Applying Florida's Planning and Problem-Solving Process (Using RtI Data) in Virtual Settings

As Florida's educational system continues to engage in systemic reform resulting in integrated efforts toward continual improvement, the consistent application of a system-wide, team-based planning and problem solving process across all educational settings becomes critically important. With data-based planning and problem-solving as our consistent way of work, educators are both empowered and challenged to become expert data-based decision makers in order to successfully implement a multi-tiered system of supports that meets all students' academic and behavioral needs.

Virtual education is a rapidly growing and promising way for some students to engage in the learning process. The purpose of this document is to provide overview information about Florida's planning and problem solving model to educators working within and supporting virtual education, to address questions that have arisen that are unique to implementation in virtual settings, and to provoke team-based discussions resulting in increased consensus around implementing this way of work.

1. What is the planning and problem-solving process?

   The four critical parts of the ongoing problem-solving cycle as a consistent way of work for teams are as follows:

   i. Define the problem by determining the difference between actual student performance and what is expected. Ask, "What specifically do we want students to know, understand and be able to do when compared to what they actually know, understand and are able to do?" When engaged in problem solving at the individual student level, the team should strive for accuracy by asking, "What exactly is the problem?"

   ii. Analyze the data to determine why the problem is occurring. Generate hypotheses (reasons why students are not meeting performance goals) founded on content area knowledge of evidence-based practices, alterable variables, and instructionally relevant domains. Gather assessment data to determine valid/nonvalid hypotheses. Link validated hypotheses to instruction/intervention so that hypotheses will lead to evidence-based instructional decisions. Ask, "Why is/are the desired goal(s) not occurring? What are the barriers to the student(s) doing and knowing what is expected?" The team must then design or select instruction to directly address those barriers. For individual-student-level problem solving and intervention planning (i.e., Tier 3), diagnostic assessments may be conducted in collaboration between the virtual education team and the district or school-based team, in the case of district virtual programs, and collaboration within and in conjunction with appropriate external service providers, in the case of

the state-level Florida Virtual School.

iii. Develop and implement a plan driven by the results of the team's problem analysis by establishing a performance goal for the individual student or group of students and developing an intervention plan to achieve that goal. Then, delineate how the student's or group of students' progress will be monitored and how implementation integrity will be supported. Ask, "What are we going to do?"

iv. Measure the response to instruction/interventions by using data gathered from progress monitoring at agreed-upon intervals to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention plan based on the student's or group of students' response to the intervention. Progress-monitoring data should directly reflect the targeted skill(s). Ask, "Is it working? If not, how will the instruction/intervention plan be adjusted to better support the student's or group of students' progress?" Team discussion centers on how to maintain or better enable learning for the student(s).

2. How does the planning and problem-solving process work in the virtual setting?

Teams of educators working collaboratively within the virtual setting – including the parents and students, if age-appropriate – engage in systematic planning and problem solving to ensure that student success is achieved and maintained. This systematic team process can occur effectively via web-based meetings using programs such as Adobe Connect™ or Skype™. The problem-solving process is critical to making the instructional adjustments needed for continual improvement in both student level of performance and rate of progress and is critical for assessing (through students' responses) the effectiveness of the instruction/interventions provided. Throughout the continuum of instruction and intervention, problem solving is used to match instructional resources to educational need.

Key questions to facilitate the teams engaged in problem solving at each tier are accessible in the manual titled *Guiding Tools for Instructional Problem Solving* (GTIPS) which is located at http://www.florida-rti.org/_docs/GTIPS.pdf.

3. What is Florida's multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)?

Three tiers describe the level and intensity of the instruction/interventions provided across the continuum. These tiers are **not** used to describe categories of students or specific instructional programs, and the three tiers are characterized as follows:

Tier 1: Core Universal Instruction and Supports – General academic and behavior instruction and support designed and differentiated for all students in all settings

Tier 2: Targeted Supplemental Interventions and Supports – More focused, targeted instruction/intervention and supplemental support *in addition to and aligned with the core academic and behavior curriculum and instruction*

Tier 3: Intensive Individualized Interventions and Supports – The most intense (increased time, narrowed focus, reduced group size) instruction and intervention based upon individual student need provided *in addition to and aligned with core and supplemental academic and behavior, curriculum, instruction, and supports*

4. Can virtual school students benefit from the three tiers of Florida's MTSS?

   Yes. MTSS helps to ensure that students learning in a virtual environment have access to additional supports and individualized interventions, as needed. The multi-tiered system is characterized by a continuum of academic and behavior supports reflecting the need for students to have fluid access to instruction of varying intensity levels. While the nature of delivering these supports may look different in a virtual setting, a continuum of interventions should be used by virtual school educators to meet the needs of all their students and increase the effectiveness of virtual instruction and supports.

5. What are the curriculum, instructional, and assessment expectations for virtual school problem-solving at the core, universal (Tier 1) level?

   Tier 1 (universal, core instruction and supports) of Florida's Multi-Tiered System of Supports, often referred to as the Response to Instruction/Intervention (RtI) framework, is about research-based instructional practices that are implemented universally for all students. It is expected that the effective core/universal academic instruction will result in at least 80% of students meeting expectations. Educators providing leadership are expected to determine whether core instruction and supports are effective for at least 80% of the students enrolled in the virtual program. If less, systematic problem-solving must occur in order to improve the effectiveness of the universal/core instruction and supports. Assessments for screening purposes provide data on the effectiveness of core instruction as well as identifying students needing additional supports/interventions.

6. How can virtual educators differentiate core instruction for all students to ensure an effective Tier 1 foundation?

   Differentiating instruction, as a result of initial assessment, requires differentiation of instructional resources specified by subject and grade level. There are built-in accommodations that allow all students in virtual instructional settings to receive extended time and assistance through the support of the learning coach and teacher. Universal Design for Learning principles should be followed to give students choices in how they interact with instructional materials and how they

respond to assignments. Instructional materials should be provided in flexible formats that can be used with a variety of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, refreshable braille displays, and computer access systems.

Additional supplemental resources are provided to students and learning coaches when deficits are identified in academics. The student's daily planner can be adjusted to meet their individual learning abilities. The learning coach and student are able to choose the time of day that the student is most productive working on academics. The students benefit from the security and comfort of the controlled learning environment. What may be considered an accommodation available to only special education students in a "brick and mortar" environment may be available to all students in virtual instructional settings. For example, students are able to work for several hours on one subject and are not limited by bell schedules.

7. What are the curriculum, instructional, and assessment expectations for virtual school problem-solving at the small group, supplemental (Tier 2) level?

   Progress is monitored weekly to determine if the addition of supplemental instructional support programs and small group sessions through appropriate evidence-based programs is having the desired effect on student learning. The group size and frequency of contact between the teacher and student is more frequent than that for Tier 1. A detailed intervention plan is developed and progress is monitored so that timely adjustments can be made to the instruction as needed, based on student response data. When students are receiving this level of intervention, data is collected and analyzed by the team at pre-determined intervals. The rate of progress and responsiveness to interventions is compared to norms or others within the peer group receiving these interventions. Session attendance and phone contact between the teacher and student and the teacher and learning coach is necessary for meaningful and timely progress monitoring at this level.

8. What are the curriculum, instructional, and assessment expectations for virtual school problem-solving at the intensive, individual student (Tier 3) level?

   A virtual teacher's "virtual observations," the data that has been gathered on instruction/interventions implemented, and the student's responses are considered important data sources for problem-solving teams planning intensive, individualized interventions. The virtual problem-solving team uses screening, progress monitoring, and other available data – including diagnostic assessments, when appropriate – to engage in problem solving and implement interventions that address the individual student's needs.

9. What are best practices for addressing individual, intensive intervention needs for students in virtual settings?

By using the planning and problem-solving process, student support teams, parents, and students (if age appropriate) work together to ensure student success. The four-step process and the meetings can take place in combinations of virtual and face-to-face settings. Key questions to facilitate the teams engaged in problem solving at each tier are accessible in the manual titled *Guiding Tools for Instructional Problem Solving*, which is located at http://www.florida-rti.org/_docs/GTIPS.pdf. Best practices to support students in virtual settings include, but are not limited to:

- increased levels of feedback to the student
- targeted online real-time sessions
- increased assessment measures and progress monitoring
- increased communication between the teacher and parent
- use of online tools to support specific learning needs
- support for the use of assistive technologies

10. What types of assessment are essential for monitoring student progress and response to instruction/intervention?

    In addition to formative assessment strategies used in daily instruction, virtual educators need access to screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic assessments tools, as well as a system for capturing student data critical to problem solving. There are a number of screening/progress monitoring tools available online that would supplement virtual school assessments and provide teachers with the necessary data for engaging in effective problem solving. The National Center for Response to Intervention provides an overview of common screening and progress monitoring tools at http://www.rti4success.org/. EasyCBM© provides online screening and progress monitoring and data analysis capability at no cost to individual teachers.

11. How does parent involvement work for virtual school programs?

    Fundamental to the RtI process is a problem-solving team that is considering interventions that are needed. This team develops a specific plan to gather relevant data about the student's functioning within that environment. The plan should be detailed to include who will conduct the observations and what they will be looking for (purpose and method) This information will assist a team in making better instructional decisions for the student.

    Parents are necessary contributing members on problem-solving teams, and this involvement would be even more meaningful for virtual school students. Parents are part of the virtual problem-solving team and active participants in the problem-solving process. Information about team engagement and tools for engaging parents and developing intervention plans is located in the GTIPS manual located at http://www.florida-rti.org/_docs/GTIPS.pdf.

12. What are the important components of the multi-tiered system of supports that should be included when orienting parents with students beginning their enrollment in virtual education coursework?

    Orientation should include materials and discussions that promote clear and common understanding of the MTSS. Helping parents understand the indicators that move students into more intensive tiers is also important. As part of orientation, building consensus and agreement regarding the necessary enhanced role of the parent in the virtual education planning/problem-solving process is critical. Clear expectations that parents are to be involved in all meetings helps set the stage for the ongoing partnership between virtual educators and parents engaged in problem-solving efforts that include instruction, intervention, progress monitoring, and data analysis for making improvements. Lastly, informational resources such as PowerPoint presentations, a parent video, and brochures aligned with Florida's system are available at http://www.florida-rti.org/. It may be helpful to provide both a district and virtual education contact to the parent to answer questions about MTSS and the use of RtI data to help improve their child's learning rate and level of performance.

13. How does eligibility for special education work for students in virtual education?

    Special education eligibility requirements for students enrolled in virtual education are the same for students enrolled in traditional public schools. Because student response to intervention data and problem-solving are part of those requirements, it is imperative that virtual school programs build consensus among their constituents, build a supporting infrastructure, and monitor the implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports. For technical assistance and guidance on special education eligibility requirements, visit the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services website at http://www.fldoe.org/ese/ese-home.asp.

    Considering the direct nature of some of the requirements for evaluations for special education services, students enrolled in a district virtual instruction program may need to visit the traditional public school site during the process. Just as districts currently are required to conduct evaluations of students who attend private schools or who participate in home education programs, districts must work with their virtual school providers to ensure that child find requirements are met. Systems in place to conduct evaluation procedures for students enrolled in other alternate settings may also be useful for evaluating students enrolled in the school district's virtual program.

    Communicating with parents accurately and effectively about potential eligibility for special education programs is very important. A resource that all teachers and parents should use to convey and understand a consistent and clear message

about evaluation procedures is available at http://www.florida-rti.org/_docs/EvaluationsSpecialEd.pdf.

During the 2012 legislative session, section 1003.57, Florida Statutes, *Exceptional Student Instruction*, was amended to require full-time virtual instruction programs to fulfill "the obligation of a school district for public school exceptional students who are enrolled in a full-time virtual program." This change will impact child find obligations assumed by full-time virtual programs. Beginning with the 2012-2013 school year, the FLVS full-time program will assume responsibility for conducting evaluations of students suspected of being students with disabilities.

14. What are examples and non-examples of appropriate modifications and accommodations to the curriculum and instruction within the virtual setting?

Examples of appropriate accommodations may include extended hours in the week to complete work, chunking work through flexible time parameters, small group and individual online coaching sessions, use of online tools to support specific needs, supplemental instructional programs to address areas of weakness, face-to-face meetings at local schools to measure student's response to intervention, and additional practice materials. Supports for visual perception needs (digital reading guides, highlighters, etc.), materials organization, and time management should also be provided.

Making modifications to course materials and instruction, such as removal of portions of the course, is not appropriate. The current courses available in the virtual programs in Florida are listed under general education course codes. The courses are electronic, and the student's grade and FTE is based on satisfactory course completion. The courses are aligned to the state standards and developed by nationwide publishers. A virtual teacher is unable to make changes to the courses but can supplement the courses with instructional resources. Students are provided with small group or individual assistance as needed. The teacher is unable to alter the electronic course format. These are limitations of current virtual courses.

At this time, there are no electronic virtual courses aligned to the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards Access Points. Placing a student in a lower grade level course is not a viable option, since the curriculum is not age-appropriate. Some students with disabilities needing specially designed instruction and related services may be unlikely to be able to complete the virtual courses that are available in Florida. The teacher-student ratio is larger in the virtual setting than in the traditional schools. One-to-one instruction to determine the student's responsiveness to interventions for an extended time, such as through special education, may be unrealistic with the current teacher-student ratio. Though appropriate decisions for students must be made on a case-by-

case basis, a student needing direct, specially designed instruction may be more likely to receive this level of intensive, individualized instruction in the traditional setting than in the current virtual programs in Florida.

15. What type of collaboration between districts and their virtual education providers is needed for successful multi-tiered systems of support?

    Consistent, ongoing collaboration between districts and district virtual education providers in problem solving and the resulting strategies that are put in place to support students is critical. The interventions must be of the nature that they can be readily monitored in an online learning environment. The student's resulting responses to these interventions must be measured, recorded, and reported for consideration by the student's support team. Input from district staff that taught the student at the school site previously is vital, since the previous teacher has had direct contact with the students. Virtual students benefit from participating in district assessments. In the case of district virtual school programs, virtual staff and district staff share responsibility for administrating the assessments and for including all virtual students in these assessments.

16. Who facilitates the structured, systematic problem-solving and planning process among district virtual instruction program educators?

    A designated virtual education coordinator and district liaison may work together with the parents, teachers, and administrators to ensure that a problem-solving process is in place to address students' needs in the district's virtual program. The district provides parents with information on the problem-solving process and the MTSS that the district has in place. In the virtual program, a coordinator may schedule student support meetings that include teachers, administrators, parents, and the student, if appropriate. A parent or teacher may request a meeting when a student is not making progress and to review responses to initial core interventions. Ideally, teams meet to discuss teacher and parent concerns regarding a student's progress. Teachers should collect data on core interventions prior to the initial student support meeting. A meeting schedule is set to review progress and determine if interventions should be continued or changed. The local school district should be invited to participate in the decision-making process. District response and involvement may vary. An intervention plan should be developed for students and the teacher. Student contact by phone may change from monthly to bi-monthly during intervention plan implementation. Contact should be increased to weekly for students requiring more assistance. This may be through small group or individual instruction.

17. How can virtual education teachers engage in ongoing, job-embedded professional development through engagement in collegial learning teams, such as the Lesson Study process?

    There are ongoing trainings available through local districts, the International Association for K-12 On-line Learning (iNACOL), Pearson, and the RtI Action

Network Webinar Series. All virtual instructors participate in professional development activities to ensure all are aware of the problem-solving process and the multi-tiered system of supports. They also receive training on procedures to document and track the implementation of interventions and students' response data. Virtual teachers and administrators participate in annual training on data-based problem-solving during pre-planning and throughout the year, provided or facilitated by the RtI coordinator. Literacy coaches and curriculum coordinators also provide ongoing professional training and support. Virtual education teachers benefit from completing the free Introductory RTI online training course available at http://florida-rti.org/. The virtual instructional curriculum is continually updated by online learning specialists and virtual providers nationally.

Subject and grade-level study teams and book study groups may meet regularly in the virtual setting via a format where members can participate through chat rooms and microphones. There may also be regularly scheduled reviews of supplemental resources and materials. Virtual courses have teacher instruction of the subject matter built into the course. The virtual teacher supplements the instruction with Live Lessons based on input from parents and teachers. Revisions of the course and lessons are completed annually by the curriculum developers. Teachers are able to participate in the Lesson Study Cycle for the subject area live lessons. Live lesson content can be based on review of student progress and electronic reports of specific skills within courses.

18. What is verifiable student data and how is it verified?

Verifiable student data is obtained through Curriculum Based Measures (CBM) administered through phone contacts or through face-to-face assessments. In the virtual instructional setting, it is difficult to determine through online assessments the amount of support and assistance a student is receiving. Students are required to participate in phone call assessments as well as district assessment to ensure that the data from online assessments is valid. Progress monitoring data is obtained through a combination of online and direct assessments. The district's virtual instruction provider and the district may require the student to come to a local site to be observed and to directly participate in learning activities. To verify a student's response to Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, the decision-making team may recommend the student return to the traditional school site for direct observations as well as virtual observations through a webcam. The team needs accurate data to measure and compare the student's responsiveness to interventions and to compare the student to the peer group as part of data analysis within the problem-solving process.

19. What resources are available to virtual school educators and parents who want to learn more about collaborative problem-solving and using student RtI data within a multi-tiered system of student supports?

Available resources are accessible through Florida's RtI website at http://www.florida-rti.org/ and include parent engagement tools, iTunesU overview videos, a free online introductory course, and links to Florida's two statewide projects' websites: Florida's Positive Behavior Support (FPBS) and the Problem-solving/Response to Intervention (PS/RtI) projects. Florida's newest RtI resource is the *Guiding Tools for Instructional Problem-Solving*, available at http://www.florida-rti.org/_docs/GTIPS.pdf, which assists districts as they implement and support data-based decision making using a systematic problem-solving process at all levels of operation. An example of available professional development resources is the Elementary Math and Science Model Lessons at http://msml.florida-rti.org/. This is a series of web-based model lessons that feature school-based leadership teams using the data-based problem-solving process.