, mastery of grapheme–phoneme correspondences, word reading). However, for more complex skills that develop slowly (e.g., reading comprehension), the interval between data collection points may be lengthened.

In the French context, a practical approach for teachers may be to reuse the national assessment tasks that were initially used to identify students with special needs. By administering these tests repeatedly, teachers can monitor students' progress in the selected target skills (e.g., phoneme manipulation, oral reading of a text). This monitoring therefore requires recording the successive scores of each student receiving intervention.

Tier 2 intervention programs typically include a clearly defined performance goal (e.g., a realistic performance score). Student progress is evaluated relative to the trajectory connecting the student's baseline score to the expected outcome. When the expected level of performance is reached and maintained, Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2010) recommend continuing the intervention program and tracking progress for several additional weeks while gradually reducing the number of weekly sessions, in order to confirm the solidity of learning gains. When observed progress falls short of expectations, they recommend first increasing the duration of intervention sessions and reducing subgroup size to increase the number of student responses during learning activities, before referring the student to Tier 3 intervention. To facilitate the interpretation of changes in students' learning trajectories, it is essential to document any modifications made to the intervention parameters. This information makes it possible to identify the specific conditions that led to a shift in the trajectory's direction.

When a Tier 3 intervention program fails to produce the expected progress, a comprehensive assessment of the student's strengths and weaknesses is recommended to guide modifications to the program. For students with particularly severe learning difficulties, it is possible that our current state of knowledge may not allow further improvement of Tier 3 interventions beyond a certain point. In such cases, it is important to keep in mind that all students can make progress in their academic learning—even those with chronic difficulties—and that the improvement of educational and remedial programs is an ongoing and evolving process.

Insufficient progress at Tier 2 often justifies referral to professionals outside the school (e.g., speech therapists, psychologists) to conduct a more precise and comprehensive assessment of the student's cognitive skills and to propose more specialized remedies. However, it is often premature to involve such professionals before Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions have been attempted within the school. One of the key strengths of the Response to Intervention approach lies precisely in ensuring that appropriate pedagogical responses have been implemented and found insufficient before seeking external intervention.

5. Conclusions

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos (2019) rightly remind us that “it is only when people act differently that an organization can expect to achieve different results” (p. 259). However, the implementation of the Response to Intervention approach highlights that acting differently requires more than wishful thinking. **It necessitates the coordinated deployment of a set of strategies and a willingness to invest substantial resources and sustained effort to improve the effectiveness of an educational system.** In return, such investment can be expected to yield significant improvements in students' academic success, a concurrent reduction in the risk of academic failure and school dropout, and an increase in both the level of expertise and the sense of professional efficacy among educational practitioners.

Key takeaways

- **Moving away from the “wait-to-fail” approach:** Learning trajectories are established early and remain stable in the absence of intervention. Rapid, appropriate, and intensive intervention is essential to prevent gaps between struggling students and their peers from widening further.
- **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Approach:** This differentiated model provides three levels of support (universal, targeted, intensive) adapted to the severity of students’ difficulties and to their needs.
- **Response to Intervention (RtI):** RtI is a specific implementation of MTSS aimed at ensuring that all students, including those with learning difficulties, receive appropriate and timely support, based on evidence-based practices and prevention strategies.
- **Universal instruction:** Tier 1 (high-quality instruction for all) plays a fundamental preventive role by reducing learning gaps and limiting the impact of external factors such as socioeconomic background.
- **Effectiveness of Tier 1:** An effective Tier 1 should enable the large majority (that is, 80 to 85%) of students to achieve the learning objectives set out in the curriculum without additional intervention. When the percentage of students identified as at risk or experiencing difficulties is significantly higher than 20%, the priority is not to implement Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, but to improve the effectiveness of Tier 1.
- **Targeted intervention:** If a student experiences persistent difficulties, they should receive targeted support at Tier 2. This level involves more individualized support, generally provided in small groups with similar needs and tailored to those needs.
- **Intensity of intervention:** At both Tier 2 and Tier 3, the intensity of intervention is a necessary condition for effectiveness. Avoid “sprinkling” or fragmented support.
- **Tier 3:** When difficulties are more severe and resistant to interventions at previous tiers, intensive support must be implemented. This includes more specialized programs and tailored interventions (e.g., 16 weeks with 4 or 5 sessions of 45 to 60 minutes per week).
- **Universal screening:** Regular assessments, such as national assessments, make it possible to identify students who need support and to adjust instruction in order to improve learning progress.
- **Progress monitoring:** monitoring at higher tiers plays a decisive role in determining whether to discontinue an intervention because it is no longer necessary or to modify its parameters because its effectiveness is insufficient.

Further reading

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