

National Center for Learning Disabilities Provides Tools to Help Individuals Succeed

The U.S. National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) provides resources to help ensure that the 15 million children, adolescents, and adults with learning disabilities in the United States have every opportunity to succeed in school, work, and life. Cisco has provided several grants to help NCLD expand their services and create an online collaborative environment.

Overview

The National Center for Learning Disabilities is a nonprofit organization that strives to create better outcomes for individuals affected by learning disabilities by developing innovative, research-based programs; distributing informative resources; and advocating for policies and legislation that protect the rights of those with learning disabilities and expand their education opportunities.

Research has shown that early interventions can help individuals with learning disabilities reach higher levels of achievement, so the tools and services provided by NCLD are designed to help parents and educators recognize special needs early on, and respond quickly and appropriately.

The partnership between Cisco and NCLD stems from a shared belief in the power of the Internet as a tool for disseminating information and facilitating collaboration. "NCLD is a great partner because they understand how to innovate and incorporate Web 2.0 approaches to reach hundreds of thousands of teachers and millions of kids," explains Alex Belous, Cisco® education and health strategy manager. "They use the Internet and technology to inform teachers about what a child needs, and how to deliver targeted instruction immediately, instead of delaying the process.

Get Ready to Read!

In 2001, with the help of a Cisco grant, NCLD launched Get Ready to Read!, an early literacy initiative that connects parents and early education professionals with an interactive screening tool and resources that can be used to identify children's reading problems and take appropriate action. NCLD developed a comprehensive website in support of this initiative at getreadytoread.org, with Spanish and English versions of the screening tool and engaging activities that are designed to build literacy skills.

In 2003, NCLD received an additional Cisco grant to expand the Get Ready to Read! website and incorporate the screening tool and educational resources into early childhood education programs in Arizona and Georgia. By 2004, the tool had been used to screen 200,000 four-year olds and more than 15,000 early educators had been trained to administer the tool. Sixty-nine percent of students who participated in the program acquired the literacy skills needed to enter kindergarten, compared to 35 percent of students who didn't participate.

Response to Intervention

In 2004, NCLD led a collaborative effort to establish the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework in U.S. Federal education law. RTI supports the early identification of struggling learners, including those with learning disabilities, and provides research-based interventions to help them succeed.

RTI combines a tiered system of interventions with personalized instruction based on student needs and outcome data to help ensure improved results for all students.

In 2007, NCLD partnered with seven leading U.S. education associations to develop the RTI Action Network, which promotes the effective implementation of the RTI model. Cisco provided a grant of \$1.8 million to support collaboration among education associations, educators, and families through online tools and resources at RTINetwork.org.

The guiding vision of the RTI Action Network is to identify and support struggling learners early and effectively so that all students can succeed in school. Unlike many programs that are designed to facilitate the implementation of the RTI model, the RTI Action Network is a unique collaboration that connects the public and private sectors with representatives from general education, special education, and family groups to support the implementation of RTI.

RTI Program Success

In the El Rancho School District in California, 123 elementary students who had been referred for special education were placed in a pilot RTI program instead. After nine weeks of targeted instruction, 115 of the participants, who were mostly English language learners and disadvantaged students, had developed the necessary literacy skills to return to their classrooms and perform at the level of their classmates, and only eight students were referred to special education.

“Most of the groups that are involved in promoting RTI are either public agencies such as the U.S. Federal Government or local school systems, or they are in the private sector,” explains James Wendorf, executive director of NCLD. “Through this partnership network, we are creating a way for education organizations and advocacy groups to work together independent of government restrictions and funding, and independent of private sector influences. This enables us to provide a free marketplace of ideas, information, and expertise, and the creation of this marketplace is a unique accomplishment of the RTI Action Network.”

In addition to several informative resources for implementing RTI from preschool to secondary levels, the RTI Action Network site contains interactive community features. “We’ve developed a variety of online communication tools such as electronic newsletters, blogs, community boards, Ask the Expert features, and success stories from the field,” explains Wendorf. “We built the site and related resources to provide a forum that frontline educators and parents can use to learn, share ideas, and gain access to experts and to each other.”

Future Plans

The RTINetwork.org site, which was launched in April 2008, exceeded all metrics set for the first year in terms of unique visitors, page views, and downloads. Since a high percentage of site visitors are special educators or specialists, NCLD is now focusing their efforts on expanding the base of general educators who use the site by carefully selecting relevant content. In addition, they will continue to populate the site with articles and features developed by experts, including the RTI National Online Forum and virtual visits of exemplary sites.

NCLD is also focusing on strengthening partnerships in 2009. “We’re looking at how we can bring content and opportunities to our partners and help them reach their members in ways that are now possible because of the network we’ve created,” says Wendorf.

To learn more, please visit www.ld.org, www.RTINetwork.org, or www.getreadytoread.org.