

## **FOCUSING CORE WORK WHILE MANAGING COMPETING EXTERNAL DEMANDS: HOW SST REGION 1 SUPPORTS DISTRICTS IN PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE IMPROVEMENT**

Districts served by State Support Team Region 1, like districts in other parts of the state, face what may be perceived as overwhelming demands in response to changing federal and state requirements, as well as demands from local stakeholders and community members. Helping districts review critically their initiatives, which are often reflected in multiple and sometimes competing plans, is a primary role of Ohio's SSTs.

"We're finding that the main struggle of many of our districts is that they don't want to add one more thing to their 'plate,' said SST 1 Director Lynn McKahan.

"They may have a strategic plan, a behavior plan, a reading plan...plan after plan after plan. We realized we weren't getting buy-in on using a continuous improvement model when everyone was so focused on checking off items on their individual to-do lists. It was going to be critical for us to help everyone see that, as part of district continuous improvement planning, they could address behavior and learning needs in an integrated, rather than siloed, way. Instead of worrying about the completion of multiple plans, we needed to help them develop a unified focus around the work that would matter to improving results for all children," explained McKahan.



### **Using OIP Team Structures to Support Collaborative Inquiry and Learning**

The Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) is Ohio's framework for supporting districts and their schools in implementing focused strategies and actions to meet school system goals. Unlike other continuous improvement (CI) models, it couples the use of a structured four-stage process (e.g., identify essential needs, develop focused goals, etc.) with the use of collaborative learning teams at the district, school, and classroom level. These teams [i.e., the district leadership team (DLT), building leadership teams (BLTs), and teacher-based teams (TBTs)] provide the forum for shared and collective learning among central office personnel, teachers, principals, and others across the district.

*"The teams that are successful use the template as the guide. The struggling teams let the template – and the 'filling in' of the template – become the work."*

**Lynn McKahan**  
Director, SST Region 1

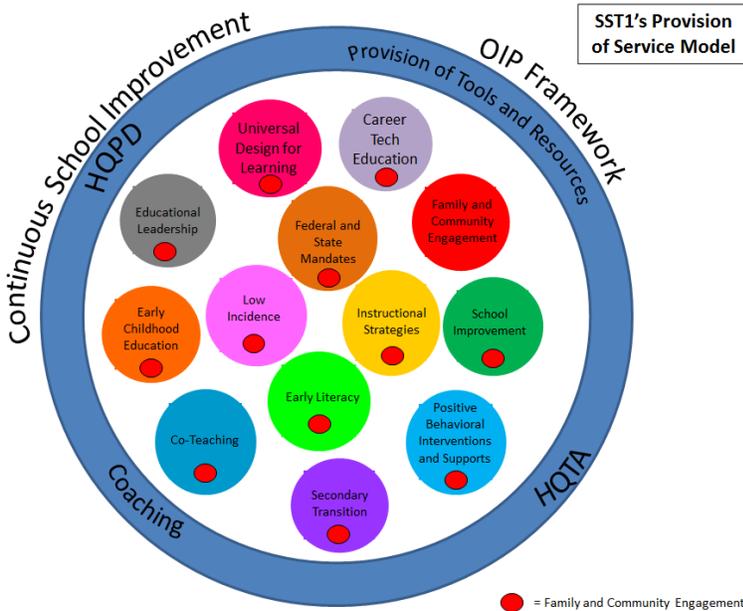
According to McKahan, "the OIP and its team infrastructure are critical!" "No matter what a team decides to focus on, such as literacy, having a structure in place for educators to learn together and inform each other's practice is a pre-requisite to effective implementation," she said. "We've been working with districts

to move them away from seeing the OIP and its associated tools and templates as a check-off list, to seeing it as a mechanism that can help them focus on the right work. The teams that are successful use the template as a guide. The struggling teams let the template – and the ‘filling in’ of the template – become the work.”



**The Plan is the ‘Glue’.** Development of a unified plan that integrates work around a limited number of focused goals is a necessary step toward improvement for the districts supported by SST 1 and other SSTs across Ohio. While McKahan characterizes “the plan as the glue” that drives improvement efforts, she also acknowledges that various plans will likely always be required in response to federal and/or state mandates.

“We talk to districts about looking beyond the paper to the substance of the plans and how to organize essential content so it is aligned and working toward the same district-identified goals. Often, plans are written to get at the same end goal. ‘Doing OIP’ is not the end goal; rather, use of the OIP supports implementation of strategies identified by the district. PBIS is not about behavior in isolation; rather it’s a tool to shape the learning environment in order to improve access and achievement,” she said.



SST 1 consultants work with districts to help them refine their plan, or to develop a new unified plan by folding in relevant content from other plans so that the work is connected, understood by everyone, and more doable.

Districts are at different places in the process, according to McKahan. “The districts that understand the importance of focus and alignment are always the ones with central office buy-in and an understanding of the process. And these districts typically want to move quickly to involving principals across the district,” she added.

To assist districts in getting beyond what McKahan calls programmatic silos, SST 1 learned about and is now using integrated comprehensive systems (ICS) as a strategy for supporting all districts to re-examine their service delivery models. “When districts aren’t focused on silos and instead are focused on integrating everything they’re doing, they’re able to see each student as part of the whole student body, rather than seeing them as part of a subgroup that has to be addressed separately,” explained McKahan.

Developed by Colleen Capper and Elise Frattura (e.g., 2009), ICS offers a framework for school districts to use in analyzing how various features of the district and school culture, organization, and operation affect the equitable treatment of all learners, particularly those from traditionally marginalized groups (e.g., students identified as having a disability, students who are English learners). *For more information on ICS, go to the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC) website and access the module titled Learner Supports (Educational Frameworks page).*

**Practicing What We Preach.** SST 1 has 21 members organized around three major components of work: (1) special education; (2) continuous improvement using the OIP; and (3) early learning and school readiness. About three years ago, SST 1 encountered issues that resulted from staff sending different messages to districts about what the SST would and would not support. That experience served as a wake-up call for the SST and, since that time, staff has worked diligently to identify common messages and non-negotiables to guide their work as an SST. “Last year was the first year we had non-negotiables; now we’re starting to use them and they’re becoming a part of our vernacular, our way of thinking,” observed McKahan.

The SST has also taken steps to ensure that all staff members participate as members of cross-functional work teams using the same CI process the SST trains districts to use. In addition to meeting as a whole staff twice per month, six work teams meet at least once per month with Mondays designated as in-house office days. McKahan noted that while the names of the work teams (i.e., designated to address Toledo Public Schools, behavior/school climate, literacy, ICS, early learning and school readiness, and diverse learners) may sound siloed, the team member composition of each team includes staff across all work areas (e.g., special education, CI). SST staff review data together, make decisions together, communicate and network to integrate knowledge and build the collective know-how and capacity of the SST to more effectively support districts across the region.

“A lot of people say that they can’t give up this much staff time each month so we talked about it as a group to determine whether the use of work teams was actually helping SST staff members do a better job. The staff was adamant that the use of work teams continue, saying they relied on the process to help them collaborate, problem-solve, and at times, commiserate together. When given the opportunity *not* to collaborate, they rejected it,” recalled McKahan.

And that collaboration is paying off. Of the 114 districts and community schools in region 1, SST 1 consultants support 26 intensively and many others on a less-intense level. “Our goal is to touch 80% of our districts throughout the year,” said McKahan. “We accept districts where they are and help them decide how they want to improve. In the past, we were much more heavy-handed and staff would say to districts, ‘nope, this is what you have to do and this is how you have to do it,’” said McKahan. “Now, we use a softer approach that first validates what districts



**State Support Team**

**State Support Team Region 1**  
**Non-negotiables (Belief System)**

1. SST is responsible for discussing continuous school improvement in all the educational entities it serves.
2. Consultants will integrate multiple resources and perspectives to support LEA growth. This will be undertaken in a collaborative manner, within the SST and within the district.
3. SST will take and promote a strength-based/asset-based approach with our LEAs/CSs/education agencies.
4. SST supports the use of multiple sources of student and adult data in the data analysis process (supplied by the state, the district, and the community). Data-driven dialogue is critical in making decisions regarding student achievement and implementation of effective instructional practices.
5. Adult behaviors must support each student’s learning and growth.

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are doing, and then helps them focus on asking the right questions – such as, are you OK with 30% of your children not being able to read at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade – rather than simply completing the template correctly. It has helped them and it has helped us grow as a staff,” she added.

## A Case in Point

SST 1 encourages districts to focus on doing the hard work of district-wide improvement because it's the right work to do, not because the district happens to be on a school improvement list generated by Ohio's differentiated accountability system. This message is one that resonates with many districts in the region including the leadership of the Bowling Green City School District (BGCS).



“Using the OIP with SST support has helped us dedicate laser-like focus on what we need to do, as well as identify the fringe pieces that we shouldn't be spending time and resources on any longer,” explained Dr. Ann McCarty, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning for BGCS. In her 20<sup>th</sup> year of professional service as an educator, McCarty returned to Ohio last year from Arlington, Virginia where she served as a middle school principal. Earlier in her career, she taught in the Columbus (Ohio) City School District.

SST 1 consultant Marty Schloegl is supporting McCarty, the superintendent, and other DLT members to put processes and leadership team structures in place, use OIP tools (e.g., *Decision Framework* tool) to review relevant data and prioritize core work, and explore the district's track record in providing equitable opportunities to learn for all children. “The SST is part of everything we've done, including introducing us to John Saphier's<sup>1</sup> work on equity,” said McCarty.

### **BOWLING GREEN CITY SCHOOLS (BGCS) – FOCUSED GOALS**

- Through the use of responsive pedagogy and research-based practices, BGCS will close the achievement gap between special education and all students by no less than 3% each year for three consecutive years in Mathematics.
- Through the use of responsive pedagogy and research-based practices, BGCS will close the achievement gap between special education and all students by no less than 3% each year for three consecutive years in Reading.
- BGCS faculty and staff will engage in professional development activities that facilitate equitable experiences for all students.

As a result of the district's commitment to improving outcomes for all learners, and the SST's support and assistance, BGCS has developed a focused plan around three goal areas and changes in the way district personnel practice are starting to take hold. For example, the high school has reallocated

<sup>1</sup> John Saphier is president and founder of Research for Better Teaching (RBT). For more information, go to: <http://www.rbteach.com/why-rbt/our-people/jon-saphier>

meeting time to be used for professional development (PD) aligned with district-identified goals. The middle school principal (currently in his second year of the principalship) participates in the *Ohio Leadership for Inclusion, Implementation, and Instructional Improvement (OLi<sup>4</sup>)*<sup>2</sup> project and receives monthly in school coaching from Schloegl.

McCarty, Schloegl, and the middle school principal meet regularly to focus on instruction and share what they're learning from OLi<sup>4</sup> with other principals. McCarty also initiated quarterly monitoring meetings with principals this year and found that support in working with BLTs – a focus of OLi<sup>4</sup> PD – is a universal need. "OLi<sup>4</sup> is supporting the district by helping to build capacity among other leaders," said McCarty.

McKahan added: "In districts like BGCS, it's all about leadership. They're willing to work with struggling teachers and don't view that as a problem, but rather as something they need to work through together. The superintendent is critical, but so are strong curriculum and student services directors. OLi<sup>4</sup> has been a gift in supporting central office personnel to get support to principals as quickly as possible."

McCarty is intentionally extending learning to all staff through a focus on equity. Personnel are reading *Out of My Mind* and were introduced to other resources (e.g., *The Will to Lead, the Skill to Teach*) as a way to foster constructive dialogue around the effects of low expectations and the importance of responsive instruction on student learning.

"We can provide responsive instruction and rigor at the same time but we have to support students differently to get there. Although we have some discomfort right now, staff members are beginning to understand that they need to do things differently and these conversations are happening at the TBT level.

"Our butterfly wings are getting ready to sprout!" said McCarty.

## References

Capper, C. A., & Frattura, E. M. (2009). *Meeting the needs of students of all abilities: How leaders go beyond inclusion (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Draper, S. M. (2012). *Out of my mind*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

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Muhammad, A., & Hollie, S. (2012). *The will to lead, the skill to teach: Transforming schools at every level*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, go to <https://www.oli-4.org/>.

### ***For More Information***

For more information about how State Support Team (SST) Region 1 is supporting districts to gain focus needed for meaningful implementation of effective instructional strategies, contact Lynn McKahan, Director, SST Region 1, 2275 Collingwood Blvd., Toledo, OH 43620; 419.720.8999; or via email at [esclew\\_lm@sstr1.org](mailto:esclew_lm@sstr1.org).

For more information about Bowling Green City Schools' efforts to focus and prioritize core work to improve results for all children, contact Dr. Ann McCarty, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, Bowling Green City Schools, 137 Clough Street, Bowling Green, OH 43402; 419.352.3576; or via email at [amccarty@bgcs.k12.oh.us](mailto:amccarty@bgcs.k12.oh.us).

For more information about the **OLAC and OIP** resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director, at [jimgay@basa-ohio.org](mailto:jimgay@basa-ohio.org).