

# Response-to-Intervention: SLPs as Linchpins in Secondary Schools

SLPs in Virginia are involved in a school-wide literacy project in middle and high schools organized around five levels of instruction/intervention that increase in intensity in response to diverse student needs.

by Barbara J. Ehren

**M**any speech-language pathologists in schools are engaging in conversations in their school districts about response-to-intervention (RTI)—a multi-tiered approach to providing services and interventions to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity—and some are playing crucial roles in the process. However, this involvement is mostly at the elementary school level. Although much of the writing and discussion in professional circles has centered on the approach with younger children, RTI also is relevant at the secondary level.

Educators still can prevent negative consequences of school failure in secondary schools, even for students experiencing achievement difficulties such as deteriorating self-efficacy, alienation, dropping out of school, involvement in anti-social behavior, and other ill effects (Ehren, 2008). As dialogue about RTI in middle, junior, and high schools increases across the country, SLPs need to be key players in the process. They should be integrally involved—and have the potential to be linchpins—in planning and implementing RTI initiatives at the school level. Such has been the case with SLPs in Virginia who are involved in a school-wide literacy project in middle and high schools.

## Content Literacy Continuum Project

Virginia is in its fifth year of a state project to narrow the achievement gap—the difference between a student's achievement and grade-level expectations—in adolescents, including those with disabilities. Part of this project involves promoting school-wide literacy in middle and high schools using the Content Literacy Continuum (CLC), a framework developed at the University of Kansas, Center for Research on Learning (KUCRL; Lenz & Ehren, 1999; Lenz, Ehren, & Deshler, 2005).

CLC is a comprehensive, school-wide framework that addresses the content literacy needs of students in middle, junior, and high schools. Content literacy—the listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and strategies students need to learn in each of the academic disciplines—involves the packaging of research-validated literacy practices with tools of the Strategic Instruction Model (Deshler et al., 2001) as anchors and is organized around five levels of instruction/intervention that increase in intensity in response to diverse student needs (see Figure A online).

Two high schools and two middle schools in Hanover and Botetourt counties were selected for an initial demonstration project. Although the initiation of the project predated the national RTI movement, the CLC framework is fundamentally an RTI approach

and is now articulated as such (Ehren & Deshler, 2009). CLC involves increasingly intense instruction for students who struggle, but its levels do not correspond to a numerical RTI tier:

**Level 1: Enhanced Content Instruction** addresses the mastery of critical content in academic subjects for all students utilizing the listening, speaking, reading, and writing access skills necessary to manipulate subject matter.

**Level 2: Embedded Strategy Instruction** focuses on student use of content literacy strategies to acquire, manipulate, and demonstrate knowledge in specific subjects.

**Level 3: Intensive Strategy Instruction** provides more intensive strategy instruction to master independent use of content literacy strategies.

**Level 4: Intensive Basic Skill Instruction** targets foundational language and literacy skills that students (usually below the fourth-grade reading level) must acquire to be successful learners.

**Level 5: Therapeutic Intervention** involves intensive intervention in language underpinnings for those students whose language impairment thwarts learning.

SLPs are integrally involved in all of the levels—not just CLC Level 5 (“intensive therapy”)—and are, in fact, linchpins in the entire CLC framework.



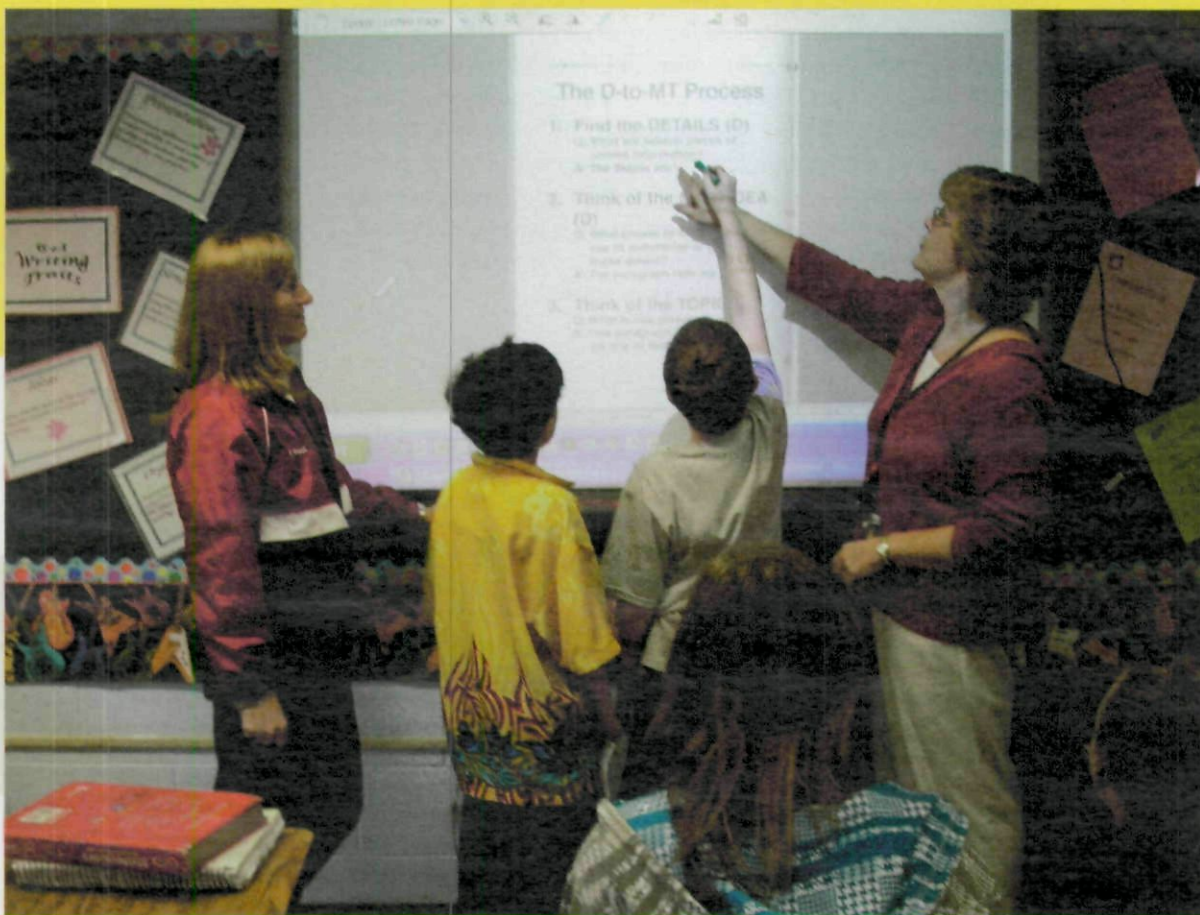


Photo by Bonnie Conway

Pam Saunders (left), a sixth-grade language arts teacher, and SLP Kimberly McAllister work collaboratively to teach paraphrasing strategy in a class for students with learning disabilities at Liberty Middle School in Hanover County, Va.

## Full-Scale Support by SLPs

An essential feature of SLP support in CLC is that it is neither place- nor time-bound. Within a given classroom situation, the SLP may actually provide supports in all five levels. The following scenario depicts such an example:

*A language arts teacher is teaching Proficiency in Sentence Writing Strategy\* to a class of 28 sixth-graders, using a large-class instructional procedure (CLC Level 2). Twelve of the students have difficulty learning the strategy and need more intensive, explicit instruction that can be managed in the language arts class by the teacher.*

*In the classroom, the SLP triages the language arts students through diagnostic teaching. In effect, she provides short-term Level 3 intensive strategy instruction for three weeks to the 12 students. After that short-term intervention, seven of the 12 are ready to be integrated into the large-group instruction, with some adaptations to instructional procedures. The SLP helps plan and model those changes.*

*The SLP identifies basic language/literacy skills that the five remaining students are lacking and*

*provides instruction in that area (Level 4 services) for three additional weeks; after that period, three students are ready to be reintegrated into the language arts instruction with additional Level 4 intervention by a reading specialist.*

*The remaining two students need a more comprehensive evaluation to determine language impairment (LI). After evaluation they are identified as LI and are enrolled for Level 5 services (i.e., Curriculum-Relevant Therapy) delivered within the language arts classroom.*

## Workload Approach

The SLPs in Virginia did not conceptualize their roles with RTI as an add-on to their existing caseload—instead, they created a new workload to account for all the tasks involved in their significant RTI roles (see ASHA, 2002). Merely counting heads, as in a caseload orientation, would not accurately reflect the work that is involved in RTI. A workload approach involves scheduling activities carried out with and on behalf of students, and incorporates collaboration, consultation, and other indirect supports throughout the SLP's schedule.

The Virginia CLC Project workload approach includes the following key features:

- **With students:** screenings and observations, evaluations, 1:1 time for students (with and/or without an Individualized Education Program [IEP]), small groups of students (with and/or without an IEP), whole group instruction with SLP as sole instructor, whole group instruction with SLP as co-teacher
- **On behalf of students:** child study/eligibility/IEP meetings, referral discussions, IEP and other consult time with teachers (differentiated instruction, whole-class impact including students with and/or without IEPs), consults with other professionals, document preparation (evaluations/IEP/Medicaid), file reviews and scoring of curriculum-based measures, recording student data (report cards, daily logs, outside contacts), lesson plans
- **Other activities:** school meetings (PTA, faculty, department, committee), clerical (e-mails, making copies), leading staff professional development, lunch

## Perceptions of Administrators

SLPs frequently express concerns that their principals do not understand what they do or appreciate the roles they can play in literacy initiatives. When SLPs are visible and active members of the school

\* specific tools of the Strategic Instruction Model



community and provide unique contributions to RTI, principals understand and acknowledge their importance to student success. However, SLPs must be proactive in shaping the perceptions of others about them and their work (Ehren & Whitmire, in press).

The SLPs in the Virginia CLC Project have been successful in articulating and demonstrating their value-added contributions to literacy and RTI. Donald Latham, principal of Liberty Middle School, a demonstration site, said that "the SLP is providing services not only to students identified for speech but has expanded services and expertise to meet the needs of all students who need assistance in the acquisition of language skills. In addition, the role of the SLP has expanded to a collaborative partnership with classroom teachers to improve literacy."

Vaneta McAlexander, principal of Central Academy Middle School, another demonstration site, noted the importance of changing delivery structures. "What a difference from the old model wherein a student had to miss class time, receive therapy in an artificial setting using curriculum that most times did not match the student's current content, and then have to generalize the information back into the regular classroom on his own," she said.

## Seven Steps to Success

Over the past five years, the Virginia experience has identified some success factors for SLPs interested in assuming productive roles within secondary RTI initiatives:

**1. Start small.** Begin with and continue educating other staff about why SLPs are involved (communication=speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Begin by observing general education classrooms, especially in English, humanities, and language arts. Work with small groups, then ease into co-teaching. Review cumulative files to identify students struggling with high-stakes testing. Know your long-term goal and develop short-term goals to meet them. Revise, revise, and revise again based on success and challenges.

**2. Self-educate.** Become proficient in all aspects of literacy, as well as grade-level academic standards, so that you

can make the connections between the language underpinnings and how they are affecting a student in the educational setting. Become familiar with teachers' language. Know the specific content vocabulary being taught, how instruction is being presented, and time frames for instruction. It is critical for SLPs to be included in school-wide professional development regarding literacy and access for all students to the curriculum.

### 3. Volunteer your skills/services.

Ask questions and learn how you can integrate your skills and services into the curriculum. Look at how homework, tests/quizzes, and content are being taught to determine how content can be "language-tweaked" for students who need help. Offer to be a part of the solution, rather than just the identifier of the problem. Ask to sit in on school meetings (department, grade-level, team, retention, etc.) to gain information on struggling students and help address concerns.

**4. Develop a game plan.** A plan can be revised, but it helps to know who is doing what, the purpose (why), time frames, and how will you determine if follow-up is needed. A written plan helps you be efficient and effective with your time, stay on task, and communicate better with teachers. Gain support from administration for the changes you propose before you communicate them to staff.

**5. Have regular contact with teachers and administrators.** Regular meetings with the same core staff help determine in a timely manner who needs intervention and how students are progressing. This contact allows a faster change in service delivery.

**6. Create a flexible daily schedule.** One option is to change your schedule every nine weeks so that you can be available for classrooms on a rotating basis. A rotating schedule means that the few students receiving Level 5 treatment may need to be seen at different times throughout the year. Another option is to provide classroom services Monday through Thursday with one day set aside for evaluations, make-up sessions, and 1:1 work. Another option

is to change the schedule weekly and sometimes daily, driven by student needs.

**7. Cultivate building and district administrative support.** Commitment to the SLPs' role by these administrators is a key to the success of this model.

The take-away message from the Virginia CLC project is simple—it can be done! Not only can SLPs serve new and expanded roles in school-wide literacy efforts within an RTI context, they also can become linchpins of RTI at the secondary level. Regardless of the framework used in a particular school district, SLPs can create the kind of workload that supports an RTI initiative.

It is clear that administrative support is key, as is effective collaboration with teachers. However, most significant is the persistent, creative energy applied to the enterprise by SLPs who believe they can make a difference, then set about to make it happen.



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