EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT TEAMS IN SCHOOL DISTRICT SYSTEMS

ACT 173 TECHNICAL GUIDANCE

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Introduction

This document is one of a series of four supporting guidance documents the Agency of Education (AOE) has developed to provide supplemental information to the Education Quality Standards (EQS) rules and practices as they pertain to the change in practices necessary to implement Act 173 of 2018. In a document entitled, *Developing Systems to Support the Success of All Students* released on Aug. 26, 2019, the AOE identified four areas of focused activity for school districts and supervisory unions (SU/SDs) under Act 173:

- Educational Support Teams (ESTs);
- Local Comprehensive Assessment System;
- Coordinated Curriculum; and
- Needs-based Professional Development.

The AOE will be publishing supplemental guidance documents for each of these focus areas regularly through January of 2020. Together, the goal of these guidance documents is to build coherence among educational stakeholders about the work involved to implement Act 173 successfully. Coherence and focus will be necessary as we then shift our work to identifying, supporting and scaling best practices across the entire educational system.

All supporting technical guidance documents in this series will follow a similar structure. Section one will contain a definition of the topic so there is clarity about how the topic is situated in the current regulatory and practice context. Section two will describe why the topic is a major systems lever for the successful implementation of Act 173. Systems lever is defined as an organizational structure that can be used to quickly bring about the alignment of instructional support activities to enhance the effectiveness, availability and equity of services provided to students who require additional supports among all schools in a district. Section three will describe how to implement the topic in the context of a school district system. This is an important consideration, since SU/SD policies emanating from the state have pointed to centralizing key instructional systems at the SU/SD level. Section four will outline how the AOE plans to provide leadership, support and oversight relative to the topic in the coming months. Additionally, a Resources section will be appended to these guidance documents to provide an easy reference to related technical concepts.

Section One: Educational Support Teams in the Current Regulatory and Practice Context

This section defines Educational Support Teams (EST) and their background and basis in statute. There is a summary of the EST process and their importance in the context of student support systems for SU/SDs.

What Is An Educational Support Team?

All Vermont schools are required to have a tiered system of academic and behavioral supports that, at a minimum, includes an EST. The tiered system (and by extension, an EST) must be "designed to enhance the ability of the general education system to meet the needs of all students," supporting academic, social/behavioral needs regardless of eligibility for categorical programs. The tiered system must promote collaboration with families as well as community supports.

The EST is required to "pay particular attention to students during times of academic or personal transition," identify supports and services which have been provided to students, and assist in planning services, supports and enrichment activities. The EST must maintain a record of its actions and report to the Secretary of Education via the annual MTSS survey.

There has been a statutory requirement for an EST (or IST) since 1989. Educational (or instructional) support teams have been shown to be instrumental in supporting many Vermont students over that time. However, there are incomplete practices and understandings of ESTs that have become fairly common. One example is the belief that an EST is part of a continuum that includes [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#) and special education. It is not. Though student needs may be addressed through an EST, it is intended to enhance the general education system. Also, as noted in statute, students with disabilities who receive services or accommodations through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 should be referred to the EST if additional needs arise that are not addressed adequately through general education.

There also may be a tendency to confound the EST with a tiered system or Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS). MTSS is a framework that defines an entire educational system. The EST is a team that follows processes to support students and to enhance the MTSS framework. MTSS, as defined in Vermont (VTmtss) consists of five integrated components: a systemic and comprehensive approach, high quality instruction and intervention, effective collaboration, comprehensive assessment and expertise. The EST reflects all of these components and provides an opportunity to examine the relative strengths of each. However, an EST is not a system and cannot function appropriately without a broader structure.

The EST Process

In practice, an EST typically responds to referrals. The referral process and what takes place before the referral varies. When a school system has a strong MTSS framework, referrals would usually be preceded by shared work within an instructional or grade level team. The referral would include data (formative, benchmark, behavioral) that help define the concern and the teacher and/or team would have accessed readily available supports from interventionists. The family of the student would have had regular information about their child's progress.

The referring teacher or team may have a good idea as to what additional support is needed. This could involve a schedule change to allow more access to an interventionist, other

specialist/interventionist support not typically accessible without administrative action, or assistance in developing a response to intervention (RTI) plan. For students in upper grades, especially in larger schools, there could be a need for supports to address behavior across settings. In some cases, there may be concern that a student has a disability that impacts learning and there is a request for consultation about a referral for a special education evaluation.

EST referrals may also result from concerns that a teacher cannot be expected to address, such as life circumstances which affect a student's learning or access to school. An EST may be able to facilitate access to in-school supports in such a case. While not all circumstances that impact learning are amenable to educational supports, in a highly collaborative SU/SD the EST can be useful in working with other agencies or community services.

If an EST is to function effectively, team composition is critical. There must be an administrator or a team member with the authority to direct scheduling and assign staff. Interventionists, school psychologists and special educators are also valuable team members. It is vital that families are also included for each student. They are often excellent resources of information and can support the work of the team. Families also have a right to know what is happening and being discussed about their children in school.

An effective EST process ensures that families are fully involved. In schools with a strong collaborative culture, family engagement is common, even before an EST referral. However, this is not always the case. The EST should have formal processes in place to involve families and, when possible, engage the family in supporting their child's learning.

The Importance of Educational Support Teams

Educational Support Teams (ESTs) are a long-standing policy approach in Vermont. Since Act 173 will require a careful examination of all student support systems, it is important to consider how ESTs can be leveraged.

This examination of student support systems should include how to improve the quality of core instruction and how to ensure students obtain maximum exposure to core instruction. Core instruction should be a central focus of any SU/SD. This points to a consideration of perhaps the most important variable in school instructional practices, time.

ESTs can be made more efficient and effective, particularly when considered in the context of a school district system where the centralization of certain EST components can improve their effectiveness and maximize time on instruction. This is especially true for SU/SDs with many small schools since teachers in these schools wear many hats. These teachers are often simultaneously tasked with designing and coordinating supports while also implementing them.

Section Two: ESTs as a Major Systems Lever for Act 173

With its role in managing supplemental supports for students as well as improving general education capacity, an effective EST is central to the successful implementation of Act 173. An EST may provide access to supports that decrease the need for special education services. An appropriately staffed EST may also serve to identify students with disabilities who require specialized instruction or accommodations through special education or Section 504. Either way, the EST can provide data and documentation that aids decision making.

The EST comes into play when student needs exceed the usual capacity of a general education system. An EST referral usually occurs when staff feel they lack the expertise or authority to provide appropriate supports. While this may be framed as a student problem, it is more accurately a systems problem (See Section Three). The immediate response by the EST will be to provide support for the student. However, there is an important longer-term need to consider how the capacity of the educational system may be increased.

Although statute places responsibility for the EST and tiered system of supports with school boards, which the SU/SD boards and superintendents oversee, actual practice often lies at the individual school level. This is problematic for several reasons. While many principals are effective at increasing capacity in their schools, they are limited if they do not have access to SU/SD resources. Without a systemic approach through the SU/SD, improvement may be limited or piecemeal. This can create equity gaps between schools and is not conducive to smooth transitions for students from one school to the next.

In an educational system committed to continuous improvement, the EST has an important systemic role. As noted earlier, the EST often comes into play when student needs exceed the capacity of general education. An effective EST will likely have dedicated meeting time to review the types of supports that have been provided and to consider what could be done to increase capacity by providing greater collaboration and expertise. A mechanism for the recommendations of the EST for systemic improvements to be considered and acted on should be in place. The timing of recommendations should be such that the recommendations are actionable. This suggests that recommendations be made when districts are formulating continuous improvement plans.

How an EST looks and functions depends on context. While the EST can have an important role in supporting the systemic improvement necessary for success under Act 173, their success will require a shared commitment to improving the core instruction that takes place in the general education classroom. SU/SDs with the most effective educational systems will have the most effective ESTs; this makes the EST an active part of a responsive system.

Section Three: Implementation of ESTs in a School District System

Many Vermont instructional practices, including VTmtss and EST, recommend a "systems" approach. For the purposes of meeting the goals of Act 173 in a post-Act 46 environment, we can now define "systems" to mean "SU/SD" more directly. This shift means evaluating to what

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extent centralized or SU/SD-level resources can be better leveraged to improve outcomes for students at the local or school level. An understanding of how the EST process has historically been deployed at the local level can inform how to implement a consistent approach to EST across an SU/SD. Specifically, organizational processes other than instructional processes (e.g. meetings) might be better shifted to the district level if a certain amount of standardization is employed. Such standardization could improve the consistency and quality of organizational decision-making while at the same time creating more time at the school level for direct instruction by having fewer meetings.

Staffing

A key consideration for managing EST at the district level is staffing. This can begin with a clear definition of roles and responsibilities for managing the EST system. This means someone should have the ultimate responsibility for managing the EST process at the district level written into their job description. Criteria for program evaluation can then be established and embedded in the individual's professional evaluation.

Data and Reporting

Centralized management of EST is possible when there is a standardized approach to EST data and reporting. Most student information systems (SISs) include the ability to attach a record comparable to an EST referral form to the student's record in the SIS. Districts should require all EST referrals and associated meeting minutes be logged into this system. Consistent data and record keeping across a school district will allow leadership teams to better understand the patterns of students' and systems' needs among the schools in the district, which in turn can lead to a more effective allocation of intervention services at the district level.

Scheduling EST Meetings

It is more efficient to hold standing meetings for ESTs at regularly scheduled times at each school so that district staff are better able to staff these meetings. The length and frequency of EST meetings should be monitored so that the impact on direct instruction can be considered. It can be useful to categorize the complexity of EST meetings across a school district system so that a meeting that is deemed to be very complex, for example, is resourced with the appropriate expertise of district and school-level staff.

Paying for EST at the SU/SD

There are several ways to sustain funding for the coordination of an EST at the district level. In some organizations, this function can easily be assigned to a district-level leader already on staff such as an assistant superintendent, curriculum director, or instructional leader. In these cases, local funding would not need to be increased. It would also be possible to lower costs of EST management in some organizations if there are staff already employed at the school level with the capability to manage an EST.

Federal funding can be a good option for funding an EST. Consolidated Federal Program (CFP) grants or Medicaid are good options for financial resources. Also, Act 173 requires a shift from a

reimbursement model to a block grant, which is designed to provide increased flexibility. However the EST is funded, it is important to remember an EST is a required process under Vermont law and Vermont State Board of Education regulation so it should be staffed appropriately.

EST and School Board Policy

It will be important to bring school board policy into alignment with organizing an EST at the district level. There is a longstanding initiative in Vermont for each school board to have a policy on ESTs. The Vermont School Boards Association promotes a model policy in this area. School boards should consider shifting this policy to the district or supervisory union level to support a better articulation of EST across the entire SU/SD. Likewise, the supervisory union board should consider requiring regular monitoring reports on EST activity and outcomes to ensure this important organizational process is being implemented effectively. Once a solid policy framework is established, administrative procedures relative to the specific staffing, reporting and scheduling processes for ESTs should be established to support the consistent implementation of ESTs over time, and to make it less vulnerable to staff turnover.

Section Four: AOE Leadership, Support and Oversight

The AOE will shift its direct professional development and technical training for ESTs to support the implementation and management of these processes at the district level with the expectation that districts provide direct support to their schools on how the EST is specifically articulated in their system.

The AOE will engage with SU/SD system stakeholders to determine which support and oversight functions would best support scaling best practices for district-level EST implementation. The AOE will be attentive to the alignment among current oversight functions (e.g. Integrated Field Reviews, Continuous Improvement Plans and CFP investment strategies) to ensure districts are moving towards systems coherence for EST implementation and management. A focus of this AOE oversight will be on supporting systems at the district level that maximize time on direct instruction.

As patterns of best practice of district-level ESTs emerge, the AOE will seek opportunities to disseminate and scale these practices across the state. For example, effective models of EST record keeping identified at the SU/SD level could lead to a required format promulgated at the state level. Similarly, when effective district policy models are identified, the AOE will evaluate, with stakeholder input, whether or not it would be useful to recommend that such policy language be mandatory.

As the AOE makes more progress on the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), it will evaluate to what extent EST record management could be standardized across the state to improve the quality of these data, and to possibly include them in education quality reporting. Data from the EST processes could be valuable for informing district continuous improvement plans.

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Resources

[Educational Support Team – A Deeper Look](#) : This paper provides information about Educational Support Teams and addresses some common misconceptions.

[VTmtss Educational Support Team](#) : This is a brief description of the Educational Support Team and team process.

[Vermont Title 16 V.S.A. § 2902](#) : These are the statuatory requirements and a description of the Education Support Team.

[Sparks, D. (2013). Strong teams, strong schools. Journal of Staff Development, 34(2), 28-30](#) : Learning Forward is a professional learning association dedicated to equity and excellence in teaching. This article describes the key characteristics of effective teams.

[SWIFT MTSS Starter Kit](#) : An Educational Support Team is part of a tiered system of supports. The SWIFT education center has a number of tools that can be useful in building a tiered system.

[The Data Wise Project](#) : Data Wise is an effective program to help learn how to make better use of data in teaching and learning.

[Vermont Agency of Education. (2019). Family Engagement Tool Kit and Self-Assessment](#) : Family engagement in the Educational Support Team process is required whenever possible. The Family Engagement Toolkit is an invaluable resource for all aspects of inclusion and engagement.

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