



Better diagnosis means better learning

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Friday, March 06, 2009

Ron Drossman and some other teachers and school psychologists knew it all along: The superior philosophy for addressing learning disabilities was the response to intervention method.

Now Drossman, a 30-year veteran of school psychology, is going to see the scientific, data-driven method officially put in place at his PEAK School, a small Flagstaff charter school that is the first charter in Arizona to be approved to use the "RTI" method. PEAK was formally approved for official RTI use in February.

Drossman has been a proponent of the method since the 1970s, when he began researching and training others in a forerunner called "problem-solving," or prevention models that sought to prevent unnecessary placement in special education.

He said there was a time when most of his colleagues would have considered the RTI method highly unlikely, and many from the old school might still be resistant to such a change. But there has been a cultural shift favoring RTI -- the National Association of School Psychologists even endorses it.

"Although I'm an old dog, I knew the new tricks had validity to them all along," Drossman said.

APPLES TO APPLES

Until a 2004 change in federal law, school districts were required to use another assessment called the discrepancy model to evaluate children for special education placement.

The model gives students IQ and academic achievement tests and compares scores. Working with the assumption that the two types of tests are inherently different, evaluators place a child in special education if there is a major discrepancy between the two scores.

"It's basically comparing apples to apples," Drossman said. "Let's say, for instance, a child had very low language and vocabulary skills -- which is an indication of a possible learning disability -- and they get a very low score on that, and then they were given an IQ test that also is very language-loaded and they get a low score on that. That means you don't get help, as opposed to what makes sense to me, which is, you do get help."

But the law change allowed schools the option between the discrepancy model and RTI.

"Of course, because the other process -- the RTI process -- has a scientific basis to it that's very strong and it's considered to be best practices, that's the choice we'll be making," Drossman said.

SUPPLEMENTAL TUTORING

Tracy Braatz, the special education coordinator at PEAK, said four of the school's approximately 160 students have been diagnosed with specific learning disabilities. Specific learning disabilities can include difficulties with processing written communication or mathematics.

The school has been informally applying the first two stages, or tiers, of the program to all students since it opened in 2002. That includes a universal screening of all children in the regular classroom setting, then offering more individualized supplemental tutoring if needed.

The third step, which the school can now officially do as an evaluation tool, is a more intensive, ongoing, data-loaded extension of the second.

Braatz said PEAK places few learning-disabled children in special education because the earlier individualized intervention methods are so effective. The school also enrolls, and mainstreams, children with developmental, speech and emotional disabilities.

Because of Drossman's longtime research and practical application of RTI theories, the Arizona Department of Education was able to readily approve PEAK's application.

He said the RTI method is fairer in diagnosing children with learning disabilities.

It's also more streamlined, efficient and even cost-effective: Drossman said an IQ test alone, from the materials to the paperwork to the training of the evaluators, can cost \$1,000 apiece. Tutoring is a less expensive, but powerful tool.

"What's even more important is it doesn't wait for children to fail in order to start giving them help," he said.

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