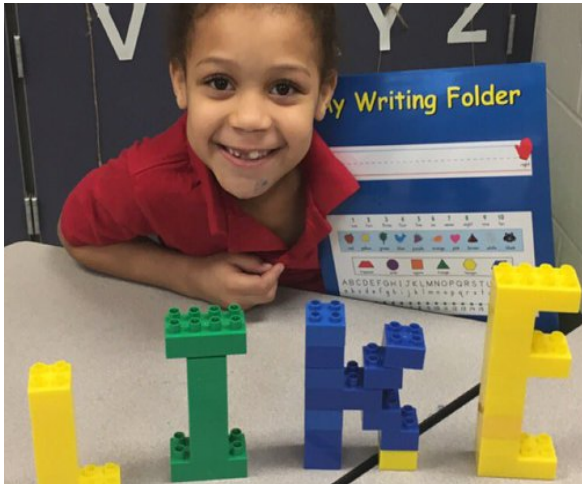


FROM SILOS TO SYSTEMS: *INTEGRATION OF CORE WORK AT HEART OF SST 4 AND PAINESVILLE CITY LOCAL SCHOOLS' PARTNERSHIP TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE IMPROVEMENT ON BEHALF OF ALL LEARNERS*

“Integrated work is our number one non-negotiable,” stated State Support Team (SST) Region 4 consultant Liesl Blackwell. Blackwell, who serves as lead SST consultant assigned to the Painesville City Local School District, is one of 10 consultants comprising SST 4, which serves districts, agencies, and families in the Lake and Geauga counties of northeast Ohio. “Our work is a collective effort; we work together, not in silos, in using a systems approach to work with districts,” added Blackwell.



SST 4 director Merrie Darrah describes her team of consultants as being “very integrated” and focused on supporting districts in making meaningful and lasting improvements. She explained: “The words ‘system’ and ‘integration’ come up so much in our collective conversation. Our team has members that look at the work from different lenses, whether it be an early learning lens, a special education lens, an improvement lens, and so on. But, we all work within

the Ohio Improvement Process framework to support districts in creating a plan that meets their needs.”

District need, according to Darrah, is determined through a review of a combination of information and data sources, including state assessment data and related state-level data and designations, as well as regional needs assessment data and individual district-specific information garnered through ongoing conversation with assigned districts.

Relationship Building: *Helping Leaders Lead*

Darrah, who served as the early learning consultant prior to becoming director, remembers not being included in conversations about improvement. Consequently, she has worked hard to make sure that SST 4 operates as a team with a singular focus on helping districts through the use of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) framework to improve results for all children.

“We’ve shifted from doing discrete, isolated pieces of work to doing integrated work and we always do our work as a team, modeling how to work as a team for our districts. We never talk only about K-12; we’re in it for PreK-12 and we apply the full scope of SST work in helping our districts build their own capacity to engage in systemic and sustainable improvement using research-based practices,” explained Darrah.

**State Support
Team**



Serving Lake & Geauga Counties

SST REGION 4 SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FUNCTIONS

1. Support for districts in identifying and remedying low academic performance for all students
2. Support for districts in systems change efforts to improve student achievement and progress
3. Compliance with federal and state requirements to improve results for students with disabilities and those at risk of being identified as disabled.
4. Early learning and school readiness
5. Literacy
6. Deployment of state and federal initiatives

Those practices – supported through frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Integrated Comprehensive Systems (ICS), and Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) – are used by SST 4 consultants as strategies for helping districts meet



identified priorities. “We have a great staff! I’ve been lucky to build a team that is comprised of members with very diverse skill sets, but that is unified in its commitment to equity in improving teaching and learning,” said Darrah.

SST 4 personnel meet twice per month for all-day staff meetings, once at the beginning of the month, and once mid-way through or toward the end of the month. During some meetings, SST staff members meet in district-specific groups and

dedicate about an hour each to discuss the progress being made in intensive or high-needs districts. Additionally, only those SST staff members involved in working with a particular district meet together to debrief about once per month.

A Google-supported application titled TRAC, developed by the SST, is used by all consultants to track all work conducted by SST consultants by district, including the type (e.g., planning, coaching, implementation) and duration of service provided and the district personnel involved in the work. “TRAC helps us ensure we’re focusing so we can make sure we’re helping districts focus,” explained Darrah.

“We can’t keep track of the work if we’re not purposeful in working together,” explained Blackwell in describing the high level of SST involvement with Painesville City Local Schools, one of SST 4’s larger districts. “We look at the work through the eyes of implementation drivers and identify good entry points. As a result, we’ve established an agenda at the end of each monthly meeting where SST staff meet and debrief with Josh (Englehart),” she added. Blackwell also meets individually with Dr. Englehart, assistant superintendent of Painesville City Local Schools and the district leader who oversees all improvement efforts in the district.

At other times, the SST district leads meet with district superintendents or superintendent designees to review progress. “It’s a reversal of us sitting in on their district meetings and we never discuss any other district with the district with which we’re meeting,” said Darrah. “We want them to see us in our meetings so they can ask us questions and know that we’re there for them. It’s about building relationships. For me and for our team, we see it as really impactful. If there’s a level of trust with the district, it’s easier for them to hear what we’re saying, which isn’t always easy stuff,” she said.

The ‘we know best’ mentality didn’t work; instead, let’s be partners in change and help leaders lead.”
**Merrie Darrah, Director
SST Region 4**

“We go into each district with a growth mindset, with the belief that there’s nothing they’re doing wrong but that we can help them think through their system and identify where it can be enhanced. The ‘we know best’ mentality didn’t work; instead, let’s be partners in change and help leaders lead,” suggested Darrah.

Keeping the ‘Main Thing’ the Main Thing

Blackwell, in her first year as a part of the SST 4 team, says she’s still learning the ropes. Prior to joining SST 4, she worked first as a teacher, then as a principal for 13 years, and then as an SST 5 consultant for three years. In addition to serving as the SST 4 lead to Painesville City Local Schools, Blackwell, along with SST colleague Steve Ramos, serve as coaches for principals of SST 4 districts participating in the *Ohio Leadership for Inclusion, Implementation, and Instructional Improvement (OLi⁴)* project.¹

“As a principal, you spend half of your life putting out fires and then realize you’ve given no thought to what the real work needs to be,” recalled Blackwell. “OLi⁴ is the best thing we’ve done flat out, and has produced the most movement. The principals in the project have opportunities to get together with people across regional areas and talk about their work in a structured way. They’ve benefitted tremendously by having the time to talk together; it has helped keep the ‘main thing’ the main thing,” explained Blackwell.



“OLi⁴ is one of the most beneficial areas that I see in supporting principals to have deeper conversations about learning; it’s awesome,” offered Darrah. Participation in OLi⁴ has not only helped principals in the project, but it has also helped build SST coaching capacity.



According to Blackwell, SST 4 consultants approach their work by asking the question, “how do we coach?” Darrah agrees, adding “we are often in a seat of coaching, asking good questions, knowing when to facilitate conversation, observing the process used by the district, and debriefing with them.

We put a lot of time into working with district leads to be sure they’re comfortable about the discussion that

will take place and afterwards giving them feedback about how it went. Our process is to first understand the district, identify areas that need a deeper dive to really understand what’s going on, and to help each other as SST consultants figure out good reflective questions that can be used to begin our conversation with the district.”

In assigning SST leads to each district, Darrah matches the consultant’s experience with the district to increase what she calls “street credibility” and ensure that the consultant can understand and speak the language of the superintendent or principal with whom the consultant will be working. “I try to match our consultant with what I see as a right fit system-wise; however, all of our consultants are well-versed in OIP. All of our staff have an absolute working knowledge of OIP and all are strong in understanding system work,” explained Darrah. “It’s not only the knowledge; it’s how you deliver the knowledge that matters,” she added.

¹ OLi⁴ is a professional development 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.

Expanding district capacity: A win-win! Blackwell, assigned as lead to Painesville City Local Schools, is a good example of a good match, according to Darrah. “Josh opened himself up to being challenged and lets me push him; we have a really good working relationship,” commented Blackwell. That sentiment is shared by Painesville City Local Schools leadership.

According to Englehart, “we’ve established a regular rhythm throughout the year and even though we have folks in the district with the same areas of expertise as the SST, they’re tasked with doing 100 different things. We’re a very overburdened administrative team. The SST significantly increases our capacity to improve instruction and learning as a district; it helps to have an outside person with very focused expertise and we feel safe and secure that somebody is making sure we have what we need in those areas.”

“The SST significantly increases our capacity to improve instruction and learning as a district.”

**Josh Englehart, EdS, PhD
Assistant Superintendent
Painesville City Local Schools**

Englehart served as a principal in a northeastern Ohio district and also worked as an SST consultant between SST regions 4 and 5. Now, in his fourth year as assistant superintendent, Englehart works with Blackwell to ensure that all improvement work in Painesville is “heavily driven through the OIP.”

“As an urban district that is one of the most impoverished in the state, we bought into using the OIP as a fluid process and framework to get done what we needed to get done,” said Englehart. “We’d been ‘doing OIP’ forever and had an improvement plan in a binder on a shelf. But when we started applying the process correctly, it didn’t take long for people to start understanding how to move student achievement and adult indicators,” he added.

Blackwell is present at all Painesville district leadership team (DLT) meetings, which typically meet on Wednesday, and meets with Englehart the following Monday for 60 to 90 minutes to debrief the meeting. Additionally, SST personnel are assigned to work with each school and meet with building leadership teams (BLTs). “Using the OIP to support improvement is my responsibility within the district, but I can’t be everywhere to offer up that level of coaching,” said Englehart.



Starting with instructional strategies jumpstarts adult learning. Painesville City Local Schools has principals from the elementary, middle, and high school levels participating in two cohorts of the OLi⁴ project. According to Englehart, the opportunity to participate in OLi⁴ came at a perfect time when the district had encountered some challenges at the teacher-based team (TBT) level. “We established the TBT process and got it in place, but after a couple years of having everyone doing what they were supposed to do because they were asked to do it, we realized they filled out the forms perfectly, but didn’t really understand or know how to gauge the impact it was having on learning,” explained Englehart. “OLi⁴ has actually proven to be very, very important; it changed everything, the whole discussion, by starting with instructional strategies instead of starting with the data,” he added.

Blackwell believes that when TBTs start and end with student data, as important as those data are, teachers don't experience an authentic inquiry and learning process as adults. "Teachers walk into a TBT meeting and look at student data and say 'now what are we going to do?' They don't get to the heart of what it can be in terms of adult learning. OLi⁴ is fixing that by teaching principals to coach TBTs to start with instructional strategies," observed Blackwell.



"Teachers now ask, 'what do we want to learn about, which instructional strategies should we use, how will we implement them, what will it look like, and so on,' and then they do it and bring data back to review as a result of their actions. It has also clarified the role of principals in the process," said Blackwell. Englehart concurs, stating "we have others in the district asking, 'how can I get into OLi⁴?' " "Josh says it's turning OIP on its ear; I say it's getting to what OIP was supposed to be about all along. The paradigm shift is to get teams to focus on what they're doing, what the adults really do, and to think about outcomes," reflected Blackwell.

"The more I do it, the more I believe the work is about coaching. We can spend all our time focusing on TBTs and the work that needs to happen, but if you don't have the leaders moving it forward in a global, systematic way, the work can't be sustained for any length of time. I'm most comfortable with principals and I tell them 'I'm doing for you what I wish someone would have done for me – help me keep the 'main thing' the main thing,'" said Blackwell.

"We can spend all our time focusing on TBTs and that work that needs to happen, but if you don't have the leaders moving it forward in a global, systematic way, the work can't be sustained for any length of time...if not owned by the larger system."

Liesl Blackwell, Consultant
SST Region 4

So, what's most essential for SSTs in working with districts? Darrah's belief that the work starts with the development of strong working relationships based on trust and shared goals is one that is supported by Englehart. "If the assumption on the part of the (SST) consultant is that work with districts begins with a blank slate, that is wrong. You have to honor the work of the district and trust the perspective of those in leadership; the context and history really matter," offered Englehart. "Consultants also have to get to know people, talk to people, and 'get their hands dirty,'" he added.

"I feel confident that working in teams with a focused effort, being able to trust the team you're with, whether it's a district team or a support team, and engaging in deep meaningful conversation allow us to change our educational outcomes and truly change systems," stated Darrah.

She added, "As SSTs, we are so pivotal in helping districts change the trajectory of their systems, focused on subgroup performance and the sustainability of improvement on behalf of all learners. Our skills, understanding, and competence in the work we do have to be top-notch, but it's about more than knowledge; it's about tapping into what will move them."



For More Information

For more information about how State Support Team (SST) Region 4 is working with districts to improve opportunities to learn for all students, contact Merrie Darrah, Director, SST Region 4, 8441 Auburn Rd., Concord Township, OH 44077; 440.478.4560; or via email at mdarrah@sst4.org.

For more information about improvement efforts in the Painesville City Local Schools, contact Dr. Josh Englehart, Assistant Superintendent, Painesville City Local Schools, 58 Jefferson St., Painesville, OH 44077; 440.394.5081; or via email at josh.englehart@pcls.net.

For more information about **OLi⁴**, contact Pam VanHorn, Coordinator, University of Dayton School of Education and Health Sciences Grant Center, 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 and OIP** resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director, at jimgay@basa-ohio.org.