What is RtI?

There is no single, absolute definition of RTI. A quick and descriptive summary, though, comes from the National Center on RTI and reads:

With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities. (NCRTI, 2010)

These elements of RTI can be observed readily in almost any RTI implementation. Struggling children are identified through a poor performance on a classwide, schoolwide, or districtwide screening intended to indicate which children may be at risk of academic or behavioral problems. A child may also be identified through other means, such as teacher observation. The school provides the child with research-based interventions while the child is still in the general education environment and closely monitors the student’s progress (or response to the interventions), and adjusts their intensity or nature, given the student’s progress. RTI can also be instrumental in identifying students who have learning disabilities.

RTI typically has different levels of intensity.

**Tier 1** At-risk children who have been identified through a screening process receive research-based instruction, sometimes in small groups, sometimes as part of a classwide intervention. A certain amount of time (generally not more than six or eight weeks) is allotted to see if the child responds to the intervention—hence, the name RTI. Each student’s progress is monitored closely. If the child does, indeed, respond to the research-based intervention, then this indicates that perhaps his or her difficulties have resulted from less appropriate or insufficiently targeted instruction.

**Tier 2** If, however, the child does not respond to the first level of group-oriented interventions, he or she typically moves to the next RTI level. The length of time in Tier 2 is generally a bit longer than in Tier 1, and the level of intensity of the interventions is greater. They may also be more closely targeted to the areas in which the child is having difficulty. Again, child progress is closely monitored. The time allotted to see if the child responds to interventions in this more intensive level may be longer than in the first level—a marking period, for instance, rather than six weeks—but the overall process is much the same. If the child shows adequate progress, then the intervention has been successful and a “match” has been found to what type of instruction works with that child. It is quite possible that, if the problem is caught early enough and addressed via appropriate instruction, the child learns the
skills necessary to continue in general education without further intervention.

**Tier 3** | On the other hand, if the child does not respond adequately to the intervention(s) in Tier 2, then a third level becomes an option for continued and yet more intensive intervention. This third level is typically more individualized as well. If the child does not respond to instruction in this level, then he or she is likely to be referred for a full and individual evaluation under IDEA.

The data gathered on the child’s response to interventions in Tiers 1, 2, and 3 become part of the information available during the evaluation process and afterwards, when a determination must be made as to disability and the child’s possible eligibility for special education and related services. Considering the amount of data typically collected in an RTI approach, thanks to its monitoring of student progress all along the way, the information that will now be available should be very helpful to the team of individuals involved in evaluating the child and determining his or her eligibility for special education services.

**Important Note:** At any point in this multileveled process, a child may be referred for evaluation under IDEA to determine if he or she is a “child with a disability” as IDEA 2004’s regulation defines that term at §300.8. Becoming involved in RTI does not mean that a child has to complete a level, or all levels, of an RTI approach before he or she may be evaluated for eligibility for special education and related services. The IDEA 2004’s regulation is very clear about this. **RTI may not be used as a means of delaying or refusing to conduct such an evaluation if the school suspects that the child has a disability or if the parents request that the school system evaluate the child.**