

Serving as a Catalyst for Innovation and Improvement: SST Region 8 Supports District Capacity Building to Improve Learning for All Students

One of 16 state support teams (SSTs) comprising the foundation of Ohio's statewide system of support, SST region 8 supports approximately 35 school districts and 20 community schools in Medina, Portage, and Summit Counties, as well as career centers, county boards of developmental disabilities, and partner educational service centers (ESCs). The mission of SST 8 is to help educators develop efficient and effective systems and processes, and use research-based instructional practices in order to close achievement gaps and improve learning for all students, including students with disabilities and other marginalized groups of learners.

SST 8 is comprised of 15 staff members, 13 of which are working directly with districts. Dr. Jenine Sansosti, now in her fourth year as SST region 8 director, includes herself among the 13 consultants supporting districts to improve learning and outcomes for all children. The work of the consultants is organized around topic-based teams (e.g., special education team, school improvement team, etc.) aligned with specific areas of the state-developed performance agreement, which delineates the services to be provided by all SSTs.

One team – referred to as the regional leadership team – works across all areas. Particular areas of emphasis, such as the use of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and common formative assessment are embedded within each topical area. “Our team has annual and multi-year priorities based on data, and strategies and action steps,” explained Sansosti. Additionally, SST personnel meet quarterly to plan and coordinate the supports that will be collaboratively delivered to districts with greater needs. “We call these internal wrap-around teams and make sure we’re intentional about communicating and keeping each other connected so that services are integrated by content and by district,” added Sansosti.



“My personal mantra is that we won’t duplicate capacity that already exists in a district. We’re not there to do to them or for them; we’re there to support them in doing things for themselves.”

**Dr. Jenine Sansosti, Director SST
Region 8**

“Like every other SST, we approach our work from a capacity-building perspective. My personal mantra is that we won’t duplicate capacity that already exists in a district. We’re not there to do to them or for them; we’re there to support them in doing things for themselves through training, coaching, and resources,” said Sansosti.

According to Sansosti, SST 8 acts on its capacity building mission in three ways – by supporting districts in identifying evidence-based practices and making high-quality instructional practice accessible to all students, by supporting district infrastructure development that promotes system-wide learning and inquiry, and by serving as a catalyst for change and innovation.

Systemic Improvements to Support Inclusive Practice



“We’re doing more systemic, big-picture alignment work with district and building leaders, giving them tools and resources to help them inform their practice, learn from each other, and ensure that students’ needs are met across the system” said Sansosti.

One such “big picture” initiative is focused on engaging cohorts of districts in examining least restrictive environment (LRE) practices as a way to support the use of more inclusive service delivery models and practices across the system.

Focus on equity.

Two cohorts of districts (about 10 districts each year during the 2016- 17 and 2017-18 school years) participated in the professional development (PD), which supported district teams in (1) analyzing school- and district-level data to determine the current status of student services and student opportunities to learn; (2) aligning the school and district mission statements with shared values and a clear vision focused on equity; (3) facilitating conversations to raise equity awareness among educators, students, community members, and families; (4) investigating research on highly effective

practices associated with “integrated” service delivery; and (5) creating a new service delivery map and rethinking structures and the use of staff.

Teams of 10 to 12 individuals representing a diverse range of disciplines (e.g., administrators, general education teachers, intervention specialists, special education directors, curriculum directors, related services personnel) participate in four full-day sessions. “The membership includes a district-wide service delivery team, recognizing the need for continuity in practice from building to building across the district,” explained Stephanie Denham, SST 8 consultant.



“We went back and forth on the name LRE and decided the work started with data sources on LRE being a need. We’re not making this just a special education thing. Cohorts have naturally made connections to other groups of children including English learners (ELs), students identified as gifted, and other traditionally marginalized groups,” stated Denham. Denham, along with SST 8 consultants Dr. Sarah Jackson and Kathryn Vuchak, serves as facilitator for the LRE cohort PD.

SST 8 consultants assigned to support district use of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) 1 also have a presence in the sessions to ensure connections in how participating districts incorporate strategies (e.g., use of Universal Design for Learning) as part of their focused district and school improvement plans. “LRE promotes a more equal distribution or natural proportions of children with disabilities in regular environments. The OIP allows for sharing among district and school personnel, and among general and special education staff. We’re seeing, for example, an increased role for intervention specialists in identifying effective adult implementation strategies,” said Denham.

Identifying critical needs.

According to Denham, the impetus for the development of the LRE cohort PD was the number of districts asking for support in the area of co-teaching. “When we got out there, we realized districts weren’t co-planning to co-serve all students, but rather were

only looking at co-teaching. We began to sift through the requests and the data and we asked local directors of special education a lot of questions about the measures they would use to determine effectiveness,” recalled Denham. Several district teams in region 8 had also participated in leading for social justice PD2, which sparked some of the interest in the work on examining PreK through grade 12 service delivery.

“We wondered if people would want to participate in an effort that would lead teams in looking at their data and at their school and district mission statements for a focus on equity. But, the timing was right and the discussions with district personnel led us to launch this whole investigation of LRE practices,” said Denham.



“Looking at district data first and supporting districts in identifying what they want their impact measures to be is critical. Data neutralizes opposing or differing philosophies.”

**Stephanie Denham, Consultant SST
Region 8**

Participating cohort teams use an SST 8-created data worksheet to examine their district’s data (see excerpt below). A variety of data overlays (e.g., state performance plan indicator data, enrollment data, data from the Ohio Decision Framework tool) are used to support districts in identifying their most critical needs. “We allow data to tell the story. We collect a lot of data

but don’t often use it. Looking at district data first and supporting districts in identifying what they want their impact measures to be is critical. Data neutralizes opposing or differing philosophies,” explained Denham.

Getting to Know Your District Through Data:
Least Restrictive Environment Data for **ADD DISTRICT NAME HERE**



Data Item	Where to find it	What it tells us	What I should be thinking about	District Data																
Data Source #1: Enrollment by Disability Flag	Ohio School Report Cards Advanced Reports http://tinyurl.com/ODEAdvanced - Enrollment -> Enrollment by Student Demographic (District) - Use "Disabled Flag" filter for Student Disaggregation *Additional information may be found through the Secure Data Center through your SAFE account.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of students labeled with (dis)abilities in your district Percentage of total enrollment of students with and without (dis)abilities in your district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the district's overall percentage of students with disabilities? Are there natural proportions of students with disabilities in all integrated classrooms as a result of the use of heterogeneous instructional grouping patterns? 	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>15/16</th> <th>14/15</th> <th>13/14</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Total Enrollment</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total # with a Disability</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total # with a Disability in Percentage</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		15/16	14/15	13/14	Total Enrollment				Total # with a Disability				Total # with a Disability in Percentage			
	15/16	14/15	13/14																	
Total Enrollment																				
Total # with a Disability																				
Total # with a Disability in Percentage																				

One District's Perspective

Three years ago, Cloverleaf Local Schools approached SST 8 and asked for help with co-teaching. That request “morphed into a conversation about how we were serving all children and that morphed into a conversation about all children deserving Tier I instruction,” explained Dr. Margo Gibson-Costello, Director of Special Services for the district. “The majority of students with disabilities are cognitively typical children and should be able to learn in a general education environment. Some will need something more intensive, in addition to core content, but all children are held to high expectations,” added Gibson-Costello.



Like many other districts in the cohort, Cloverleaf realized that its continuum of service options was limited. “Our model was you’re in general education, in general education with support, or in a separate environment; we realized we had locked ourselves in and didn’t really have a continuum,” said Gibson- Costello.

According to Gibson-Costello, the support provided by SST 8 allowed the district to change the conversation to one focused on making core instruction accessible to every child. A decision-making flow chart is used to support decision making and ensure that no child is removed from the general education classroom solely because of the need for accommodations.

The district is firmly behind the work and despite some variability across schools, progress is being made. “If we didn’t have to cluster so many kids in little packs, look how many more kids you can reach...because heterogeneous richness is where all students learn.

Finding the Pulse of Each District

According to Gibson-Costello, listening to people is key to making meaningful improvements on behalf of all children. “You have to listen to the people closest to the children and start asking the right questions. The most important thing our SST does is listen. They find the pulse of the district and they listen not only to administrators, but also to staff to get a really good feel for the district. You have to meet people where they are.”

Access to research, using data well to inform practice, and providing relevant professional development that is truly job-embedded are also key aspects of the services provided to Cloverleaf Local and other districts in SST Region 8. Gibson-Costello explains: “Sit and get doesn’t work. The SST provides bigger job-embedded, regional, and closer-to-home PD with ongoing support to help us solve problems. The best part is hearing what other districts have to say. We were honest about where our struggles have been in talking with other districts, but they said ‘you gave us so many good ideas.’ It was very validating.”

“The SST brings us research from many different areas. I’m a research geek and appreciate being able to use research to get beyond opinion in making improvements. It’s the only way you’re going to sway people,” added Gibson-Costello. During the 2018-19 school year, SST 8 consultants will move from using what Denham calls a PD direct support model to a coaching model.

“The LRE PD provides many entry points for our work with districts, the goal of which is inclusive practice. We’re realizing as we talk about inclusive service delivery that there are core pieces of assessment and instruction we need to help districts address and that instruction is, in fact, accessible,” said Sansosti.

References

Capper, C. A., & Frattura, E. M. (2009). *Meeting the needs of students of all abilities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

For More Information

For more information about SST 8 and its work to improve outcomes for all children, contact Jenine M. Sansosti, Ph.D., Director, SST Region 8, 420 Washington Avenue, Cuyahoga Falls, OH 44221, 330.929.6634 (x 511242), JenineS@sst8.org.

For more information about Cloverleaf Local Schools and its work with SST 8, contact Margo Gibson-Costello, Ph.D., Director of Special Services, Cloverleaf Local Schools, 8525 Friendsville Road, Lodi, OH 44254, 330.302.0316, margo.costello@cloverleaflocal.org.

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.

Photographs of the LRE cohort PD used on pages 1 and 2 of this article are used with permission of SST region 8 and feature SST 8 consultant Stephanie Denham (page 1) and a panel of district representatives (page 2) that include (from left to right) Alana Niemiec, Director of Student Services, Green Local Schools; Dr. Margo Gibson-Costello, Director of Special Services, Cloverleaf Local Schools; Brian Madigan, Principal, Cloverleaf Middle School; and Megan Maloney, Preschool Specialist, Cloverleaf Local Schools.