



Kim Gibbons, Executive Director, St. Croix River Education District (SCRED)

Fix special education not with more money, but by reforming regular education

An Interview with The Civic Caucus

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Present

Dave Broden, Janis Clay, Kim Gibbons, Joe Graba, Lars Johnson, Sallie Kemper, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Tim McDonald, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder. By phone: Amir Gharbi, Paul Gilje (coordinator).

Summary of Discussion

Kim Gibbons, executive director of the St. Croix River Education District (SCRED), believes that special education is a broken system. She says the way to fix special education is not by providing it more and more funding, but by reforming the regular education system. She argues that school districts in Minnesota and elsewhere should be using the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework, which ensures the provision of high-quality, personalized instruction and interventions that are matched to the needs of students requiring additional academic and behavioral supports. Through RtI's regular use of screening assessments and earlier interventions, Gibbons says, school districts can reduce the number of children struggling with reading who are identified as having specific learning disabilities and are then referred to special education.

To increase the use of RtI statewide, she advocates that Minnesota consider doing four things: providing incentives to districts for implementing RtI; giving educators access to high-quality professional development and coaching around RtI; becoming a mandated RtI state, as 11 other states have done; and continue providing funding for positive behavioral interventions and support, which is part of the RtI framework.

Gibbons states that successful implementation of RtI strongly depends on a school district's leadership, especially the principals. But, she notes, while a number of districts have struggled with teacher resistance to RtI, in some districts, teachers have taken the lead in implementing the system.

Background

Kim Gibbons, Ph.D., has worked with the St. Croix River Education District (SCRED), located in Rush City, MN, since 1995. She has served as the Executive Director of SCRED since 2006. SCRED has earned national recognition for its use of the Response to Intervention (RtI) framework. This framework ensures the provision of high-quality instruction and interventions that are matched to the needs of students requiring additional academic and behavioral supports. In 2007, SCRED received a legislative appropriation that funded a statewide Minnesota RtI Center for two years, from 2007 to 2009.

Prior to her role as executive director, Gibbons worked as a director of special education, staff development coordinator and school psychologist. In addition, she has been on the faculty at the University of Minnesota as an instructor in the Department of School Psychology.

Gibbons obtained her doctoral degree in school psychology from the University of Oregon. Her research and professional interests include school-wide organization to support a multi-tiered system of instructional supports, assessment linked to intervention, alternative service delivery models, evaluation of psycho-educational services, and intervention and assessment of basic skill areas.

She has authored three books, most recently (with Matt Burns), *Implementing Response-to-Intervention in Elementary and Secondary Schools: Procedures to Assure Scientific-Based Practices - Second Edition*. She is a sought-after consultant, who has presented numerous workshops throughout Minnesota and nationally.

Discussion

The St. Croix River Education District (SCRED) has been a leader in the implementation of a framework aimed at improving instruction for all students, Response to Intervention (RtI).

According to SCRED executive director Kim Gibbons, the six school districts in East Central Minnesota who operate SCRED (Chisago Lakes, North Branch, Rush City, Pine City, Hinckley-Finlayson, and East Central School Districts), have been long-term implementers of this model, starting in the 1980s. They've been formally using the model since 1995.

Gibbons said SCRED has received a lot of national recognition for its work with RtI. In 2007, the Legislature provided SCRED with \$1 million to form a statewide RtI center to provide assistance to school districts around the state. The center worked with over 50 school districts, but the funding ended after two years. "There's been a great void in Minnesota in terms of professional development and technical assistance to districts," Gibbons said.

School districts in Minnesota are using about 33 percent of their general funds to pay for the portion of special education not funded by the state or federal governments. "We're all aware of the amount of money going into special education," Gibbons said. "The country spends \$500 billion on public education and it costs twice as much to educate students with disabilities as it does for their typical peers."

Nationally, 12 percent of students are identified as needing special education services. So, as a country, we're spending about 25 percent of education dollars, or \$125 billion, on special education. The majority of that funding, Gibbons said, is coming from state and local sources.

Students with learning disabilities amount to about 50 percent of those receiving special education services nationwide. According to Gibbons, of the students who qualify as specific learning disabled (SLD), the majority qualify because they can't read. A number of researchers have speculated that many students receiving services because of reading difficulties probably aren't disabled. These are students who haven't been taught to read well using the science of reading instruction.

"There are volumes of research over the past 20 years," Gibbons said. "We know how to teach reading; there is a science behind it. The field of education hasn't caught up with the research on teaching reading. Lots of students are receiving inadequate and inappropriate instruction. That's resulting in large numbers of students needing special education services. In fact, if they had been taught to read adequately at a young age, we could prevent that."

The RtI model can reduce the number of children classified as learning disabled, who require special education services, by providing earlier interventions in the regular classroom for students who are at risk of not meeting grade-level standards. "RtI is trying to prevent many students from needing costly special education services," she said. "My passion is how to set up good systems in regular education to prevent so many students from needing special education."

Gibbons described RtI as "Really Terrific Instruction" where teachers work collaboratively as teams; use data to determine which students are on track, which are exceeding our expectations and need more differentiation, and which are not meeting our expectations; and figure out how we can set up systems to support students based on their needs using research-based instructional practices.

The underpinnings of RtI came from the University of Minnesota in the early 1980s. Dr. Stan Deno and colleagues developed formative assessment measures to track student progress in basic skill areas (Curriculum Based Measurement). SCRED was the pilot site for testing the RtI measures in the 1980s.

The RtI framework has three components:

1. An assessment system, which includes:

- (a) Screening all students three times per year with short tests to determine which students are at risk of not meeting the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) test proficiency standards;
- (b) Progress monitoring for students at risk, from once a week to once a month, depending upon the severity of the problem;
- (c) Diagnostic information for some students to figure out why they are behind in reading or math.

2. Instruction across tiers of service :

Tier 1. Good core instruction for all students that is aligned to state standards and involves teachers using research-based strategies to teach. The system aims for 80 percent proficiency with core instruction alone.

Tier 2. Supplemental support for students who are below grade-level expectations and need an extra boost. In addition, supplemental support can be provided to students who exceed grade-level expectations.

Tier 3. More intensive and individualized support for students who do not respond to Tier 2 interventions or those students who are significantly below (or above) grade-level expectations.

3. Problem-solving and school-wide organization to set up collaborative teams of teachers, who review data and use it to change instruction.

Prior to the use of the RtI framework, Gibbons said, there were generally only two options for students: general instruction or special education. There were not a lot of options for the students who needed additional support within general education.

Students with disabilities drop out at twice the rate of their peers. Dropping out is highly correlated with academic achievement, Gibbons said. "If we can work at engaging students and meeting their needs at young ages, from a policy perspective, that will pay off for us tenfold in the long run." She said conservative estimates show that if all the high school dropouts from 2007 could have earned a diploma, our economy could have benefitted from an additional \$330 billion of wages over these students' lifetimes.

The most recent Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) tests show that around 62 percent of students statewide are proficient in math; 76 percent of students are proficient in reading. But Gibbons reported that there is an achievement gap for students of color and students with disabilities.

- Only 33 percent of students of color are proficient in math and only 53 percent are proficient in reading.
- Only 34 percent of students with disabilities are proficient in math and only 46 percent are proficient in reading.

According to Gibbons, special education is not the answer for reaching the 38 percent of students not proficient in math and the 24 percent of students not proficient in reading or for solving the math and reading achievement gap for students of color and students with disabilities.

"Special education as structured now is not overly effective," she said. "Outcomes are not good. It's a broken system. Special education teachers work hard, but they serve students after years and years of failure. It's hard to remediate problems at that point. Only five percent of students who receive special education services ever exit special education."

The way to fix special education is not by funneling more and more money into it, but by reforming regular education. "We need to make sure we've got a multi-tiered system, where special

education is not the only answer for getting assistance for students who need help," Gibbons said. "We have to have a range of options and that's where RtI comes in."

She noted that when she gives talks and workshops around the country, she doesn't talk about RtI as a new initiative, but as a framework for good instruction. "This is about collaborating, using data, using the research to guide your instruction," she said.

Studies show that RtI has a desirable effect that advances student achievement by two to three years in one year. In 1995-1996, the average reading proficiency for SCRED students using only core instruction was 20 percent. Now, Gibbons said, the reading proficiency using RtI is around 80 percent at the elementary level and somewhat lower than that at the middle school level, where it is still far above the earlier 20 percent level.

Gibbons stated it's harder to keep focused on reading in middle school, because a lot of people think formal reading instruction stops in sixth grade. "We've had to work hard to keep reading instruction alive and well for students who need it," she said. "We still have more growth to make. I'm encouraged by the growth the students are making in a year. It's much higher than when we started."

Using RtI, SCRED has decreased the percentage of students receiving special education services for specific learning disabilities from 4.2 percent in 1994-1995 to 2.3 percent in 2012-2013, considerably lower than the statewide level of 3.3 percent. "A lot of students are getting the help they need without requiring special education services," Gibbons commented.

Data from the RtI process can be used to see whether a student meets the criteria for receiving special education services for a specific learning disability. Gibbons said the old way of determining if a child met the specific learning disability criteria was to give each child an intelligence (IQ) test and an achievement test. In order to qualify for special education, the child had to have a big discrepancy between the two tests. "That's a wait-to-fail approach," she said, "because students often don't have a large enough discrepancy to qualify for special education until later in their school career, perhaps fourth or fifth grade."

To increase the use of RtI statewide, Minnesota should consider doing four things from a policy perspective:

1. Provide incentives to districts for implementing RtI.
2. Give educators access to high-quality professional development and coaching around RtI.

"There has been a huge void in this area," Gibbons said.

3. Consider becoming a mandated RtI state, as 11 other states have done.
4. Continue providing funding for positive behavioral interventions and support, which is part of the RtI framework.

SCRED has implemented RtI largely without extra resources. According to Gibbons, it requires looking at your existing resources and using them differently. "Lots of people would argue that more

funding is needed for RtI and I wouldn't argue with them about professional development and technical training," she said. "But you have to look at the big picture of how much money you'll actually be saving in the long run."

There are several special education funding provisions that can help pay for RtI. Gibbons said school districts can use 15 percent of their federal special education funding for early intervention services. And in Minnesota, school districts can submit an Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instructional Services (ADSiS) application to the state Department of Education. If approved, ADSiS allows districts to obtain special education funding for teachers to work with at-risk students. The teacher doesn't have to work with special education students, but can work with at-risk students where interventions other than special education are being used.

Acceptance of RtI depends on the leadership in a school district. An interviewer asked why RtI is not accepted in districts that really need it the most. Gibbons responded that it starts with the leadership in the district. "It depends on the principals and the superintendent and the value they place on data and outcomes," she said. Principals are key to implementing RtI. "If you don't have a principal on board, the implementation speed of this is a snail's pace," she said. "You need a principal who will be an instructional leader to really help teachers improve their instruction."

When asked whether the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts are using RtI, Gibbons responded that St. Paul is working on implementing RtI. Minneapolis, she said, has used a problem-solving, databased decision-making model for many years. The district was involved with the work out of the University of Minnesota in developing the RtI framework.

Sometimes fear drives teacher resistance to RtI. An interviewer asked whether there has been teacher resistance to RtI. Gibbons said in a number of districts, teachers have actually been the driving force behind use of RtI, bringing administrators along. Where there is teacher resistance, she said, sometimes teachers don't want to be members of grade-level teams. "But part of teaching," she said, "should be meeting with your colleagues and looking at the data and talking about the students in your grade level." RtI requires a lot of professional judgment. "Resistance is sometimes fear; people are afraid that they don't have the skills to operate in this framework," she said.

Perhaps providing incentives and shared state funding would help implement RtI more quickly than mandating it. One interviewer commented that RtI seems to be an area where the experimentation is done and replication is beginning. "It seems to cry out for some sort of policy adjustment," he said. Gibbons responded that there is legislative support, "but it always boils down to money." There are costs associated with implementing RtI, including the cost of the screening measures, of the data storage system, of the professional development programs and of putting together grade-level teams.

The same interviewer continued. "This offers the best promise of any approach for reading I've seen in 40 years." He said the state should think about a four-to-five year program to provide incentives and shared state funding for implementing RtI. "Maybe the state should help start RtI in one-quarter of the school districts each year for the next four years," he said. "Perhaps we should step back from a statewide mandate and think about providing incentives instead."

RtI offers highly personalized instruction for all students, if a school uses the proper screening measures. Gibbons said a child at the 99 percent level, but making no growth, needs assistance as much as a child in the bottom five percent. **RtI is very appropriate at the high school level, but it's more difficult to schedule the interventions.** "We started RtI in high school in 2001 or 2002," she said. "There are still a lot of students at that level not proficient in reading or math and lots of students with behavioral problems who aren't engaged in school."

She said it's harder to find flexibility in scheduling the extra help time in high school than in elementary school, so support is usually offered as an elective course with credits. One problem is that sometimes students can't take a different elective course they'd prefer

More schools of education are interested in RtI. In response to a question, Gibbons said college and university schools of education are "definitely coming on board." She said when SCRED led the RtI center from 2007 to 2009, they did meet with higher education institutions to help teach them about RtI. She recently led a daylong RtI workshop for all faculty and students in the education school at North Dakota State University (NDSU).

Conclusion

"RtI really is a framework that, if implemented well, will bring large increases in achievement for all students, especially for students who are struggling," Gibbons said. "It can keep large numbers of students out of special education later on. We must keep working with teachers on how to work collaboratively, how to use the research-based models of instruction and how to use the right data to guide their instructional decisions."

Note View other recent Civic Caucus discussions on special education with **Bob Wedl**, senior associate of Education|Evolving (June 14, 2013); with Anoka-Hennepin Superintendent **Dennis Carlson** and Anoka-Hennepin Special Education Director Mary Clarkson (May 10, 2013); and with **Jody Hauer**, principal evaluator in the Office of the Legislative Auditor (April 5, 2013).