Eavesdrop on a conversation of speech-language pathologists in the schools talking about Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI) and this is what you might hear: "Oh no, not one more thing to do. I'm overwhelmed. I can't add another thing on my plate."

Such sentiments reflect the realities of providing speech-language services in schools, where a critical shortage of SLPs often increases job demands. Often SLPs serve several schools, sometimes ranging from preschool to high school; are inundated with paperwork; and spend a great deal of time in procedures required to meet legal mandates. Although the most recent data show that the average caseload size is 50 students, many SLPs face numbers much larger, in some instances in excess of 100 students (ASHA, 2006). It is understandable that many SLPs might be less than enthusiastic about becoming involved in RTI models, if it means assuming additional responsibilities.

RTI models, whether they are labeled as such by states or districts, focus on attempts to optimize student performance (before students begin a cycle of failure) by providing scientifically based classroom instruction and then scientifically based intervention, if needed. The following description of RTI by the National Center for Research in Learning Disabilities (2006) captures nicely what it is all about:

*The RTI process is a multi-step approach to providing services and interventions to students who struggle with learning at increasing levels of intensity. The progress students make at each stage of intervention is closely monitored. Results of this monitoring are used to make decisions about the need for further research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education, in special education or both* (p. 1).

For some proponents, RTI is a prevention model that provides a mechanism to ensure that students who need more explicit, direct instruction get it without having to be declared a student with a learning disability. For others it is an alternative way to identify a student as an individual with a disability, when the student is not responsive to intervention. Most RTI approaches revolve around literacy issues—reading in particular—and are focused on the early grades, usually K-3. While emergent literacy in early grades has been the most popular target, some models take a broader view of school success and include problem-solving around behavior issues. In addition, RTI is just now getting the attention it deserves at the
RTI as a Tipping Point

There are a few examples of SLPs' involvement—and leadership—in RTI models, but from a national perspective they are not yet central players. ASHA has addressed RTI in a number of significant ways—through continuing education opportunities, conference presentations, publications, and partnerships with other groups. Many states and districts are also exploring the role of the SLP in this arena. However, SLPs are still not considered essential participants in most RTI models. This omission is unfortunate, as SLPs have much to offer schools in their efforts to provide effective, scientifically based instruction and intervention, especially related to literacy.

SLPs could wait for others to realize their value as integral members of RTI models—or they could proactively advocate for involvement. To be effective advocates, SLPs have to be convinced that roles within RTI are doable and essential to their work. This orientation will require a change in perspective. Rather than thinking of RTI as adding more to an already full plate, SLPs might think about RTI as the impetus for getting a different plate—an opportunity for doing things differently in school settings. The bottom line is that RTI presents a chance to change practices to advance the cause of making speech-language services a valued commodity in the schools. Therefore, RTI might just be the tipping point (Gladwell, 2000) needed to thrust speech-language services into the spotlight at schools in order to make greater use of SLPs' expertise in language and literacy.

As RTI models get off the ground across the country, the notion that significant attempts must be made to assist struggling students before considering special education is becoming part of school culture. The time is right for SLPs to declare their place in the schools as essential contributors to student success. More importantly, RTI gives SLPs a specific framework in which to assume applicable roles and responsibilities. In this context, ASHA's recommended roles for reading and writing (2001) are relevant: prevention, identification, assessment, intervention, and other roles that include providing assistance to general education teachers, students, and parents, assuming literacy curricular responsibilities on behalf of all students, and extending the knowledge base for students and colleagues. (For details of how these roles can be implemented, see Roth & Ehren, 2001. With specific reference to the SLPs' roles with RTI, see Ehren, 2005.)

SLPs as "Insiders" in the Schools

The notion that SLPs need to be more involved in literacy and curriculum is not new. However, the buzz about RTI in states, districts, and schools provides a golden opportunity for SLPs to show what they know and can do to improve academic achievement through their work with language. The door will not be open forever, and now is the time to walk through it and assert crucial roles with RTI to become "insiders" in the schools—central figures in the education of students of all ages.

SLPs have made heroic efforts to become more visible and contributory in the educational arena by providing services that are educationally relevant, focus on curriculum and literacy, and make a real difference in student success. However, the educational system remains rooted in traditional practices that others in the system do not necessarily value—or even
notice. Pull-out services of 30 to 60 minutes a week remain the mainstay in many school districts, hardly sufficient for students with language impairment who struggle with literacy and the curriculum, based on what we know about the need for intervention intensity (Swanson & Hoskyn, 1998). That model also restricts the amount of contact SLPs have with teachers, creating a lack of visibility that contributes to the mystery surrounding speech-language services. SLPs are still in the shadows in many schools in which teachers and administrators do not fully understand the role of SLPs and do not call upon them to contribute to prevention and problem-solving efforts for struggling students. An SLP is still commonly called the "speech teacher," with educators wondering what roles such a professional might have with curriculum and literacy. Typically, SLPs are not the "go-to" professionals for academic achievement problems, despite what they know about the role of language in learning. The most disturbing aspect of this lack of visibility is that children and adolescents are not reaping the benefits of what SLPs have to offer.

In addition, speech-language pathology services in the schools do not necessarily capture the attention of decision-makers who hold the purse strings. If these people do not understand SLPs' unique contributions, this condition can be dangerous, especially where critical shortages exist. They will have little motivation to advocate for a solution to SLP shortages. SLPs do not want others to say, "We can't find them and don't really need them anyway." The good news is that RTI models provide frameworks in which to redefine SLPs' roles in the schools so that others appreciate their value to education.

A Blueprint for Getting Involved

What might SLPs do to move forward with RTI and gain "insider" status in the schools? Figure 1 [PDF] provides a blueprint to guide SLPs on the journey. SLPs should think of RTI as an important opportunity and step forward to participate. They must be willing to do things differently, which may require moving outside of their comfort zones.

This process begins with understanding RTI definitions, intent, and possibilities, especially related to their locale. While SLPs should consult resources on RTI with a national perspective (see resource list at right), they should zero in on their school district's RTI model. Because RTI models differ widely, it is essential to gather information from state and district Web sites and policy manuals. SLPs should also engage in a dialogue about RTI implementation with teachers and administrators to find out how it is actually working in their schools.

Most importantly, reinventing services requires defining unique contributions of SLPs. In becoming more involved in literacy and curriculum, a lingering problem is the blurred lines between being a teacher and being an SLP, or being an aide or tutor and being an SLP. If SLPs are not careful, they may cross these lines in RTI models. In the midst of implementation, it is difficult to delineate the tasks SLPs should be doing in light of their scope of practice, but SLPs should be clear about what they are uniquely qualified to do based on their knowledge and experience.

SLPs should make three unique contributions [PDF]:

- Focus on language and related cognitive underpinnings
- Use a language lens (defined below)
Focusing on the language and related cognitive underpinnings of curriculum and literacy involves analyzing curriculum and literacy standards, benchmarks, and grade-level expectations to uncover the language roots of the student’s experience. Using a language lens means employing a linguistic and metalinguistic perspective in viewing curriculum, instruction, and assessment components and students’ responses to them. Taking a diagnostic-prescriptive approach is a way of working with students that stems from SLPs' clinical roots in profiling students' strengths and weaknesses within the context of classroom performance and addressing them specifically in treatment. The intersection of these contributions is where SLPs' uniqueness lies. Not only should SLPs focus their practice on these contributions, but they should also be able to articulate them to others.

When exploring the opportunities and challenges within the RTI model in their districts, SLPs should learn what happens at each level or "tier" of the model and discuss ways to become involved. Before assuming specific tasks and activities within RTI models, SLPs should subject them to the litmus test of the three integrated unique contributions and ask: "Does this task require me to focus on language and related cognitive underpinnings, use a language lens, and take a diagnostic-prescriptive approach?" Ultimately, SLPs' roles within RTI should constitute a value added to the school that rests squarely within their expertise. Examples of activities that offer opportunities for involvement, while making use of unique contributions, are guiding language-sensitive assessment and instruction, triaging students, and providing short-term interventions, all of which are interrelated in their application.

The SLP may:

- Help teachers to look at students individually, deciphering patterns of strengths and challenges in learning
- Identify the nature of poor academic performance, with an emphasis on language underpinnings
- Analyze tasks by identifying component parts, breaking them down into smaller parts and highlighting language components
- Select instructional and assessment language to match students' comprehension
- Scaffold instruction based on the learners' language needs within the context of classroom performance

Caseload, Workload, and Leadership

SLPs have to set the stage for shifting roles by defining the existing context and conditions in their school districts—i.e., what is happening in their environment to facilitate or impede changing roles? For example, the existing caseload structure may thwart assumption of RTI roles and there may be an absence of leadership in the district promoting inclusion of the SLP in RTI models. Therefore, two important elements in this category are promoting a workload framework and exerting leadership in RTI design.

It is difficult to become involved in RTI within a traditional caseload approach. If an SLP must generate a caseload of students with speech-language impairment (SLI) as a basic requirement of the position, RTI activities would likely add more to the already-full plate. Because work within the RTI tiers involves students other than those identified as SLI, a
mechanism must be in place to account for the time spent on these activities. The concept of "workload," which has been offered by ASHA since 2002, is essential to make RTI work. If SLPs do not have to count students, but rather account for the variety of responsibilities and tasks that are needed to address the language and literacy needs of a school (i.e., their workload), then RTI activities will become an essential part of their scope of work—not an extra set of things to do.

An important consideration about workload is the level at which this alternative structure must be adopted. Although SLPs can move in the direction of adopting a workload approach, especially in smaller districts in which they may have more autonomy, it is unrealistic to think that workload can be operationalized on the broad scale needed by individual SLPs. This is where leadership in RTI design comes in. In addition to advocating for the role of the SLP as an essential participant in RTI, each SLP must find a way to exert leadership in restructuring service delivery. SLPs should learn what a workload approach entails, work with administrators and school boards on the local level and, if necessary, work with state agencies and organizations to create a system based on the workload concept. (See ASHA's Web site for information on workload.) Further, SLPs must proactively define their activities with various tiers, or steps, of the models.

Given that RTI is becoming part of the fabric of education, it behooves SLPs to engage seriously and wisely in efforts to become involved in the models. This involvement will allow SLPs to contribute to the academic success of a broader sector of the school population and gain insider status. Considering the challenges in education, speech-language pathology is clearly at a crossroads in the schools. Either SLPs will respond by asserting the essential nature of their roles in student success and deliver valued services, or they will run the risk of becoming a critical-shortage profession that other educators are not motivated to support. Our mantra needs to be, "carpe diem with RTI!"

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