Symposium Title: Data driven decision making: An in-depth look at Response to Intervention (RtI) practices

First and second choice of conference section:

Instruction and Student Achievement, Understanding the Effects of Education Policies

Justification (500 word limit):

In response to NCLB accountability policies as well as provisions in IDEA 2004, elementary schools increasingly use data-driven decision making for instruction. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a framework that systematizes this approach with regular assessment, matching of student needs to instruction or intervention approaches, and frequent progress monitoring with opportunities to adjust intervention supports. RtI schools organize services in a multi-tiered model, beginning with high-quality classroom instruction for all students (Tier 1), and universal screening to ensure early identification of students with reading difficulties. Struggling students receive more targeted intervention, assessment and progress monitoring (Tiers 2 and 3) to help them read at grade level. The expectation is that early identification and support can prevent unnecessary referrals to special education, thereby preventing delays in the progression through elementary school. The RtI framework is most developed for early reading—operating in more than 70 percent of districts—but is also applied to other academic subjects and to address student behavior.

Data-driven approaches raise questions about when to screen students, how soon after initial screening to place students in reading groups for extra support, and what criteria determine whether a student is responding to intervention services.

This symposia brings together leading researchers on RtI and reading to address these questions, and focus on different points in the sequence of identification and placement of students. Each of these studies uses an experimental or rigorous quasi-experimental design to address the conference theme about educational trajectories throughout elementary school. These studies seek to understand the specific mechanisms of screening and placement that may explain when policy driven efforts to boost student reading achievement can succeed.

The first of these studies asks a critical question in the data-driven decision making process: when to assign students to intervention services. It compares the efficacy of waiting 8 weeks with the efficacy of assigning students to intervention immediately when school begins.
The second study asks in what grade to begin intervention, kindergarten or first grade, in order to improve achievement.

The third study focuses on the next step in the data-driven RtI process, determining which students are unresponsive to small group reading intervention services.

The last of these studies, forthcoming under an IES contract, addresses each of these issues when RtI is at scale—in schools that implemented RtI for three years without research staff or supports, and identified students to receive intervention services in the Fall, starting in first grade. Based on a regression discontinuity design, it tests whether assignment to intervention services is effective for those students on the margin of eligibility for intervention services. The study speaks to questions raised by the earlier studies about whether to wait before assigning students to receive intervention services, and how to distinguish responsive from unresponsive students, particularly among those at the margin of needing reading support.

Together, these studies offer a rich picture of how elementary schools are implementing data-driven decision making, and offer implications for future research on identification and placement of students in appropriate interventions.