

A Winning Partnership: SST Region 14 and Area ESCs Work Together to Support Educator and Student Success

State Support Team (SST) region 14 serves 18 school districts, other educational agencies, and families in the rural five-county region of Adams, Brown, Clinton, Fayette, and Highland counties. One of 16 SSTs in Ohio, SST 14 strives to provide the highest quality educational services and resources with the goal of helping all students to succeed in school and in the community.



SSTs operate as an extension of the state education agency in Ohio and all are required to provide a set of services as outlined in a services agreement developed by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). In addition to this scope of work, SST 14, in collaboration with its fiscal agent educational service center (ESC) – the Southern Ohio ESC – provides special

education instructional and related services (e.g., teacher of the visually impaired, itinerant teacher of the hearing impaired, physical therapy services, educational interpreter services, etc.) to area districts through its Hopewell Center (Hillsboro) location.

Embedded in the SST services agreement is the state’s expectation that SSTs work collaboratively with area ESCs to meet the needs of the districts they serve. In region 14, longstanding relationships among the SST, Southern Ohio ESC and Brown County ESC, and area school districts facilitate the development and implementation of partnership efforts based on shared work.

Watchword: *Collaboration!*

“Collaboration is not a difficult issue in our region. In areas where there is conflict or where someone’s definition of collaboration is that everyone else makes them look good, the state can prescribe or try to force collaboration. However, quality collaboration comes down to how much people are willing to work together and trust each other,” explained SST Region 14 Director Jeff Royalty.

Brown County ESC superintendent Jim Frazier recalls working for many years with previous SST 14 director Dr. Lisa Barnhouse and former Southern Ohio ESC superintendent Tony Long, stating “from the start we tried to create partnerships and collaborate rather than compete.” “From attending statewide ESC meetings, it was apparent that this was not the way it developed in many other areas. The confrontational and

Collaboration Defined!

- To work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor
Merriam-Webster <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>
- To work, one with another; cooperate, as on a literary work:
Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/>
- The action of working with someone to produce something.
English Oxford Living Dictionaries <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/>

competitive nature in some regions was particularly evident when ESCs that were not serving as fiscal agents for SSTs may have felt left out or felt that the fiscal agent ESC was using that role to their advantage. We've consciously tried to avoid that in region 14," added Frazier.

Like Frazier, Beth Justice, in her second year as Southern Ohio ESC superintendent, believes that SST-ESC collaboration is key to making regions stronger. "Because I grew up in this region, I didn't realize the competitiveness and sometimes really distrust between SSTs and ESCs until I sat in on directors' meetings. It was foreign to me because I knew that the relationship in our region was always collaborative."

"Districts want the best help they can get so why wouldn't all partners in the region work together to provide it?"

**Jeff Royalty, Director
SST Region 14**

Royalty, formerly a superintendent in the region, explained: "I grew up in this region too. I think I speak for most superintendents in saying that we're really not all that concerned with where help comes from. Districts want the best help they can get so why wouldn't all partners in the region work together to provide it?"

Combining Forces: Leveraging Resources to Maximize Opportunity

"In rural settings like ours, all of our entities and agencies are strapped to come up with expertise; the demographics and the populations just aren't there. So, we've tried to leverage the partnership between the two ESCs and the SST to create opportunities. If we were just competing, we'd all come up short," explained Frazier.

Approaches that rely on shared services, particularly in rural or remote areas, can include such benefits as access to expertise not otherwise available or accessible, shared information for better planning, reduced costs, greater scale, and improved services (see, e.g., Dollery, Kortt, & Drew, 2016; Helge, 1984).



Of the five counties comprising SST region 14, all are classified as rural, and three (Adams, Brown, and Highland) are classified as Appalachian. In 2016, the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio released [*Ohio's Appalachian Children at a Crossroads: A Roadmap for Action*](#), noting significant gaps in rural Appalachian and non-Appalachian counties when compared to the state on measures such as children living in poverty, rates of unemployment, babies born with low birth weight and exposure to opiates, families without access to benchmark broadband speed, and more.

"In some areas there is a dire situation and some ESCs are struggling, which makes it difficult," said Royalty. Despite the high level of poverty in the region, Royalty, Justice, and Frazier don't view the families they're there to serve as having deficits. Instead, they approach their collective work with awareness, empathy, a

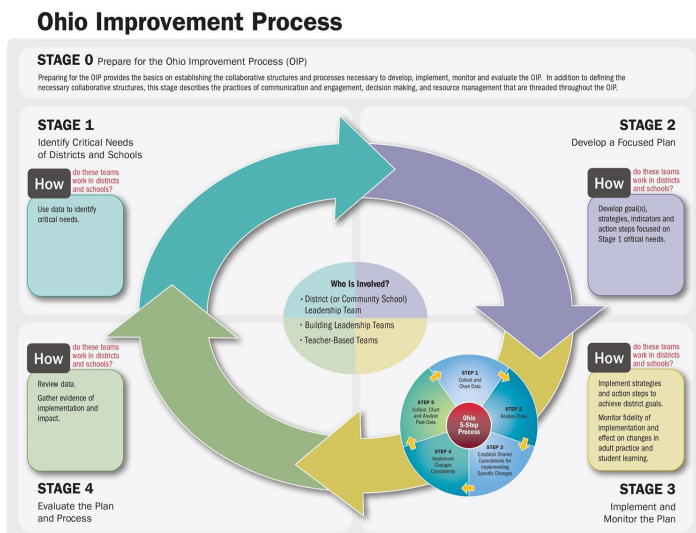
no-excuses attitude, and a shared commitment to support the right work on behalf of all students and their families across the region. “It’s just the culture,” said Justice. “We knew it was imperative for our SST and ESC partners to work together for our survival with all of the budgetary and different initiatives within our region and across the state,” said SST 14 school improvement consultant Sherri Helderbrand.

Service delivery in rural Ohio. In region 14, the planning and delivery of professional development (PD) are routinely accomplished through a combination of SST and ESC staff members working together to maximize the use of existing expertise within the region. The SST contracts with both the Brown County ESC and the Southern Ohio ESC for part-time consultants who serve in a dual ESC-SST role. The ESC and SST consultants meet monthly as a regional state support team (RSST) to plan joint work. Consultants are assigned to particular districts and if a need identified for which the SST does not have expertise, the SST works with ESC personnel to provide the needed services to the district.



Justice recalled when “a district in the region ask for math expertise in a particular area and we didn’t have anyone on staff with that expertise. I immediately got on the phone with Jim (Frazier) and said ‘hey Jim, I know you have someone with this background; can we contract with you?’ Right away, the district is getting served. We’re utilizing resources and knowing our people.”

“Recruitment of personnel, whether it be related services personnel, or for the SST, continues to be an issue, which makes providing high quality PD on individual district needs a challenge. We’re also finding that districts don’t want to pay for subs or let people out of the district so we have to think about ways to deliver services in different ways using blended formats,” observed Justice.



In addition to meeting needs that might be specific to a particular district, SST and ESC personnel work together to continually gauge and plan for anticipated needs across the region. “Our most common need is related to ensuring fidelity in using the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) and specifically the Ohio 5-Step Process by district leadership teams (DLTs), building leadership teams (BLTs), and teacher-based teams (TBTs),” said Royalty.

“Supporting the use of the OIP in the way it should be used is a concern for my consultants and for me. We need to get superintendents and principals engaged in using it to achieve the results we want. Many of our districts are not obligated to use it, but are

seeing it as a way to improve what they already have to do; they're seeing the value of having a system," he added. Nevertheless, Royalty believes that the "use of the OIP, when done correctly, is the best possible PD districts can receive. It's job-embedded, real life, and improves learning in the classroom. It is not just about compliance."

SST 14 is also involved in the state-supported *Ohio Leadership for Inclusion, Implementation, and Instructional Improvement (OLi⁴)* project coordinated through the University of Cincinnati Systems Development and Improvement Center. Royalty, who is serving as an OLi⁴ coach with a district in SST region 14, believes that "OLi⁴ provides intensive PD and support for principals in using the OIP." He credits OLi⁴, along with using the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC) resources, as helping the BLT rethink its role in supporting TBTs. "It has been a remarkable turnaround. We'll make some significant progress," he said.



OLAC resources are regarded by Justice as integral to supporting regional consultants in understanding how to use the OIP in working with districts. ESC-SST collaboration has involved supporting internal and external facilitators through network meetings, supporting the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports (e.g., Brown County ESC preschool programs), collaborating in providing coaching support to districts, and other sponsoring other joint efforts that support district improvement.

Looking ahead. *Leading with innovative solutions for student and community success* is the vision of region 14's current strategic planning process. Royalty, Justice, and Frazier are obtaining feedback through surveys and face-to-face meetings in order to gain a better understanding of the needs of districts across the region and the quality of employees' delivery of services.



The year-long planning process involves three work groups comprised of SST and ESC consultants. One group is developing a process (e.g., service plan) and system for working with districts; another is working on the issue of expertise and how to identify and deploy people with expertise in the region to

meet district need; and the third group is developing a tool for use in monitoring SST-ESC work with districts. "We think our strategic service delivery plan will strengthen collaboration between districts and the regional support system. I'm a firm believer that whatever a superintendent puts his name on will carry more weight," offered Royalty.

Frazier offered the following advice to other ESCs on the importance of working with area SSTs to meet district needs:

"How various entities are able to work together and partner often depends more on the personalities involved than some scripted mandate or policy. I have seen through my career opportunities for various agencies to partner, save money, and produce a better outcome, yet the personalities involved could not get along and thus it did not happen. Other times, despite the odds, personalities that could collaborate created a win-win out of nothing! Communication, trust, partnership, representation, and common planning with common goals are key. Region 14 is blessed with talent; the leadership is trustworthy and willing to partner. That collaboration adds value in geometric fashion to the districts involved as well as the agencies contributing."

Royalty suggests that SSTs and ESCs start small and collaborate on a clearly defined project, get to know each other, and move on from there. “There’s the rural aspect here; we don’t have a lot of people so in order to provide diverse services, we’ve got to work together. If we didn’t, there would be a lot of districts missing out on services they really need.” Justice agreed, noting that “when you come together to work on a common goal, you get to know each other’s strengths and build relationships.”

“Our region is looked to for our ability to collaborate and share responsibility and resources. It’s just who we are!” said Helterbrand.

References

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For More Information

For more information about **SST 14** and its work with partner ESCs to improve outcomes for all children, contact Jeffrey A. Royalty, Director, SST Region 14, 5350 West New Market Rd., Hillsboro, OH 45133, 937.393.1904 (x 2129), r14_jroyalty@mveca.org.

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For more information about the **OLAC and OIP** resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director, at jimgay@basa-ohio.org; or Karel Oxley, OLAC Co-director, at Oxley@basa-ohio.org.