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# Tough Choices: How Principals Sustain Response to Intervention Programs During Times of Budgetary Constraint

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TOUGH CHOICES: HOW PRINCIPALS SUSTAIN RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION  
PROGRAMS DURING TIMES OF BUDGETARY CONSTRAINT

by

ADRIAN MILES THOMPSON

(Under the Direction of Linda Arthur)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how principals effectively manage to sustain RTI programs in environments of budgetary constraint. The researcher utilized a qualitative approach while exploring this issue. Twenty-five elementary school principals from southeast Georgia were invited to participate in individual 60 - 90 minute interviews. The first ten elementary school principals with at least one year of experience who responded to the invitations were selected to participate in the interviews. Transcriptions from the interviews were then analyzed to identify themes and categories to be discussed in the findings.

All of the principals in this study indicated that their schools had experienced changes due to budgetary constraints placed on them by the recent recession. The participants reported that these affects were felt in a variety of areas such as school personnel, professional development, the ability to provide materials, and special programs. Although all of the principals in the study indicated that their RTI programs had been impacted by budgetary constraints, they all indicated that they were managing to sustain their RTI programs through a variety of different strategies. Strategies involving utilization of school personnel, providing professional development, securing

materials needed for RTI, and use of creative scheduling were all used by the principals in this study to sustain their RTI programs.

**INDEX WORDS:** RTI, Response to Intervention, Elementary principals, Budget, Constraints, Funding

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## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my wife and two sons, Aidan and Avery Thompson. I know that I have sacrificed a lot of time with you while working on this project. Thank you for your patience, love, and support.

I also want to dedicate this study to my three younger brothers; K.E., Andrew, and Josh Kelly. I have always tried to be a positive role model for you guys and hope that I have been so. Always work hard, push yourselves, and never settle.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, Response to Intervention (RTI) has become a major topic of interest in education reform efforts. RTI, a tiered system of interventions designed to ensure that all students experience academic success, was developed in the later 1970's and has only recently gained much attention due to the 2004 reauthorization of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). This reauthorization allows states to use methods other than the traditional discrepancy formula to identify students with learning disabilities. RTI has quickly spread to school districts throughout the United States, becoming one of the primary methods by which schools identify students with disabilities and support students who are struggling academically (Samuels, 2009).

Sustaining RTI programs demands a great deal of resources. Much time and money is expended on salaries and the training of teachers and other support staff to provide students with research-based interventions, to effectively and efficiently monitor student progress through various types of data collection, and finally, to use those data to modify the students' instruction. However, the recent recession that America has experienced since the latter part of 2008 is making it increasingly difficult to find funds to provide these resources (Connor, 2009).

The recession is creating budget shortages at both the local and state levels. The National Conference of State Legislatures projects education budget shortfalls across the United States to exceed one hundred billion dollars over the next two years (Trainor, 2009). Few states will be able to stay within their budget limits this fiscal year. Districts

being hit especially hard by the recession are those dependent on property-tax income to fund education. The recent foreclosures and decrease in property values have dramatically lowered the local earning power of districts, some of which depend on property taxes to make up 75% of their budgets (Gillum & Toppo, n.d.). These cuts can mean losses in funding in excess of \$200 per student (McNeil, 2008). Regardless of the funding sources, whether at the state or local level, almost all districts are being faced with the problems associated with budgetary constraints. These budget cuts will undoubtedly impact the sustainability and effectiveness of RTI in schools throughout America.

### **Research Questions**

Response to Intervention (RTI) plays an important role in addressing the needs of students who are struggling academically by evaluating academic needs, prescribing research-based interventions, carefully monitoring student progress, and adjusting the intensity of interventions accordingly. The research suggests that this process increases student achievement and prevents students from being mislabeled as "students with disabilities." RTI requires a great deal of resources in the way of personnel, training, and materials. With school leaders feeling the effects of shrinking budgets caused by the recent recession, the availability of these resources are dwindling. However, an extensive review of the related literature revealed no research concerning the effects of budgetary constraints on the sustainability of RTI programs or how principals are responding to these challenges.

The following overarching question was explored in this study: How do elementary school principals effectively manage the sustainability of Response to

Intervention (RTI) programs in environments of budgetary constraint? This overarching question was answered by the findings of the following sub questions:

1. How is the sustainability of Response to Intervention affected by budgetary constraints?
2. How do principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints?

### **Importance of the Study**

Perhaps the most difficult task of educators is to ensure that they are meeting the educational needs of all students, not just the high and average achieving students, but the students who struggle as well. Response to Intervention (RTI) has proven itself to be an effective model for identifying struggling students, planning interventions, monitoring their progress, and adjusting instruction based on students' response to the interventions. Utilization of RTI has resulted in greater student achievement as students with academic struggles are identified for assistance early and also eliminated the number of students who have been mislabeled as "students with disabilities." Although RTI has proven itself to be beneficial to students, its implementation and sustainability are dependent upon resources that are not always readily available. The findings of this study identified the effects of budgetary constraints on the sustainability of RTI programs. More importantly, the study identified ways in which elementary school principals have effectively served their students through RTI despite reductions in funding. These findings provided other principals with ideas and strategies to continue a RTI program within their schools' limited budgets.

### **Procedures**

A phenomenological approach, which is a part of qualitative research, was utilized to fully examine how principals managed the sustainability of Response to Intervention (RTI) programs in environments of budgetary constraint. Twenty-five elementary school principals were invited to participate in 60 - 90 minute interviews that were conducted face-to-face. The first ten principals who agreed to participate and had at least one year of experience as principal were then interviewed using semi-structured interview questions. The interviews were audio recorded and then the recordings were transcribed. The researcher then analyzed and reanalyzed the data until emergent themes became evident. The findings were organized into these themes, subcategorized and reported in chapter four.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The purpose of this study was to examine how principals effectively manage to sustain Response to Intervention programs in environments of budgetary constraint. One limitation of the study was the researcher's dependence on the participants for honest and accurate responses throughout the interview process. Information regarding how resources were utilized could be seen as a reflection of the priorities of the school or principal.

Another limitation of this study was the varying levels of financial decision making power of the principals who participated in this study. The sample included principals from seven different school districts. The latitude and resources at the disposal of principals varied from one district to another. These variances likely influenced the

responses of the participants and may have reduced the ability to generalize the findings to other school settings.

A delimitation of this study was the geographic location of the study in which the researcher chose to confine the study. The sample of principals who were invited to participate in this study all worked in southeast Georgia. While some of these principals worked in mid-sized to large elementary schools, most worked in smaller elementary schools in rural settings. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalizable to all elementary schools.

### **Definition of Terms**

*At risk:* At risk students are students whose academic performances put them at risk for poor learning outcomes unless they receive some type of interventions (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2009).

*Discrepancy formula:* A discrepancy formula is a means by which students are identified as having a disability by revealing a large difference between children's cognitive level and their achievement (Bender & Shores, 2007).

*Elementary school principals:* For the purposes of this study, elementary school principals will refer to principals who work in any combination of grades kindergarten through sixth-grade.

*Interventions:* Interventions are targeted instruction in addition to regular classroom instruction that address students' specific learning needs (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008).

*Problem solving model:* The problem solving model is an approach to RTI in which the implementation of interventions is based specifically on the needs of an individual student (Bender & Shores, 2007).

*Progress monitoring:* Progress monitoring is a scientifically based practice in which students' progress and program effectiveness are measured (National Center on Student Progress Monitoring, 2007).

*Response to Intervention (RTI):* RTI is a tiered system of interventions used to ensure student achievement. Students are identified as being academically at risk, and interventions are assigned to the students based on their levels of need. Decision making is data-driven in this model, both to identify at risk students and to adjust the intensity of interventions (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2009).

*Standard protocol model:* The standard protocol model is an approach to RTI that is based on interventions designed for small groups of students with the same academic struggles (Bender & Shores, 2007).

*Tiers:* Tiers are levels of instructional intensity based on the needs of the students (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2009).

*Universal screening:* A universal screening is a short test or series of tests given to students to identify students who may be at risk for poor learning outcomes (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2009).

### **Chapter Summary**

RTI has proven itself to be a valuable program model for supporting students who struggle academically and for identifying students with disabilities. Although a wealth of research exists that defines RTI, identifies its essential components, and examines its

effects on students, there appeared to be no research that explained how principals continue to sustain RTI programs when faced with shrinking resources. The purpose of this study was to examine how principals effectively manage to sustain RTI programs in environments of budgetary constraint. The researcher utilized a qualitative approach to collect data through face-to-face interviews. Ten elementary school principals from southeast Georgia, who had at least one year of experience, were selected to participate in the interviews. Transcriptions from the interviews were then analyzed and results were discussed in the findings.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

In order to comprehend the significance of the problem concerning how recent budget cuts have affected the sustainability of Response to Intervention (RTI) and how school leaders are adapting, a background of related topics is needed. First, a basic understanding of RTI is essential. While RTI is not a prepackaged program, it does have common core elements that are essential to its implementation and to ensure that the program is carried out with fidelity. There are also two different models of RTI. Since the research examined was collected from schools that used both models of RTI, a basic understanding of each is needed; these two methods will be discussed in chapter two.

The second element essential to understanding the problem at hand is the history of RTI. This history provides an explanation of the inadequacies of traditional methods of supporting students who were struggling academically or identifying students with disabilities. Understanding the development and quick adoption of RTI in schools throughout the U.S. over the past several years also attests to the significance of RTI and its faithful implementation in schools.

The third element, a basic understanding of RTI's effects on students, is also needed to support the idea that RTI is a program worth sustaining in a time of economic hardship for schools. The effects of RTI fall into two subcategories: identifying students with disabilities, and RTI's general effects on student achievement. A brief overview of each is found in the subsequent literature review.

To understand the implications of budgetary constraints on RTI a fourth element must be examined. An overview of the resources required to effectively sustain a RTI

program is needed. Finally, an examination of budgetary constraints and how they affect the decisions made by school leaders is necessary to fully understand the implications of budgetary constraints on the ability of principals to sustain RTI programs. A brief overview of the literature regarding these topics: a description of RTI, its history, effects of RTI, resources needed in order to implement and sustain RTI, and finally the effects of budgetary constraints will be explored in the following overview of the literature.

### **Description of Response to Intervention**

According to the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD), Response to Intervention (RTI) is a systematic process of assessment and intervention followed by monitoring student progress (NRCLD, 2006). The data collected from this progress monitoring is then used to determine if changes in instruction or the intensity of services are needed. Though RTI may look different from one school to the next, researchers have identified common features in RTI programs (Mellard, Byrd, Johnson, Tollefson, & Boesche, 2004).

First, all students receive high-quality, scientifically based classroom instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Johnson & Smith, 2008; NRCLD, 2006). Second, all students are subjected to "universal" screening, a series of assessments used to accurately identify students who are at risk for learning difficulties (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Johnson & Smith, 2008; NRCLD, 2006). Third, tiered levels of intervention or instruction are utilized to meet the instructional needs of students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Glover, DiPerna, & Vaughn, 2007; NRCLD, 2006). Fourth, research-based interventions are utilized at all tiers to ensure quality instruction for students (Glover, DiPerna, & Vaughn, 2007; Johnson & Smith, 2008; NRCLD, 2006). Fifth, progress monitoring assessments are

utilized to evaluate student progress and drive decision making (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; NRCLD, 2006). Finally, fidelity checks are in place to ensure that the RTI process is carried out effectively (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Glover, DiPerna, & Vaughn, 2007; NRCLD, 2006).

Johnson and Smith (2008) stated that one of the main advantages of Response to Intervention (RTI) is that the base level of instruction, tier one, focuses on ensuring appropriate learning opportunities for all students in the regular classroom. Brown-Childsey (2007) noted that schools can achieve this by evaluating this tier one instruction based on how well its students demonstrate proficient levels of knowledge in all subject areas. School leaders can help ensure quality tier one instruction in classrooms by choosing evidence-based curricula and instruction, providing teachers with adequate professional development in best teaching practices, and checking the fidelity of implementation of instructional best practices (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). Insight into the effectiveness of tier one instruction can be gained through the examination of schoolwide or state testing data (Johnson & Smith, 2008).

The NRCLD (2006) identified universal screening as a type of assessment that is quick, cost efficient, and supports repeatable testing of age-appropriate skills. Jenkins (2003) stated that for a screening to be useful, it must accurately identify students who require further assessment, be practical to carry out, and generate positive outcomes in terms of identifying students for interventions without unnecessarily consuming resources. The NRCLD (2006) also recommended that screenings err on the side of overidentifying students who are at risk and who are in need of further assessment to ensure that these students' academic needs are addressed. Ideally, screening identifies at

risk students by using brief assessments that have been proven to predict performance on reading and math state assessments or students that fall below the 25th percentile on the previous year's state assessment (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001).

Tiered levels of intervention are also essential components to RTI programs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Glover, DiPerna, & Vaughn, 2007; NRCLD, 2006). According to Glover and DiPerna (2007), tiers are simply the different levels of assessment and intervention services that students receive in RTI programs. Barnes and Harlacher (2008) described the multiple tiers in RTI as a continuum of support ranging from general supports for all students to highly specialized instruction for those students who demonstrate the greatest need. Though some researchers advocate a two or four-tiered approach, the three-tiered model is by far the most commonly utilized and recommended (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003).

Tier one instruction is considered to be the base-level of interventions that all students experience (NRCLD, 2006). Effective tier one instruction is based on educational best practices, and therefore should meet the needs of most students in a school setting. Educational leaders in schools with effective tier one instruction ensure that the curricula and instruction are evidence-based, ensure that teachers have rigorous professional development in best teaching practices, and document fidelity of implementation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). Students who are identified as at risk in tier one are monitored weekly using brief monitoring tools. Adequate academic gains by students are determined using local and national normative estimates for improvement or criterion-referenced benchmarks in RTI programs. Students who do not make adequate

gains as a result of tier one interventions are considered nonresponsive and are identified as needing tier two services.

Tier two instruction is comprised of specialized intervention for students who do not achieve at the expected level with tier one instruction (Brown-Childsey, 2007). Interventions in tier two are designed to address the specific academic weaknesses of students and students' responses to those interventions are monitored frequently (NRCLD, 2006). According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2001), an ideal tier two intervention consists of a small group of three students who share similar academic strengths and weaknesses, meet at least three times per week for sessions, and sessions should be at least thirty minutes in length. In addition to these suggestions, Fuchs and Fuchs also stated that the importance of utilizing a certified teacher or teacher's aide to implement a research-based intervention or program. Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) identified three possible outcomes based on students' responses to tier two interventions.

First, students may make sufficient progress in their specific deficiencies. The students no longer need tier two interventions and return to basic tier one instruction. Second, students make progress, but it is not enough progress to exit tier two interventions. The students remain in tier two and continue to participate in specialized interventions. Finally, students may show little or no progress in their deficient areas. The level of student support needed requires a referral for special education eligibility determination. These tier two interventions are often in addition to regular classroom instruction and require extra personnel and materials, increasing demands on schools' resources.

In a three-tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) program, tier three generally refers to special education services (Johnson & Smith, 2008). It is in tier three that schools take steps to determine special education eligibility through comprehensive testing and analysis (Brown-Childsey, 2007). Brown-Childsey also noted that the data gathered in tiers one and two are utilized in determining why students' performances are lagging and what services might be needed in order to ensure the success of those students. It is in tier three that students receive the highest level of individualized instruction. This tier of intervention is the most demanding on schools' resources as they are the most intensive, often requiring more time or smaller teacher-to-student ratios.

The fourth essential component to effective RTI implementation is research-based instruction and interventions (Glover, DiPerna, & Vaughn, 2007; Johnson & Smith, 2008; NRCLD, 2006). According to Brown-Childsey and Steege (2005), "research or evidence-based instruction" refers to instruction with supporting empirical evidence of its effectiveness. Barnes and Harlacher (2008) noted the particular importance of research-based instruction at tiers one and two for those students who are being evaluated for special education services. By having documentation of the utilization of research-based interventions, evaluators can rule out poor instruction as a cause for unsatisfactory student achievement.

Effective RTI programs also use progress monitoring assessments to determine students' responsiveness to the interventions that they receive and to drive decision making throughout the process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; NRCLD, 2006). The NRCLD identifies three main purposes for utilizing progress monitoring (2006):

First, progress monitoring is used to determine whether students are making adequate progress as a result of the interventions they are receiving. In addition to determining whether or not students are making progress, progress monitoring is used to modify instruction to meet the needs of students who are not making adequate progress at the levels of interventions they are receiving. Finally, progress monitoring provides educators with a means by which they can determine rates of improvement for student learning.

The frequency of progress monitoring is directly related to the intensity of the intervention that students receive (NRCLD, 2006). Students receiving tier one interventions may be progress monitored only once every six to eight weeks whereas students receiving tier two and three interventions may be progress monitored once or twice per week. The NRCLD identified several modifications that may be made to interventions based on the results gained from progress monitoring. Sizes of the instructional groups may be adjusted, creating small group settings for students needing more intense interventions. Frequency of progress monitoring and mastery requirements can also be modified based on students' needs. Data collected from progress monitoring can also determine the frequency and duration of interventions needed in order to ensure that students make adequate progress. Finally, educators can adjust the skill level of the instructors delivering interventions in an effort to increase the instructional intensity of interventions.

The final essential component supported by a number of researchers is the assurance of program fidelity (Johnson & Smith, 2008; Kovaleski, 2003; NRCLD, 2006). Kovaleski stated that while RTI has been proven effective for the diagnosis of students

with learning disabilities, it is essential that the interventions utilized were carried out with fidelity before any assumptions can be made about diagnosing students. According to Kovaleski (2003), fidelity can be achieved through intense and regular training, collaborative support systems, and administrative follow up.

Glover and DiPerna (2007) noted that training needs to occur frequently and be of sufficient intensity to allow teachers to gain the prerequisite skills needed in order to implement RTI as a whole and to implement the specific interventions involved. Once these skills are established, additional training is reinforced by giving teachers opportunities to practice these skills under the advisement and support of expert teachers.

Kratochwill et al. (2007) described some of the many support structures that need to be in place for teachers after receiving initial training. They described the importance of utilizing teacher networks and study groups to implement and maintain new instructional strategies. Kovaleski (2003) also suggested the use of data analysis teams. These teams review the data from the universal screenings and progress monitoring tools with the goal of helping students to achieve basic proficiency levels in core skills.

Kovaleski (2003) suggested that principals have the primary responsibility to ensure that quality core curricula and interventions are carried out with fidelity. According to Kavaleski, principals must move beyond merely suggesting that their teachers use research-based practices and move to expecting high levels of teacher performance. Principals make sure initial plans for program fidelity are evident in teachers' lesson plans. These principals must also ensure these plans are being carried out by observing teachers delivering the lessons or interventions and then providing them with specific feedback.

In addition to these essential components, there are three different approaches to Response to Intervention (RTI) (Bender & Shores, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Hollenbeck, 2007; NRCLD, 2006): the problem-solving model, the standard protocol model, and the mixed model. The problem-solving model requires that educators come together to make decisions based on individual student needs. Collaboration between educators within each tier of the model is needed to provide additional support for at risk students (Hollenbeck, 2007). This allows a variety of choices in terms of what interventions are used and how resources are used. According to Kovaleski (2003) problem-solving approach is most effective when the following attributes are found: First, a scientific approach to problem solving is utilized. Second, interventions are designed for individual students. Third, a system for continuous monitoring is established. Fourth, collaboration among general and special education personnel to develop, implement, and monitor interventions is evident. Fifth, information is collected from a variety of sources such as teachers, parents, and anyone else familiar with the children. Sixth, curriculum-based measurements are used to assist in problem identification and for continuous progress monitoring and evaluation of intervention effectiveness. Finally, interventions are an integral part of the regular classroom routine and the classroom teacher takes responsibility of implementation.

While the problem-solving approach has its merits, it is not without drawbacks as well (Kovaleski, 2003). Collaboration between educators in this problem-solving approach can be time consuming. The problem-solving approach also requires that educators have a great deal of knowledge in the areas of research-based strategies and interventions.

The standard protocol model involves systematic steps of research-based interventions implemented with two to four tiers (Bender & Shores, 2007). As students moves through the tiers, the interventions become more intensive in terms of intervention time and smaller teacher-to-student ratios are utilized. The NRCLD (2006) identifies several key characteristics of the standard protocol model: In the standard protocol model approach, the focus is on students who have been identified as at risk. Instruction must involve scientifically based programs. Also, instruction is provided in homogeneous groups with low teacher-to-student ratios. In addition, a minimum of thirty minutes each day are spent on interventions for at risk students. This time is in addition to the students' regular classroom instruction. Students in tier two and above are monitored on at least a weekly basis on the targeted skill. Skilled interventionists, teachers or paraprofessionals who are trained in delivering specific interventions, are paired to work with students depending on the specific weaknesses of the students. Finally, interventions are delivered in appropriate settings.

An advantage to the standard protocol is that the interventions are already in place and are available when needed by students (Bender & Shores, 2007). There is also a structured progression in place when students do not respond to interventions, allowing faster transitions between tiers. One weakness of the standard protocol model is that less choice is offered in the selection of interventions. The standard protocol model is also likely to require more staff than the problem-solving method (Bender & Shores).

While the standard protocol and problem-solving models are the most widely used models of RTI, some schools adopt a mixed model of RTI, incorporating some characteristics of each (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). This method utilizes a problem-solving

method at tiers one and two, ensures high standards in the regular classroom, and also utilizes standardized interventions (Hollenbeck, 2007). Educators in mixed model RTI programs often use regular assessments to identify groups of students who are at risk on a class-wide level as opposed to focusing on individuals. These students are then grouped together to receive interventions specific to their area of need (Hollenbeck).

### **History of Response to Intervention**

According to Brown-Chidsey (2007), the origin of Response to Intervention (RTI) began with passing of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The act was passed by Congress in an effort to urge public schools to accommodate the needs of all children, overriding states' rights to prohibit students with certain disabilities from attending school. Legislators and policymakers soon became alarmed by two growing trends. The first concern was the extremely large number of students who were identified as having learning disabilities. The second concern was the overrepresentation of minorities who were identified as having learning disabilities.

These concerns led policymakers to seek alternative methods to the traditional discrepancy model to identify students with disabilities (Gresham, 2001). The discrepancy model compared students' IQ to students' actual achievement data. If a large disparity between students' intelligence quotient (IQ) scores and their academic achievement existed, the students were likely labeled as having a learning disability (LD). Critics of the discrepancy formula described it as a "wait to fail" model (Brown-Chidsey, 2007, p. 42). Others argued that the discrepancy model relied too heavily on IQ scores (Francis, Fletcher, & Morris, 2003) and did not consider inadequate classroom instruction

as being a potential cause for learning deficiencies (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), thus resulting in the overidentification of students with learning disabilities.

According to Hollenback (2007), RTI was recognized as a process that could be utilized by schools as an early intervention to meet the needs of students who were struggling academically and to identify students with potential learning disabilities. After much pressure from influential individuals in the education community to use RTI instead of the widely used discrepancy formula for identifying students with disabilities, Congress discontinued to require states to use the discrepancy formula in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was signed into law (Zirkel & Krohn, 2008). Several specific components of IDEA (2004) had a direct impact on the adoption of RTI and how learning disabilities were identified.

First, local educational agencies (LEA) were no longer required to use the discrepancy formula to identify students with disabilities. LEAs could instead focus on students' responses to research-based interventions. Thirdly, Response to Intervention was not specifically defined. This allowed LEAs flexibility in developing RTI programs to fit the specific needs of their students and the limitations of their resources. Finally, up to fifteen percent of special education funding could be used through RTI as an early intervention strategy. This provided LEAs with some federal funding to implement and support RTI programs (IDEA, 2004).

### **Effects of Response to Intervention**

Although Response to Intervention (RTI) is a relatively new topic in education, researchers have already begun to investigate its effects. The bulk of the research has been concentrated into two main areas: the effectiveness of RTI in identifying students

with disabilities, and how the incorporation of RTI impacts student achievement in general.

**Identifying students with disabilities.** Ortiz (2002) described some of the ideal characteristics of an effective approach for identifying students with disabilities. Many of these best practices are those included or addressed in a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach and are as follows: First, educators must evaluate, modify, and reevaluate hypotheses. Second, the RTI approach reduces the possibility of testing bias. In addition, the approach utilizes alternative assessments. Also data is evaluated within the context of the learning environment in the RTI approach. Finally, assessments are directly linked to the interventions.

Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, and Young (2003) stressed the importance of having a tiered system of interventions that emphasizes accountability on the part of the regular education teacher. They stated that under a process such as RTI, teachers are unable to remove students with learning difficulties by simply referring them to special education. Under RTI, research-based instructional practices are key. This emphasis on effective instruction enables educators to eliminate the possibility of poor instruction when eligibility for special education is being considered (Fuchs et al., 2005). Students who actually have a learning disability can also be identified more quickly by eliminating the need to wait until a severe discrepancy can be identified using the traditional discrepancy model (Speece & Case, 2001).

A study was performed in 2002 in the Minneapolis School District which implemented the problem-solving model of RTI in all K-8 schools (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003). The study included approximately one hundred schools. Results of

the study suggested that RTI implementation resulted in little impact on the number of students placed in special education as a whole, but did suggest a positive impact on the disproportionate identification of minorities as students with disabilities . The achievement level of students on the Minnesota Basic Standards Tests and the Minnesota State Special Education Goals was comparable to students placed in special education under the traditional model.

In 1990, the Heartland Area Educational Agency began implementation of a four-tiered problem-solving model in thirty-nine schools throughout Iowa Public Schools (Tilley, 2003). Throughout the 1999-2004 school years, the schools reported a reduction in the number of initial special education placements. They reported a 41% percent reduction in initial placements in kindergarten, a 34% reduction in first grade, a 25% reduction in second grade, and a 19% percent reduction in third grade.

O'Connor, Fulmer, and Harty (2003) found that the incorporation of a three-tiered RTI model resulted in much lower special education referrals. His study was conducted using two schools over a four-year period. Approximately one hundred kindergarten students were tracked over four years. Initially, students were identified as at risk by assessing students' phoneme awareness and letter recognition. These students participated in tier two interventions that consisted of small group reading instruction from ten to fifteen minutes per day, three days per week. Students who were found to be nonresponsive to tier two interventions were then placed in tier three interventions, consisting of individual instruction for thirty minutes per day, five days each week. The experimental group, those utilizing the RTI model, produced a referral rate of only 8% as opposed to a 15% rate in the control group.

Bollman et al. (2007) also discovered a reduction in referral rates in his study of students from five different Minnesota school districts. Students in grades K-8 were identified as being at risk through administration of reading curriculum based measurements. Those students who fell below the 10th percentile in reading ability were targeted for tier two interventions. Teachers utilized the problem solving approach to RTI in order to determine if students needed to be involved in more intensive interventions or be dismissed back to tier one instruction. Special education referral rates fell from 4.5% to 2.5% over a period of 10 years.

Similarly, VanDerHeyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) discovered that an RTI approach to addressing the needs of at risk students and identifying those students with true learning disabilities had multiple benefits. Approximately 2,700 students within two schools participated in the study. Students were identified as being at risk through use of curriculum based measurements in reading fluency and mathematics computation. Students who scored in the bottom 15% of their grade were targeted for tier two interventions. The intensity of interventions was adjusted based on the data collected from progress monitoring instruments. Results of the study suggest that the utilization of an RTI process decreases the number of students referred for special education services and increases the percentage of students who actually qualify when referred.

**Student achievement.** Another study of 45 second graders who were identified as having reading difficulty in a Texas elementary school suggested a positive impact from the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). These students were provided with supplemental interventions based on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, instructional-level reading, comprehension, and spelling.

After each ten-week period, students were evaluated and those who met the established goals were dismissed from the interventions. For those who did not respond adequately, the intensity of the interventions was increased. Thirty of the students met the reading goals and continued to be successful even after the interventions were discontinued. Fewer than 25% of the students failed to respond to the interventions and were evaluated for special education.

Torgesen et al. (2001) investigated the capacity of reading interventions to improve word-level skills in students aged 8 to 10 who were identified as having learning disabilities in reading. These students were introduced to intensive reading interventions and were posttested three times, similar to benchmarking found in an RTI model. The growth rate of the children's reading abilities were much higher than the gains produced from the traditional learning disability resource rooms. Results of this study suggest that many students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability could have instead been "caught up" in a tier two intervention.

A study performed by Floorman Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, and Mehta (1998) on 285 first and second graders receiving title one services also had implications to RTI. Students received instruction from one of three different reading programs. The results from the three different programs varied significantly. This suggests that the base instructional programs administered to all students, equivalent to tier one in an RTI model, aid in preventing students from having reading difficulties in the future.

O'Conner, Fulmer, and Harty (2003) also found similar findings in their study of ninety-two students in grades kindergarten through third grade. These students fell below the cutoff scores in the reading areas of phonological awareness or reading fluency. They

were targeted for tier two interventions three days each week for approximately twenty minutes per session. Researchers found that students who participated in the interventions scored significantly higher in areas of reading comprehension, decoding, fluency, and word identification than students in the control groups.

Fuchs et al., (2005) studied the effects of RTI on 41 first grade classrooms. Students were identified as being at risk for a mathematics disability based on their scores on weekly curriculum-based measurements. These students were placed into intervention groups of two or three students and received tutoring or computer-based practice for forty minutes per day, three days each week. Results of this study reveal that students who participate in interventions generally outperform those who do not. The academic gains of the tutored at risk students were greater than the gains of the students not at risk on a number of different measures. In addition to finding increased student achievement among students who participated in the interventions, the researchers also found that participation in these early interventions reduced the number of students identified as having math disabilities by an average of 35%.

In a similar study, Bryant et al. (2008) examined the effects of tier two interventions on forty-one first-grade students who were struggling academically in math. Students were identified using the Texas Early Mathematics Inventories: Progress Monitoring (TEMI-PM) instrument. These students participated in a tier two interventions four days each week for a period of twenty-three weeks. The results of the study suggests that tier two interventions significantly affect student achievement in areas of number sequences, number recognition, number identification, and finding missing numbers in number sequences.

Fuchs, Fuchs, Prentice, Burch, and Paulsen (2002) examined the effects of the “Hot Math” curriculum within forty third-grade classrooms. The Hot Math program consisted of whole-class instruction, which is a form of tier one intervention. A tutoring element, which is considered to be a tier two intervention for students who continued to score poorly on math assessments, was also incorporated. The study indicated that the majority of the students made strong academic gains and reduced the number of children at risk for math disabilities in third grade.

Although the previously referenced research suggested that Response to Intervention offers many potential benefits to children and educators alike, it can also pose challenges to principals. To implement and sustain RTI programs requires a variety of resources. In times of budgetary constraint, it can be very challenging for principals to provide those resources.

### **Resources Needed to Sustain Response to Intervention**

Although Response to Intervention (RTI) is highly adaptable, depending on the resources of the school in which it is being implemented, it requires some common resources in order to be effectively implemented. These necessary resources fall into four main categories: personnel, time, materials and space, and finally professional development (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Lose, 2007; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD], 2005).

Many of the essential components of RTI are very labor-intensive and require a number of personnel in order to see that they are performed effectively (NJCLD, 2005). For example, the universal screenings which are used to identify students who are at risk must be administered and scored by trained professionals. Once at risk students have

been identified, personnel are needed to implement these interventions in small group settings with research-based interventions geared toward strengthening those academic deficiencies (Reutebuch, 2008). As students progress through the tiers, showing a need for higher levels of support, the sizes of the intervention groups become smaller and are more demanding of personnel. Throughout these interventions, staff are needed to regularly assess these students in order to monitor their progress. Administration and other supervisory staff are needed in order to examine this data so that interventions can be modified if needed, to ensure fidelity of implementation at all levels, and to determine what types of professional development are needed in order to maximize program effectiveness (NRCLD, 2006).

The NJCLD (2005) also noted that time was a key resource to be considered when implementing RTI programs. Personnel need time outside of their regular duties in order to administer the universal screenings that identify students who are considered to be at risk (Deshler, Mellard, Tollefson, & Byrd, 2005). Once identified, teachers need time to implement research-based interventions based on the specific learning needs of the students (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). Conducting these interventions can be very time consuming. In tier two often consists of small group intervention two to three times each week for thirty to forty-five minutes. If these interventions do not produce the needed results, in terms of student achievement, interventions interventions may need to be increased to thirty to forty-five minutes five days each week. Time must be allotted for progress monitoring of the students who are participating in any level of interventions. Problem-solving teams also require a great deal of time to analyze students' responses to

interventions and to then plan an appropriate course of action based on the data (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Space and materials are also essential in implementing RTI (NRCLD, 2006).

Interventions in tiers two and above require small group settings. Educators need space in order to work with their small groups of students so that they are not distracted. In addition to space, RTI implementation requires a variety of materials. These materials may consist of computers and software programs used to record and speed the analysis of student data collected through screenings and progress monitoring assessments.

Educators also need all materials required of the specific interventions that they are using in order to ensure that the intervention is carried out with fidelity (NRCLD, 2006).

The final essential resource needed in order to implement RTI is professional development. This professional development must take place prior to RTI implementation and then must be ongoing to be effective (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Dexter, Hughes, & Farmer, 2008). Barnes and Harlacher stated that professional development should include the following: discussing the rationale behind RTI, examining the relationship between instruction and assessment, and training teachers in the skills needed to effectively implement RTI. Some of the skills needed to be addressed in professional development include being able to administer progress monitoring and screening tools correctly, implementation of interventions, and how to effectively analyze student data and to adjust interventions accordingly.

### **General Effects of Budgetary Constraints on Schools**

The recent recession has significantly weakened property values and has caused a decrease in revenues generated by sales taxes (Chen, 2009). These losses in state and

local revenues have resulted in shrinking budgets within schools across America. No facet of education seems to be immune to the effects of shrinking budgets. Many schools have had to make drastic cuts in the areas of personnel expenditures (Stover, 2009). Other schools have also utilized creative scheduling in order to stretch their budgets (Cook, 2009; Vanderploeg, 2009). Programs and services offered to students have been eliminated or reduced in order to save school districts money as well (Sawchuck, 2008). These budget cuts have even forced some districts to close school campuses altogether.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, teacher salaries and benefits make up around eighty percent of school districts' budgets (Sawchuck, 2008). As a result of personnel expenditures making such large portions of district budgets, it is almost inevitable that teachers and support staff are affected by budget cuts. Many districts have been forced to eliminate teaching and support-staff positions altogether (Cook, 2008a). According to the American Association of School Administrators, seventy percent of school leaders expect to eliminate positions going into the 2009-2010 school year (Cook, 2009). Other school districts have initiated hiring freezes and have cut or frozen teacher salaries across-the-board in an effort to reduce the number of personnel that needed to be laid off (Chen, 2009; Sawchuck, 2008). Some districts have reduced employees to part-time or have increased employee contributions in order to save money on benefit packages offered to employees (Trainor, 2009). Professional development funds, associated with personnel expenses, have been dramatically cut in some districts as well (Stover, 2009).

Eliminating teaching and support staff positions have impacted schools in a number of ways. Although the number of students in schools have remained relatively

static, the number of teachers and support staff in schools have decreased. The result of this has been increased class sizes and higher student-teacher ratios (Vanderploeg, 2009; Waldorf, 2009). Loss of other support staff like campus police, counselors, and truency officers have also limited initiatives focusing on keeping students in school, drug prevention, and ensuring that students graduate on schedule.

In an effort to reduce budget deficits without completely eliminating jobs, some states have enacted mandatory furlough days (Rooney, 2009). According to Rooney, nine states have incorporated the use of furlough days, and many others are considering using them. In addition to furlough days being implemented at the state level, some school districts have elected to take additional furlough days to reduce budget expenditures at the local school district level (Stirgus, 2010)

Many districts have also attempted to cut expenses through scheduling. A popular method of reducing the operational costs of schools has been the conversion to four-day school weeks (Cook, 2009). Around 100 school districts in 16 different states have adopted four-day weeks (Cook, 2008b). By operating on a four-day work week, schools have been able to reduce the costs associated with fuel for bussing students as well as heating and cooling facilities (Trainor, 2009). Another way that districts have cut expenses is by pushing back the first day of school. Later start dates have reduced energy expenses as it is much cheaper to cool facilities in September than in August (Stover, 2003).

Other districts have modified scheduling throughout the regular school day in an effort to save money. Many schools have eliminated eight-period schedules, sometimes referred to as block scheduling (Vanderploeg, 2009). Though block scheduling allowed

students to accumulate more credit hours in a shorter period of time, it also required more personnel when compared to a more traditional six-period schedule. The result of reverting back to a six-period schedule was a reduction in the number of teachers needed but also students had fewer opportunities to pass required classes. This often led to students not graduating on schedule or dropping out of school altogether.

School districts have also made tough decisions concerning the programs and services they offer to students. A major service schools have cut back on is the bussing of students. According to a survey by the American Association of School Administrators, over a third of school leaders have eliminated bus stops or bus routes altogether (McDevitt, 2008). Drivers have been trained to eliminate stops and to increase fuel efficiency by turning off their engines when idling and checking tire pressure often. Other districts have required parents to be responsible for home-to-school transportation or to pay for annual bus passes (Cook, 2008b).

In addition to cutting bussing, other school related services have been cut. Many schools have cut field trips, sports programs, and performing arts courses such as band (Trainor, 2009). Other districts have eliminated programs that target academically struggling students such as after-school and tutoring programs (Stover, 2009). Many “advanced” classes such as Advanced Placement (AP) classes and foreign languages have been eliminated or reduced as well.

Specific areas of the country have experienced a mass exodus of families in search of jobs (Chen, 2009). As student enrollment has decreased in some schools, teachers have been laid off and thus moved away in search of work. Over a period of time shrinking enrollments have resulted in a snowball effect of greater losses in funding. In

some cases, this combination of shrinking funding and declining enrollments has forced some schools to close schools altogether (Billups, 2009).

### **Effects of Budgetary Constraints on Response to Intervention**

The researcher performed an extensive search in effort to review the literature concerning the implications of budgetary constraints on Response to Intervention (RTI). The terms “Response to Intervention,” “RTI,” “budget,” “funds,” “resources,” and “money” were used as key words in the Academic Search Complete search engine. These terms were again used to search the following dissertation databases: Proquest, Georgia State University Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Georgia Tech Theses and Dissertations, the University of Georgia Electronic Theses and Dissertations, and Worldcat Dissertaions and Theses. Finally, these search terms were used in a Google Scholar search and a general Google search in attempt to locate literature relevant to the topic. None of the searches produced results related to the effects of budgetary constraints on RTI.

### **Chapter Summary**

Based on the previously reported research, Response to Intervention (RTI) has played an important role in addressing the needs of students who have struggled academically by evaluating academic needs, prescribing research-based interventions, carefully monitoring student progress, and adjusting the intensity of interventions accordingly. The research suggested that this process increases student achievement and prevents students from being mislabeled as “students with disabilities.” However, RTI requires an abundance of resources in the way of personnel, training, and materials. With school leaders feeling the effects of shrinking budgets caused by the recent recession, the

availability of these resources will likely be dwindling. However, an extensive review of the related literature revealed no research concerning the effects of budgetary constraints on the sustainability of RTI programs or how principals have responded to these challenges.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

According to the research findings reported in chapter two, Response to Intervention (RTI) supports the needs of students who are struggling academically by determining their academic needs through various assessments, prescribing research-based interventions, carefully monitoring student progress, and adjusting the intensity of interventions accordingly. Furthermore, researchers have suggested that this process increases student achievement and prevents students from being mislabeled as having a learning disability (Fuchs et al., 2005; Torgesen et al. 2001).

Although it has been found to be beneficial for students, RTI requires a great deal of resources in the way of personnel, training, and materials. The recent recession has forced schools all over the country to make substantial cuts to their budgets. The effects of the recession on areas of education, such as transportation, personnel, class sizes, scheduling, programs, and special services, have often been documented. However, an extensive review of the related literature reveals no research concerning the effects of budgetary constraints on the sustainability of RTI programs or how principals are responding to these challenges.

In this chapter, the researcher first identifies the overarching question and sub questions involved in this study. Next, the researcher explains how the overarching and sub questions were be answered in a description of the research design. This will be followed by identification of the target population, participants, and the sample who were the focus of the study. Next, all instruments that were used to collect data in this study are described. The researcher will then describe the measures that were taken in order to

ensure the validity of the study. Finally, a description of how data was collected, analyzed, and reported, will be included.

### **Research Questions**

Response to Intervention (RTI) has proven to be an effective process to increase student achievement and identify students with learning disabilities (Fuchs et al., 2005; Torgesen et al. 2001). Like other initiatives, RTI requires a variety of resources in order to be sustained (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). As a result of the recent recession, the resources of schools around the country have steadily dwindled and it has become increasingly difficult for schools to maintain the level of resources that they once had (Sawchuck, 2008). While it may be inferred that these times of budgetary constraint have had an impact on the ability of principals to sustain RTI at their schools, there is minimal research on the topic.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to answer the following overarching question: How do elementary school principals effectively manage the sustainability of Response to Intervention (RTI) programs in environments of budgetary constraint? This overarching question was answered by the findings of the following sub questions:

1. How is the sustainability of Response to Intervention affected by budgetary constraints?
2. How do principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative approach was utilized to fully examine how principals effectively managed the sustainability of Response to Intervention programs (RTI) in environments

of budgetary constraint. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) defined qualitative research as an approach that focuses on analyzing various phenomena in their natural settings. In addition, qualitative researchers strive to make sense of these phenomena through the perspectives of the people who have experienced them. Shuttleworth (2008) noted that qualitative approaches are best utilized when the problem or subject is too complicated to be explained with a basic yes or no answer. Such was the case in this study, as the researcher sought to understand how elementary school principals have sustained Response to Intervention programs during times of budgetary constraint. The findings varied, at least somewhat, from one principal to the next as they all had different backgrounds and operated in different environments. However, the elementary school principals involved in this study shared some common experiences as well.

Shuttleworth (2008) also noted that a broader range of information is often found in a qualitative approach. This broad range increased the likelihood that at least some useful information was gathered as the researcher investigated this subject. An unverified hypothesis, typically used in quantitative research, would have provided little information about how elementary school principals effectively manage to sustain RTI programs during times of budgetary constraint. This was yet another reason that a qualitative approach was best suited to address the investigation at hand.

Merriman (2002) described qualitative research as being inductive in nature, as researchers attempt to gather data in order to formulate theories or hypotheses. According to Merriman, qualitative research provides richly descriptive data that are not forced into categories or defined numerically as in quantitative studies, giving the researchers a more accurate picture of the phenomena. This was a practical research approach for the study

at hand, as the researcher sought to examine how principals maintain RTI programs despite dwindling resources through the perspectives of the principals themselves.

Specifically, a phenomenological approach to the study was employed by the researcher. A phenomenological study, which Merriman (2002) described as an approach that focuses on the essence of a phenomenon based on the perspectives of the people who have experienced it, will be employed. Merriam also identified interviews as the primary method of collecting data in phenomenological studies. Therefore, data were collected from principals of schools with effective RTI programs concerning the sustainability of those programs in environments of budgetary constraint via face-to-face interviews, a qualitative approach.

### **Population**

Elementary school principals in Georgia with at least one full year of experience as principals were the target population of this study. This population was targeted for a number of reasons. First, a great deal of the research concerning Response to Intervention (RTI) was derived from studies conducted in elementary schools. Practically all of the research concerning RTI implementation and its beneficial effects on student achievement took place in elementary school settings. This strengthened the significance of this study, as the researcher attempted to identify ways in which elementary school principals sustained their RTI programs during times of budgetary constraint.

Another reason for focusing on elementary school principals is that the level of implementation of RTI is generally greater in elementary schools. This is likely due to the belief that RTI is a type of early intervention for identifying students at risk for academic failure and who may have a learning disability (NRCLD, 2006). It stands to

reason that since elementary schools have higher levels of implementation, they are most susceptible to feeling the effects of dwindling resources. This created the potential for principals of elementary schools to provide rich data for this study.

The elementary school principals in this study also needed to be somewhat familiar with RTI in order to provide data for the study. For this reason, the researcher collected data only from principals who had been in their position for at least one full school year.

### **Participants**

The researcher employed a purposeful sampling technique in order to determine who participated in the study. Patton (as cited in Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003) suggested purposeful sampling when the researcher needs to identify cases that will likely produce rich information in a qualitative study. For the purposes of this study, the researcher needed data from elementary school principals who were familiar with Response to Intervention. Therefore, this purposeful sample included elementary school principals of schools with RTI programs who had at least one full year of experience.

These participants consisted of elementary school principals from southeast Georgia. This population included approximately twenty-five elementary school principals from seven different counties in southeast Georgia. These participants were chosen because the researcher had worked with many of these principals in the past and had a favorable chance to gain their participation in the study. Also, these had varying levels of experience and backgrounds, which made them a more representative sample of most of Georgia. All of the elementary school principals were invited to participate in 60 - 90 minute interviews. The first ten principals who responded, who had a minimum of

one year of experience and who agreed to participate in the interviews, were selected to take part in the interviews.

### **Instrumentation**

A set of semi-structured open-ended interview questions was developed to guide the interviews of the ten selected participants (Appendix A). Creswell (1998) suggested using semi-structured interviews in qualitative research, stating that semi-structured interviews helps to ensure that the researcher stays focused on the research questions and that all questions will be answered. Goldman (n.d.) supported the use of open-ended questions in qualitative research. He stated that participants are chosen because the researcher believes they have substantial knowledge of a certain topic of interest. As such, the researcher needed to allow participants to speak freely about their experiences. The interview questions were designed around the previously stated overarching question and its sub questions.

### **Validation**

The researcher took measures to ensure validity in this study. Data were collected from participants who could provide meaningful and rich information pertinent to the study. Only elementary school principals with at least one full year of experience were selected to participate in the study. This ensured that the participants had experience in the management of RTI and were able to provide useful data.

Steps were also taken to minimize the effects of researcher bias. By using semi-structured interviews, the researcher was sure that the same core or essential questions were asked of all of the interviewees. This ensured that all interviewees had an opportunity to respond to the same questions. Also, the entirety of the interviews were

audio recorded and transcribed. This reduced the likelihood that the researcher omitted data by focusing on anticipated or interesting responses.

The semi-structured interview questions were reviewed by experts in the field of RTI to evaluate question clarity and validity. These "experts" were people who serve as RTI coordinators at their schools. They were very familiar with the process of RTI and its components. The researcher also conducted a pilot study using the created structured interview questions. The pilot study consisted of interviewing a principal who did not take part in the actual study. Revisions were made based upon the suggestions of the reviewer, and the final draft of the structured interview questions was used to interview the actual participants in the study.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher contacted all of the superintendents in the targeted school districts via email. A brief explanation of the study was given along with a request that the principals in their districts be allowed to voluntarily participate in the study. Once Georgia Southern University's Institutional Review Board's approval was secured, the researcher then contacted the twenty-five principals from districts that had been permitted to participate in the study. They were then invited to take part in individual 60 - 90 minute interviews. These invitations were made via email. The first ten principals who responded to the emails and who agreed to participate in the interviews were selected to participate in the study. Interviews were based on the convenience of the interviewees.

The researcher employed the use of structured interviews to collect data from the interviewees. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) identified several characteristics of semi-structured interviews. First, using semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to

prepare for the interview prior to conducting it. This allows the interviewer to be prepared and appear more competent during the interview. Semi-structured interviews serve as a guide for the interviewers, assuring that they will cover the major questions, and yet allows the interviewees the freedom to completely answer the questions in a manner more comfortable for them. Use of semi-structured interviews also provides the researcher with the flexibility to incorporate follow-up questions in order to clarify the responses of the interviewee.

Each interview was audio-recorded with a digital recorder. The researcher then uploaded the recording to an online transcription service. The transcription was then compared to the original audio recording to ensure accuracy by the researcher. This process was repeated using the recordings of each interview.

### **Data Analysis**

A precoding system was first developed in which each of the interview questions were linked to one of the following two sub-questions from the study: How is the sustainability of Response to Intervention affected by budgetary constraints? How do principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints? Under each of these two major categories, four subcategories were created based upon emergent themes in the data.

After ensuring the accuracy of the transcriptions, the researcher carefully examined the transcriptions, reading and rereading them as recommended Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). After becoming familiar with the data, the researcher then focused

the analysis of the data by examining the responses to each question asked in the semi-structured interviews. Deeper analysis of the data revealed further subcategories.

### **Reporting the Data**

The reporting of the data was organized into two major categories. These two categories were directly related to the two sub-questions in this study.

The findings from the first major category, concerning how the sustainability of Response to Intervention had been affected by budgetary constraints, were broken down into four subcategories. These subcategories included personnel, professional development, materials, and services offered. Some of these subcategories with large amounts of data were broken down even further into smaller categories.

Findings from the second major category, concerning how principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints, were also reported in four major subcategories. These major subcategories consisted of utilization of personnel, providing professional development, providing materials, and utilization of creative scheduling.

### **Chapter Summary**

Response to Intervention (RTI) has proven itself to be a valuable program model for supporting students who struggle academically and for identifying students with disabilities. Although a wealth of research exists that defines RTI, identifies its essential components, and examines its effects on students, there appears to be no research that explains how principals continue to sustain RTI programs when faced with shrinking resources. The purpose of this study was to examine how principals effectively manage to sustain RTI programs in environments of budgetary constraint. The researcher utilized a

qualitative approach while exploring this issue. Twenty-five elementary school principals from southeast Georgia were invited to participate in individual 60 - 90 minute face-to-face interviews. The first ten elementary school principals with at least one year of experience who responded to the invitations were selected to participate in the interviews. Transcriptions from the interviews were then analyzed to identify themes and categories to be discussed in the findings.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS**

The following overarching question was explored in this study: How do elementary school principals effectively manage the sustainability of Response to Intervention (RTI) programs in environments of budgetary constraint? This question was examined through one-on-one interviews with elementary school principals. In this chapter, the researcher will describe the instrumentation, the data collection procedures, the participants, data analysis, and findings. The findings will be organized according to the manner in which they fell under the following two sub questions:

1. How is the sustainability of Response to Intervention affected by budgetary constraints?
2. How do principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints?

The researcher will conclude chapter four with a summary of the findings.

#### **Instrumentation**

A set of semi-structured interview questions was developed to guide the interviews of the ten selected participants (Appendix A). Each of the fourteen interview questions was created to collect data relevant to the question, “How do elementary school principals effectively manage the sustainability of Response to Intervention (RTI) programs in environments of budgetary constraint?” Two sub-questions were developed in order to answer the previously stated research question. The first sub-question addressed how the sustainability of Response to Intervention had been affected by budgetary constraints. The second sub-question addressed how principals allocated

resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints. All interview questions were directly related to either one or both of the two previously identified sub-questions.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

After permission had been gained from their superintendents for them to participate, the researcher emailed invitations to elementary school principals with at least one year of experience in those districts to participate in 60 - 90 minute interviews. The first ten principals who agreed to participate in the study were contacted to schedule interviews. The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from the interviewees.

Each interview was recorded with a digital recorder. The recordings were uploaded to an online service for transcription. Transcriptions were then compared to the original audio recordings by the researcher to ensure accuracy.

### **Participants**

The sample from which data was collected for this study was drawn from a population of elementary school principals in Southeast Georgia. In addition, these ten elementary school principals had at least one full year of experience as principal and worked in schools that had RTI programs in order to ensure that they could provide relevant data. The participants had varying levels of experience and different backgrounds. Table 1 provides demographic data on the participants.

Table 1

*Demographic Data of Participants*

Principal Name	Highest Degree	Gender	Years in Education	Years in Administration	Student Population	Number of Teachers
Principal One	Ed.S.	M	24	15	300	15
Principal Two	Ed.S.	F	20	7	450	30
Principal Three	Ed.S.	F	17	6	750	38
Principal Four	M.Ed.	F	30	12	450	30
Principal Five	Ed.S.	F	18	4	470	35
Principal Six	Ed.S.	F	30	16	550	35
Principal Seven	Ed.D.	F	21	13	650	40
Principal Eight	M.Ed.	M	8	6	490	30
Principal Nine	Ed.D.	F	19	12	650	35
Principal Ten	Ed.S.	F	23	8	660	40

**Findings**

The researcher employed the use of coding to analyze data collected during the interviews with the ten elementary school principals. First, each of the interview questions were linked to one of the following sub-questions from the study: How is the

sustainability of Response to Intervention (RTI) affected by budgetary constraints? How do principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints? Four subcategories were created based upon themes that emerged through analysis of the data.

The findings of this study were first organized according to how they addressed each of two research questions. The first major topic, which addressed the sustainability of RTI and how it has been affected by budgetary constraints, was broken down into four categories. These categories included personnel, professional development, materials, and programs. The second major topic, which addressed how principals utilized their resources to sustain effective RTI programs, was also broken down into four categories of information. These categories included personnel, professional development, materials, and scheduling.

### **Sustainability of RTI**

When interviewing the ten principals, a variety of issues surfaced when examining the effects of budgetary constraints on the ability of principals to sustain RTI programs. Those findings could be organized into four major groups of information: personnel, professional development, materials, and programs.

**Personnel.** Since teacher salaries and benefits make up such a large portion of the budget of local school systems, the affects of budgetary constraints in the area of personnel are easily identified. Most of these effects identified in this study could be divided into two main categories: 1) reduction of personnel and 2) changes in job responsibilities. The findings have been grouped and reported accordingly.

***Reduction of personnel.*** Nine out of the ten principals (90%) interviewed reported that they had experienced varying degrees of personnel reduction as a result of recent budget cuts. Some of the positions cut included regular classroom teachers, Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers, instructional coaches, RTI specialists, and substitutes. Most of the principals reported that these reductions in personnel were not necessarily termination of employment, but were instead positions that were not rehired when someone left the school system due to moving, retirement, or a host of other reasons.

Regardless of how these positions were eliminated, they have had a direct impact on the ability of elementary school principals to maintain RTI at its former levels. For example, reducing the number of classroom teachers had many adverse effects on the ability of elementary school principals to sustain Response to Intervention (RTI). Many principals reported that teachers were often used not only to provide students with the quality classroom instruction required in tier one of RTI, but also to provide students with specialized, tier two interventions. Increased class sizes, as a result of eliminating teaching personnel, hindered teachers' abilities to provide these interventions.

Six of the principals (60%) explained that they utilized Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers to conduct the interventions with students receiving services under RTI. These teachers are directly responsible for ensuring that students receive the specific help that they need to correct their deficiencies. In addition to providing interventions, principals reported that EIP teachers have many other instrumental roles within the RTI process. All ten of the principals (100%) reported that they used their EIP

teachers to help with the screenings used to identify students to be placed in the RTI program, and to conduct the progress monitoring.

Instructional coaches also played a vital role in the RTI process. Two out of ten principals (20%) used instructional coaches to provide teachers with training in specific interventions. Principal Three noted that, "She does a lot of the training with the teachers." Another major role of instructional coaches was to provide teachers with support to ensure that teachers were providing their students with quality Tier 1 instruction. In addition to these responsibilities, Principal Four and Principal Six reported that these instructional coaches also helped to conduct the RTI meetings with the parents.

Much like instructional coaches, RTI specialists had a major role in RTI programs. Many of these RTI specialists provided their staff with initial training in the RTI process. They also provided teachers with training in specific interventions. Seven out of ten principals (70%) also reported that these specialists took on a number of other responsibilities that supported RTI such as providing interventions with students, recording progress monitoring data, and conducting meetings with teachers and parents.

Four out of ten principals (40%) also noted that they were no longer able to hire substitutes when teachers had to be out of work as a result of the recent budget crunch. This has adverse effects on the quality on an RTI program at a school. Paraprofessionals were often pulled from their regular job responsibilities to cover classrooms when teachers had to be out. Seven out of ten principals (70%) reported that they utilized paraprofessionals to perform several duties associated with the day-to-day activities involved in RTI such as administering interventions and progress monitoring students.

Principal Eight stated that, "If they are covering for someone else, then they can't do their RTI that day, so the kids suffer from that."

*Changes in job responsibilities.* Although all ten principals reported that they had faced reductions in personnel, most indicated that they would still sustain high levels of RTI implementation. Essential components of RTI such as training, universal screenings, progress monitoring, and interventions were still sustained. This was generally achieved through changes in job responsibilities that touched almost everyone on staff. Among those who were impacted by these changes in job responsibilities were paraprofessionals, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Paraprofessionals, or teacher aids, often had to bear a larger load in terms of being responsible for sustaining RTI. Seven out of ten (70%) principals reported having to utilize them more for a variety of responsibilities associated with RTI. For example, paraprofessionals became increasingly responsible for conducting interventions with children as Early Intervention Program (EIP) teaching positions were eliminated. These principals also reported having to use paraprofessionals more for progress monitoring, recording the associated data, and conducting screenings.

Teachers have also had more added to their job responsibilities as a result of recent budget cuts. This shift in responsibilities took place primarily in the area of providing interventions for students. Although research-based practices are an essential part of the tier one instruction, many teachers became responsible for providing students with more intensive interventions generally found in tiers two and three. Four out of the ten principals (40%) reported having to use their regular classroom teachers to provide more intensive interventions for struggling students.

According to four out of the ten participants (40%), administrators and counselors also experienced changes in job responsibilities as a result of budgetary constraints. Though they were not identified as often as teachers and paraprofessionals as having changes in job responsibilities, four out of ten interviewees (40%) noted that administrators and counselors had taken on additional job responsibilities. Some of these additional job responsibilities included scheduling and holding parent meetings, conducting screenings, and the progress monitoring of students. Principal One described specifically how budgetary constraints changed the job responsibilities of his assistant principal. When referring to RTI he stated:

I guess the basic thing is that to do it and to do it right, it takes tremendous amount of work in time from somebody. And last year our instructional coach was primarily responsible for that. And before we started RTI she was able to get in the classroom, do some coaching for the teachers, get in the classroom, do some small group instruction with students and things like that much more than the year we started RTI. RTI just took such a huge amount of time. And so now it becomes the responsibility of our assistant principal. And bless her heart, she's trying to do her whole assistant principal job and be the RTI coordinator.

This type of response was common among the participants.

**Professional Development.** While recent budget shortfalls have had a significant impact on school personnel, those effects can be seen in many other areas of education as well. One such area is professional development, which is needed to implement and sustain Response to Intervention programs. Nine out of the ten participants (90%) stated that they were having to address most of the professional development needs associated

with RTI either at the school or district level. Only one respondent (10%) stated that her school system paid outside consultants to address their professional development needs. Having school faculty be responsible for training others not only adds to the large number of responsibilities held by educators, but also raises concerns about the fidelity of the program or training received. Principal One succinctly voiced those concerns:

And so we're having to rely on our people to get trained from somebody who went to something and got trained. And so it's like a third or fourth hand training for our teachers. Now, that doesn't mean that it's not necessarily poor training. I think we have good people doing it. Do I think that it retains the focus and fidelity of the original? Possibly not, and that's where I'm a little concerned with that.

Principal One was the only participant who voiced such a concern dealing with the fidelity of training.

**Materials.** Educators also require certain materials in order to implement Response to Intervention programs. In times of budgetary constraint, finding funding for these materials becomes more difficult. Four of the ten participants (40%) in this study reported that they had experienced increased difficulty in providing needed materials for their teachers. Two of these participants (20%) reported that their spending accounts had been cut and that they had to be very judicious with the spending of the money. Principal Three noted the importance of, "being really aware of what you're spending and even public perception because the public knows that we're very low on money, so you don't do the little extras that you might do even in decorations or something like that for an event. Everything is just really scaled down." Two participants (20%) reported that their accounts had been frozen altogether.

**Programs.** The recent budget constraints placed upon school districts have also affected their ability to provide other services for students. Three of the participants (30%) noted that their schools or districts had eliminated or reduced some of the services that they provided. Field trips were one service that had been mentioned as being eliminated as a result of lost funding. Principal Eight emphasized the importance of field trips as he noted that, "field trips allows them access to the outside world and some of the things that they would never be exposed to if it wasn't for the school."

In addition, the elimination of summer school and after school programs was identified as effects of budgetary constraints. Such programs have a direct impact on Response to Intervention as after school and summer school programs are utilized as additional supports for struggling students. Without supports for students, such as after school programs and summer school programs, it is likely that more students will need to have their academic needs met through RTI. This is an additional strain on already dwindling resources for RTI programs.

### **Allocation of Resources in Times of Budgetary Constraint**

Although resources associated with sustaining Response to Intervention programs have become more scarce as a result of the recent economic downturn, education leaders have adapted and found ways to sustain RTI programs in their schools. These findings have been organized into four major categories: personnel, professional development, materials, and scheduling.

**Personnel.** As stated previously, many of the essential components of a Response to Intervention (RTI) programs are very demanding of personnel resources. This of course, presents challenges to principals as they strive to best utilize their personnel in

order to sustain their RTI programs in a time when resources are so limited. The findings concerning how principals utilize their personnel resources to sustain RTI programs will be organized into four of the more labor-intensive tasks regarding RTI. These tasks include; 1) conducting universal screenings, 2) conducting interventions, 3) progress monitoring students who are receiving interventions, and 4) management of the RTI programs.

***Conducting universal screenings.*** Universal screenings, or school wide screenings, are used to identify at-risk students who may need more intensive interventions. Despite reductions in personnel, principals have had to designate people in their buildings to perform these screenings. Counselors, paraprofessionals, and Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers were most often identified as the people responsible for conducting these screenings, each being identified by three of the ten participants (30%). Special education and physical education teachers were identified by two out of the ten participants (20%) as being instrumental in conducting universal screenings. A variety of other school personnel were utilized to conduct universal screenings in schools. These personnel included administrators, classroom teachers, media specialists, instructional coaches, and Title One teachers.

***Conducting interventions.*** When students are not performing adequately with regular classroom instruction, or within tier one of RTI, they are identified as needing additional interventions. Principals who participated in this study identified a variety of different personnel in their schools who were being utilized for conducting these interventions.

Paraprofessionals were the group of educators who were most often identified as being responsible for conducting interventions for at-risk students. Six out of the ten principals (60%) interviewed stated that paraprofessionals were used to carry out interventions. Classroom teachers and EIP teachers were also utilized frequently by the participants. These two groups of educators were each identified by four of the principals (40%) interviewed. Special education teachers were used to conduct interventions by two principals (20%). In addition, connection teachers, such as art, music, and computer-lab teachers, media specialists, Title One teachers, intervention specialists, instructional coaches, and RTI coordinators were also identified as personnel who helped to carry out tier two and tier three interventions.

***Progress monitoring students.*** Another major component of RTI programs is the progress monitoring of students to evaluate their responsiveness to interventions. According to the principals in this study, EIP teachers were most often utilized to fill this role. Four out of ten participants (40%) stated that EIP teachers were responsible for progress monitoring students. Two out of the ten principals (20%) interviewed used special education teachers to progress monitor students. In addition to EIP teachers and special education teachers, the participants in this study identified a number of school personnel who assisted in the progress monitoring of students. These personnel included; administrators, paraprofessionals, physical education teachers, and connection teachers.

***Management of RTI programs.*** While universal screenings, conducting interventions, and progress monitoring are vital components of effective RTI programs and are demanding of personnel resources, there are a variety of other responsibilities associated with RTI that must be addressed. Some of these responsibilities include the

management of data, and scheduling and conducting parent meetings. Administrators, EIP teachers, and counselors were most often identified as people who were primarily responsible for fulfilling these responsibilities, each being identified by three out of ten participants (30%). RTI coordinators and instructional coaches performed these duties as noted by two out of the ten participants.

Whether, they are providing interventions, conducting universal screenings, progress monitoring students, or are involved in the management of RTI programs, having personnel to perform these responsibilities is essential in maintaining RTI. However, paying for the salaries and benefits of these personnel is difficult when funds are scarce. One way in which the participants in this study managed to provide these personnel was through utilization of Title One funds. Title One funds, which are provided through the federal government to schools in an effort to meet the needs of at-risk and low-income students, were used by four of the ten principals (40%) in this study to pay for EIP teachers, regular classroom teachers, and paraprofessionals. Principal Five explained how she was using Title One funds to sustain the RTI program at her school. She stated, "Through Title One, we're still able to have our RTI intervention specialists and also our two paraprofessionals for RTI." This principal used Title One funds to pay the salaries of these personnel.

**Professional Development.** As previously mentioned, tightened budgets have changed the way that principals have had to meet the professional development needs of their staff. However, principals are still managing to meet these needs in a variety of different ways.

Five out of the ten principals (50%) in this study indicated that they were addressing the initial training in RTI by having teachers direct the training of other teachers. Seven out of ten principals (70%) also utilized teachers to provide training in specific interventions in the same way. According to six out of the ten participants (60%), this training was usually conducted informally during grade-level planning times, teacher workdays, and preplanning days. Three of the participants (30%) indicated that their schools had intervention specialists who provided training in specific interventions for teachers.

A few of the participants indicated that they still had some specialized staff at the school level that were responsible for the professional development needs of their staff concerning RTI. For example, one school still had an instructional coach while yet another had an RTI specialist to provide professional development. Both of these schools were in more urban areas, which are better suited to generate local funds.

**Materials.** Universal screenings, progress monitoring, and providing students with research-based interventions are all major components of RTI programs that require varying materials. These materials become increasingly difficult to provide during times of budgetary constraint. The principals interviewed in this study identified a variety of ways in which they provided these materials.

Four of the ten principals (40%) interviewed emphasized the utilization of existing materials in their schools. Several mentioned taking an inventory of all the materials throughout their schools and utilizing them to provide interventions for students. Oftentimes, intervention kits or programs had been stored away and forgotten about were again utilized in schools' RTI programs. Some schools had previously

purchased software that was used as interventions and monitoring student achievement progress. Principal Five noted, "Then our progress monitoring is a piece that's included in the two programs that we purchased, so the program itself will tabulate for the progress monitoring." This software was utilized to provide interventions and progress monitoring for students in the RTI program.

Three of the principals (30%) interviewed mentioned the use of a variety of free materials that are available for educators. For example, Principal Ten reported that her school used websites such as [cbm.com](http://cbm.com) (Curriculum Based Measurements), a free site that has a number of downloadable assessments, to be used as progress monitoring or universal screening tools. [Interventioncentral.com](http://Interventioncentral.com) was another site that was identified as being a free site that had tools for progress monitoring students and provided a variety of research-based interventions that could be used to serve students in RTI. Three principals (30%) reported that their personnel had recreated interventions based on kits that were sold online or in catalogs using their own materials.

The principals in this study managed to provide the needed materials for RTI with funds from a variety of different sources. Four of the participants (40%) utilized their Title One funds to purchase materials such as interventions, assessments, and software. Principal Nine stated, "Title One picks up a lot of the funds. Even when they told us we had to freeze funds in our internal account, then I would use money from that budget [Title One] like grade level money to help." Since RTI is a process that enables educators to more accurately identify students with disabilities, other principals reported utilizing special education funds to provide materials for their RTI programs. Although their

budgets had been reduced, four of the ten principals (40%) interviewed also reported using school or district funds to purchase materials for RTI as well.

**Scheduling.** The principals who participated in this study identified a number of ways in which they were using creative scheduling to meet the needs of their at-risk students through RTI. Three out of ten participants (30%) indicated that they scheduled their at-risk students to receive interventions in math and reading during times generally designated for other content areas. Principal Two noted that, "You don't want to miss regular classroom instruction, but at some point, you got to make sure they got those reading and math skills that they need." Typically, students were pulled out of science and social studies classes in order to receive additional math and reading interventions. Two out of ten principals (20%) had at-risk students pulled during Accelerated Reader time, which is time designated for independent reading on each student's reading level, for RTI interventions.

Principal Eight indicated that he utilized connection times, P.E., music, art, and computer lab time as a time to pull students to receive interventions as well. Another principal had students pulled from recess two or three times each week for additional instruction. He also used an "Early Morning Club", a group of students who met just before the instructional day started, to provide students with additional interventions in reading and math.

The principals who participated in this study also used some creative scheduling in the utilization of their staff in order to support their RTI programs. For example, one respondent had his teachers use their planning times to provide students with progress monitoring and conduct universal screenings. Another principal had each connection

teacher in the school free from their regular duty for half of a day each week in order to progress monitor students. At another school, early intervention or EIP teachers, were scheduled to serve students Monday through Thursday. Fridays were designated as days for EIP teachers to progress monitor students and take care of the paperwork and documentation associated with RTI.

### **Chapter Summary**

All of the principals in this study indicated that their schools had experienced changes due to budgetary constraints placed on them by the recent recession. The participants reported that these affects were felt in a variety of areas such as school personnel, professional development, the ability to provide materials, and special programs. Although all of the principals in the study indicated that their RTI programs had been impacted by budgetary constraints, they all indicated that they were managing to sustain their RTI programs through a variety of different strategies. Strategies involving utilization of school personnel, providing professional development, securing materials needed for RTI, and use of creative scheduling were all used by the principals in this study to sustain their RTI programs.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

Chapter V contains an overview of the study and a summary of the findings discovered while conducting the research. The findings of the study are then discussed in detail. Next the conclusions and implications of the study are examined. Finally, recommendations for further research are made and a description of how the findings will be distributed is shared.

#### **Overview of the Study**

Response to Intervention (RTI), a systematic process of tiered levels of interventions, has gained popularity as a means of both supporting at-risk students and as a method in which students with disabilities can be accurately identified (Samuels, 2009). However, while RTI programs may look very different from one school to the next, there are some common core components of RTI programs that are demanding of a schools' resources. For example, professional development is needed in for initial training in the RTI program and its process, how to conduct interventions specific to the needs of students, and in training personnel in administering progress monitoring and universal screening assessments. In addition, time is needed for this professional development as well as time for pulling students to receive interventions, progress monitoring, universal screening, and managing the data collection. Various materials, generally associated with the specific interventions that are utilized, are also needed. Perhaps the greatest and most expensive need of RTI program is personnel. Conducting screenings, progress monitoring, managing data, and perhaps most importantly, conducting interventions, create a great need of personnel.

Unfortunately, the recent recession has made it increasingly difficult for schools to provide such resources. The recession has placed additional strain on budgets at both the local and state levels all across America. These new budgetary constraints will likely make it increasingly difficult for principals to sustain effective RTI programs in their schools. However, a review of the associated literature provided no insight into how these budgetary constraints are affecting RTI programs or how principals are responding to these challenges. Therefore, the following overarching question was posed in this study: How do principals effectively manage the sustainability of RTI programs in an environment of budgetary constraint? This overarching question was answered by the findings associated with the following sub questions:

1. How is the sustainability of Response to Intervention affected by budgetary constraints?
2. How do principals allocate resources in order to continue to meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative study was conducted. Ten elementary school principals with at least one year of experience as principals were chosen from a population of approximately 25 principals from seven different counties in southeast Georgia. Each individual principal participated in 60 - 90 minute semi-structured interview questions. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A precoding system was developed based upon the two sub-questions of this study. The transcriptions were read many times. The data were analyzed until themes began to emerge from the data. These themes were the basis for the main categories reported in the findings.

## Summary of the Findings

### The Effects of Budgetary Constraints on the Sustainability of RTI

Although Response to intervention (RTI) has the flexibility and adaptability to be utilized in practically any school, it does require some common resources such as personnel, professional development, and certain materials (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Lose, 2007; NJCLD, 2005). However, the recent recession has caused the funding sources for education to dwindle (Chen, 2009). Areas of education hit especially hard include, but are not limited to personnel, professional development, materials, and programs (Cook, 2009; McDevitt, 2008).

In addressing the first sub-question concerning how the sustainability of RTI has been affected by budgetary constraints, the reoccurring themes that emerged fell under same four categories: personnel, professional development, materials, and programs. Regarding personnel, most of the principals interviewed indicated that they had experienced varying degrees of reduction in school personnel. Some of the personnel lost included classroom teachers, Early Intervention Program (EIP) teachers, instructional coaches, RTI specialists, and substitute teachers.

The elimination of these personnel had many direct effects on the sustainability of RTI as reported by the participants. For example, reduction in the number of classroom teachers increased class sizes and resulted in higher student-teacher ratios. These increased class sizes not only make it more difficult for teachers to provide quality classroom instruction as necessary in tier one of RTI (NRCLD, 2006), but also made it more difficult for teachers to provide at-risk students the highly specialized and specific tier two interventions. Similarly, EIP teachers were also identified as personnel who

played a large role in providing RTI students with tier two interventions. The elimination of these positions made it more challenging to provide at-risk students with the interventions they needed in order to be successful.

The principals in this study indicated that RTI specialists and instructional coaches provided vital support for teachers in sustaining RTI programs. Some of these vital roles included providing teachers with professional development in interventions, conducting meetings and explaining data to parents, and providing classroom teachers with support to ensure that they were providing students with quality tier one instruction. The elimination of these positions made these supports more difficult to provide.

Though most principals noted reductions in personnel, many explained that they would still be able to sustain RTI through changes in job responsibilities among remaining staff members such as paraprofessionals, teachers, counselors, and administrators. Paraprofessionals took on additional responsibilities that were once performed by other personnel. Some of these additional responsibilities included; conducting interventions, progress monitoring students and recording the associated data, and conducting universal screenings.

In addition, the principals in this study indicated that teachers faced increased job responsibilities as well. While teachers were typically responsible for providing tier one interventions in the regular classroom, many had to take on the responsibility of providing specialized tier two and tier three interventions as well. Principals and counselors also experienced changes in job responsibilities due to budgetary constraints and the resulting reduction of school personnel. Some of the additional responsibilities

they took on included holding meetings, conducting screenings, and progress monitoring students.

The ability of principals to provide their teachers with professional development associated with Response to Intervention (RTI) was also affected by budgetary constraints. As a result of these constraints, almost all of the participants reported that they had to address most of the professional development needs of their staffs at the school or district level.

Reduced budgets would obviously hinder the ability of principals to provide materials needed to support RTI programs. The principals interviewed in this study confirmed this. Many reported that their spending accounts had been cut or frozen and that they had to be very frugal with the spending of funds. This made it more difficult for principals to provide materials such as computers, software, and other materials associated with specific interventions.

The principals in this study also indicated that many of the programs that their schools had once offered students were no longer available as a result of budgetary constraints. Perhaps most significantly, summer school and after school programs had been eliminated in some schools as reported by the participants. Elimination of these programs had a direct impact on RTI as these two programs had been utilized to meet the needs of at-risk students. Without these programs, more strain was placed on the RTI programs to meet those needs.

### **How Principals Allocate Resources to Sustain Response to Intervention**

The second sub-question in this study addressed how principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to

Intervention (RTI) despite budgetary constraints. These findings were broken down and reported in four main categories. These four categories include personnel, professional development, materials, and scheduling.

Some of the more labor-intensive components of Response to Intervention include conducting universal screenings, conducting interventions, progress monitoring students, and managing the programs themselves. Even though they were faced with reductions in personnel due to budgetary constraints, the principals interviewed in this study indicated that they were still managing to provide those services. They achieved this through changing and expanding the job responsibilities of the remaining personnel. These changes touched practically every employee in schools as the principals interviewed indicated expanded roles taken on by teachers, paraprofessionals, administration, media specialists, Title One teachers, instructional coaches, RTI coordinators, and intervention specialists.

Budget constraints also have impacted the ability of principals to provide their staffs with the professional development needed in RTI. Many of the principals in this study met this challenge by providing training at the school level. This most often took the form of having teachers, who were trained in RTI or specific interventions, teach other teachers. This training typically took place during teacher planning times, teacher workdays, and preplanning days.

Principals also managed to provide their personnel with the materials needed for their RTI programs in a number of ways. Many emphasized the utilization of the materials that they already had in their schools, taking inventories of what they had on

hand. Others emphasized the use of free materials that are available for educators to support their RTI programs.

The principals who participated in this study also utilized various funding sources in providing materials for their RTI programs. Many reported that they used their Title One funds, to provide materials for interventions, assessments, and software. Others used money designated for special education to provide materials for RTI.

A variety of creative scheduling practices were used by the participants in this study to support the needs of their RTI programs. One of the more common practices used was to pull students out of other content areas such as science or social studies in order to receive extra interventions in readings and mathematics. Others indicated that their students were pulled from Accelerated Reader time or from connection classes such as P.E., music, art, and computer lab.

Creative scheduling was also utilized in order to free personnel to perform the many tasks associated with RTI. Some of the principals interviewed indicated that teachers used planning times to progress monitor and universal screen students. Others freed teachers from their regular teaching duties for varying amounts of time each week in order to conduct interventions or progress monitor students.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

When addressing the first sub-question of this study concerning how the sustainability of RTI has been affected by budgetary constraints, the findings produced few surprises in relation to the associated literature. Although there were few direct links in the literature between the recent recession and its effects on RTI programs, the effects

were logical and easily inferred from the information presented in the review of the literature.

Cook (2008a) noted that many school districts across the nation had to eliminate teaching and support-staff positions as a result of budgetary constraints. All of the participants in this study confirmed that their schools had suffered from reductions in personnel to varying extents, making it more difficult to provide students with the same services that they had once received under Response to Intervention (RTI). The obvious result was fewer personnel to conduct universal screenings, provide interventions, and to conduct progress monitoring. In addition, this reduction in personnel created additional job responsibilities concerning RTI with the remaining staff.

Professional development is a key component of maintaining effective RTI programs (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). Stover (2009) stated that professional development funds had been dramatically cut as a result of budgetary constraints. The principals interviewed in this study acknowledged the fact that it had become more difficult to provide professional development and were resorting to more teacher-directed training at the school level as a result.

Materials for interventions, as well as for assessing and monitoring students, were also identified as an essential component of effective programs (NRCLD, 2006). However, it is certainly understandable that budgetary constraints make providing these materials more difficult for principals. The principals interviewed in this study confirmed this. Many had been faced with reduced or frozen budgets and had to be very judicious in how their limited funds were spent.

Stover (2009) stated that many schools had eliminated programs that target academically struggling students such as after-school and tutoring programs. The participants in this study had experienced some of these effects first hand as some reported that their after-school and summer school programs had been eliminated as a result of budget cuts. Reduction of these supports for at-risk students creates additional strain on existing RTI programs.

The second sub-question concerning how principals allocate resources in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention (RTI) despite budgetary constraints yielded no results in the review of related literature. This was the gap in the literature that the researcher attempted to fill in this study.

The findings of this study revealed that principals allocate resources in a variety of different ways in order to effectively meet the needs of students through Response to Intervention despite budgetary constraints. Principals interviewed in this study managed to use their personnel to meet the needs of their students under RTI in a variety of ways. This was typically accomplished by expanding the roles of remaining personnel to take on some of the responsibilities associated with RTI.

Professional development needs necessary of maintaining RTI programs were met primarily by using in school training by teachers who had previously been trained in RTI or specific interventions to train new personnel. Inventorying and utilizing existing materials or seeking out free materials provided a means by which principals could obtain materials needed for sustaining RTI programs. Principals also utilized specific funds such as Title One funds and special education funds to provide materials as well. In addition, various forms of creative scheduling were utilized by the principals in this study to

maintain effective RTI programs at their schools. This included the scheduling of school personnel to free them to perform the many tasks associated with RTI and various scheduling configurations that allowed students to be pulled to receive interventions.

### **Conclusions**

Response to Intervention (RTI) has been identified as an effective means by which the needs of at-risk students can be met and an accurate method to identify students with disabilities (Ortiz, 2002; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). However, there are a variety of resources needed in order to sustain effective RTI programs and the recent recession has created new challenges in providing these resources. The elementary school principals from southeast Georgia who participated in this study indicated that they had been impacted by budgetary constraints but still managed to sustain their RTI programs through a variety of different methods.

The greatest impact of the recent recession on RTI was made in the area of personnel. Essentially, these principals were charged with trying to continue the same services under RTI with fewer personnel. This challenge was met through changes in the job responsibilities of the remaining personnel. Although funds for professional development had been greatly reduced, the principals in this study utilized in school training by skilled teachers to meet the professional development needs of their RTI programs. Principals also began to identify materials that were already in the building, search out free materials, and utilize special funds such as Title One and special education funding in order to provide their schools with materials needed for their RTI programs. In addition, a variety of creative scheduling methods were used in order to

provide time to administer interventions for students and to free personnel to perform duties associated with RTI.

In summary, the principals in this study all seemed to recognize the importance and value of RTI. They all had felt the effects of budgetary constraints to one extent or another and responded to these challenges in a variety of different ways. By effectively using their personnel, professional development resources, materials, and creative scheduling, these principals managed to sustain what they felt were effective RTI programs despite budgetary constraints.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary school principals manage the sustainability of Response to Intervention (RTI) programs in environments of budgetary constraint. The findings of this study suggest that elementary school principals have experienced a variety of challenges as a result of budgetary constraints on their RTI programs. Funding for personnel, materials, professional development, and special programs, all with direct or indirect ties to sustain effective RTI programs, had been reduced. Despite these challenges, the principals in the study indicated that they had taken action to ensure that their RTI programs were sustained. The findings of this study provide principals with a variety of strategies in the areas of utilizing personnel, providing professional development, providing materials, and using creative scheduling to ensure that students benefit from effective RTI programs.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Response to Intervention (RTI) has proven to be a valuable tool for educators. It has been recognized as an effective means to accurately identify students with disabilities

and to meet the needs of at-risk students. However, budgetary constraints are making it increasingly difficult for principals to provide the resources necessary to sustain RTI programs. It is essential that future research be conducted to examine the effects of budgetary constraints on RTI and how principals are managing to effectively allocate resources to meet those challenges. The following recommendations for future research are suggested:

1. Expand the study beyond southeast Georgia, the area in which this study took place, to other areas of the state or country in order to gather data from a larger population of principals from more urban areas.
2. Expand the study to middle and high school principals. This study focused solely on elementary school principals. Middle and high schools are generally departmentalized and operate on schedules very different from elementary schools. It would be beneficial to identify how RTI programs in middle and high schools have been affected by budgetary constraints and how principals are responding to those challenges.
3. Shift the focus of the study to a comparison of rural and urban schools. The researcher noticed that schools from more urban areas seemed to be impacted by budgetary constraints less so than rural schools. Schools from more urban areas appeared to have more resources available and therefore seemed to be impacted less. This created some differences in how those principals were able to meet the challenges posed by budgetary constraints.

### **Distribution of Findings**

The findings of this study will be distributed in a number of ways. A hardcopy of this study will be made available in the library at Georgia Southern University. In addition, the findings will be shared at a local RESA meeting. A summary of the findings of this study will be provided to the participants of this study. The study will also be uploaded for viewing via the worldwide web.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. What are some of the most positive and negative aspects of your RTI program?
2. How, in general, have recent budget cuts affected your school?
3. What steps have you had to take in your school as a result of school budget cuts?
4. Where does RTI fall in your school's priority list for continued budget expenditures?
5. How expensive is your RTI program in terms of personnel, materials, and training?
6. What is the likelihood that your school will continue to sustain RTI at current levels?
7. Has your RTI program sustained any real changes as a result of the loss of revenue?
8. How are you managing to provide your staff with the training needed in order to sustain your RTI program despite budget cuts?
9. How are you providing students and staff with the materials needed in order to sustain your RTI program despite budget cuts?
10. How are you utilizing your personnel to meet the needs of your RTI program despite budget cuts?
11. Are there any other ways in which you are utilizing your resources to sustain your RTI program despite budget cuts?
12. Who in your school district will ultimately make decisions concerning budget cuts that affect your RTI program.

13. How closely aligned are your budget priorities with the decision maker we just talked about?
14. Is there anything else concerning your RTI program that we have not talked about that you would like to share?

## Appendix B

### Institutional Review Board Approval

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs <b>Institutional Review Board (IRB)</b>		
Phone: 912-478-0843		Veazey Hall 2021 P.O. Box 8005 Statesboro, GA 30460
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	

**To:** Adrian Thompson  
205 Brighton Circle  
Brunswick, GA 31525

**CC:** Charles E. Patterson  
Associate Vice President for Research

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** April 27, 2010

**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H10338** and titled "**Tough Choices: How Elementary Principals Sustain Response to Intervention Programs During Times of Budgetary Constraint**," it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to **10** subjects.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.*

**This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter.** If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes  
Compliance Officer