

Lessons Learned

A series published by Education Northwest that distills and shares research and experience from the field

Volume 2, Issue 1 | November 2011

Optimizing Support to Low-Performing Schools Through School Support Teams

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In the Northwest and across the nation, state education agencies (SEAs) are providing intensive and sustained support to schools and districts that have been identified as in need of improvement. One tool in the school improvement arsenal is the use of school support teams (SSTs): cadres of highly qualified teachers, principals, or district staff who have been successful in boosting academic achievement.

To help SEA policymakers as they refine SST structures and practices, Education Northwest has compiled a series of lessons learned about using these teams to maximum effect. The lessons are drawn from conducting

research studies supported by the Institute of Education Sciences (Davis, Krasnoff, Ishimaru, & Sage, 2010; Davis, Krasnoff, Moilanen, Sather, & Kushman, 2007), as well as working with states to implement their support systems. For example, Education Northwest recruits, supervises, and provides professional development for coaches deployed by the Oregon School and District Improvement Network (OSDIN), a program of the Oregon Department of Education. The 57 OSDIN coaches are highly experienced educators who work 8–10 hours per week assisting 90 schools and districts identified for improvement.

In addition to being of interest to SEA policymakers, the lessons in this brief also may be beneficial to technical assistance providers who are engaged in coaching. As well, district and school administrators can use the lessons to inform their work with SST members provided by the SEA.

Lesson #1 SST members must be able to provide capacity-building support to schools by drawing on a wide range of resources and information.

While SST members are selected because of their proven expertise as effective educators, they may lack experience and/or formal preparation as technical assistance providers. They need to know how to offer side-by-side capacity-building support to school leaders rather than take over leadership responsibilities. Further, they must come to their assigned schools armed with knowledge about state initiatives and federal requirements they may not have used in their former roles.

SST members who are well-informed about state-sponsored programs and resources can share these with their schools to create a coherent system of support for all schools. Being well-versed in this area also promotes deeper

Lessons Learned About Optimizing Support to Low-Performing Schools Through School Support Teams

1. SST members must be able to provide capacity-building support to schools by drawing on a wide range of resources and information.
2. The experience and skills an SST member brings to the assignment must be carefully matched to the characteristics and needs of the school and its leaders.
3. SST members must first build trust and establish credibility, to help the school develop capacity for positive change.
4. A fundamental role of the SST member is to assist with implementation of strategies to address the school's goals.
5. What worked in one school does not guarantee similar results in a different school context.
6. SST members foster sustainable improvement by cultivating ownership among all stakeholders and a vision of continuous improvement that is shared by the leadership and staff.

The Role of the School Support Team (SST) Member

SST members typically work as independent contractors or part-time employees and are most often assigned individually to schools. They make regular visits to the school and work primarily with the school's leadership. Their tasks include analyzing the school's operations in relation to improvement efforts; collaborating with the school community in developing, implementing, and monitoring improvement plans; and providing additional technical assistance as needed. SST members are expected to be well-versed in research-based instructional practices, and are knowledgeable about successful approaches to schoolwide reform and closing the achievement gap.

Oregon principals who worked with SST members during the 2010–2011 school year praised the coaching they received:

- "I knew *what* to do—but our coach helped me see the path to *how* to make it happen."
- "Our school's coach has mentored me to become an instructional leader."
- "We would not be where we are today without our coach's help. He has brought a calm presence and invaluable expertise that we fully trust."

knowledge about issues contributing to the achievement gap and ways in which other schools have addressed such challenges. Networking among SST members during information and training sessions provides for "cross pollination" of ideas and sharing effective practices in other sites across the state.

Lesson # **2** The experience and skills an SST member brings to the assignment must be carefully matched to the characteristics and needs of the school and its leaders.

To place an SST member appropriately, his or her strengths must be assessed in relation to students' needs, teachers' skills, and the leadership style of the principal at a particular school. Given the urgency of need, the SST member must "hit the ground running." A school that has not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) due to the performance of students in the limited English proficiency (LEP) subgroup might be best served by an SST member with past experience and deep knowledge of ways to increase achievement of LEP students. Likewise, SST members with many years at the secondary level are best matched with a high school or middle school. When SST members have the right connection with the principal and other staff, they speak the same language, tend to understand the context and complexity of the changes that are needed, and are often able to develop relationships and rapport with school staff.

Lesson # **3** SST members must first build trust and establish credibility, to help the school develop capacity for positive change.

Trust and credibility are the foundation upon which SST members can actively assist the school in addressing its challenges. SST members gain credibility in schools through a variety of actions, such as providing specific research on new initiatives being considered or implemented at the school, or by bringing important information about deadlines or new training opportunities.

Asking questions and digging into the school's data can signal an understanding of the school's demographics and its history of reform efforts. Creating a schedule of visits, showing up on time, and following through on promises are ongoing strategies for building trust. SST members with recent administrative experience in turning around chronically low-performing schools find opportunities to share their own challenges, frustrations, and actions that resulted in improvements.

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Schools in improvement status generally are careful in setting their improvement goals and identifying appropriate actions to achieve those goals. However, creating and sticking with the activities and implementation benchmarks in the improvement plan can be difficult for busy administrators and teachers.

An important role for an SST member is to assist the staff in determining whether the agreed-upon actions are improving student performance. By monitoring implementation, school staff can gauge if their actions are actually helping more students be successful. Many SST members have performed a key role by helping staff gather implementation data and participating in staff discussions about interventions and next steps with individual students. SST members also help school staff create systems for progress monitoring and the accompanying interventions for students who are missing important skills. SST members work with the principal to conduct nonevaluative observations in classrooms (often called “learning walks,” “instructional rounds,” or “walk-throughs”) that provide feedback to staff on their efforts geared to the school improvement goals.

What worked in one school does not guarantee similar results in a different school context.

While the critical elements of school improvement—reviewing data, planning interventions, and monitoring results—remain

constant, they must be tailored to the individual school's locale, demographics, leadership, and previous improvement efforts. Two similar schools, for example, may serve the same grade levels, be close in size, and have similar student demographics. However, at one school the faculty may be ready for change, the principal has gained the staff's trust, and there's already been some professional development on effective instructional strategies that teachers are starting to use. In contrast, a second school may have a new leader, many staff members who believe the problem

resides outside their sphere of influence, and professional development that has not led to consistent use of effective instructional strategies. An SST member with a school such as the second example must first build awareness of student needs and staff expectations, as well as share how other, similar schools have tackled achievement gaps. The SST member serving the first school can devote his or her time to working more deeply on instruction and appropriate interventions for students.

Snapshot: School Support Teams in the Northwest

Although states have deployed school support teams (SSTs) since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, scant information has been collected about the characteristics and roles of SST members or how they operate at the school and district levels. A recent study by REL Northwest researchers at Education Northwest (Davis, Krasnoff, Ishimaru, & Sage, 2010) examined the characteristics, qualifications, roles, and functions of 109 SST members working in Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming during the 2008–2009 school year. The study, funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, found that despite the diverse contexts in the four study states, there was consistency among SST members' backgrounds and qualifications.

Across the four study states, 66 percent of SST members were women; 72 percent were age 56–64; 80 percent were retired; more than half had most recently been employed as school or district administrators prior to becoming an SST member; virtually all held administrative certificates, with nearly a quarter certified as superintendents; 96 percent held master's degrees; and 19 percent had earned doctorates.

As reported by SST members, their top areas of expertise were professional development for adult learners; knowledge of literacy and math strategies, school reform, and change management; and leadership skills. The activities they most engaged in to support implementation of improvement efforts were coaching or mentoring school principals on leadership skills and identifying the professional development needs of staff members. Most SST members collected, organized, and analyzed data for decision making; led or supported professional development; located and recommended resources; met with administrators on issues other than school improvement; observed in classrooms; and communicated with stakeholder groups.

The study, *What Are the Characteristics, Qualifications, Roles, and Functions of School Support Teams? An Examination of Survey Results for Four Northwest Region States*, can be accessed at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/REL_2010095.pdf.

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LESSON # 6 SST members foster sustainable improvement by cultivating ownership among all stakeholders and a vision of continuous improvement that is shared by the leadership and staff.

SST members work closely with principals and school leadership teams to inform staff, students, families, and community members about results and to seek their input and support for continued growth. SST members help schools develop ways to communicate and highlight improvement efforts and to define stakeholders' role in creating and sustaining improvements. They help organize community meetings, create visual displays that demonstrate student progress, and design ways to motivate and celebrate success. To ensure sustainable change that reaches into every classroom, SST members work with the principal, leadership team, other staff, and school districts to create and institutionalize processes and practices that will continue after the SST member leaves the school.

Summary

Many states deploy SST members to support individual schools in improvement status. Typically these individuals are former principals, teachers, and district-level staff who work as contractors or part-time staff, providing resources and professional development on state and federal initiatives and requirements. Though SST members are selected because of their successful experience and expertise, they need to be oriented to resources available through the state and receive ongoing professional development on effective practices for improving student achievement and strategies for providing effective technical assistance.

When SST members are carefully matched to schools based on their prior experience, it results in a stronger working relationship that can be enhanced by quickly establishing credibility and building trust. A key role of SSTs is to provide resources and assist with monitoring the implementation of strategies designed to achieve school improvement goals. To ensure that improvement is continuous and sustainable, SSTs must work with school leadership, staff, and other stakeholders on shared ownership of a school improvement vision.

For more on school and district improvement, please visit educationnorthwest.org or contact Deborah. Davis@educationnorthwest.org, 503.275.9644

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