Bob Wedl, Senior Associate of EducationEvolving

Control the cost of special education by strategically reducing the need for it

An Interview with The Civic Caucus

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Present

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Summary

Bob Wedl, senior associate of Education|Evolving, says the best way to save on special education costs is by not having to provide it in the first place. He explains that a new model called Response to Intervention (RtI), used in a few innovative Minnesota school districts, can reduce the number of students being referred to special education as learning disabled by up to 40 percent.

Wedl calls the RtI model a three-tiered framework that includes the regular classroom, remedial support programs and more in-depth programs. It uses analytic testing three times a year to determine which students need interventions in order to be proficient in reading or other skills. Grade-level teams of teachers decide on interventions for individual students. One- to two-minute "tests" are used weekly to see if the interventions are working. If not, the interventions are changed. While the RtI model is used primarily for reading, Wedl says it also can be applied to math and some behavior problems.

He sees technology as a powerful intervention tool in the regular classroom for students having trouble with reading, math or other subjects.

Background

Bob Wedl is a senior associate of Education|Evolving, a joint venture of the St. Paul-based Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University. His career in public education includes experience in district and chartered schools, Minnesota Education Department leadership and higher education. He served as Minnesota's Commissioner of Education in the late 1990s, leading Minnesota's innovative standards and measurement initiatives, electronic data collection systems and new finance models, including having revenues following students to the sites they attend. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, while serving as deputy commissioner of education, he was a leader in the development of much of Minnesota's educational choice policy, including open enrollment, postsecondary enrollment options, "second chance" programs and the nation's first charter school law.

Wedl also served as the executive director of planning and policy for the Minneapolis public schools, where he led the development of new models for serving students. He expanded the Response to Intervention (RtI) model and helped develop a "value-added growth accountability model." He also provided direction to the district's nine chartered schools and 33 contract alternative schools.

He has published numerous articles on education and is finalizing a book titled *School Boards Have Choice Too*. He has undergraduate and graduate degrees from Saint Cloud University.

Discussion

Special education students are primarily regular education students .
According to Bob Wedl, senior associate of Education|Evolving, the vast majority of most special education students' time is spent in regular classes. While special education services for some students may be only 20 minutes of speech therapy a week, children at the other end with profound disabilities may require extensive services. But most students are receiving special education services because they don't read and/or do math well.

The best way to save on special education costs is not having to provide it in the first place.
Wedl said that when reviewing the March 2013 Legislative Auditor's evaluation report looking at the costs of special education, he did not see that the audit looked at different models that resulted in kids not needing special education services as a way of controlling costs. (See Civic Caucus April 5, 2013, discussion with Jody Hauer , principal evaluator for the report.)

Wedl and colleague Curt Johnson consulted on a 2011 report prepared by a number of Minnesota's foundations titled Beyond the Bottom Line (see chapter 5, page 29), which addresses prevention strategies in special education as a way to improve outcomes and lower costs. According to Wedl, a key part of controlling the cost of special education is a prevention model, as well as a direct service model, called Response to Intervention (RtI), which is being used in a few innovative Minnesota school districts. While the model is most widely used for reading, it is also being applied for mathematics and behavior. RtI recognizes that the most important part of the model, in terms of prevention, is what goes on in the regular classrooms.

The report states that initiating an RtI prevention model has demonstrated up to a 40 percent reduction in students classified as "learning disabled." It says that current Minnesota law provides

options in the ways districts can identify special education students. "Ironically, most continue to use outdated and expensive models which require that 'students fail,' before they can be helped," according to the report.

The RtI model has three tiers:

Tier 1 is the core instruction that all students receive. A quality core instruction program should result in around 80 percent of students on-track towards grade-level standards.

Tier 2 supports are supplemental to the core instructional program. The goal is to have 15 percent or fewer students needing supplemental instruction. Usually, these interventions will be provided by a Title I teacher, a learning disabilities teacher or other staff.

Tier 3 involves more intensive services uniquely designed to meet the instructional and/or behavioral needs of a few students, usually three to five percent. These students are served by teachers with expertise in different curriculum and instruction models.

Tier 1 is very important in a prevention model. Wedl said most districts tend to use the same curriculum in all classrooms. "A one-size fits all model guarantees failure for 25 percent of the kids, because not all kids learn the same," he said. "The regular classroom curriculum must be tailored to the students. For example, the reading curriculum used at sites where most students come to school at kindergarten as fluent beginning readers will be much different than the curriculum used at sites where students who walk through the schoolhouse gate for the first time don't have a clue as to what those squiggles on a page mean.

RtI uses a screening mechanism that tests all kids in the fall, winter and spring.

In Minnesota, one of the most frequently used tools is a test called Measures of Academic Progress (MAP).The MAP test is an electronic tool that measures the performance level of students in reading and math. It is a "levels test," meaning that for students who continue to answer items correctly, the computerized test continues to add more difficult test items. For students who are not able to provide correct responses, the computerized model adds less difficult items until the student is providing the appropriate responses. The data are then analyzed and the results provided immediately to the teacher, not months later as is common with paper-pencil tests.

"With MAP, we know which kids are not on target to be proficient in reading and math in the fall, winter and spring," Wedl explained. "Then we help those kids immediately, either by having the classroom teacher provide interventions in the classroom or, where more significant needs are evident, having a remedial program provide the interventions. The RtI model provides assistance to students who are even a tad below target. It is individualized for every single student at the site."

The RtI model assumes that if learning is not occurring, it is not because of a problem "inside the student."

Rather, the problem lies with the instruction, Wedl said. Therefore the instruction continues to change until learning results. The testing is "formative," which teachers fully support, because it aids them

immediately by informing them of the impact of the instruction they are providing. While the RtI model is most frequently used with reading, a number of districts are using it in other areas, such as mathematics and behavior management.

A growing category of special education is behavior problems .
Wedl suggests that while the RtI model is effective in terms of preventing behavior issues from becoming chronic, sometimes student behavior is in response to their learning environment. In other words, frequently students need a more individualized instruction environment, perhaps one that is project-based and most often has far fewer students. Rather than labeling these students as having a disability of "severe behavior problems," school districts should develop school-within-a-school or, even better, alternative programs located away from the mainstream school that use different models of instruction, such as project-based learning.

In Wedl's experience as an administrator of an alternative school, as students walked through the doors to alternative schools, most left their behavior problems behind. "They were behavior problems because of the environment they'd been in," he said. "That's an example of what could be done to give a much better education to those kids at a huge cost savings. It would also relieve regular classroom teachers."

The model used by many districts (the severe discrepancy model) does not provide interventions until students are considerably behind.
The literature calls this the "wait to fail" model. "If kids are receiving special education academic services in fourth grade using the severe discrepancy model, they most likely will be there for the rest of their school lives," Wedl said. "That gets very expensive. But the important question is why let that happen?"

All of the schools in the St. Croix River Education District (SCRED) use the RtI model.

SCRED is operated by six school districts in East Central Minnesota: Chisago Lakes, North Branch, Rush City, Pine City, Hinckley-Finlayson, and East Central School Districts.Those districts have been using RtI in all of their schools for over 10 years, Wedl said.

The research on the RtI model was first conducted in Minnesota in the 1990s, led by researchers at the University of Minnesota (Stan Deno), SCRED (Gary Germann) and the Minneapolis public schools (Doug Marston and David Heistad). The "Center for Learning Solutions," based in Minnesota, worked with state Senators Gen Olson and Kathy Saltzman, along with Representatives Mindy Grieling and Tim Faust, to get Minnesota laws changed to permit the use of the RtI model. The model is now being used by hundreds of districts around the United States.

The school districts in SCRED have shown that the RtI model can reduce by 40 percent the number of students who will ultimately need special education learning disability services.
This is significantly fewer students when compared to the schools in Central Minnesota and statewide, as well. "But as important is that when SCRED applied this model," Wedl said, "the performance of all students as a cohort improved, both because of the attention paid to the regular classroom curriculum, as well as the immediate intervention provided when students were not on track to proficiency."

"The RtI model alone is just another model," Wedl noted. "What is important is that screening with tools having predictive validity provides quick and reliable data as to which students need assistance. Interventions taught by competent individuals are key. Organization of the school day must permit teachers to convene to review the data, select the interventions likely to be of greatest assistance to individual students, determine whether the instruction is working and, if not, to change it.

It's difficult to analyze savings from students you never serve with special education services. "If kids are being helped and don't need special education services, you don't evaluate them, and you don't have paperwork that teachers express so much concern about," Wedl said. "That would never show up on a review by the Legislative Auditor." Several Wisconsin school districts with enrollments of 3,000 to 4,000 students concluded that they saved 4.5 full-time teachers in a year in each district by using the RtI model, partly because the paperwork is much simpler.

A key premise of RtI is that regular assessments mean teachers always know where kids are academically.
Data from the MAP tests correlate highly with the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs), required by the state to show whether students are proficient academically at various grade levels. MAP data show where kids need to be in the fall, winter and spring to meet the proficiency targets on the third-grade through eighth-grade MCAs.

"The MAP tests are diagnostic tests," Wedl said, "while the MCA is an accountability tool. Because the MCAs are administered at the end of the year, the data are not provided to schools until long after the test is administered, so it is not very helpful for instruction. That is why districts enrolling about 80 percent of the students in Minnesota use the MAP. It is useful for instruction, which ought to be the primary reason for gathering data."

Short diagnostic tests are used to monitor whether interventions with individual students are working .
In response to a question about how the teacher analyzes the data day-to-day in order to provide the needed direct intervention, Wedl said the MAP tests are used analytically and are very sensitive to measuring growth. If a student is not on target, a grade-level team of teachers can select the appropriate interventions, depending on the needs of the student. When a student is being provided a reading intervention, one- to two-minute weekly reading samples monitor the student's progress. If there is no progress within a week or two, the intervention is quickly changed until one is found that works. Depending on the type of intervention, it is provided either by special education teachers or by classroom teachers.

The Minneapolis school district has some of the leading researchers in the country on the RtI model, but not all schools in the district are using the model. Wedl said he believes the Minneapolis "Beat the Odds" schools are all using the model.

The RtI model is mainly used for students with moderate to mild disabilities.
Wedl said Anoka-Hennepin Superintendent Dennis Carlson and Special Education Director Mary Clarkson, in their May 10, 2013, discussion with the Civic Caucus , were really talking more about kids whose special education services cost $40,000 to $50,000 per year. "The RtI model won't suddenly bring students with severe and profound disabilities to proficiency," Wedl said.

"The points Carlson and Clarkson raised are right on," Wedl argued. "Lack of increased general education revenue over the past number of years resulted in a significant increase in the amount of general revenue needed to support special education programs."

Some districts don't use the RtI model because it requires significant change that begins with the regular classroom.
An interviewer asked what is preventing districts like Minneapolis and St. Paul from implementing the RtI model. Wedl responded, "Nothing. Much of the answer is because 'We don't do it this way and we don't change easily.' I believe that if we permitted school sites to do it, more would. But principals are told, 'This is the curriculum and the model we use in this district and it is your responsibility to follow it.'" He said, though, that schools like Lyndale, Loring, Kenny and others in Minneapolis continue to beat the odds. Strong site leadership is key, he said.

"In Minneapolis the central office is very strong," he continued, "although Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson is starting to change that. Even with the nationally recognized RtI leadership in the district, neither the board nor the central office was supportive of this model when I worked in the district 10 years ago. It requires considerable change. RtI is far more than 'a special ed model.' It requires district-wide change and, like any organization, education doesn't change quickly."

Wedl noted that Governor Mark Dayton, visited SCRED districts and publicly supported the RtI model during his gubernatorial campaign .

There are some incentives in the special education formula for districts to use the RtI model .
Only if a district uses this model, the state will pay the same special education reimbursement on licensed teachers who are providing students needed interventions, even those without special education licenses. "In addition, federal special education funds can be used for this as well. This gets extra money to help kids before they need special education," he said.

Some school districts are using the RtI model in their early childhood programs.
Wedl pointed out that SCRED districts implement the age-three-to-grade-three program, using the RtI model. The Rush City district has the most experience with this model. He said the Minnesota Reading Corps, an AmeriCorps program, trains its members in pre-kindergarten and K-to-grade-three interventions and measurements. They are placed in Head Start programs and in district pre-kindergarten programs only in school districts that accept the RtI model.

"Some people say pre-kindergarten programs don't work because, as students go through school, they don't hold on to the progress they made in those programs," Wedl added. "But I suggest that's really because while the kids are ready for school, the school is not ready for the kids. If these students had an individualized learning program waiting for them, regression would not occur."

At least one chartered school sponsor, Innovative Quality Schools (IQS), requires the schools it sponsors to use the RtI model and provides training to the schools' staff members.

State Department of Education staff could be more supportive of RtI.
In response to a question, Wedl said, Commissioner Brenda Cassellius is a supporter of the RtI model. "But," he said, "we really need to come up with a new way to provide state assistance. At one time, 'state assistance' meant assistance provided by the state agency. That needs to change. 'State

assistance' ought to mean assistance provided by organizations best able to provide it. Here Minnesota sits with the very best RtI researchers and practitioners in the nation. Why isn't 'state assistance' provided by contracting with SCRED and Minneapolis? That does not mean state department employees are not good at what they do. That is not the point. We must change how we use resources at the state level and this is a good example of how the role of 'state assistance' might be provided differently.

Minnesota school districts have met the Civil Rights objective of educating all students .
Wedl said special education laws were put into place in the 1970s, because districts weren't serving all children with disabilities. "Parents of children with disabilities took districts to court, because educators weren't doing their job," he said. The courts agreed with the parents and, as courts and lawyers do, they wrote orders in legal and procedural terms. But perhaps there are three things we need to do:

"First, maybe it's time to say, OK, we've met the Civil Rights objective," he said. "All kids are now able to go to school. Students are getting the kinds of services they need. Now let's all sit down together and see how we could more reasonably do this."

"Second, Minnesota laws and regulations extend beyond what is required by the federal laws. There are certain areas where that is good policy, such as in serving children from birth. But for the most part, Minnesota ought to abide by the federal definitions and procedures," he said.

"Third, Minnesota should not label students with behavior problems as having a disability," Wedl added. Rather than putting all the kids with behavior problems in special education, districts should come up with school-within-a-school or alternative learning programs. Many students need a change of environment.

Use of technology can be a powerful intervention .
An interviewer asked how useful technology is in schools today. "It's huge," Wedl said. "The teacher is often driving instruction aided by technology. The real breakthrough is when the technology becomes the teacher." He gave the example of a computer game that pushes kids to read faster. The computer has words go by on the screen, but won't go any faster than the student can go.

"Those types of interventions are very, very powerful," he said. "The digital platform is the world of today's students. It isn't new to them. They grew up with it as a part of their daily lives. Yet we treat it as an add-on when it comes to learning."