

Three tiers to intervention and improvement

Watson Elementary in Chilliwack introduces a Response to Instruction and Intervention model, drawing on data and collaborative problem-solving. This three tier approach helps the school to shift its focus, from fixing the student to fixing the instruction.

by Leslie Dyson

When Principal Taryn Dixon first arrived at Watson Elementary School in Chilliwack three years ago she could see that it was like no other school she had ever spent time in. There were behaviour problems that she had never observed before in her 22 years as an educator.

“Several of our youngest students were demonstrating behaviours similar to that of a two-year-old having a temper tantrum. This included kicking, hitting, and screaming. It was disrupting the learning of others and in spite of interventions and consistent expectations, it wasn’t settling down. We said, ‘Wow! What’s going on and what do we need to do differently?’

“With the help of district staff, we began to understand that some students experienced trauma and the brain goes back to those incidents in their lives when stressed. They had lots of sensory issues. Kindergarten classes can be noisy and colourful but this was setting some of them off.” We started to take steps to address the social/emotional and academic needs of our students.”

Watson has 440 students, including 91 who are Aboriginal and 61 requiring ESL or ELL help. There are 52 students in the Ministry’s 1701 categories who require some kind of specialized support, including 10 students with intensive behaviours and 12 with moderate.

Watson is a pilot school for the

Response to Instruction and Intervention model. RtI² (as the staff at Watson calls it) systematically responds to the learning needs of all students, staff and parents in a school. It uses a three-tier approach to instruction and intervention and depends heavily on collaborative problem-solving and data gathered from current assessments.

This whole-school approach is now in place in three schools in the Chilliwack school district (and other schools around the province) and it’s spreading.

The way the strategy developed at Watson over three years has changed how all staff members in the school see their roles and allows them to respond quickly and flexibly

when learning or behaviour problems come up.

RtI² hasn’t required a lot of additional funding. Watson applied for a grant from the district’s Learning Improvement Fund, but it already had access to many support staff and effective programs that fit well with the three-tier approach.

Vice-Principal Nicole Driscoll said most of the work was simply restructuring. “A system is now in place to have time to talk and be proactive.”

Dixon, Driscoll and Shawna Petersen, District Vice-Principal of Curriculum, gave a presentation on RtI² to delegates attending the BCPVPA *Connecting Leaders* conference in October this year.

“We weren’t willing to send the kids home,” Dixon told the workshop participants. “They were our students. We wanted to provide all children with what they needed. We believe all children can learn if they’re given the right tools.”

RtI² is credited with making a noticeable difference at Watson, Dixon said. “But it’s not easy or quick and there still are kids who are disruptive. Most kids settled down, not all, but even those who haven’t improved. We’re still learning what the triggers are. We absolutely love these kids, but we have to respect the learning environment of others.”

Now, if children arrive at school angry, they don’t go into the classroom right away. “Sometimes, they’re not sure why they’re angry,” she said. “But they’re helped to remember the self-regulating strategies they’ve learned.”

RtI² is a three-tiered approach that demands data-driven decision making, high-quality instruction, collaborative problem-solving and timely intervention.

The school has shifted from trying to “fix the student” to “fixing the instruction,” said Driscoll.

Tier 1 refers to the regular solid and high-quality classroom instruction and it will look different from classroom to classroom depending on the makeup of the class and the teachers’ styles and strengths.

In addition, focus is given to careful analysis of the data coming from the various assessments that are already under way.

“We focused on assessment,” said District Vice-Principal Shawna Petersen. Before the new model was introduced, “there was lots of inconsistency. Teachers were just sending results in as a number.”

“Now teachers are analyzing the results to see how to plan their in-

struction and provide extra support,” Dixon said. “The staff see there is a purpose for the data sheets. The data is being used to guide their instruction.”

“All of this is evidence-based research and it became embedded in staff meetings,” added Petersen.

Tier 2 provides all the components of Tier 1 classroom instruction plus strategic academic and behavioural interventions for the students who require it. This was the tier that sold the staff at Watson on RtI² in the first place. The curriculum at this level also includes social and emotional learning through programs such as *Roots of Empathy*, *Alert Program* (which teaches self regulation) and *Reading Bear Circle* (directed mostly at Aboriginal students).

Children are pulled out of afternoon activities to receive the extra support. Driscoll called it “getting a double dose.”

Workshop participants wondered if the parents of children requiring extra sup-

port are upset about having their children miss PE, music or art, but Petersen said, “The parent part is the easy part.” The school principal and the counsellor talk to the parents about why the extra support is needed. “So parents are onboard and things smooth out at home.”

“They’re not lifers in learning assistance,” Dixon added, and every effort is made to ensure students don’t miss whole periods devoted to music, art or PE and that the pullout time is not long term.

JUST KIDDING



By Rod Maclean www.justkiddingcartoons.com

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Editor

Richard Williams

With the change in school culture has come better collaboration. Hearing about particular challenges, teachers from various grade levels, eager to help, begin their responses with “Have you tried this?”

“But we didn’t want them missing their reading or math,” said Driscoll, “which was the way with the old learning assistance model, when they were pulled out in the morning. In the end, they will miss less PE and arts.”

Tier 3, directed at just a few students, adds on intensive interventions that are more frequent, longer, intensely targeted and administered by specially trained staff.

There are seven members of the Core Problem Solving Team: the principal, vice-principal, counsellor, learning assistance teacher, resource teacher, early intervention teacher and child/youth care worker. They meet weekly for one hour.

The core team regularly challenges itself with the question, “Are we seeing progress?” Driscoll said. Some of the evidence is anecdotal but concrete evidence is being collected as well and the staff is convinced that substantial progress will be seen in the data collected in the fourth and fifth years of RtI².

“We don’t wait to see someone who needs support,” said Dixon, “because we meet weekly and the groups are fluid. Kids move in and out. We do our best to provide timely, targeted intervention.”

The school also needed to find a way to provide time for teachers to meet and work through concerns in their classrooms. Key to the success of implementation was providing helping teachers and implementing mandatory collaboration. “The first year was tough,” acknowledged Pe-

tersen, “but now it’s caught on.”

The notion of mandatory collaboration got people at the workshop talking. “There are people who don’t know how to collaborate,” Petersen acknowledged.

Sheila Pace, retired principal from Maple Ridge and now educational consultant, said, “It doesn’t matter how you get them to the table. If you make it rich and their needs are met, it will be good for everybody.”

To demonstrate proof that it’s working, Petersen said “Teachers now have the skill sets to ask questions like, ‘What am I missing in trying to help this child?’ and ‘How can I embed these ideas?’”

A half-hour assembly is held every Monday morning. The primary teachers leave their students with the principal or vice-principal so they can meet with their colleagues in the library. Using a structured template to guide the conversation, they share teaching strategies and programs. But the classroom teacher “maintains the professional autonomy in how strategies are carried out,” Petersen said.

That same model is used on Friday mornings to allow the intermediate teachers time to problem-solve.

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Dixon said, “We knew that the

learning assistant teacher had a great bank of strategies but they weren’t being used in the classrooms. Those practices are aligning now.”

Another innovation was using the learning assistance teacher, early intervention teacher and learning support teacher to help co-teach within the classroom. Instead of pulling kids out, we offered support within the classroom during the core literacy time.


Pace said what RtI² requires is “really listening to the problem no matter what it is and getting clear about the child. It’s strength-based planning that provides clear support for the teacher.”

Sue Reed, Vice-Principal at École Squamish, said she appreciated that the “collaborative piece is built into their schedule. I want to go back to my school and propose that we meet at lunchtime.”

Jeff Maynard, Principal of Myrtle Philip Community School in Whistler, said he likes RtI² because “it’s authentic and meaningful. Ongoing ProD is most meaningful.”

“We really are excited by the changes we are seeing in the kids, in the parents and in the staff,” said Dixon.

“It’s amazing to see,” said Driscoll. “The teachers are so comfortable with their teaching that they want to take the most vulnerable students. Teachers’ doors are opening and they’re helping each other out. We’ve seen huge growth in the intermediate grades too. Now teachers are saying ‘I’m confident all my kids are going to get to grade level by the end of the year.’”

“It’s a paradigm shift,” added Petersen. “They’re now thinking ‘It’s not just me who owns this class. We all own this class.’” 

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