Chapter 1

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A. Purpose of the *Public Schools of Brookline Child Study Teams: Framework and Guidelines*

Brookline is proud to be a diverse school community. With the strengths of this diversity come challenges. Regularly, teachers grapple with how to meet the needs of Brookline students across a broad range of learning styles, life experiences, languages spoken, expectations from parents and families, previous school experiences, and background skills and knowledge. Within this context, a Brookline teacher might say, "I've tried everything I know and I just can't seem to get the growth I would expect from this student. I wonder what's going on with her. What else can we do?" Child Study Teams (CSTs) support such inquiry. Within a school culture that values collaboration and inquiry, CSTs can help teachers, schools, and our school system respond to the diverse needs of all Brookline students.

The purpose of the *Public Schools of Brookline Child Study Team: Framework and Guidelines* is to clarify all elements of the process in order to support and strengthen each school's CST, always maintaining the focus on improving student learning. It represents what we know now and it will evolve as we learn more. The *Framework and Guidelines* are offered with a welcoming spirit, inviting educators to see their model of CST within the framework and to apply these guidelines to deepen their understanding of CSTs and the support that is available throughout the system.

Beyond this primary purpose of the *Framework and Guidelines*, special attention has been paid to acknowledging the inextricable connection between CSTs and the culture of a school. When appropriate, the *Framework and Guidelines* help to create an understanding of this relationship and provide various tools and processes that nurture a developing professional learning community. If the purposes of the *Framework and Guidelines* are fully realized, it will be clear how CSTs provide the potential for Brookline educators to experience the synergy created when we question, wonder and learn together in support of every child.

B. 1. The Larger Context of Child Study Teams

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), which later became Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990, required that states provide a free and appropriate public education for all students with disabilities. Specifically:

"Massachusetts school districts are required to identify, locate and evaluate all children with disabilities residing in the State, including children with disabilities attending private schools, regardless of the severity of their disability, and who are in need of special education and related services. Massachusetts school districts include as part of their child find responsibilities both highly mobile children with disabilities (such as migrant and homeless children); and children who are suspected of being a child with a disability and in need of special education, even though they are advancing from grade to grade." [1]

In effect, this mandate required school districts to seek out struggling students who already had a disability or who were suspected of having a disability and offer them services. To assess for learning disabilities, psychological and educational testing were used with a focus on the ability-achievement discrepancy model (i.e. if a student had an average IQ but low academic achievement scores, they were labeled as learning disabled and given special education services). CSTs were born out of this "child find law" as teachers needed someplace to go within their schools when they were faced with a struggling student.

There are several points in the above mandate which define a need for CSTs. The first is that even "highly mobile children" must be evaluated to see if they have a disability. Yet students who travel from district to district, or children who miss chunks of school time while their families look for housing, may appear "learning disabled" given that they have not been exposed to certain academic skills or concepts. Thus the use of the ability-achievement model might over-identify these children as disabled. The second interesting point is that the mandate does not state that every student about whom there is a concern must be designated as a special education student.[2] This opens up a need for individualized, targeted services and interventions that are provided under the "general education" umbrella. In both of these cases, CSTs provide a means of getting to know a child's individualized needs and history to ensure that the child is served appropriately and in the "least restrictive environment."

CSTs took on an even more important role in the quest to meet each child's educational needs following the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. Prior to 2004, the ability-achievement model of identifying disabilities was criticized as being a "wait to fail"

[1] *Massachusetts Department of Education Part B Eligibility.* (2003). Retrieved June 30, 2010, from http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/2003/news/partb_eligibility.pdf
[2] Walsh, J. (2008). RTI vs. Child Find: A Natural Tension. *This Just In…* Retrieved June 30, 2010

model, in that students had to have "low achievement" before services were implemented. Moreover, this approach had the effect over time of over-identifying students with different racial or cultural backgrounds as "disabled" when really, these children needed additional instruction but a disability was not in evidence. Thus, CSTs were able to more responsibly evaluate which students actually had a disability by supporting the general classroom teacher to employ teaching strategies geared to support different kinds of learners. If several rounds of strategies had been applied and found to be unsuccessful, then students were referred for a special education evaluation.[3]

The 2004 revision of IDEA allowed for a different way of evaluating for the presence of a disability: the Response to Intervention (RtI) model. This model provides routine screening to identify all students who may be at risk for learning difficulties in order to see which students are or are not making progress with generalized classroom instruction. If a student is not making progress, further (general education) assessments may be needed, and more intensive, targeted (general education) interventions and progress monitoring may be implemented for a set period of time. If documentation of the interventions shows that a student continues not to make progress at a rate similar to his or her peers after this "second tier" of targeted interventions, then a referral for a special education evaluation may be warranted.

Currently, CSTs vary in name from state to state but serve the same purpose: to support classroom teachers in identifying and applying instructional strategies that support many different types of learners. They also serve a preventative function in that they support students in the general education setting who are having difficulty before they fail or lose a great deal of academic ground. Current CSTs appear to be very closely tied to the RtI model of identifying learning disabilities in that RtI also is designed to support all students, and to only refer non-responding students for special education evaluations. Notably, the identification of student strengths is a key component of designing successful interventions and strategies.

In a 2008 Connecticut court case in which parents felt that the school had not adequately served their child using the CST model, the court ruled that, "…the use of alternative programs, such as CSTs, is…[consistent] with…IDEA…. [and] it is sensible policy for LEAs [Local Education Agencies, i.e. school districts] to explore options in the regular education environment before designating a child as a special education student." [4] However, CSTs should not function as roadblocks or "speed bumps" on the road to a child receiving special education services. [5] In the case that teachers and parents are clear that a child

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[3] Deninger, M. (2008). *Disproportionality: A Look at Special Education and Race in the Commonwealth*. Office of Strategic Planning, Research, and Evaluation. Retrieved June 30, 2010

[4] Walsh, J. (2008). RTI vs. Child Find: A Natural Tension. *This Just In…* Retrieved June 30, 2010

[5] Walsh, J. (2008). RTI vs. Child Find: A Natural Tension. *This Just In…* Retrieved June 30, 2010

truly has a disability, a referral should not be delayed, and any referral from a parent should be acted upon in a timely manner by following the proper procedures.

B. 2. RtI in Brookline

Meeting the needs of the wide range of learners represented in Brookline's classrooms is a daunting task. Even with the district's high quality instruction, some students struggle to acquire the knowledge or requisite skills needed to meet grade level expectations. Current research suggests that utilizing a Response to Intervention (RtI) approach offers teachers a way to assess and work more effectively with struggling learners.

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a problem-solving framework that focuses on providing high quality instruction and intervention matched to student needs. Interventions are determined by monitoring student progress and collecting student performance data (NASDSE/CASE, 2006; NASP, 2006). An effective RtI model provides for the *early identification* of student learning and behavioral needs and provides students with timely support when necessary. This is a paradigm shift from what is often referred to as the "wait to fail" method in which students must be failing significantly before they receive support.

RtI models vary considerably, but most are based on a framework consisting of three tiers that are often represented in the form of a pyramid. Each level of the pyramid represents a tier, and each tier represents the percentage of students generally found at that level. Generally, 80% of the students in a classroom are in Tier One, 15% in Tier Two, and 5% in Tier 3.
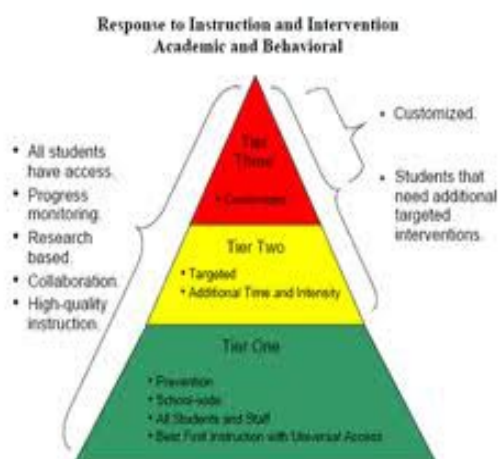
Tier One: At this tier, the classroom teacher is providing high quality instruction and routinely assessing students (progress monitoring) to ensure that they are acquiring expected skills and knowledge. Teachers may use flexible grouping, remediation, and/or differentiated instruction to facilitate student learning. Should a student or group of students not show evidence of expected growth, the teacher should consider accessing the support of CST. Through the CST process, the teacher may be provided with additional instructional strategies or accommodations to use in the classroom (CST Initial Action Plan). The teacher then collects data to determine if the strategy or intervention is achieving the desired result and shares this information with the CST. If the intervention has not been successful, the CST team may consider a more intensive response through Tier Two.

Tier Two: The second tier is characterized by the need for a more significant level of support (intervention) for struggling students. At this level, additional personnel such as the literacy or math specialist *may* be directly involved in the intervention. The student's response to the intervention is closely monitored and data are collected over a six – eight week period. Should the student not respond to the intervention, an alternate approach may be identified and additional data will be collected. This cycle of inquiry and data collection continues until the team determines that the evidence collected suggests a more intensive approach is warranted through Tier Three.

Tier Three: At this Tier, students have not responded to Tier Two interventions. These students may qualify for special education if there is a suspected disability or they may be evaluated for possible placement in special education.

Brookline is building the capacity for a more comprehensive application of the RtI framework through the DCAP (District Curriculum Accommodation Plan) and CST process. In some Brookline schools, frameworks similar to RtI are already in development. These structures are characterized by collaborative decision-making in response to student performance data. In time, system-wide CSTs will work together to develop more systematic approaches to data collection and interventions. Moreover, teachers will have additional data sources to consider as common assessments are developed and universal screening tools are identified. For now, teachers will continue to use current classroom assessments, DRA, QRI, and numerous other measures to monitor student progress and inform instruction and intervention. Brookline's evolving CSTs will serve as the vehicle to facilitate the district's move to an effective RtI model.

C. Purpose of CSTs

The goal of the Child Study Team (CST) is for students to succeed in general education classrooms with interventions that are targeted to students' learning needs, with attention to monitoring and documenting progress, close evaluation of that progress and determination of appropriate next steps. A CST is a group of 6-8 educators across multiple roles that engage in collaborative inquiry and problem solving with a presenting

general education classroom teacher. When a teacher sees that a student is struggling with academic and/or behavioral issues and the teacher's strategies to support the student's learning are not yielding the desired results, the teacher is encouraged to bring this quandary to the CST for feedback and support.

D. Process of CSTs

Child Study Teams are led by educators who are trained and experienced facilitators of collaborative problem solving. A Child Study Team meeting begins with the presenting teacher sharing student work and observations to inform the CST in order to gain a deep understanding of the student's learning profile and studies and reflects upon the strategies used by the teacher thus far. Through this review, the CST and presenting teacher collaboratively create a plan of strategies to support the student and a plan to document the student's progress.