

## CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS:

### ***DETERMINING THE INTENSITY OF SERVICES TO BE PROVIDED: ONE SST'S APPROACH***

The focus of a *multi-tier system of supports (MTSS)* approach is system change across the classroom, school, district, and state (Kansas State Department of Education, 2014). This same kind of approach can be used by technical assistance (TA) providers in making decisions about the level and intensity of services to be provided to a variety of intended recipients. At Tier 1, for example, broad dissemination of products and resources is provided, usually through electronic means, to any interested person or organization, ensuring universal access to services. At the targeted (i.e., Tier 2) level, TA is provided to intended recipients in particular areas of need most often through one-time events (e.g., workshop). The most intensive level of support is Tier 3, which often involves direct and/or individualized support through a sequenced delivery of services over time.



In Ohio, regional providers are required to provide high quality TA and professional development (PD) on the design and implementation of multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) – including academic/instruction and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) – as part of supporting district use of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) (*Performance Agreement, Ohio's State Support Teams, 2014-2015*, page 2).



For State Support Team (SST) personnel – the people who, along with their educational service center (ESC) colleagues, form the foundation of Ohio's statewide system of support – deciding what level of services to provide and when to reduce such services to a particular district can be challenging. “We never completely exit from a district because all districts have achievement gap issues,” explained Dr. Teresa Purses, director of SST region 9 (Stark County ESC), which serves about 40 districts in Stark, Wayne, and Holmes counties.

SST 9 formalized criteria for organizing the districts it serves by tier (in a three-tiered model). If the gap in reading between the performance of students with and without disabilities is less than 30 percent, the district is designated as Tier 1. If that gap is greater than 30 percent, the district is placed in Tier 2. Districts that have gaps greater than 30 percent and are in differentiated accountability<sup>1</sup> are deemed to be in Tier 3, triggering the most intensive level of service delivery from the SST. “When I came to SST 9, districts in the region either had two SST consultants assigned or no SST support. We designed a tiered model to replace this approach so that every district receives support. Although some districts have made important progress toward closing the achievement gap, most districts continue to have a significant achievement gap for students with disabilities,” explained Purses.

<sup>1</sup> Differentiated accountability refers to Ohio's approved ESEA flexibility waiver, which allows specific provisions of ESEA to be waived in order to provide greater flexibility to the state in supporting district and school improvement efforts.

All districts in SST region 9 are assigned an SST consultant as a mechanism for providing Tier 1 services. Districts that have achievement gaps, but are not identified as a “waiver district,” receive Tier 2 supports through SST consultation that is provided in person to districts. As part of Tier 2, Purses also meets and regularly talks with the district superintendent about the district’s needs, services provided, and degree of progress or improvement being made to meet identified needs. Tier 3 districts – in addition to receiving SST support in the use of OIP – also receive content and coaching support in reading and/or mathematics.

In order to provide content coaching to districts with identified needs, Purses routinely “buys days” from ESC consultants for SST work. “The more I need a certain skill set, the more days I hire people with that skill set. SST and ESC personnel generally have different areas of expertise; together, they’re powerful,” observed Purses. “We are always on the agenda and in the room during ESC instructional design and curriculum planning meetings, asking ‘What do you think your principals and teachers need?’” “ESC consultants are already working in the districts we serve; we need them as collaborative partners if we’re going to build district capacity for sustainable improvement,” she added.

***Did you know?***

**Under Ohio’s approved ESEA flexibility waiver (revised August 2014), school districts [aka local education agencies (LEAs)] and their schools move through the OIP together, using data to target improvement efforts by identifying their greatest needs and aligning work around a limited number of focused goals. Through a unified regional infrastructure of State Support Teams, LEAs and their schools are provided with high-quality training and support to meet their focused goals for improvement (*Ohio ESEA Flexibility Request, 2014, page 102*).**

SST 9 personnel meet monthly to review district performance data using the same 5-step process they train districts to use at step 3 of the OIP. A combination of achievement data, state performance plan (SPP) data, and data on the effects of the PD they provide to districts is reviewed and questions (e.g., is what we’re doing as an SST working for some/all districts and why? If a district isn’t making as much progress as we’d hope, does it need more time? When should we stop supporting a particular strategy? Can we connect our work with some of the closing the achievement gap data we’re seeing?) are asked and discussed. “We always ask, ‘what is our primary work?’” said Purses. The answer, according to Purses, is to close the achievement gap between student subgroups, and the key is fidelity of implementation. “If you implement with fidelity, you get results; if you don’t, you won’t,” she said.

A commitment to collaboration is operationalized through strong SST-ESC partnerships and intentional, focused support that helps districts build their internal capacity to continually learn and improve. Wooster City School District superintendent Dr. Michael Tefs commented on the importance of external facilitation from the SST stating, “we need that external voice and have relied on strong external facilitation to implement a sustainable process, allowing the superintendent to participate as a team member, rather than a facilitator.” (see the *Ohio Doing What Works Superintendent Pathfinder* at <http://o-dwwpathfinder.org/>) for more information on external facilitation.

For Purses, a former superintendent in the region, it’s all about shared leadership. “I always ask, ‘who else and what other voices need to be in the room?’ I don’t know any other way to do business,” she said.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

- For more context around the use of a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) framework, readers are encouraged to visit the Kansas State Department of Education (KDSE) website at <http://www.kansasmstss.org/> [note: the graphic on page 1 of this article was taken from the KSDE website].
- For more information about the OIP and how it can be used to support district-wide improvement, go to the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council website at: [www.OhioLeadership.org](http://www.OhioLeadership.org) and click on **OIP Modules and Resources**.
- For more information about the importance of external facilitation in supporting district-wide improvement, go to the Ohio Doing What Works *Superintendent Pathfinder* at: <http://o-dwwpathfinder.org/>.
- For more information about the strategies highlighted in this article, contact Dr. Teresa Purses, Director, SST Region 9, at [teresa.purses@email.sparcc.org](mailto:teresa.purses@email.sparcc.org).

### **SHARE YOUR STORIES**

A unified system involves collaboration among all components so that as issues are identified, the system is able to respond in an effective, coherent, and timely manner. The strategies highlighted in this story are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they are intended to spark idea sharing across SSTs. All SSTs are encouraged to submit examples that can be highlighted in future articles. To submit ideas for future articles, contact Dr. Jim Gay, Director, OLAC, at [jimgay@basa-ohio.org](mailto:jimgay@basa-ohio.org).