RTI Makes Few Inroads Into the Nation's Education Schools
By Stephen Sawchuk
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For Angela L. Bradbury, applying response to intervention techniques comes almost as second nature.

As she completes her student teaching, the soon-to-be graduate of the University of Utah’s Urban Institute for Teacher Education draws on specific pedagogical strategies practiced in methods classes. In reading groups, her elementary students get increasingly specific kinds of help, from practicing with certain phonics patterns to comprehension exercises.

Ms. Bradbury’s lesson plans identify advanced activities for students who grasp concepts quickly and extra practice for those who are slightly behind.

Perhaps most importantly, she has gone into teaching with few illusions about the challenges students face in Salt Lake City, which has a fast-growing English-language-learner population.

“You have to know your students. You need to assess them to begin your teaching, then use other assessments to see if they’re learning, to accurately give them the interventions they need,” Ms. Bradbury said.

Using response-to-intervention techniques, such as those practiced by Ms. Bradbury, is a core tenet of her education school’s undergraduate education program. Every aspiring teacher, not just those who will work closely with students with disabilities, is schooled in RTI through a core set of courses. In fact, that’s one reason why, at the University of Utah, it’s known as “three-tiered instruction” rather than RTI.

“We are concerned about the intensity of support that students receive, not the label,” said Michael L. Hardman, the dean of the university’s college of education, who has overseen a revision of the school’s curriculum for teacher education that began in 2006. “We don’t want RTI to be looked at as a special education issue.”

An emphasis on RTI is not typical of teacher education as a whole, according to those in the field. But that probably isn’t due to a lack of awareness of RTI, they say.

Like classroom teachers working in districts that have moved to the increasingly popular instructional model, teacher-educators across the nation are wrestling with many of the contours of the debate about the approach. They are raising questions about the contexts in which to apply it, what it means to be proficient in classrooms that adopt it, and, ultimately, whether to design programming around it.

As David P. Prasse, the dean of the school of education at Loyola University, in Chicago, put it: “Awareness of RTI does not mean embracing it.”
Whether called tiered instruction or RTI, the approach uses progressively intensive, evidence-based strategies designed to get all students to reach academic standards by continually gathering data on them and monitoring their progress. Proponents say the framework can help teachers improve instruction for all students, in addition to providing extra assistance for students struggling in some areas.

Within university departments of special education, where RTI may have its deepest roots, teacher-educators still hold a variety of opinions about the approach. That makes it challenging for proponents to secure RTI’s acceptance as a guiding principle for preparing teachers.

'Dressed Up' Special Education?
At Eastern Michigan University, in Ypsilanti, which has one of the nation’s largest special education departments, teacher-educators may discuss or refer to RTI in their courses. But working within the framework is not taught formally, according to Phil Smith, the interim head of the department.

Some of the faculty view RTI merely as a gussied-up name for practices that should already be occurring, he said, especially the analysis of data on student outcomes, both academic and nonacademic.

“That is sort of the foundation of special education,” Mr. Smith said. “RTI is dressing that up some, but we’ve been doing it for a really long time.”

As RTI moves out of special education into a general education context, as is happening now, it is also facing an organizational challenge. In teacher colleges, general education and special education departments are often separated and have different orientations, making collaboration difficult.

“I do think that general education [preparation] has an orientation toward kids who are living in poverty, don’t speak English, who are culturally and ethnically different,” said Paul T. Sindelar, a professor of special education at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. “What I’m less sure about is whether that concept of difference includes students with disabilities.

“The expectations are upped in [an RTI] system,” he continued. “Teachers can’t simply refer kids to special education and expect them to be removed from their watch.”

And there’s another, broader obstacle: Even if special education has historically used fine-grained data analysis to monitor progress, the K-12 culture at large still leaves educators grappling with how to do so.

“Our first challenge is teachers’ ability to read data, understand data, and use data,” said Loyola’s Mr. Prasse. “We don’t have either our teaching corps or leadership corps with the knowledge base or skill sets to do that well.”

Broad Integration
Higher education institutions that have embraced RTI or tiered instruction have eschewed making it an add-on taught in only one course. After all, say the deans of those schools, if RTI is a broad framework for instruction, it makes little sense to limit it to one course, degree program, or pathway.
At the University of Utah’s Urban Institute for Teacher Education, tiered-instruction techniques are covered in several of the core classes, and they take center stage in one on reading foundations and methods—a nod to RTI’s origins in monitoring the progress of students with reading difficulties.

Before Loyola University’s teacher-candidates graduate, they must complete a project in which they demonstrate their ability to collect data and improve the learning of the students in their clinical-fieldwork classrooms. They also have to show success with a particular subset of students, reflecting RTI’s focus on more-intensive interventions for children who don’t respond to whole-class instruction.

“Our candidates in our teacher-prep program leave here knowing how to read data, use data, monitor student progress—all the things we’ve read about that are important to functioning and performing within that kind of a system,” Mr. Prasse said.

Bumps Along the Way
The transition to RTI-centered programs in education schools that have gone that route has not been without challenges. With its emphasis on evidence-based practices, tiered instruction also bumps up against long-standing debates in teacher education, such as whether teaching ought to be teacher-directed or filtered through constructivist, “student-centered” activities.

The University of Utah’s core program doesn’t tell faculty members how to approach instruction in an RTI framework, but it does list objectives that need to be covered, Mr. Hardman said.

Nevertheless, the overhaul of teacher education initially prompted five teacher-educators to leave. Today, school officials try to defend against “curriculum drift,” ensuring that the objectives are covered.

“When we first started six years ago, we had faculty that said they wouldn’t buy into this model,” Mr. Hardman said. “But we felt that we needed to be consistent in the skill sets teachers had.” Teacher-educators note that RTI has yet to make a formal impact on the many policy levers affecting teacher preparation. It is not referenced in several influential sets of teacher standards, including those promulgated by the Council of Chief State School Officers’ Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium or by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.

“We don’t mention any one strategy or intervention by name, but we expect the programs to cover all the major research, disciplinary theories, and pedagogical approaches and for candidates to be well versed in them,” said Jane Leibbrand, a spokeswoman for NCATE.

Against that backdrop, Mr. Prasse of Loyola sees the need for greater dialogue on the possibilities RTI offers for more effective teacher education. He and several peers are drafting a paper detailing the domains of knowledge that candidates coming out of a teacher-preparation program should be able to demonstrate. With help from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, a Washington-based membership group, and the National Center for Learning Disabilities RTI Network, he hopes the paper could serve as an opening salvo of sorts in that dialogue.