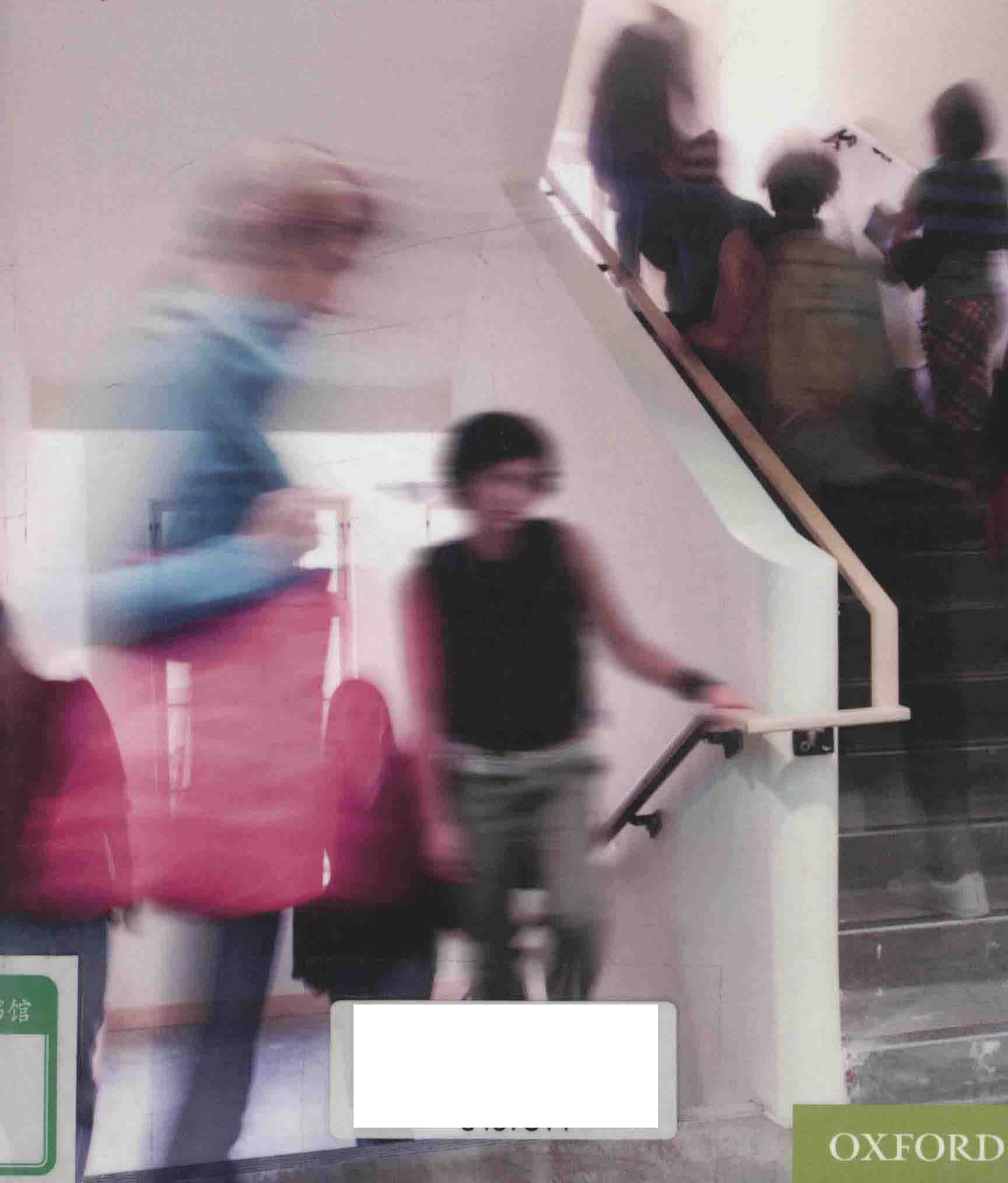


# Response to Intervention

A Guide for School Social Workers

Edited by James P. Clark and Michelle E. Alvarez



OXFORD

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James P. Clark  
Michelle E. Alvarez



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# Response to Intervention

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James P. Clark

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Michelle E. Alvarez

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# RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

## Introduction and Overview

JAMES P. CLARK & MICHELLE E. ALVAREZ

This book is designed to provide school social workers with a working understanding of Response to Intervention (RtI) practices and systems. School social workers will be challenged to take on the role of system change agents in the adoption, implementation, and evaluation of RtI systems that improve the educational outcomes for all students. Because RtI includes the development of school-wide supports for *all* students, school social workers will need to expand their repertoires of knowledge and skills beyond assessment of and services to individual students who are at risk or experiencing educational problems. For many practitioners this represents a significant paradigm shift requiring a concomitant shift in practice that includes the development of knowledge and skills required to assist in the design and implementation of school-wide support systems. School social workers will need to be able to conduct system-level assessments and use these data to design differential interventions and supports that are able to be directly measured, monitored, and evaluated for their effectiveness. This does not mean that school social workers should totally abandon their direct service work with students. Rather, a more balanced approach is needed in which considerably more attention is directed to system improvements that will use resources more efficiently and lessen the extent to which individual and group interventions are needed.

## WHAT IS RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION?

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a multitiered framework for organizing evidenced-based practices in a systematic process for the purpose of determining what interventions ensure the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success of all students. In this approach, student performance data are continuously used to match high-quality instruction and supports to the needs of all students. The specific focus of this book is on the use of RtI to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students in elementary and secondary schools.

National policy support for the use of RtI has recently been explicitly stated in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004. As a result, implementing federal regulations for IDEA now require states to permit the use of a process that examines whether the child responds to scientific, evidence-based interventions as part of the information reviewed to determine whether a child has a specific learning disability (SLD). Though the specific reference in IDEA is to evaluation procedures to determine special education eligibility for students with learning disabilities, the benefits of this approach extend far beyond those students requiring special education programs and services. In the role of system change agents, school social workers have the opportunity to lead efforts to develop school-wide systems that incorporate RtI principles and practices and that ensure the educational success of all students. In advocating systemic improvements, school social workers will be effective only if they are knowledgeable about RtI and are proficient in the skills needed to practice in RtI systems.

## THE CHALLENGE

To advocate effectively and lead efforts to adopt and implement RtI systems, most practitioners will need to acquire or revitalize the knowledge and skills needed to continually practice data-based decision making. The social work profession has long claimed to be rooted in both science and art. However, to a great extent, considerably more emphasis has been given to the artistic delivery of services such as the use of rapport, relationships, and effective communication as the foundations for effective helping, with relatively less attention given to the scientific dimensions of practice. The strong focus on evidence-based practices and data-based decision making in RtI systems demands greater emphasis on the scientific features of practice than ever before. Developing and using data systems and procedures that document needs and the effectiveness of interventions at the individual and systems levels require the artful application of scientific methods to school social work practice. In effect, RtI represents an opportunity to expand the scope of school social work practice by applying systems theory, functional assessment practices, and an ecological perspective to efforts to improve

behavioral and academic results. As such, school social workers will need to effectively and efficiently integrate RtI into their practice.

## UNDERLYING BELIEFS

The following beliefs about RtI and school social work practice have guided the development of this book:

- RtI is an approach that is highly consistent with social work values and school social work practice standards and should be viewed as an organizing framework for school social work practice.
- The scientific method can and should be applied to efforts to solve educationally relevant social, emotional, and behavioral problems.
- School social workers should be active participants in supporting the adoption and effective implementation of RtI at state and local levels.
- The implementation of RtI should enhance problem solving and positive educational results for all students and should not promote the labeling and categorizing of any students.
- Social, emotional, and behavioral competence is a matter of teaching and learning on a par with academic competencies. Therefore, RtI should promote an instructional approach to improving students' social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment and performance.
- School-wide, group, and individual student performance data (academic and behavioral) should be systematically used to make decisions about resources needed to ensure student success.
- School social workers should use functional behavioral assessment procedures to inform the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of behavioral interventions.
- The effectiveness of interventions and programs developed for students by school social workers must be documented with data.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 traces the evolution of RtI policy and practice beginning with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The influence of policy shifts on practice throughout subsequent decades is described, concluding with the explicit policy support for RtI articulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. A three-tiered RtI model is presented as an organizational framework for the book. This framework is used to organize subsequent chapters into four sections. Sections I, II, and III are organized in relation to each of the three



tiers of the RtI framework. Each of these sections includes a chapter describing the tier followed by chapters that present case examples to illustrate how specific programs, practices, or data collection systems might be implemented in that tier. Case examples presented here have several limitations. First, because these programs, practices, and data collection systems were not initially designed with the intent of being implemented within a comprehensive RtI framework, the reader may note that they have a less than perfect or natural fit with the three-tiered model presented here. However, this is the current state of practice, and it illustrates the formidable challenge inherent in using this framework to orchestrate the efficient and effective use of an array of programs and practices in a well-functioning and coherent RtI system. Second, programs and practices presented in the case examples vary in the extent to which they are considered evidence based. They range from promising practices to those that have established strong data to support their claim to be evidence-based. Finally, outcome data that are presented in case examples are intended to illustrate the application of the problem-solving process that includes progress monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the program or practice. The examples are not experimentally designed and the data are not intended to establish an evidence base for the particular program or practice.

Section IV includes a chapter describing the use of RtI data in making special education eligibility decisions; a chapter describing the identification, selection, and use of evidence-based programs and practices; and a chapter presenting critical information on how to support the adoption and sustained implementation of RtI systems. The final chapter concludes with a challenge for school social workers to become advocates for the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of RtI systems.

## THE NEED FOR THIS BOOK

The scant attention to RtI in the school social work literature has been a major impetus for the development of this book. Though some topics relevant to RtI such as evidence-based practices are addressed in the literature, it is astounding that in the past decade no articles exclusively focusing on RtI have been published in school social work journals. Only two very recently published book chapters on RtI can be found in the school social work literature (Massat, Constable, & Thomas, 2009; Lindsey & White, 2009). Both of these chapters are in the same book.

Because the knowledge base generated from school social work is lacking, the reader will note that most of the supportive material cited in this book is from the education, school psychology, and applied behavior analysis literature. However, all authors of chapters in this book have been involved directly in the development and implementation of RtI systems. Additionally some authors have extensive experience with designing state and local RtI policies, procedures, and practices, and some have extensive experience practicing as school social workers in RtI systems.

Despite the virtual absence of attention to RtI in our literature, school social workers most assuredly have much to contribute to the systemic improvements that RtI demands. But we will need to become more substantive and visible contributors to the innovations needed to drive these improvements. We will need to act on our claim that we are change agents who use systems theory and thinking to ensure successful outcomes for students and that this role and perspective is what distinguishes us from other professions. After all, isn't this or shouldn't this be the heart of school social work? Let this book serve as a rallying cry for school social workers to rise to this challenge.

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