

PUTTING DISTRICTS FIRST! SST 16 BUILDS REGIONAL CAPACITY TO IMPROVE STUDENT AND ADULT LEARNING

“Our number one non-negotiable as a staff is that we put districts first when it comes to all of our work,” said Heather Wolfe, director of State Support Team (SST) region 16. This core belief is evident in SST 16’s longstanding rule that staff spend more time in the field than in their offices, and in how SST 16 deploys personnel resources – with more staff time dedicated to in-district/school coaching, and less time spent in holding regional professional development sessions for interested district and school personnel.



“We’ve found it’s been way more beneficial to go to the district to meet its individual needs, than to ask districts to come to us for what often was a ‘one size fits all’ training. There can be a stark contrast among districts in terms of their needs and population,” explained Lisa Bonner, lead special education consultant for SST 16.

Another complicating factor in the region is the difficulty districts served by SST 16 have in finding substitute teachers in order to allow full-time teaching staff to attend needed professional development (PD). “We have to tailor our PD to respond to the needs of the district or school we’re working with based on the coverage they have. It just makes more sense for us to push in our services rather than pulling them out of their buildings,” added Bonner.

Getting the Right Balance

SST 16 serves 24 districts, seven county boards of developmental disabilities, four career centers, and a variety of other agencies across an eight-county region. SST personnel work with five educational service centers (ESCs) – Muskingum Valley, Athens-Meigs, Ohio Valley, Gallia-Vinton-Jackson, and South-central Ohio – and partner with SST 12 and SST 15 to ensure that the services they provide meet the intent and spirit of their mission: *to build the capacity of local and related education agencies to engage in systemic and sustainable improvement that impacts educational outcomes for students.*

“Another non-negotiable is around building capacity – our own capacity and the capacity of the districts and agencies we serve. We build capacity through leadership. Several years ago we spent a lot of time with teachers and teacher-based teams and found that nothing really changed until and unless we changed the mindset of leaders,” explained Wolfe.

Wolfe and Bonner believe that building SST and district capacity rests on “moving from a compliance mindset to finding meaning” in and across various aspects of the work. “Yes, there are compliance components, but we try to make everything we do meaningful to the districts we support. When I was in a district and in charge of school improvement we often asked, ‘what’s everyone doing? Oh, they’re doing Marzano; we’ll do Marzano too,’” recalled Wolfe.

SST 16 uses a different approach in helping districts identify what is most essential in improving results for all learners. “We typically review the district improvement plan with district personnel and ask them ‘what’s most important to you?’ If no part of the existing plan is important, we start from scratch and use the new *Decision Framework*¹ tool to tailor our conversation with the district. We encourage them *not* to do something for compliance sake only. Instead, we help them think about how to reframe and extend what they’re doing or want to do, such as expanding co-teaching to involve co-planning to co-serve,” said Wolfe.



SST 16 builds the capacity of districts across the region in other ways too. For example, Wolfe and her colleagues partner with the Athens-Meigs ESC to sponsor a principal academy. Principals attend the academy three times a year to focus on building principal leadership, understanding implementation science,² and receiving personalized assistance with issues relevant to them and their schools. The SST hopes the model will soon be expanded to Washington County and, next year, to districts served by the Ohio Valley ESC.

In addition to the principal academy, SST 16 hosts the Special Education Academy for Leaders (SEAL), which involves monthly evening meetings for district leaders responsible for overseeing the delivery of special education services. According to Bonner, who plans and facilitates the meetings, approximately 24 district representatives attend each session. Sessions often feature speakers who provide timely information on topics relevant to special education procedural requirements [e.g., individualized education program (IEP) and educational team report (ETR) requirements, discipline requirements, corrective action plan requirements, etc.].



“Participants learn from the speakers, from the SST, and from each other; it’s not just a ‘sit-and-get’ that could have been provided through email,” explained Bonner. Participants can earn university course credit from the University of Rio Grande. The meetings, which serve as a type of support group for participants, are important for a variety of reasons including the high turnover rate among special education leaders in the region.

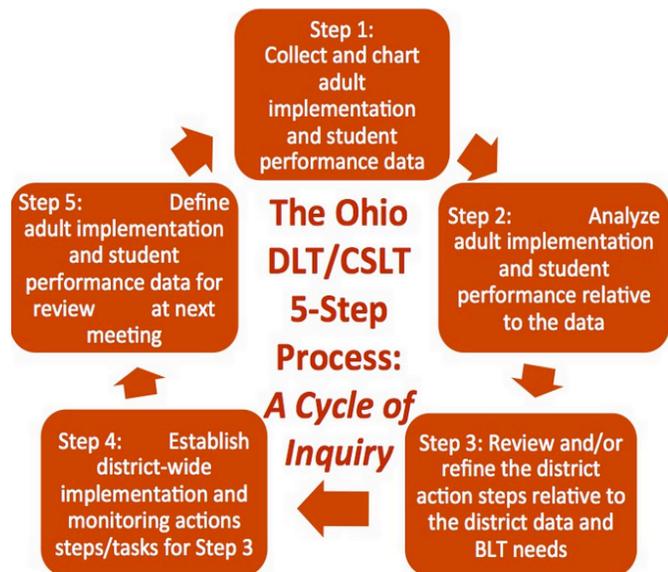
We’re in, now how do we spread out? SST personnel have worked to develop and strengthen relationships with their districts and partner agencies, and their responsiveness to district need is paying off. “We’ve gotten in everywhere, now we have to figure out how to spread out with the same number of staff. I remind staff that we no longer have the issue of trying to get in; we’re in!” declared Wolfe.

¹ The *Decision Framework* is the major web-based tool used at Stage 1 of the Ohio Improvement Process. For additional information, go to page 9 of the OLAC module titled, *Diversity: Ensuring Everyone Learns*.

² For more information about implementation science, go to page 12 of the OLAC module titled *The Collaborative Process* and click on the link in the **Foundational Concept** box.

SST 16 has eight full-time consultants (including the Director), two half-time consultants, and five contractors who work between 40 and 100 days per year. Consultants are assigned based on several factors, including proximity from their residence to assigned districts and the level of rapport they've developed with district personnel.

For example, part-time SST consultants Nancy Ruth and Joe Finley have long associations with the Marietta City Schools – one of the larger districts in region 16 – and are highly regarded by district leaders. Finley was a principal in Marietta for 25 years and Ruth – a life-long resident of Marietta and graduate of Marietta City Schools – taught for 37 years in a neighboring district where she also served as the *High Schools that Work* coordinator. Both Ruth and Finley understand how to work within the district to improve instructional practice. “Marietta has embraced the change process and I’m very pleased and proud of them for the progress they’ve made,” said Ruth.



“It’s a two-and-a-half hour drive from our most northern to our most southern county, which makes it challenging in thinking about where consultants live in making district assignments,” said Wolfe. “We have an excellent team; we’re all different but in a good way. We all bring something to the table and the team works well together. I’m thankful,” added Wolfe.

SST 16 personnel meet monthly for full-day meetings that are planned to provide growth opportunities for staff. The morning is typically spent in discussing district work and progress being made in each district with the afternoon dedicated to staff PD. For example, the SST transition specialist may train all other SST consultants in transition-related issues. Similarly, a consultant with expertise in early childhood education might train staff in literacy-related content and update colleagues on the state’s pilot implementation of the *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling* (LETRS) framework in addressing early literacy needs.”

The SST uses the *Ohio 5-Step Process*³ to structure team meetings and conversations. Similarly, each district interacts with assigned SST personnel to review progress using the *Ohio 5-Step Process* each month. “This is something Heather implemented when she became the SST director,” explained Bonner. “It gives you a good focus and helps you ask, ‘what did I say I was going to do and did I do it?’”

Using OIP to Gain & Maintain Focus

“The 5-step process is everywhere! We do it, they do it, everything we do is based on that 5-step process,” said Wolfe. The *Ohio 5-Step Process* is used primarily at Stage 3 of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) and can be characterized as a protocol for anchoring the work of collaborative learning teams (e.g., teacher-based teams, building leadership teams).

³ For more information about the *Ohio 5-Step Process*, go to page 5 of the OLAC module titled, *Teacher-based Teams: What Districts Need to Know* and click on the link in the **Foundational Concept** box.

Ensuring that all SST staff use a consistent approach is key to ensuring high-quality support to all districts. “Everyone is grounded in the OIP,” said Wolfe. An SST consultant is assigned to each district as the main point of contact and communicator with the district. However, according to Wolfe, “in addition to the primary lead consultant assigned, other SST personnel with particular areas of expertise support the district based on that district’s identified needs.”

“One of the biggest things I noticed was that teachers and administrators didn’t have as much access to quality PD in rural Ohio. I felt like OLi⁴ did a really good job of bringing quality PD to the region.”

**Heather Wolfe, Director
SST Region 16**

SST 16 uses additional state-sponsored initiatives, such as the **OLi⁴** project (i.e., the *Ohio Leadership for Inclusion, Implementation, and Instructional Improvement⁴*) and the **State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG)** to build the instructional capacity of districts in the region. Wolfe, having moved from another state to rural southern Ohio in 2001 was struck by what she perceived as a dearth of resources available to districts served by SST 16 and contiguous SSTs.



“I feel like OLi⁴ did a really good job of bringing quality PD to the region,” she remarked. “It took them to the next level, enabling them to grow in an opportunity that is pretty rare for rural Ohio as well as providing coaching benefits to districts and our staff. As an OLi⁴ coach the past two years, learning how to use the performance coaching model – how to respond and not to jump in and try to fix problems – was tremendous for me as a consultant,” she added.

In addition to OLi⁴ and SPDG, SST 16 relies on the **Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC)** on-line learning resources to develop shared understanding of the state’s improvement model and how to use it to support district improvement and implementation efforts. Bonner recalled that prior to joining the SST five years ago, she worked in a district that did not use OIP-OLAC as designed. “What I experienced prior to joining SST 16 was not the intent or even remotely close to what it should have been. I used OLAC modules to get up to speed and truly understand the process and how to use it in guiding districts,” explained Bonner.



Wolfe concurs with Bonner about the value of OLAC resources. “We experience large staff turnover. For example, this year, we have two new consultants. If you don’t know OIP, you can go to the OLAC modules for a foundation in the work,” said Wolfe. “Putting districts first means we have to constantly increase our own individual and collective learning as a staff.”

⁴ OLi⁴ is a PD initiative developed and implemented through the University of Dayton School of Education and Health Sciences Grant Center with support from the Ohio Department of Education.

Case in point. Marietta City Schools, located in Washington County, serves approximately 2,600 PreK through grade 12 students in its six schools (four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school). According to Superintendent Will Hampton, SST 16 provides a variety of services to the district including support for teacher-based teams (TBTs), the development and use of co-teaching models, the introduction of universal design for learning (UDL), and strategies to improve literacy instruction district-wide. For example, SST 16 consultant Ally Trew is working with Jona Hall, Marietta's Director of Curriculum and Technology and the district's literacy team to assist the district in developing a new early literacy plan and curriculum.



Marietta City is also the region 16 district participating in the state's SPDG implementation. Participating in the SPDG with SST 16 support is "helping us bring the pieces together so we don't feel like we're addressing competing priorities," Hampton explained. "We use OIP to support all children and it gives us a focus and foundation for looking at the goals we've set, paying attention to equity issues, and ensuring that all students are being met where they need to be met," added Hall.

One outcome of Marietta's participation in the Ohio SPDG has been the establishment of a parent group that meets regularly to discuss critical issues or perceptions related to the education system. According to Hall, the group has taken on a variety of issues important to the community – from community forums on prescription drug abuse to monitoring children's use of social media. "Jona has done a great job with the SPDG parent group. They're engaged in a way we haven't had parent groups engaged before at the



central office level and it has opened the door wide to allowing for real parent feedback and involvement in the district," said Hampton. "Our next step is to involve parents on the district leadership team, which will be a great launch point as we transition to next year," he added.

Finley agrees: "Jona is doing a nice job of connecting what the district does in providing feedback to schools based on what's in the district plan and connecting the district plan down to the TBTs. Instruction is where it occurs and I believe in the old saying, 'what gets monitored, gets done.'"

Finley works with two schools within the district and is exploring different ways to support TBTs in using the 5-step process to more effectively support instructional improvement, rather than to fill out a form as a compliance activity. Much of Finley's work, and that of other SST consultants, involves supporting district and school personnel in differentiating between instructional strategies (i.e., what adults do) and student activities (what students do as a result of teacher instruction).

"We're starting with identifying what teachers want students to be able to do at the end of an instructional lesson or unit, differentiating between learning targets and data, and reviewing pre-assessment data that exist," explained Finley. "Teams analyze student performance data and then collaboratively develop specific instructional strategies and student activities that will be implemented to drive student performance forward," he added.

At the district level, SPDG is also supporting the central office personnel and school administrators in adopting a UDL framework⁵ to support student learning. “We’ve purchased two Katie Novak books and we’ll be discussing where UDL fits into our focused work and district plan, and what we need to know more about next month,” said Hall.

SST consultants Ruth, Finley, and Trew support Marietta’s improvement efforts in varied but focused ways and are credited by Hampton and Hall as helping to shape current practice and, at the same time, introduce improvements that can and should be made. “The SST support is recognized as instructive and assistive, not punitive, and that has taken the top-down feel out of the conversation,” explained Hampton.

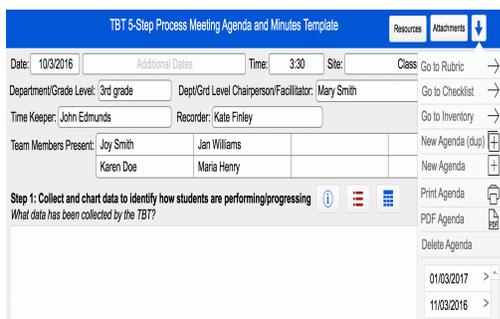
Despite Ruth’s long association with Marietta, “Nancy came into the district with an open mind and was really good at getting at developing a good understanding of the culture and climate of the district. She would often sit quietly and listen and then give effective feedback to administrators,” offered Hall. “Now, she’s almost become a norm, a part of the district!”

“It’s hard to stay true to one thing and to know it and do it well. OIP is helping and you get to decide how you feel about the process. If you feel it’s there to punish you and you’re in compliance mode, then it will be a chore. If you feel you can learn and get better from using the process, then it’s an opportunity.”

Will Hampton, Superintendent
Marietta City Schools (Marietta, Ohio)

Despite the challenges associated with poverty (approximately half of Marietta’s student population is identified as economically disadvantaged) and the absence of many resources that would be common in other parts of the state, Marietta leadership has adopted a no-excuses attitude that underlies the district’s overriding commitment to all children. “They have an equity focus and don’t let poverty become an excuse in any part of their decision-making,” said Ruth.

TBT on the Go



Creative programs developed in collaboration with Marietta College, such as the **MC²** group (i.e., Marietta City Schools and Marietta College) have served to bring additional resources to classrooms across the district. For example, Marietta College science professors spend an hour or two on a weekly basis providing science instruction to elementary school students. Hampton and Dr. Dottie Erb, Professor and Chair of Education at Marietta College, are working to develop pathways for students interested in becoming teachers in the district. While Hampton describes the effort as “still a seed in the ground,” this and other efforts are expanding opportunities to learn for all children.

Hampton offered advice for other districts that may be reluctant to work with SSTs in using the OIP as a foundation for more meaningful implementation of evidence-based instructional practices: “Initially it’s put upon you and you don’t have a choice. We’ve been in intervention and one school that was at one time in a serious situation came out of improvement due to the work of the SST. We’re getting processes and

⁵ For more information about UDL, go to page 8 of the OLAC module titled, *Learning Supports*, and visit the CAST website at <http://www.cast.org/>.

procedures in place that were non-existent before our work with the SST using the OIP. It's hard to stay true to one thing and to know it and do it well. OIP is helping and you get to decide how you feel about the process. If you feel it's there to punish you and you're in compliance mode, then it will be a chore. If you feel you can learn and get better from using the process, then it's an opportunity."

What's next? SST 16 is looking ahead to next year and how it can continue to improve its own capacity and the capacity of the districts and agencies it serves. "Using the OIP as the foundation, we want to support every district in developing a strong kindergarten TBT that uses the 5-step process effectively, and support effective monitoring of implementation efforts through TBTs, BLTs, and DLTs," explained Wolfe.

To aid districts in implementing effective TBTs, Wolfe and SST 16 are partnering with Practical Solutions for Educators to automate a protocol for TBTs using the Ohio 5-Step Process. "We developed a TBT application through FileMaker Go that can be used with Macs or PCs. We're still in the piloting stage but are eager to test it and if it is useful, we want to add protocols for BLTs and DLTs. We're also looking at how to integrate components of implementation science," said Wolfe.

When asked about what's most essential for SSTs in supporting districts, Wolfe responds "I'm going back to our team; we have to take the time to build relationships among the staff and accept each other's differences in order to support districts in making sustainable improvements. We are continually learning and extending our own learning."

References

Novak, K. (2016). *UDL now! A teacher's guide to applying universal design for learning in today's classrooms* (2nd Ed.). Wakefield, MA: CAST, Inc.

Novak, K., & Rodriguez, K. (2016). *Universally designed leadership: Applying UDL to Systems and Schools*. Wakefield, MA: CAST, Inc.

For More Information

For more information about how SST Region 16 is supporting districts in rural southeastern Ohio, contact Heather Wolfe, Director, SST Region 16, 21 Birge Drive., Chauncey, OH 45719; 740.797.0150; or via email at heather.wolfe@sst16.org.

For more information about the Marietta City Schools' improvement efforts, contact Will Hampton, Superintendent, or Jona Hall, Director of Curriculum and Technology, at Marietta City Schools, 111 Academy Dr., Marietta, OH 45750; 740.374.6500; or via email at whampton@mariettacsdo.org or jhall@mariettacsdo.org.

For more information about OLi⁴, contact Pam VanHorn, Coordinator, coordinator, at 614.785.1163, or via email at pvanhorn1@udayton.edu; or visit the OLi⁴ website at <https://www.oli-4.org/>.

For more information about the OLAC-OIP resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director, at jimgay@basa-ohio.org.