

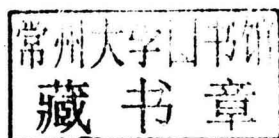
# **BEFORE** the Special Education **REFERRAL**

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Leading  
Intervention  
Teams

Matthew  
Jennings

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# Preface

I have served in the roles of a prereferral intervention team member, team coordinator, and administrator responsible for a school district's prereferral intervention process. It has been my experience that these teams are ineffective, inefficient, and sometimes used in harmful ways.

At best, the prereferral intervention team process was viewed as a bureaucratic necessity to be tolerated. Staff members went through the motions of the process because it was required by the policies of their school district. At worst, the process was a mechanism used to prevent children from being evaluated for services they may have required. All students were required to be referred to the school's prereferral intervention team before the teacher could initiate an evaluation for special education services. As a result, services to students who obviously required them were delayed and those students fell further behind.

Not wanting to rely solely on my own experience, I have engaged in conversations about this process with countless teachers and school administrators. To my dismay, my experience is not unique. Teachers bring students who demonstrate the greatest academic, behavioral, and health challenges to a group that is both poorly designed and managed. As a result, teachers do not develop new strategies for assisting these students, teachers end up frustrated, and the students' situations do not improve.

Being dissatisfied with the status quo, I embarked on a journey to determine what the research literature on this topic could offer. Interestingly, I found a significant discrepancy between what was being advocated in the literature and what was being applied in schools. Though interesting, this is not surprising; the studies were not synthesized into a set of practical steps that school administrators could follow to design, manage, and lead their schools' prereferral intervention team process.

## **THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK**

The content of this book is based on an extensive review of research literature on the topics of prereferral intervention teams, group dynamics, and team development. The review and analysis of this literature was a critical first step, but it was not the primary goal. Rather, my primary anticipated outcome is for readers to develop their ability to understand and apply a sequence of practical steps that, done correctly, will result in improvement of the quality of prereferral intervention programs.

A second anticipated outcome is for readers to develop their ability to understand and then strengthen the connection between prereferral intervention and response to intervention programs. Response to intervention is a concept currently receiving a great deal of attention among educators. In response to this attention, many schools and districts are creating new programs and structures designed to implement response-to-intervention models. This is usually unnecessary and sometimes counterproductive. Readers will see why the better alternative to meeting the intent of response to intervention may be the improvement and extension of existing prereferral intervention programs.

## **INTENDED AUDIENCE**

The primary audiences for this book are the school and district staff members charged with implementing, managing, and leading prereferral intervention teams. Typically, this group includes principals, assistant principals, and supervisors or directors of special education, but it may also include guidance counselors or supervisors, basic skills staff, and Title I program coordinators.

Although not the primary audience, there are important reasons for upper-level district administrators to read this book as well. It has been my experience that their support and understanding is essential for successfully achieving the goals of change efforts that are focused on improving the quality of prereferral intervention programs. By familiarizing themselves with the content in this book, superintendents and assistant superintendents will gain the knowledge necessary for supporting those on the front lines of these improvement initiatives.

## **APPROACH**

In Chapter 1, I introduce the reader prereferral intervention teams and the fictional character Ellen Santiago. In the following four chapters, the reader moves back and forth between Ellen's story and a description of research and practice.

Throughout the narrative, I help the reader understand the struggles and triumphs of an administrator seeking to improve the quality of her school's prereferral intervention program. Furthermore, Ellen's story provides a real-world context to better understand the application of the research and practices described.

In Chapter 6, I describe the methods for evaluating prereferral intervention activities. Chapter 7 focuses on connecting and strengthening the linkage between current prereferral intervention programs and response to intervention.

## **SPECIAL FEATURES**

In writing this book, a major goal was to provide the reader with all of the tools necessary for implementing the model described. As a result, Resource A provides a step-by-step one-year plan that the reader can follow to successfully implement the activities described throughout this book. This synthesis makes it possible and practical to move from theory to action.

Resource B includes every reproducible form necessary for implementing and evaluating the prereferral intervention program described. Examples of completed versions of many of these forms are provided throughout the chapters.

Resource B also contains sample overhead transparencies that can be used for training staff members. A script that can be followed or modified to explain the content of these transparencies is found where each is introduced in the text. Similarly, training activities are introduced in the body of the text. Complete descriptions of these activities can be found in Resource B.

Finally, embedded in the chapters are tables and charts designed to increase the reader's understanding of the material. The tables provide quick summaries of the most critical points presented in the corresponding section of the text, and the charts give the reader the opportunity to visually follow the processes being described.

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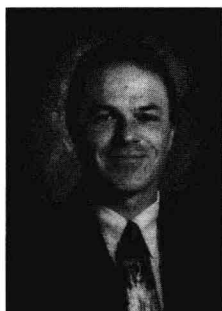
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# About the Author



**Matthew Jennings** is currently the superintendent of schools for the Alexandria Township Public School System, in New Jersey. Prior to serving in this position, Dr. Jennings served as an assistant superintendent of schools, a director of student services, a supervisor of curriculum and instruction, and a classroom teacher. He earned his master's degree and doctorate in educational administration from Rutgers University.

In addition to presenting at numerous state and national conferences, Dr. Jennings has served as an organizational behavior consultant to school districts throughout New Jersey. He works as an adjunct professor for Rutgers University, where he teaches courses on curriculum development, school administration, and the supervision of instruction. His work has been published in *Kappan*, *Preventing School Failure*, *The New Jersey English Journal*, *Channels*, and *The Writing Teacher*. His most recent publication, *Leading Effective Meetings, Teams, and Work Groups in Districts and Schools*, was released by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in June 2007.

When he is not spending time with his wife, MaryAnn, his children, Ryan and Tara, and their dog, Amber, Dr. Jennings enjoys time at the beach, competing in triathlons, and watching Rutgers football games.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# An Introduction to Prereferral Intervention Teams

*If there is dissatisfaction with the status quo, good. If there is ferment, so much the better. If there is restlessness, I am pleased. Then let there be ideas, and hard thought, and hard work.*

—Hubert H. Humphrey

At this point in the new teacher orientation program, Mrs. Thompson felt agitated by her confusion. This was not because she was a new teacher. She had been teaching in a neighboring state for almost 10 years, but as a result of her husband's job transfer and the subsequent move it required, she had needed to find a new teaching position. Being an experienced teacher, she felt she should know all of the information being presented by the program facilitators. In fact, she resented being required to attend this program. It was when the district's director of student services brought up the topic of School Intervention Assistance Teams that her feeling of confusion set in. The concept of a problem-solving team designed to help teachers

with hard-to-teach or hard-to-manage students sounded like a great idea. Could her previous school district have had this type of program and she just hadn't known about it?

That evening, she called a friend and teaching colleague from her previous school district. During their phone conversation, the friend expressed her opinion that the School Intervention Assistance Team sounded something like the Pupil Intervention Committee in her previous district. Mrs. Thompson had already considered this possibility, but had concluded that even though the processes shared similarities, these two teams were significantly different. The School Intervention Assistance Team in Mrs. Thompson's new district was a voluntary problem-solving team consisting of general education teachers who met during the school day to help teachers requesting assistance. Consulting the Pupil Intervention Committee in her old district was a mandatory step that teachers were required to take if they intended to refer a student for a special education evaluation. The committee was led by the school principal and was composed of special education personnel. All of the meetings of the Pupil Intervention Committee were held after school. Teachers were told that this was due to scheduling constraints, but most of the teachers believed this was a strategy designed to deter them from initiating the process.

Upon ending the phone call, Mrs. Thompson felt just as confused as ever. Later, as she was lying in bed before going to sleep, she reflected on the possibility that maybe she didn't know as much as she had thought she did. As she turned off the light beside her bed, she realized that to succeed in her new school district it would be important for her to learn about these new procedures and services.

## **VARIATIONS ON A THEME**

Although fictitious, Mrs. Thompson's confusion is likely a reality for many teachers who change jobs and start out in new school districts. According to Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, and Frank (2005), 86 percent of states either require or recommend prereferral intervention activities. This is true despite the fact that there are no federal mandates requiring them. Certainly, revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and passage of

the No Child Left Behind Act are major pieces of federal legislation that encourage early intervention for students who demonstrate academic difficulties. However, states currently remain free to decide whether or not to incorporate prereferral intervention processes into their education regulations.

One result of allowing this choice has been implementation practices that vary considerably across states, school districts within the same state, and even schools within the same district. Prereferral intervention activities are one of the most inconsistently applied processes in education, and variance can be found across multiple dimensions.

Some states require prereferral intervention activities, some recommend them, and others neither require nor recommend them. Where they are required or recommended, the names for the school-based teams formed to implement the prereferral process vary considerably. Consider these examples: Teacher Assistance Teams, Teacher Intervention Teams, Prereferral Intervention Teams, Student Assistance Teams, School Support Teams. In 25 states there is no standard term used for describing the prereferral process (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003).

In states that provide training for the prereferral process, it is most often the responsibility of local school districts. In some states, this training is the responsibility of a state education agency. Yet in a significant number of states, no training for completing the prereferral process is provided by anyone (Buck et al., 2003).

In the majority of states, general education teachers are responsible for implementing and leading the prereferral process. However, in several states special education teachers and administrators are assigned the primary responsibility for implementing the prereferral process. The composition and size of the teams responsible for completing prereferral activities, as well as the type of services they provide, vary widely even within the same state or school district.

Regardless of differences in title and design, most prereferral intervention activities share some common conceptual features. First, the process used is intended to be preventative in nature. More specifically, interventions are developed and implemented before a formal, special education evaluation is conducted. Second, the process uses an action-research model. Teams develop specific interventions that the referring teachers are

expected to implement in their classroom and evaluate in terms of their effectiveness. Third, the intervention process is focused on enhancing the success of students and teachers in the general education setting and in the general education curriculum. Last, a team-based problem-solving approach is used. Team members review data on a referred student, hypothesize the causes that might explain the student's difficulties, and develop strategies to remediate those difficulties.

## EDUCATIONAL LEADER'S ROLE

Having been a high school math and science supervisor, Ellen Santiago was thankful to have Jim Dalton as her mentor now. Ellen's first few weeks as an elementary school principal were going well. Having been a teacher at the secondary level for 10 years and then a subject area supervisor for 6 years, she felt very confident in her ability to serve as an instructional leader. However, her lack of experience at the elementary level and more specifically her lack of leadership at the building level had presented some challenges. Until this point, Jim's advice, accrued from 10 years of experience as an elementary principal, had helped her meet the challenges presented.

On this day, she received a memo from the district director of student personnel services, which stated that it was time for the school buildings to start the prereferral intervention team process. Ellen was familiar with the concept, but she had never been responsible for managing or leading the process. Naturally, she turned to her mentor for guidance on how to proceed. She picked up the phone and called Jim.

After exchanging the usual pleasantries, she mentioned the memo. The following is the rest of that conversation:

**Jim:** Yes, Ellen, I did receive that memo. I meant to mention to you the last time we spoke that this would be coming out. You have to be really careful with this one.

**Ellen:** Why is that?

**Jim:** The district is under scrutiny to lower the number of classified students. No one will put this in writing, but it is

expected that the principals will force every evaluation to go through the prereferral intervention team so that we can keep it from going to a special education evaluation.

**Ellen:** What if a student really needs a special education evaluation?

**Jim:** I know this sounds wrong, but if you want to keep yourself out of trouble with the Central Office, you have to do everything you can to avoid that. Don't put this in writing, but make it clear to your staff that they have to refer all students to the prereferral intervention team. Also, put people you can control on the committee. I try to stack it with nontenured teachers. This way I can control the outcomes of the meetings.

**Ellen:** Jim, this doesn't sound right to me. I would be denying services to kids who may really need them. Besides that, I'm not really sure I can make accurate judgments on my own about who needs what.

**Jim:** That's why if I suspect a child may need a special education evaluation, I secretly talk to the parents and coach them on how to write a letter requesting it. The district has no choice but to consider those requests. I just hope that I don't get caught.

As Ellen hung up the phone, she thought to herself that there must be a better way. In fact, there are much more effective and efficient methods for conducting this process. Although prereferral intervention teams are common and schools devote considerable personnel resources and time to them, there remains a significant difference between these teams as they are described in research literature and as they operate in most schools.

As in Jim and Ellen's situation, political realities often contribute to how the prereferral process is implemented. However, even more significant is most educational leaders' lack of knowledge and skill as it relates to prereferral intervention activities. Research, experience, and discussion with colleagues have revealed that most school administrators do not receive any formal training in the management and leadership of prereferral intervention programs. It is part of neither their formal preservice



coursework nor their in-service training. Instead, they frequently rely on past experience or the advice of colleagues. But neither of these sources of information is usually grounded in research on effective prereferral intervention practices.

Administrative support, especially by building-level leaders, has been cited by several researchers as the single most important factor influencing the effectiveness of prereferral intervention activities (Bahr & Kovalski, 2006; Kovalski & Glew, 2006; Kruger, Struzziero, Watts, & Vacca, 1995). Considering the significant role that educational leaders play in the success or failure of prereferral intervention activities, this makes the current situation even more troublesome. It is the intent of this book to bridge the gap between current practice and research literature.

It is not the direct involvement of school administrators as members of prereferral intervention teams that is most important. In fact, a substantial body of evidence supports the assertion that teachers express greater satisfaction with collaborative prereferral intervention activities when school administrators are not members of the team (Rafoth & Foriska, 2006; Safran & Safran, 1996). What, then, is the importance of school administrators in making prereferral intervention activities effective?

One frequently overlooked aspect of prereferral intervention activities is the fact that all of the names given to the process include the word *team*, which signifies that these activities are supported by a team process. Thus, to achieve effectiveness in this area, educational leaders must have the knowledge and skill required to design, establish, and support effective problem-solving teams. The school administrator's critical role is to create the conditions that will support the effectiveness of prereferral intervention teams. Rather than being directly involved in the team's activities, educational leaders must focus their efforts on creating a context within their schools that increases the likelihood that these teams will operate efficiently and effectively.

Chapters 2–5 provide the educational leader with a means for accomplishing this task. More specifically, they provide a sequential, four-phase model designed to result in effective prereferral intervention teams. Chapter 6 then focuses on methods for evaluating the effectiveness of a prereferral intervention program. Chapter 7 presents the potential connection between the Response to Intervention model for identifying learning