The Path to Mastery—for Every Student

How Mastery Measures Help Educators Support Students in RTI Programs

Educators seeking to address the individual needs of all students—including those with more intense instructional needs—are increasingly turning to Response to Intervention (RTI) programs. This multi-tier educational approach is aimed at early identification and support of students whose learning needs are not being met. Implementing an effective RTI program helps teachers identify and meet the needs of all students, including those with more intense instructional needs.

An RTI program is built on a multi-tier system of support. Commonly, programs consist of three tiers:

- Tier I: Universal screening of all students to determine which students need interventions
- Tier II: Individualized interventions, along with monitoring progress
- Tier III: Intensified interventions with continued progress monitoring and potential referral for additional diagnostic assessment to identify special education needs

Generally, universal screening tends to identify about 20% of a student population who is at risk for academic failure and would benefit from Tier II interventions (such as individual instruction or special group work) coupled with monitoring of the effects of those interventions. For educators, an effective means of monitoring the progress of students receiving these interventions is crucial to success.

Progress Monitoring: Good Assessment Is Essential

Progress monitoring is a crucial component of RTI. When a student is engaged in an intervention, the most pressing question for educators is: “Is this intervention working?” This is where assessment comes in. Assessment in the context of RTI goes beyond just measuring achievement. Any assessment must give teachers immediate data about what skills each student has mastered and is ready to learn next. This way, an educator can continually adjust the intervention to effectively address each student’s individual learning needs. Having a valid, reliable, informative assessment at this stage can make all the difference in helping a student succeed.
Mastery Measures Versus General Outcome Measures

Two types of measures are often used for progress monitoring: general outcome measures and mastery measures. A general outcome measure assesses a student’s performance in content knowledge or basic skills. A mastery measure offers more specific assessment of skills within a learning progression.

General outcome measures tend to be appropriate for summative evaluations—the data can show whether an intervention was effective. While the data from a general outcome measure will indicate if an intervention is ineffective and therefore needs to be changed, general outcome measures lack the ability to pinpoint what, precisely, needs to be adjusted.

Mastery measures, on the other hand, can directly assess specific student skills, showing a teacher not just that an instructional adjustment needs to occur, but also what that change should be in order to meet the needs of the student. Mastery measures are often used to monitor progress beginning at Tier II, included as part of tailoring the instructional intervention to the student. They are also used at Tier III, where individualization is most feasible. Progress monitoring with mastery measures puts more emphasis on skill evaluation than general outcome measures. Monitoring over time with mastery measures addresses the question, “Is the instruction we are offering resulting in mastery of more discrete skills?”

A Skills Framework: the Foundation of Mastery

Because mastery measures are assessing a student’s mastery of a set of skills, an effective mastery measure requires a valid set of skills to assess—and those skills must be presented in a logical sequence for a student to learn. The education experts at Northwest Evaluation Association™ (NWEA™) have built a proprietary skills framework to underpin their Skills Navigator® assessment—a tool educators can use both for skills mastery assessment across all classrooms and for specific Tier II progress monitoring in RTI programs.

To appropriately support progress monitoring, a mastery measure must comprise:

- A hierarchy of skills that can be mastered one after the other
- A way to track the adequacy of student progress over time
- A way to track changes and adjustments made to the intervention

The NWEA tool, Skills Navigator, supports each of these requirements by rooting the mastery measure in a strong skills framework.
Hierarchy of skills

By relying on progressive skills mastery, the skills framework created by NWEA allows educators to discover exactly which skills a student is missing in any given knowledge strand, then tailor instruction appropriately. The skills in the framework are organized within the context of particular strands of conceptually related skills as they develop across grades K – 8. In each strand, skills are ordered and grouped based on a logical instructional sequence. Because of this framework structure, the skills are well-suited to monitoring progress in a particular strand. Students can take tests to demonstrate their mastery of skills, or teachers can designate the skills as mastered based on other data (such as classroom observation); teachers can use the tool to track progressive mastery of skills within a strand.

Adequate Progress over Time

Because the skills framework supporting Skills Navigator is made of skills arranged in a logical learning progression, educators can track a student’s progress over time as the student masters one skill after another in the sequence. Educators can set a learning goal, then easily see whether the progress is adequate to meet that goal within a strand. The gauge of how well a student is responding to an intervention is in the increasing number of skills mastered over time. A teacher can use Skills Navigator to quickly identify which specific skills a student has already mastered and which need work. The educator can then set a goal for how many skills a student should master in a given set of time (for example, all of the skills in a given strand associated with the student’s grade level by the end of the school year). The tool displays an easy-to-read graph that tracks a student’s progress over time, making it easy for an educator to quickly see if the student is making adequate progress or if the interventions need to be adjusted.

Tracking Intervention Adjustments

A solid progress monitoring system should allow educators to track which interventions they used for each skill a student is working on, as well as track adjustments to the interventions. Because the skills framework created for Skills Navigator operates on a logical learning progression of discrete skills, students work on learning a single skill at a time. If the student is unable to master that skill, an educator can make a specific, targeted, and documented adjustment to intervention to help the student learn that skill. Only when the intervention has been successful and the student has learned the skill will he or she progress to the next skill. This logical instructional sequence makes it very clear how a student is responding to interventions at each step in the progression of skills. A strong skills framework makes a mastery measure an ideal way to monitor progress in an RTI program.
Mastery Is Achievable for Every Student

Too often, students are left behind by inadequate interventions that don’t address their needs—or by progress monitoring that fails to tell educators not just that more help is needed, but specifically what that sorely needed help might be. Though general outcome measures have a place in RTI, a mastery measure is an invaluable tool for monitoring progress because it can directly identify what skills a student is missing, allowing for timely instructional adjustments on the part of the educator. The sheer volume of skills a student could master has made mastery measures seem daunting in the past. However, Skills Navigator makes assessment efficient by combining a strong skills framework with a computer adaptive engine, allowing educators to pinpoint the precise skills a student is missing in a remarkably short amount of time. As a mastery measure with this capability, Skills Navigator empowers educators with specific, up-to-the-minute data that can drive instruction.

A mastery measure is ideally suited to Tier II progress monitoring when the skills framework underlying it provides a clear picture of student skill mastery at every step. A mastery measure like Skills Navigator answers not only the crucial question “Is this student learning?” but goes further to reveal the answer to what educators truly need to know: “What does this student know, and what is this student ready to learn next?”

About NWEA

Founded by educators nearly 40 years ago, NWEA is a global not-for-profit educational services organization known for our flagship interim assessment, Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®). More than 7,600 partners in U.S. schools, school districts, education agencies, and international schools trust us to offer pre-kindergarten through grade 12 assessments that accurately measure student growth and learning needs, professional development that fosters educators’ ability to accelerate student learning, and research that supports assessment validity and data interpretation. To better inform instruction and maximize every learner’s academic growth, educators currently use NWEA assessments with nearly eight million students.