Achievement and Access for All (A³): *SST 12's Unified Approach Helps Districts Eliminate Pillars and Address Low Expectations*

Not too many years ago, SST 12 provided training, consultation, and other services to multiple groups of educators in the districts and agencies served by the SST; however, these services were typically delivered to groups by the professional role of the attendees. For example, training and related sessions were held separately for directors of special education, for curriculum directors, for early childhood personnel, and for other groups.

The intentional integration of SST services to be provided to all 42 districts in the largely rural 13-county region began around 2012-2013 with the development of the *Achievement and Access for All (A³)* initiative.

A^3 – an organizing framework for SST personnel in designing and delivering services to improve learning for all children, fit well with the mission of the SST to "partner with districts in the development of a unified system of education through the use of a connected set of tools to improve instructional practice and student performance on a continuing basis."

Unifying Service Delivery

Additional support for *A³'s* focus on unifying processes came from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP) introduction in 2014 of a revised accountability system called Results-Driven Accountability (RDA). RDA shifted the accountability from a longstanding and primary emphasis on compliance to a focus on improved results for students with disabilities, and aligned components of the accountability system to better support States in improving results through an emphasis on child outcomes (e.g., early learning outcomes, performance on assessments, graduation).

SST 12 provides services and technical assistance to school districts, educational service centers, community schools, early childhood centers, and families in Guernsey, Muskingum, Belmont, Perry, Monroe, Morgan, Holmes, Coshocton, Harrison, Jefferson, Noble, Tuscarawas and Carroll counties.

This focus on unifying service delivery was also supported by the state's use of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) as a framework for supporting SSTs in providing consistent, coherent, and high quality professional development and technical assistance to all districts. "The unified system builds the internal capacity of every district to move all students, including those with disabilities, to higher levels of performance," explained Brad McFadden, Director of SST Region 12. Prior to becoming SST 12 Director, McFadden served as transition consultant and then special education contact and assistant director for the SST. "We no longer differentiate SST personnel by titles like special education contact person (SPEC) or single point of contact (SPoC). We identify by roles such as director or consultant with the understanding that every SST employee is here to improve results for all children, irrespective of student subgroup designation," added McFadden.

Consultant Leads Karen Merrin Swope and Holly Hall were instrumental in working with McFadden to restructure the way services were provided to SST 12 districts and agencies. Both brought a wealth of experience to their SST positions – Hall as a disability and transition manager with Head Start; and Merrin Swope as a teacher, district reading specialist, elementary principal, director of curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent, and East Central Ohio Special Education Regional Resource Center consultant.

Regional Leadership Team. Consultant Leads work with the Director to plan for the integration of SST services. To support the integration process, McFadden, Merrin Swope, and Hall created a Regional Leadership Team (RLT) as a structure that could function much like a district leadership team (DLT) functions within a school district. In addition to holding brief monthly business meetings, all SST 12 personnel convene monthly for RLT meetings during which SST staff members use the Ohio five-step process to plan services to be provided, monitor the implementation of those services, and continually evaluate the effect of that implementation on the progress of recipients in the region.

"We used to have different internal structures in place that mirrored the services we provided, such as special education meetings, early childhood meetings, school improvement meetings. Now, we capitalize on individual staff member expertise by making prevention and intervention our focus and planning all services with the goal of improving core instruction for all children and decreasing inappropriate referral to and placement in special education," explained Merrin Swope. Hall added, "we don't have to be expert in all things, and we also don't want only one person to have all the knowledge; our challenge was to rely on individual expertise while broadening the shared understanding of all staff."

Cross-functional Teams & Training. The A^3 initiative fostered shared learning on the part of SST personnel by engaging all staff in planning and delivering training. For example, a cross-functional team of three staff members, comprised of Merrin Swope, Hall, and one other staff member designed and delivered training in positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS). Using this approach required SST personnel to be "cross-trained" to plan and deliver professional development collaboratively. "When we started this process a couple years ago, there was some pushback from staff who would say things like, 'I'm an expert in X and I don't feel comfortable writing a school improvement letter.' So we provided training, we read our letters aloud so staff could support each other, and we encouraged staff to ask each other for resources, input, and assistance as needed. I never take individual staff member's area of expertise away from them," stated McFadden.

The SST 12 Leadership Team is another structure used to build the collective understanding and capacity of SST 12 staff, area DLT representatives, and representatives from county boards of developmental disabilities (DD), career technical centers, educational service centers, and other entities served by the SST. The Leadership Team meets quarterly under the umbrella of A^3 and focuses on such issues as RDA, early literacy, and other topics related to improving results for all children. McFadden notes: "I always say 'capital A – capital L – capital L' in talking about the pre-K-12 system and the need to care about all kids in

the region. Even if a child doesn't attend an ODE-sponsored preschool, that child eventually comes to an area school system where we have to educate them."

All SST consultants help plan A³ and are required to attend A³ Leadership Team meetings. One important aspect of SST 12's work involves the number of small rural districts served by the SST. "Allowing district personnel to attend sessions that provide relevant information in a coherent way, helping them "connect the dots," provides a real service to them. They no longer have to attend multiple separate meetings that focus on one aspect of the work," said McFadden.

Supporting District Use of OIP-OLAC

OLAC modules and resources are embedded in a variety of trainings provided by SST 12 personnel. For example, OLAC videos and handouts are included in sessions ranging from training on alternate assessment to training sessions for parent/family members.

At the same time, comprehensive monitoring is being integrated into districts' focused improvement plans so issues that become actions for corrective monitoring become part of district plans. Adult indicators for improving student achievement would be included as an integral part of the plans. When SST personnel work with districts, they ensure that conversations about monitoring and improvement both occur at DLT level, and that necessary actions are tied to the district plan. Hall notes, "working with individual schools is not sufficient for system-wide change and improvement." Merrin Swope concurs, explaining that a couple years ago, "districts would have a focused plan and then go into support status and see this as something separate from their plan. Similarly, districts would develop a focused plan using OIP and then get a Race to the Top grant and see them as separate, disconnected work. The work we were doing with each district got scaled up to the regional level through A³ and nothing gets to stay in its own silo now."

What Rules Your World?

The use of A³ as a strategy for bringing district, agency, and SST representatives with varying roles together for the purpose of shared learning and collective action took intentional planning on the part of SST leadership. Merrin Swope recalls that "someone from a particular area, such as Title I, would be invited to an A³ session and say, 'why should I care about that?' So, it had to be marketed well and integrated well." "We constantly made connections to major initiatives or requirements that districts faced – like OTES, IDEA, ESEA flexibility waiver – and showed how OIP-OLAC and other aspects of our work helped them meet requirements," added McFadden. "For example, we'd talk about the relationships across principle 3 of OTES, standards on climate, and PBIS and implications for districts," he added.

McFadden advises other SSTs to stay the course despite inevitable resistance to change. Asking what Merrin Swope calls the "what rules your world" question and showing how various pieces of work are related helps districts and other recipients of SST services stay focused on the big goal – improved instructional practice and learning for all children.

Another bit of advice to other SSTs: Hire individuals that know their job is to improve learning for every child. "The biggest attribute we look for in prospective employees is a vision that all students can succeed. One of my pet peeves is when someone says 'those kids or SE kids.' That's a big red flag and it indicates lower expectations for some children," said McFadden. "We don't use pillar language now," added Merrin Swope.

McFadden summarized, "Our focus is on RDA. We can't stop and say we're integrated now so the work is done. We have to keep finding ways to bring people on board in the service of improved results for all kids."

For more information, contact Brad McFadden, Director, SST Region 12, 1300 Clairmont Avenue, Cambridge, OH 43725, 740.439.9383 (x 2312); brad.mcfadden@mvesc.org.