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Improving the outcomes of the I & RS process for students with exceptional learning needs

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**IMPROVING THE OUTCOMES OF THE I&RS PROCESS FOR
STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS**

by

Erica Alimario

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of

Master of Arts in Learning Disabilities

at

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Thesis Chair: S. Jay Kuder, Ed.D.

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to my supportive parents. My mother, Carole Timmons, who taught me to believe in myself and persevere. My father, Timothy Emmons, has shown me the true meaning of unconditional love and the consequences of being strong in body and spirit. Both of my parents are survivors. Through their examples, I have learned what it truly means to never give up.

Also, I dedicate this work to my own family. My husband, Terence Alimario, who continues to inspire me to be a better person; and to our two sons, Miles and Jackson, who have taught me about feeling important. I hope to make them as proud of me, as I am of them.

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It has taken me six years to complete all of the requirements for this master's program. I reluctantly returned to school to pursue a special education certification and ended up in the Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant (LDTC) program. While working full-time and raising my family, I took one course per semester. I suppose the old saying rings true...*slow and steady wins the race.*

Abstract

Erica Alimario
Improving the Outcomes of the I&RS Process for
Students with Exceptional Learning Needs
2016-2017
S. Jay Kuder, Ed.D
Master of Arts in Learning Disabilities

New Jersey schools are mandated to establish and implement a coordinated system to serve the general education population in order to improve student achievement. This system, known as I&RS (Intervention and Referral Services), is designed to implement pre-referral interventions for at-risk students through a collaborative problem-solving process, which takes place between school administration and staff. A pre-referral intervention web page, containing an overview of the I&RS process, as well as various forms and resources, was created and linked to a school's website for convenience and easy access. Thirty-two teachers at an urban school district in a low socioeconomic community in Camden, NJ were introduced to the I&RS web page and surveyed about their perceptions of the I&RS process.

The data from this study illustrated that the teachers who participated in this survey reported an increase in their understanding of the I&RS process. The data also reflected that teachers view the I&RS process as an effective means of addressing the needs of their struggling students. Additionally, the teachers reported that they would like to receive additional training on the I&RS process. Finally, teacher feedback emphasized the need for direct instruction pertaining to the I&RS process and continued collaboration between I&RS team members in order to create effective intervention plans for general education students who may be at-risk for failure.

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Functions and Intentions of I&RS	2
Key Terms.....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
Pre-Referral Interventions.....	7
Pre-Referral Teams	9
Intervention and Referral Services.....	11
Improving the Pre-Referral Process	13
Chapter 3: Methodology	16
Setting and Participants.....	16
Intervention and Referral Services Team	16
Procedure	17
Design	18
Chapter 4: Results	20
Question One Results.....	20
Question Two Results	24
Chapter 5: Discussion	29
Review	29

Table of Contents (continued)

Limitations31

Implications for Practice32

Future Studies32

Conclusion33

References34

Appendix A: Teacher Survey36

Appendix B: Pre-Referral Forms38

Appendix C: I&RS Web Page Layout41

List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1. Referrals to Special Education	21
Figure 2. Comparison of Item 8 Responses	28

List of Tables

Table	Page
Table 1. Initial Referral Summary Report 2015-2016	23
Table 2. Initial Referral Summary Report 2016-2017	24
Table 3. I&RS Pre-Survey Results	26
Table 4. I&RS Post-Survey Results	27

Chapter 1

Introduction

The New Jersey Special Education Administrative Code, Title 6A; Chapter 14 explains the laws that govern the delivery of special education services in the state of New Jersey. The code states that all students with disabilities are entitled to a free, appropriate public education implemented within the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). According to law, the first consideration of student placement should always be the general education classroom in conjunction with the appropriate supplementary aids and services. An advantageous residual effect of such specific laws created to protect students with disabilities, is that general education students may also benefit from the same protections.

According to the New Jersey Administrative Code 6A: 16-8, each school must establish and implement a coordinated system to serve the general education population in order to improve student achievement. The program is known as Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS.); the design of the program is to provide support to students who are experiencing learning, behavior or health difficulties. It is also intended to assist classroom teachers who may be having difficulties addressing specific student needs. The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) mandates that schools are required to provide resources to support their staff in the effective implementation of best practices. Although little research has been done on I&RS, findings suggests that implementing the I&RS program in schools can result in concentrated instruction which leads to improved academic outcomes for struggling students (Gronda, 2012).

Functions and Intentions of I&RS

One intent of the I&RS program is to create and implement pre-referral interventions for at-risk students through a collaborative problem-solving process, which takes place between school administration and staff. The success of that process is contingent on many factors. One significant factor is providing intervention strategies and resources to teachers. These strategies and resources should be quickly and easily accessible. Due to variations in the structure of individual I&RS programs, inherent scheduling constraints, and the overwhelming expectations placed on teachers, intervention plans and resources are not always efficiently created and implemented. Jamgochian (2004) posited that if intervention resources were readily available and easily accessible, then teachers may be more willing to implement strategies that enable student success.

Another significant objective of I&RS is to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education. The implementation of effective interventions in the general education classroom may address the needs of students who are at-risk for failure or retention. Interventions provide support to enable struggling students to achieve academic success through a preventative process. Through the I&RS process, individualized action plans are developed in order to improve instruction and reduce the amount of special education referrals.

Teacher collaboration and the implementation of effective interventions are two important factors in creating a successful I&RS program. The NJDOE provides an on-line I&RS resource manual which outlines the functions of the I&RS system and includes samples of forms and strategies. It is available online at

<http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/irs/>. Each school district is given the autonomy to decide how exactly the I&RS process will be executed within their schools. Personnel support, collaboration, and efficient documentation of interventions are essential components of a successful I&RS system.

The research questions to be addressed were: If teachers are given easy access to effective strategies that they can implement to provide interventions to struggling students, will there be a reduction in the amount of students who are referred to special education? How can a teacher's competence to intervene effectively be strengthened so that they can reach a wider range of students' needs?

For the purposes of this research study, accessibility to the necessary I&RS forms, an overview of both the I&RS and special education processes, and effective teaching strategies and resources were made available through the school's website. It was hypothesized that if teachers were able to begin the I&RS process and implement strategies at a faster rate, than there would be a reduction in the amount of students who were referred to special education. An I&RS web page containing information, forms, and resources was created and linked through the district's main website for accessibility by teachers.

Initially, the teachers were given a baseline survey to determine their perceptions of the I&RS process. In October 2016, the teachers were then provided with an overview of the new online component of the I&RS program. Thirty-two elementary teachers at Camden's Pride Charter School in Camden, NJ were provided with instructions and a password to access the web page. The teachers were asked to use the web page and were surveyed to collect their feedback about the efficiency of this online resource. The

teachers were encouraged to use the forms and the resources on the school web page from October 2016 through April 2017. Teacher feedback about the web page was taken into account.

Not only is the I&RS program mandated by the state, but it is also a critical component of the school system. I&RS can offer teachers the support that they seek when dealing with struggling students. I&RS provides guidance and accessibility to effective teaching strategies. As a result, struggling students are more likely to receive the support that they need. It is a cyclical process which provides support to both teachers and students. The fidelity of an effective I&RS program is contingent on the extent to which the school culture buys into it. It is essential that all individuals involved in the I&RS process believe that is an effective solution in order to address school-based problems.

Experienced teachers, who are able to share effective strategies with other teachers, play a key role in the I&RS process. Giving teachers access to proven strategies can enable effective interventions to take place in the classrooms. By providing struggling students with the right support, teachers can promote student success and possibly avoid unnecessary referrals to special education. Another important feature of a successful I&RS program is the notion that teachers are being empowered by putting the power to solve problems back into the hands of the teachers.

This research study was conducted in order to analyze teacher perceptions about the I&RS process and also hopefully improve the school's I&RS program. There are many obstacles that can prevent the I&RS process from working smoothly. Easy access to forms and resources is one possible adjustment that can cause the I&RS program to

operate efficiently and provide the teacher's with the assistance that they request to help support their students. Being a program that is required by each school district in New Jersey, makes I&RS a widespread system which affects a large number of teachers and students. Research on I&RS is relevant and important considering the amount of people that are involved in the process.

This research study also attempted to answer the following question: If teachers are provided with effective strategies, would the amount of students who are referred to special education be reduced? For the purposes of this research study, accessibility to the necessary I&RS forms, an overview of both the I&RS and special education processes, and effective teaching strategies and resources were made available on a school-based web page. It was hypothesized that if teachers were able to begin the I&RS process and implement strategies at a faster rate, than there would be a reduction in the amount of students who were referred to special education.

The research study also sought to examine whether the access to readily available resources would have an effect on the amount of students initially referred to the district's child study team for evaluations. In April 2017, a report was run through the district's student information software system. The total number of elementary students attending Pride Elementary School who were initially referred to the district's CST, between August 29, 2015 and April 4, 2016, was obtained. Then, another report was run to obtain the total number of students referred during the 2016-2017 school year, between August and April. These totals were then analyzed to determine if the accessibility to I&RS resources had any impact on the total number of initial student referrals to special education.

Key Terms

Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) - A collaborative team approach. The team is a committee composed of building instructional and support staff, including district support personnel, under the leadership of the building principal/assistant principal. The team provides an appropriate forum for the exchange of ideas and the development of instructional strategies designed to address the instructional needs of students experiencing difficulty. The team, in consultation with the classroom teacher, determines which instructional strategies should be implemented in the classroom, and which additional school level support services may be most beneficial to students. The committee supports the teacher in an effort to provide an appropriate program in the least restrictive learning environment.

Referral - Begins the evaluation and placement process to determine whether a student has a disability and requires special education services.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Pre-Referral Interventions

When teachers are provided with effective ways to continually reassess and develop their professional skills, the results include improved outcomes for all students. (Young & Gaughan, 2010). Over the past 20 years, special education service delivery models have shifted to be more inclusive. As a result, pre-referral interventions have become necessary for the success of some students within the general education classroom. In special education, attention has been placed on designing and implementing effective practices which have consequently yielded beneficial outcomes for students with disabilities, as well as typical achieving students. (Vaughn & Swanson, 2015).

Pre-referral interventions are used to decrease the number of inappropriate referrals to special education. These interventions include classroom strategies designed to promote student success. The purpose of the pre-referral intervention process is to identify students who are having problems in the classroom, develop a plan to address those problems, and implement alternative strategies within the general education classroom. Effective interventions are implemented for the identified problem. The problem-solving process should include persons who are most familiar with the problem and who can assist in identifying intervention strategies that are most likely to be successful.

A study done in 2012 by Michael Richard Gronda at Fordham University, examined how school leaders shaped their school's collaborative problem-solving

process intended to assist elementary teachers with students who were academically struggling in their classrooms. Gronda's study used a qualitative research approach to examine how school leaders shaped the school-based pre-referral collaborative problem-solving process. Data were collected from interviews with the principals and chairs of the pre-referral committees from four elementary schools. The resulting data were used to inform and recommend best practices regarding the leadership and function of state-mandated pre-referral teams in New Jersey.

The results of the study suggested that a pre-referral intervention program may potentially lead to more focused classroom instruction as a result of its innate collaborative attributes, as well as problem identification techniques, focused instructional methods, and progress monitoring elements. The findings from Gronda's study confirmed that a well-established pre-referral program can improve the academic outcomes for children experiencing difficulty in school. The case studies showed examples of how the pre-referral process worked and the resulting specific outcomes. Each case study evidenced how teachers, as well as student learning, were affected by the pre-referral committee's deliberations. In all four schools and with all six participants, the committees were viewed as improving classroom teachers' instructional efforts when working with at-risk students. Although not the sole intention of pre-referral programs, their existence in elementary schools was viewed to be as either reducing or maintaining the number of referrals to special education. All six participants believed that the pre-referral committee had a positive effect by helping teachers through the use of targeted interventions to assist in improving the progress of students, thereby

increasing the possibility that children referred to special education would be maintained in the regular education setting.

Gronda stated that the success of an individual pre-referral program is dependent on strong leadership from the school principal as the committee leader, the presence of collaborative relationships among school personnel during the problem-solving process, the systematic use and collection of data, and the analysis of outcomes to recommend improvements for the overall instructional program within the school. Finally, Gronda concluded that a well-organized problem-solving committee can enhance the instruction of at-risk students and reduce special education referrals. These conclusions were based on responses received from the individual interviews.

Unfortunately, pre-referral interventions can often be confused with the referral process defined in special education. The special education referral process incorporates a team decision to identify, assess, refer, and place students in special education based on their academic and behavioral needs. However, despite similar terminology, implementing the pre-referral intervention process does not imply special education. The pre-referral intervention process is school-based and allows educational professionals to brainstorm ways to have a positive impact on students who are experiencing difficulty in the general education classroom. Pre-referral interventions occur in the general education classroom and do not fall under the umbrella of special education.

Pre-Referral Teams

In order to examine pre-referral teams, two national surveys were administered, as part of a 2005 study by Truscott et al. The two purposes of this study were to examine state education department's mandates, recommendations, and regulations for pre-referral

teams, and also to observe the current status of the prevalence, membership, goals, and interventions of pre-referral teams. The participants in this study included state departments and elementary schools. In the first survey, 51 state departments (50 states and DC) responsible for general and special education were contacted via telephone. The interviewer asked to be directed to the department employee who could answer questions about state pre-referral intervention regulations and services. Most respondents were professional employees in either the department or sub-department responsible for special education. In the second survey, four randomly selected elementary schools from each state were contacted by telephone to collect information about pre-referral teams that were implemented in ordinary schools. The respondents were primarily school counselors (60%) or school psychologists (32%). The results of this survey suggest that although pre-referral teams are common and schools devote considerable resources to them, there is still a substantial disconnection between the pre-referral teams as reported in the literature and the actual teams that exist in most schools. The researchers were not surprised by their findings. They believed that their findings regarding the pre-referral process were a result of widespread mandates for the quick implementation of pre-referral teams over the past decade, with little direction from the states.

As a result of their research efforts, Truscott et al. concluded that state education departments should carefully examine whether they have provided enough professional development on the pre-referral process that they have frequently required or recommended. Professional development should provide states with a clear articulation of the intent of the pre-referral process, guidance about team membership, and training in evidence-based practices. If states provided schools with more direction, schools might

exhibit less deviation from pre-referral teams as described in the literature. At the school level, this research found that pre-referral teams do not necessarily share common goals and that their existing goals are not always consistent with the purposes of the pre-referral process as stated in the literature. The implications of this research suggested that pre-referral teams should rethink problems in broader terms, which may also open up additional avenues for intervention. Finally, their research found that the pre-referral teams infrequently made specific, evidence-based recommendations and often reported the same, simple interventions that the teacher had likely already tried.

In order to further examine how pre-referral teams could be expanded to function more effectively using a problem solving approach, Burns (2005) reviewed research related to pre-referral teams. Burns concluded that the pre-referral process was developed from a solid theoretical base and data existed to support its effectiveness. The study determined that consistent implementation of the pre-referral process had not been achieved and remained a significant barrier to moving toward an operative problem solving approach. Burns determined that additional research is needed regarding pre-referral team format, assignment of staff, training, and treatment fidelity to better assure consistency through recommendations for practice.

Intervention and Referral Services

The New Jersey State Board of Education has stated that one of the primary missions of each school is to enhance student achievement of high academic standards in safe and disciplined learning environments. The public education system's ability to successfully fulfill this mission depends largely upon the capacity of school systems to respond to the diverse educational needs of students. Changing social conditions and

educational needs often create barriers to student achievement. In response to these ever changing circumstances, the New Jersey Department of Education continues to provide leadership to schools for educational improvement and whole-school reform. The state has addressed these needs by establishing that all schools should implement a program of intervention and referral services, most frequently referred to as I&RS.

The New Jersey Department of Education has mandated that district boards of education are required to: "... establish and implement a coordinated system in each school building for the planning and delivery of intervention and referral services that are designed to assist students who are experiencing learning, behavior, or health difficulties..." [N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.1(a)]; and which are designed to: "...assist staff who have difficulties in addressing students' learning, behavior, or health needs." [N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.1(a)].

The regulations set forth by the state of New Jersey make it clear that I&RS activities should be focused on concerns for students. The end result of the I&RS process should be student improvement. The in-house I&RS program of each school must consist of a formal, coordinated and well-articulated system of supportive activities and services for staff who have identified student difficulties. The ultimate goal of the I&RS team is to maximize the chances for short-term success, and hopefully long term change of the individuals' involved. The I&RS process is continued for each student, as necessary, to achieve the desired outcomes.

In order to provide the appropriate support and assistance to staff, students and parents, the I&RS team members should remain up-to-date on the research literature related to learning, behavior and health, as well as versed in effective techniques for

teaching, learning, behavior and health management. One important purpose of the pre-referral team is to empower teachers and to increase the skills and abilities of teachers to effectively meet the needs of students who may have learning problems, behavioral problems, or both.

Improving the Pre-Referral Process

In a study conducted by Young & Gaughan (2010), general education teachers' attitudes, regarding students who were having difficulty, had improved as their teaching skills increased. Their study examined a four year program designed to improve the effectiveness of pre-referral intervention teams in rural schools. The study used qualitative analysis to evaluate the amount of time pre-referral teams spent in the different stages of a problem-solving model and the amount of time they spent focusing on all of the relevant factors that can influence student functioning. Descriptive data identified factors that could potentially increase team effectiveness. The study yielded results that may assist pre-referral teams in their efforts to implement effective pre-referral programming.

Additional results from the Young & Gaughan (2010) study showed that the pre-referral program yielded positive effects, including a shift from teachers selecting outside interventions to implementing in-class interventions, increased follow-up, and increased utilization of objective evaluation methods. Qualitative results determined that teams focused on a variety of factors and used problem-solving processes. This study provided an example of an effective way for the state to collaborate with schools to improve the functioning of pre-referral teams. Findings suggest that pre-referral teams are most likely to be successful when they invest in training, have administrative support, operate with

multidisciplinary membership, and adhere to a consultative model using a structured problem-solving process.

A 2015 study, conducted by Alexis Rich, examined the I&RS process. The school district involved in this study had been cited by the State of New Jersey Department of Education for overrepresentation of minority students in special education. One purpose of this study was to evaluate teacher and administrator perceptions of the I&RS process. Rich (2015) examined the I&RS procedures for meeting the needs of all students and determining appropriate placements of students in general education or special education settings. The study also attempted to determine what areas for improvement were needed, in terms of essential components of the I&RS process. The areas included multi-disciplinary teams, teacher training, instructional interventions and follow-up.

Rich's study utilized a qualitative case study approach with mixed methods data analyses to provide a comprehensive analysis of the I&RS process at the elementary school level. Data collection included a survey distributed to four elementary schools, interviews with ten key participants in the I&RS process, and a document review based on public documents pertaining to demographic data. Findings of this study suggested that the school district had been adjusting the I&RS process in order to meet the needs of students who were struggling in general education and to determine appropriate special education referrals. The study found areas for the improvement of the essential components of the I&RS process. It was suggested that the district could further improve the I&RS process by enhancing multi-disciplinary teams, teacher preparation and training concerning language-based interventions, varied instructional interventions, and

providing both short and long-term follow-up throughout the I&RS process (Rich 2015). This study described the importance of how an efficient I&RS process can better service students in general education and also provide meaningful data to assist in determining appropriate educational placements. Additionally, the research findings from Rich's study further rationalized that adjusting classroom instruction may result in helping students succeed in general education before a possible special education referral.

In a 2004 study, Elisa Jamgochian examined if the internet held the potential for facilitating collaborative problem solving during the pre-referral process by providing direct access for teachers to intervention information and resources. The study examined whether the internet could be a viable tool for professional collaboration. Jamgochian created a pre-referral intervention website containing various forms and resources and linked it to a school web page for easy access by teachers. Teachers were asked to access the website and they were then surveyed to obtain their perceptions of the usefulness of the web-based intervention resource. Overall, the teachers responded positively to the website, and indicated that it was useful to have access to necessary forms and intervention suggestions online. Finally, Jamgochian set the stage for future research in the areas of intervention implementation and internet use by teachers. Her study was the initial inspiration for this research study, and I hope to build upon Jamgochian's work.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Setting and Participants

A total of 32 general and special education teachers, Kindergarten through fourth grades, at Camden's Pride Charter School in Camden, NJ were invited to participate in this study. According to the New Jersey School Performance Report (New Jersey Department of Education, 2015), there were 239 students enrolled at Camden's Pride Charter School during the 2014-2015 academic year. The report stated that 82.4% of the students in the elementary school were Hispanic, 16.3% of the students were black, 0.8% of the students were Asian, and 0.4% of the students were two or more races. English is the primary language spoken in the community, as well as Spanish. When further examining the school population, approximately 7% of the students were students with disabilities, 82.4% of the population was considered economically disadvantaged, and 6.7% of the population was limited in English proficiency. An examination into school records revealed that during the 2015-2016 school year, there were 241 students enrolled compared to 333 students enrolled during the current 2016-2017 academic year.

Intervention and Referral Services Team

The I&RS committee at the school was comprised of three special education teachers and a building administrator. The team met once a week for approximately one hour, in an available classroom or office space. Classroom teachers, school social workers, child study team members and parents were also invited to participate at the I&RS meetings, depending on the individual students who were being discussed and their specific needs. During each meeting, the team addressed teacher concerns regarding

academic and behavior issues related to students who had exhibited difficulties in the classroom. The team created action plans for students and reviewed the progress of the action plans based on teacher feedback. Teacher feedback was recorded on the Action Plan form. Typically, an action plan was implemented for six weeks, and the classroom teacher recorded the progress of the interventions being implemented during that time period. After six weeks, the action plan was collected and reviewed, and the team decided if another six weeks of interventions were required. If the student had made sufficient progress, it was determined that the student no longer required an action plan.

Procedure

The teachers were invited to complete an initial baseline survey. They were emailed a link to an online survey and invited to complete it on their own volition. Items on the survey addressed the teachers' perceptions of the usefulness and efficiency of the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) program at the school. Teachers were asked to answer ten questions related to the level of support they received from colleagues and administrators during the I&RS process (Appendix A: Teacher Survey). The purpose of the initial survey was to collect baseline data on teacher attitudes and perception of the I&RS process.

Following the initial survey, a school-based web page was created for the purpose of this research study. A link to a password-encrypted web page was placed on the homepage of the school website, in an attempt to make it easy for the teachers to access, yet limited accessibility for non-users. All teachers at the school had computers with internet capabilities in their classrooms. Teachers were emailed instructions on how to

access the new I&RS web page, as well as given the password for admittance. A link to the web page was included on the school's existing website. Teachers were in the habit of accessing the school website daily to retrieve their email, submit student attendance, and input grades and lesson plans. This made the I&RS web page convenient for them to access and use. Initially, information on accessing and using the I&RS web page was given only to the 32 teachers at Camden's Pride Charter School. In effort to share the I&RS resources with other teachers in the district, an email with directions for accessing the I&RS web page was also sent out to teachers at the district's middle school.

Design

The I&RS web page included an overview of the I&RS process, district I&RS forms, teaching strategies and resources. The forms included the Initial Request for Assistance Form and the Information Collection Form (Appendix B: Pre-Referral Forms). The purpose of these forms was for the teachers to collect student information and formally submit their requests for assistance to the I&RS Committee. The I&RS web page also contained a variety of resources, which included suggestions and strategies for interventions, as well as printables, in the areas of classroom management, reading, writing, math, and test taking skills (Appendix C: I&RS Web Page Layout). The source of the resources and strategies was from a collection of teacher-made materials which were based on effective, research-based strategies and interventions. Examples of the resources available on the web page included student checklists, sight word flashcards, and test taking strategies.

The I&RS web page was revised and updated through March 2017, at which time a follow-up survey was emailed to the teachers. Survey responses were collected throughout March 2017. The second survey was used to collect and analyze additional data from the teachers regarding their attitudes and perceptions of the I&RS process. The I&RS web page will remain available online indefinitely, and improvements and adjustments to the web page will be made based on responses and survey results.

In addition to the survey, this study also examined the total number of general education students who were referred to special education. In April of 2017, the number of students initially referred to special education was collected. The number of initial referrals from the 2016-2017 school year was then compared to the number of initial referrals from the 2015-2016 school year. These two sets of numbers were compared in order to determine if the implementation of the I&RS web page had any effect on the total number of students referred for special education services.

Chapter 4

Results

In this experimental pre/posttest research study that was designed to improve pre-referral services, 32 teachers at Camden's Pride Elementary School in Camden, NJ were provided with instructions on how to access an internal web page that contained an overview of the I&RS process, district I&RS forms, teaching strategies and resources. The teachers were also invited to participate in two online surveys that were designed to measure teacher perceptions about the I&RS program, including the amount of training and resources they had been provided. The research questions to be answered were:

1. Will there be a reduction in the amount of students who are referred to special education if teachers are provided with easy access to effective strategies?
2. How can a teacher's competence to intervene effectively be strengthened so that they can reach a wider range of students' needs?

Question One Results

Will there be a reduction in the amount of students who are referred to special education if teachers are provided with easy access to effective strategies?

Data on the number of general education students who were referred to the district's Child Study Team for special education services was analyzed from the previous 2015-2016 academic school year and compared to data from the current school year 2016-2017. The total number of students who were initially referred for special education services between August 30, 2015 and June 30, 2016 was five students. The

total number of students who were initially referred for special education services between August 30, 2016 and April 10, 2017 was nine students. Enrollment totals for this school during the two school years were also collected. The total number of students enrolled at the elementary school during the 2015-2016 school year was 241 students. The total number of students enrolled between August 2016 and April 2017 was 333 students. The total number of enrolled students was compared to the total number of students initially referred to special education in order to obtain and compare the percentage of students referred. Figure 1 represents the data described above, in a year-to-year comparison.

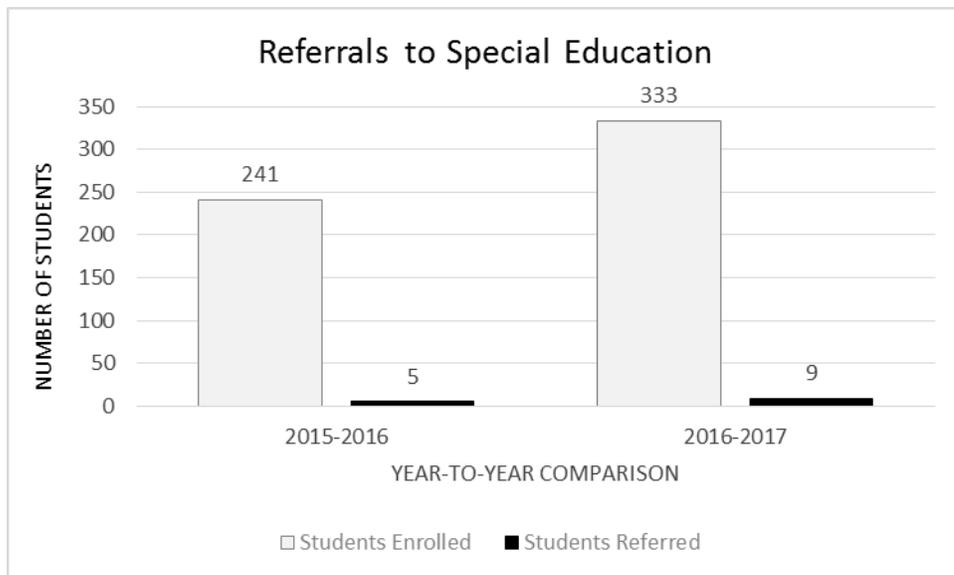


Figure 1. Referrals to special education

During the 2015-2016 academic year, 2.1% students were referred to special education, while 2.7% of the total student population had been referred through April of the 2016-2017 academic year.

The information presented in Tables 1 and 2 was obtained through the district's online information system. Between August 29, 2015 and June 30, 2016, there were a total of five students who were referred to the child study team. 80% of those students were referred by a parent submitting a formal letter requesting a child study team evaluation. Three out of the five students who were referred presented with speech and/or articulation concerns. Two out of the five students were referred due to a suspected learning disability. Out of the five students who were referred, four of those referrals were accepted and warranted child study team evaluations.

Between August 29, 2016 and April 10, 2017, there were a total of nine students who were referred to the child study team. Five of those students were referred by a parent and the other four students were referred by school staff. The highest area of concern, or the reason for the referral, was a suspected learning disability. The next highest area was related to behavior concerns. The remaining concerns were related to speech and/or articulation issues. Out of the nine students who were referred, five of those students were accepted and received a child study team evaluation.

Below in Tables 1 and 2, the data related to the referral reports for each academic year are presented. The information is broken down by who referred the student, as well as reasons for the referrals. Percentages are also provided in the tables.

Table 1

Initial Referral Summary Report 2015-2016

Referral Date Range: 08/29/2015 - 06/30/2016		
Total Students Referred	5	
Accepted/Tested:	4	80%
Not Accepted:	1	20%
Total:	5	100%
Referred By		
Parent:	4	80%
I&RS:	1	20%
Teacher:	0	0%
Physician:	1	20%
Referral Reasons		
Language Arts/Literacy Difficulties:	1	20%
Other:	1	20%
Reading Deficits:	1	20%
Speech/Articulation:	3	60%

Table 2

Initial Referral Summary Report 2016-2017

Referral Date Range: 08/29/2016 - 04/10/2017		
Total Students Referred	9	
Accepted/Tested:	5	56%
Not Accepted:	4	44%
Total:	9	100%
Referred By		
Parent:	5	56%
Staff:	1	11%
I&RS:	2	22%
Teacher:	1	11%
Physician:	0	0%
Referral Reasons		
Academic Deficits/Delays:	4	44%
ADHD	1	11%
Attention Difficulties/Focusing:	1	11%
Behavior:	3	33%
Difficulty Learning:	1	11%
Difficulty Retaining/Recalling Information:	2	22%
Emotional Difficulties:	1	11%
Has Been Retained:	1	11%
Other:	2	22%
Possible Learning Disability:	2	22%
Speech/Articulation:	1	11%
Speech/Language	1	11%

Question Two Results

Question 2 was: How can a teacher’s competence to intervene effectively be strengthened so that they can reach a wider range of students’ needs? Of the 32 participants invited to participate, 26 teachers submitted survey responses for the initial survey, and 27 teachers submitted responses to the follow-up survey. All of the teachers, who were invited to participate in the pre- and post-surveys, were general and special education teachers in grades Kindergarten through fourth. Some of the teachers taught in co-teaching classrooms or a special subject area, such as art or technology.

The baseline survey had a response rate of 81 %. Data from the post-survey showed a response rate of 84%. The results of the surveys are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to draw conclusions about the teacher's perceptions and attitudes concerning the I&RS process. The survey questions focused on the understanding and usefulness of I&RS training, support, required forms and resources. The percentage of each response per item was calculated in order to determine information related to each item's overall rating (Tables 1 & 2). Results, for both the pre- and post-surveys, indicated that the teachers favorably rated their own understanding of the I&RS process, training and support, their comfort level with asking for help, and their perception of the effectiveness of the I&RS process. On the pre-survey, the majority of responses for each item (38.46% or higher) ranged from "Agree" to "Strongly Agree". On the post-survey, the majority of responses for each item (37.04% or higher) ranged from "Agree" to "Strongly Agree". The most significant difference in responses between the pre- and post-surveys was related to items 8 and 10. On the pre-survey, Item 8 "I know where to find I&RS forms and resources", more than half (61.45%) of the participants responded "Agree", compared to the post-survey which showed less than half (25.93%) responded "Agree". The responses for Item 10, "I am comfortable with documenting the interventions on the Action Plan", also revealed a discrepancy. 50.00% of the participants responded "Agree" on the pre-survey, compared to 33.33% "Agree" responses on the post-survey.

Table 3

I&RS Pre-Survey Results

IR&S Pre-Survey Results							
Survey Items							
1. I understand the I&RS process.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	2	2	15	7	4.04	26
%	0.00%	7.69%	7.69%	57.69%	26.92		
2. I was provided with sufficient training on I&RS and the implementation of interventions.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	1	3	9	10	3	3.42	26
%	3.85%	11.54%	34.62%	38.46%	11.54%		
3. I would like to receive more training about I&RS.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	3	7	10	6	3.73	26
%	0.00%	11.54%	26.92%	38.46%	23.08%		
4. The I&RS process is an effective means of addressing the needs of my struggling students.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	6	5	12	3	3.46	26
%	0.00%	23.08%	19.23%	46.15%	11.54%		
5. I feel comfortable approaching I&RS Team members to ask for help.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	1	0	2	11	12	4.27	26
%	3.85%	0.00%	7.69%	42.31%	46.15%		
6. The I&RS Team provides effective interventions that I can use to help my struggling students.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	1	1	7	15	2	3.62	26
%	3.85%	3.85%	26.92%	57.69%	7.69%		
7. I feel confident in my ability to implement the suggested I&RS interventions.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	1	5	18	2	3.81	26
%	0.00%	3.85%	19.23%	69.23%	7.69%		
8. I know where to find I&RS forms and resources.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	1	2	2	16	5	3.85	26
%	3.85%	7.69%	7.69%	61.54%	19.23%		
9. The Action Plan form that is created by the I&RS Team is user-friendly.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	1	3	16	6	4.04	26
%	0.00%	3.85%	11.54%	61.54%	23.08%		
10. I am comfortable with documenting the interventions on the Action Plan.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	1	10	13	2	3.62	26
%	0.00%	3.85%	38.46%	50.00%	7.69%		

Table 4

I&RS Post-Survey Results

I&RS Post-Survey Results							
Survey Items							
1. I understand the I&RS process.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	2	2	17	6	4.00	27
%	0.00%	7.41%	7.41%	62.96%	22.22%		
2. I was provided with sufficient training on I&RS and the implementation of interventions.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	2	6	7	10	2	3.15	27
%	7.41%	22.22%	25.93%	37.04%	7.41%		
3. I would like to receive more training about I&RS.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	2	6	11	7	3.88	26
%	0.00%	7.69%	23.08%	42.31%	26.92%		
<i>skipped question</i>							1
4. The I&RS process is an effective means of addressing the needs of my struggling students.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	2	7	14	4	3.74	27
%	0.00%	7.41%	25.93%	51.85%	14.81%		
5. I feel comfortable approaching I&RS Team members to ask for help.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	2	6	9	10	4.00	27
%	0.00%	7.41%	22.22%	33.33%	37.04%		
6. The I&RS Team provides effective interventions that I can use to help my struggling students.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	2	7	11	7	3.85	27
%	0.00%	7.41%	25.93%	40.74%	25.93%		
7. I feel confident in my ability to implement the suggested I&RS interventions.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	0	1	3	16	6	4.04	26
%	0.00%	3.85%	11.54%	61.54%	23.08%		
<i>skipped question</i>							1
8. I know where to find I&RS forms and resources.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	1	2	10	7	7	3.63	27
%	3.70%	7.41%	37.04%	25.93%	25.93%		
9. The Action Plan form that is created by the I&RS Team is user-friendly.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	2	1	6	13	5	3.67	27
%	7.41%	3.70%	22.22%	48.15%	18.52%		
10. I am comfortable with documenting the interventions on the Action Plan.							
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Response Count
Raw	1	2	10	9	5	3.56	27
%	3.70%	7.41%	37.04%	33.33%	18.52%		

Figure 2 presents the relationship of the pre- and post-survey results from Item 8 of both surveys. When the results of Item 8 were compared, there was a decrease in the number of teachers who responded that they agreed with the statement” I know where to find I&RS forms and resources.

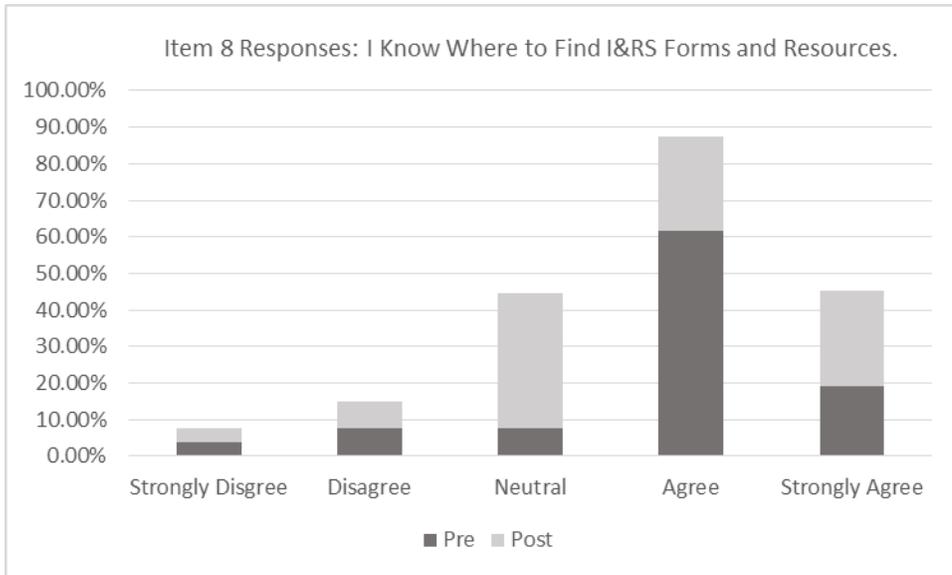


Figure 2. Comparison of item 8 responses

Chapter 5

Discussion

Review

This research study examined pre-referral interventions for at-risk students and sought to improve the outcomes of the intervention process for students with exceptional learning needs. The research questions to be addressed were: If teachers are given easy access to effective strategies that they can implement in order to provide interventions to struggling students, will there be a reduction in the amount of students who are referred to special education? How can a teacher's competence to intervene effectively be strengthened so that they can reach a wider range of students' needs? This study was also conducted in order to analyze teacher perceptions about the pre-referral process and improve the I&RS program.

The data from this study illustrated that the teachers who participated in this survey reported an increase in their understanding of the I&RS process. Additionally, the results indicated that teachers required ongoing support to be better adept at accessing and implementing effective intervention strategies. Simply providing instructions to teachers on where and how to access I&RS resources was not enough. Teacher feedback emphasized the need for direct instruction pertaining to the I&RS process and continued collaboration between I&RS team members. It can be posited that the same evidence-based, direct, and explicit instructional practices that have been proven to be effective for students may also be applied to professional development for teachers.

Previous research has found that at-risk students may be less likely to require special education services if effective interventions are implemented in the general education classroom (Noell & Witt, 1999). Effective interventions should be evidence-based, proven through outcome evaluations, and delivered early. The results of the current study presented inconsistent and varying results. It did not show a direct relationship between providing teachers easy access to effective strategies and a reduction in the number of students who are referred to special education. Instead of the expected decrease, there was a slight increase in the amount of students referred to special education from one year to the next.

The development of professional collaboration among school administrators and teachers may potentially increase support for struggling students in the general education classroom. Collaborative intervention planning may not be realistic since teachers may be influenced by the presence of the collaborator and often find the prescribed interventions to be complex and time-consuming (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990).

Mamlin and Harris (2001) found that teachers were frustrated with the extensive documentation required throughout the pre-referral process. The results of this study showed that more than half of the teachers surveyed felt comfortable approaching other professionals in their school and asking for assistance with their struggling students. However, the teachers' level of comfort with knowing where to access the necessary forms and resources was not secure.

Research results from the Young & Gaughan (2010) study showed that the pre-referral program yielded positive effects, including a shift from teachers selecting outside interventions to implementing in-class interventions, increased follow-up, and increased

utilization of objective evaluation methods. Providing teachers with an abundance of strategies may increase their confidence. When the pre- and post-survey results from this study were averaged together, those numbers showed that about half of the teachers surveyed stated that they had been provided with effective interventions to use with their struggling students. The same amount of teachers, 49%, stated that they agreed that the I&RS process was an effective way of addressing the needs of struggling students.

Limitations

One significant limitation of this study was the implementation time. The teachers had less than six months to familiarize themselves with the new I&RS web page. When results are compared for Item 8 on the pre- and post-surveys, there was a decrease in the number of teachers who “agreed” with the statement: “I know where to find I&RS forms and resources.” Given more time and practice, teachers may become more efficient with utilizing the I&RS web page.

Another limitation of this study was the lack of in-person collaboration between myself and the teachers. The teachers were sent an email with instructions on how to access the I&RS web page. Some of the teachers received an in-person overview of the I&RS process and web page at two I&RS meetings. This opportunity allowed for the teachers to watch a demonstration of how to access the web page and ask follow-up questions. Due to time and scheduling constraints, all of the teachers were not able to receive the face-to-face training session. I feel that the teachers would be more likely to utilize the I&RS web page if they were able to collaborate in-person. This study suggests that the internet cannot replace in-person collaboration.

The school where this study was conducted had significantly increased their student enrollment from the 2015-2016 school year to the 2016-2015 school year. The school's charter was increased and as a result it was able to accept 92 additional students. When the numbers of students who were referred to special education are compared from these two academic years, it appears that there is a significant increase. Five students referred during 2015-2016 compared to nine students referred during 2016-2017. However, if those numbers are converted into percentages of the total school population, the increase is actually 2.1% to 2.7%. When the percentages are compared, the amount of students who were referred stayed about the same.

Implications for Practice

The immediate benefits from this study included access to the I&RS web page, via the internet. This web page provided all the necessary forms for teachers to complete as part of the I&RS process, as well as an overview of the I&RS and Special Education referral processes and access to resources and strategies. As teachers become more familiar with using the I&RS web page, as well as the I&RS process, there may be an increase in collaboration and a decrease in initial referrals. The future use of the I&RS web page may suggest that with easy access to information, teachers may feel more confident in their ability to implement successful interventions.

Future Studies

This study suggested that teachers need on-going support in order to address the needs of struggling students. Future research should continue to find the best methods to provide teachers with the appropriate support and effective interventions for at-risk

students. Another focus of future research might focus on making pre-referral interventions convenient in order to increase teacher confidence.

Conclusion

The data from this study illustrated that the teachers who participated in this survey reported an increase in their understanding of the I&RS process. The data also reflected that teachers view the I&RS process as an effective means of addressing the needs of their struggling students. Additionally, the teachers reported that they would like to receive additional training on I&RS. Although this study did not establish a causal relationship between accessibility to effective interventions and a decrease in the number of students initially referred to special education, it examined important aspects of the pre-referral process. This study sets the stage for future research in the areas pre-referral collaboration and the implementation of effective interventions.

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Appendix A

Teacher Survey

You are invited to participate in this online research survey entitled "I&RS Survey". You are included in this survey because your feedback is very important in helping to improve our school's I&RS program. The number of subjects to be enrolled in the study will be 32 general and special education teachers.

The survey may take approximately five minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, do not respond to this online survey. Completing this survey indicates that you are voluntarily giving consent to participate in the survey.

The purpose of this research study is to analyze teacher perceptions about the I&RS process and also improve the school's I&RS program. This research study will also attempt to determine if providing teachers with effective strategies, would reduce the amount of students who are referred to special education. All general and special education teachers at Pride Elementary School will be invited to participate.

There are no risks or discomforts associated with this survey. There may be no direct benefit to you; however, by participating in this study, you may help us understand how we can better serve our students.

Your responses will be kept confidential. We will store the data in a secure computer file and the file will be destroyed once the data has been published. Any part of the research that is published as part of this study will not include your individual information. If you have any questions about the survey, you can contact me at XXX.

Please check the boxes below.

To participate in this survey, you must be 18 years or older. Place a check box here:

Completing this survey indicates that you are voluntarily giving consent to participate in the survey:

1. I understand the I&RS process.
- | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| <input type="radio"/> |

Teacher Survey (continued)

2. I was provided with sufficient training on I&RS and the implementation of interventions.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
3. I would like to receive more training about I&RS.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
4. The I&RS process is an effective means of addressing the needs of my struggling students.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
5. I feel comfortable approaching I&RS Team members to ask for help.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
6. The I&RS Team provides effective interventions that I can use to help my struggling students.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
7. I feel confident in my ability to implement the suggested I&RS interventions.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
8. I know where to find I&RS forms and resources.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
9. The Action Plan form that is created by the I&RS Team is user-friendly.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree
10. I am comfortable with documenting the interventions on the Action Plan.
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

Appendix B

Pre-Referral Forms

I&RS REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE FORM
CONFIDENTIAL

TO: The Intervention and Referral Services Team

FROM: _____

DATE: _____

STUDENT: _____

D.O.B.: _____ Grade: _____

Reasons for Request for Assistance (Must be for school-based issues, i.e. academics, behavior, health):

Specific and Descriptive Observed Behaviors (Hearsay or subjective comments will not be accepted):

Please explain the student's strengths (i.e. academic, social, emotional, and behavioral):

**Please attach supporting documentation with this referral
(i.e. work samples, progress reports, test samples, writing samples, etc.)**

I&RS PRIOR INTERVENTIONS CHECKLIST
CONFIDENTIAL

Staff Requesting Assistance: _____ Date: _____

Student: _____ Grade: _____

Please indicate the types of interventions you have tried prior to this request for assistance.

1. Spoke to student privately after class. _____
 - a. Explained class rules and expectations. _____
 - b. Explained my concerns. _____
2. Gave student help after class/school. _____
3. Changed student's seat. _____
4. Spoke with parent on the telephone. _____
Phone number _____
5. Gave student special work at his/her level. _____
6. Checked cumulative folder. _____
7. Held conference with parent in school. _____
8. Sent home notices regarding behavior/school work. _____
9. Arranged an independent study program for student. _____
10. Gave student extra attention. _____
11. Set up contingency management program with student. _____
12. Referred student to guidance or administration. _____
13. Other (Please explain.) _____

By submitting this form, I understand that I will be a full partner with the I&RS Team in resolution of the identified concerns.

Staff Member's Signature: _____ Date: _____

INTERVENTION AND REFERRAL SERVICES
ELEMENTARY TEACHER INFORMATION FORM
CONFIDENTIAL

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Teacher Name: _____ Grade: _____

Reason for Request for Assistance:

Directions: Please provide the information requested in the appropriate spaces below.

	Current Academic Performance Levels/Grades	Student Strengths	Student Areas for Improvement
Language Arts			
100 Book Challenge			
Math			
Writing			
Social Studies			
Science			
Other			

Appendix C

I&RS Web Page Layout

I&RS FORMS AND RESOURCES WEB PAGE

The links listed below will open a PDF file. All files are available for you to print.

FORMS

- 1) [I&RS Process](#)
- 2) [I&RS Referral to Special Education Process](#)
- 3) [Initial Request for Assistance Form](#)
- 4) [Information Collection Form](#)

TEACHER RESOURCES

- 1) [Multisensory Teaching Techniques](#)
- 2) [Power Goal Contract](#)
- 3) [Teaching Strategies and Ideas](#)

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- 1) [Morning Checklist](#)
- 2) [Stay on Target System](#)
- 3) [Task Strip](#)

TEST TAKING RESOURCES

- 1) [Academic Language Slides \(Reading and Language\)](#)
- 2) [Academic Language Slides \(Math\)](#)
- 3) [Academic Language Slides \(Science\)](#)

I&RS Web Page Layout (continued)

READING RESOURCES

- 1) [1G Power Words](#)
- 2) [2G Power Words](#)
- 3) [Sight Words - Flash Cards](#)
- 4) [Sight Words - Large Posters](#)
- 4) [Alphabet Missing Letter Cards - Beginning and Ending Letters](#)
- 5) [Alphabet Missing Letter Cards - Beginning Letters](#)
- 6) [Alphabet Missing Letter Cards - Ending Letters](#)
- 7) [Alphabet Missing Letter Cards - Middle Letters](#)
- 8) [Phonemic Awareness Rhyming Words Match Game](#)
- 9) [Phonics Mini Books](#)
- 10) [Talk-to-Yourself Chart](#)
- 11) [Vowel Sounds Chart](#)

WRITING RESOURCES

- 1) [Check Your Writing Cards](#)
- 2) [C.O.P.S. Checklist](#)

MATH RESOURCES

- 1) [How Much is Your Word Worth? - 1](#)
- 2) [How Much is Your Word Worth? - 2](#)
- 3) [How Much is Your Word Worth? - 3](#)
- 4) [Math Mats - Addition and Subtraction](#)
- 5) [Math Mats - Grades K through 2](#)
- 6) [Touch Math Cards](#)