

# RTI: An Approach On the March

Response to intervention started out as a way to identify and teach struggling readers and special education students, but it's fast becoming a way to change schooling for all students.

**R**esponse to intervention burst onto the national scene thanks to two major efforts by the federal government.

The \$1 billion Reading First program ushered in with No Child Left Behind in 2002 gave a boost to the educational framework by encouraging schools to use it for their literacy programs.

Two years later, the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act said that states must permit districts to use RTI as one tool for determining if a child has a specific learning disability.

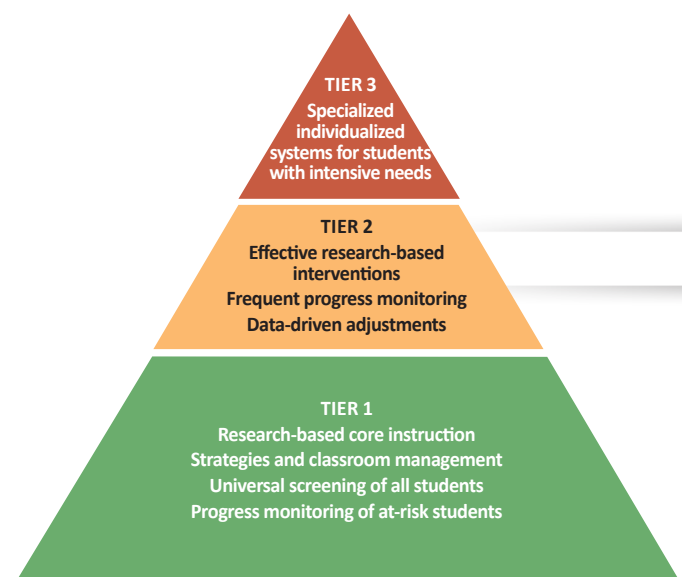
The process has been growing exponentially ever since, morphing along the way into new forms and educational uses.

In 2010, a survey of district administrators found that 61 per-

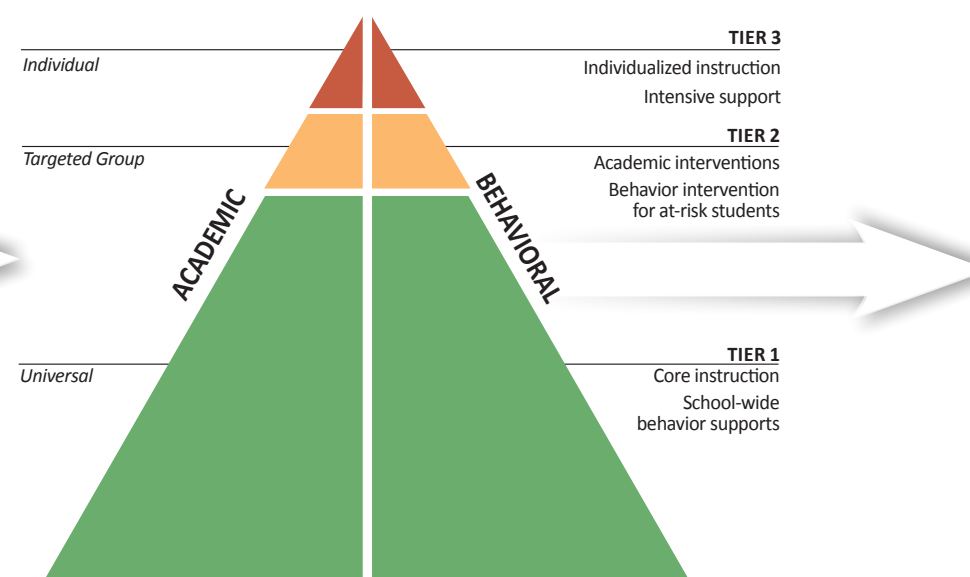
cent had implemented an RTI educational framework or were in the process of spreading RTI throughout their districts. In 2007, that proportion was only about a quarter.

Response to intervention involves early identification of students' learning problems and the use of focused lessons, or interventions, to address those problems before they became entrenched. Though primarily linked with special education and early reading, the method is now used at all levels of schooling and in a variety of subject areas. Educators use "tiered-intervention" models—of which RTI is one type—to improve school discipline. Response-to-intervention models have also been used to improve instruction for English-language learners, with preschoolers,

BY CHRISTINA A. SAMUELS



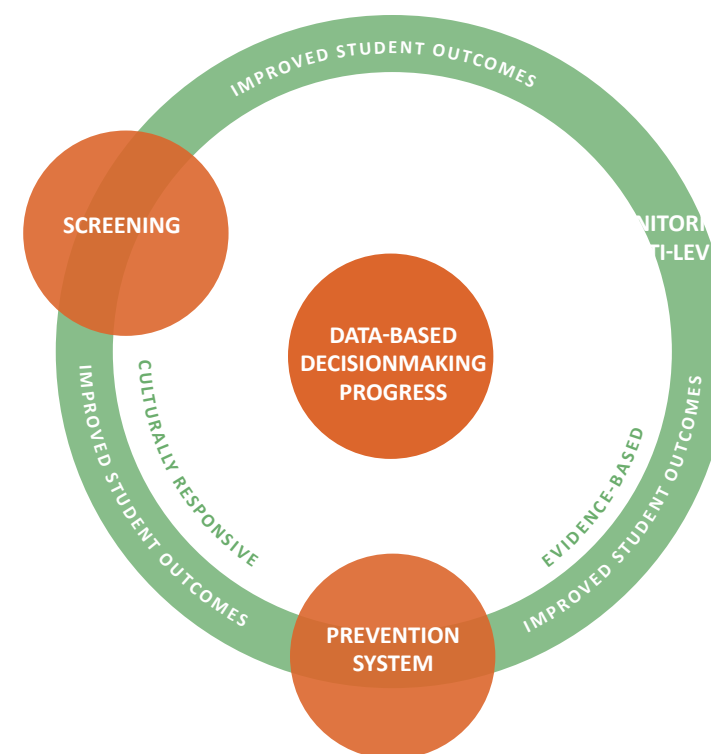
SOURCE: "Foundations and Research on Identifying Model Responsiveness-to-Intervention Sites," *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 2004



SOURCE: "Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation," National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005

## THE EVOLUTION OF RTI

The basic "pyramid of interventions," at left, became a well-known symbol of response to intervention because it gives a quick visual representation of how an RTI program can function in schools. Some depictions evolved to show how RTI fits in a model of academic as well as behavioral supports for students. Below, the National Center on Response to Intervention now promotes an even more complex visual model of RTI.



and as a lever for districtwide reform.

The process has been credited as a factor in reducing the overall rate of students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, which has been on a steady decline since 2005. And in a time of constrained resources, response-to-intervention materials are one of the few areas where school districts are increasing spending.

RTI "hasn't changed special education," Alexa E. Posny, the assistant secretary overseeing the U.S. Department of Education's office of special education and rehabilitative services, told a group of researchers gathered in Washington for an RTI research summit last December. "It has changed education, and will continue to do so."

The basic framework of a response-to-intervention process has coalesced around a few necessary parts. The approach typically begins with a program of "universal screening" that picks out students who may be struggling academically, usually with early reading skills.

When the student's problem area has been identified, teachers use high-quality, research-based interventions with the student, while closely monitoring his or her response to those lessons. If the student's skills pick up, he or she leaves the process. If there are still problems, the interventions intensify in frequency or length.

If a student still doesn't respond to the most intensive instruction, he or she might then be referred for a comprehensive special education evaluation. In that way, using RTI as part of a disability-inter-

vention process is different from the previous method that involved giving a student an IQ test, and then seeing if those results showed a discrepancy between the student's intelligence and academic achievements. The "IQ discrepancy" model meant that students had to essentially fail in school for a long period before being deemed eligible for special education services.

Proponents of RTI say the process has changed education because of its focus on catching problems early, and on improving education for all students.

"RTI, writ large, is really about general education reform," said Robert H. Pasternack, a former assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services, and now an official with Dallas-based Cambium Learning Group, which creates instructional materials. Mr. Pasternack was in office when President George W. Bush created the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, which in 2001 pushed both for the use of RTI and for allowing states to use federal special education dollars for intervening early with students who were not yet identified as having a disability. Both recommendations ended up in the IDEA.

"We had a moral imperative to do things differently, and a fiscal imperative to do things differently," Mr. Pasternack said, because too often, students were being told they had a disability when they were really victims of poor instruction.

Even with the intense and expanding interest and the investment of new money and other

## NATIONWIDE LOOK: Identifying Students With Learning Disabilities

Seven years after response to intervention was incorporated into federal special education law, most states now allow RTI or IQ discrepancy to be used to identify students with learning disabilities.

resources, the RTI process evokes questions.

The migration of RTI into new subjects, grade levels, and uses has come with little hard research to guide the way. At the same time, education schools are trying to figure out how—or whether—to introduce the concept to teachers-in-training.

Researchers are pondering whether RTI is being used carefully enough to yield valid results when it comes to identifying learning disabilities.

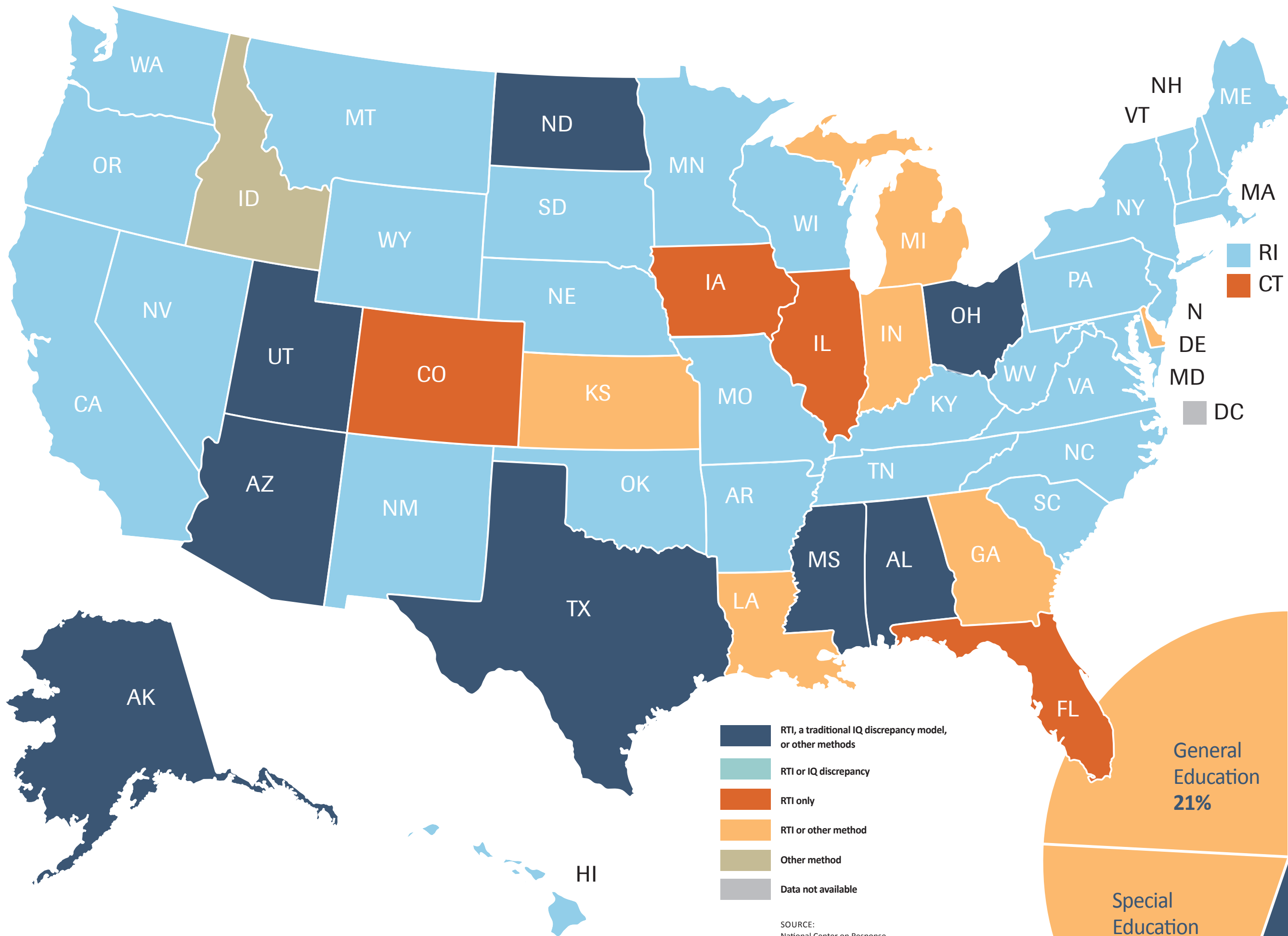
By the same token, some parents have complained that the process takes too long, and is not always implemented well enough to help their academically challenged children.

As the debate continues, RTI practitioners are forging ahead.

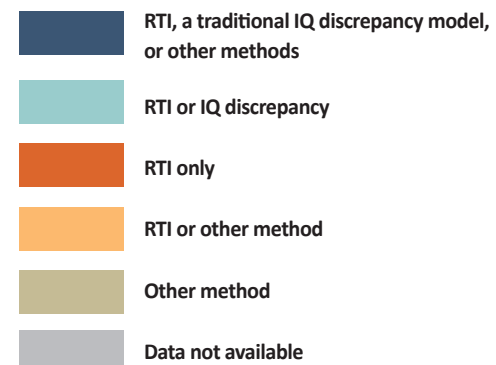
Donald Deshler, a professor of special education at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence, and a long-time researcher of student literacy, said the next step in RTI is for researchers to shift away from studying the nuts and bolts of how to implement the framework, and instead figure out just what elements make the process thrive in some schools and districts.

“There are some things that are embedded in RTI that make me

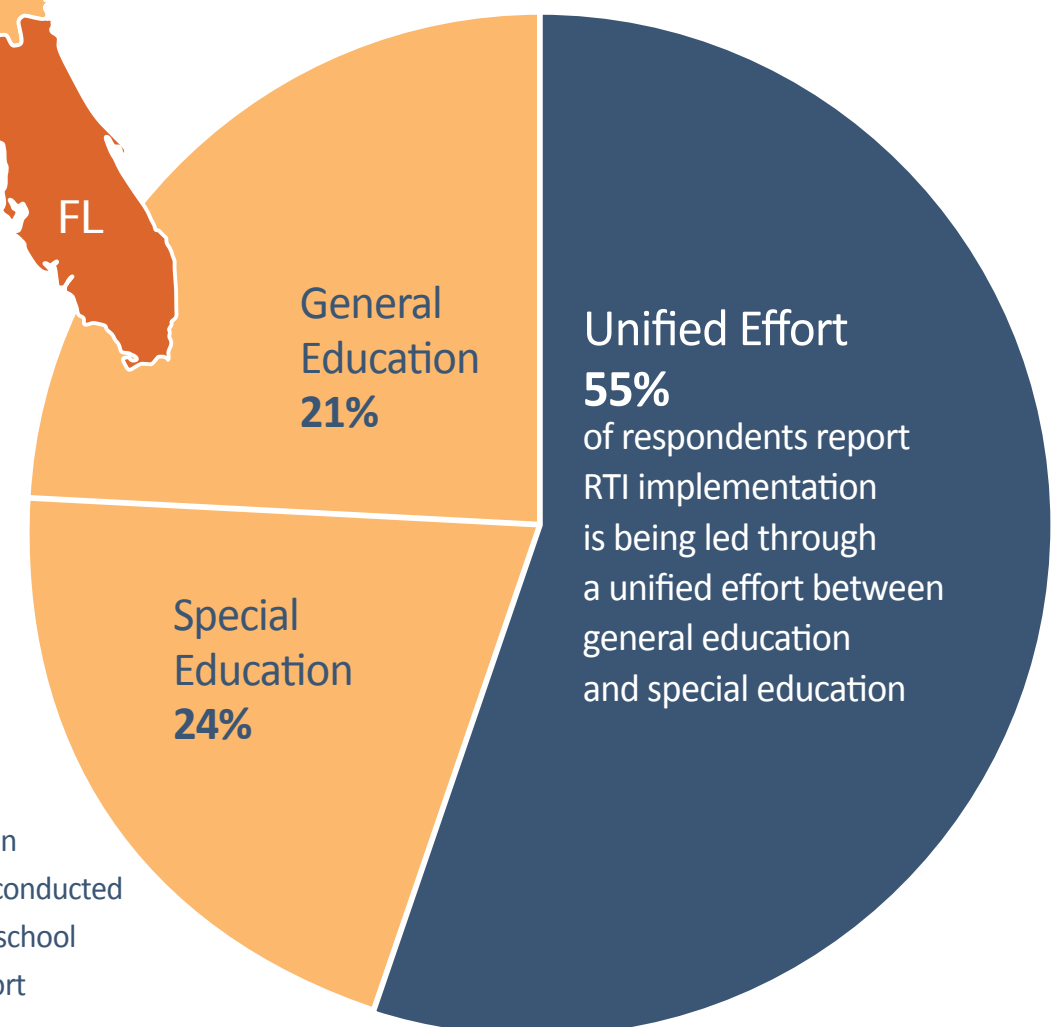
hopeful,” Mr. Deshler added. For one, he said, “it begins and ends with instruction. RTI looks directly at student achievement in the most fundamental way.” ■



SOURCES: Spectrum K-12 Solutions; American Association of School Administrators



SOURCE: National Center on Response to Intervention



**RTI ADOPTION** Proponents of response to intervention have stressed that RTI goes beyond special education, and a survey conducted last year suggests that message is being received. More than half of school administrators said their districts are implementing RTI as a joint effort between general education and special education.

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