

SCHOOL SUPPORT SYSTEM

A Collaborative System of Focused Monitoring

The School Support System (SSS) is being implemented by the Rhode Island Department of Education, Office of Special Needs (RIDE/OSN), to improve outcomes for students with exceptionalities who receive special education services. The SSS evaluates the quality and effectiveness of special education, and the extent to which the district (Local Education Agency) meets special education laws and regulations. It emphasizes:

- involving the whole school district, including administrators, special and general educators, students and parents;
- gathering and analyzing information from multiple sources of information;
- visiting all schools, interviewing administrators and staff to focus on the appropriateness of the education for specific special needs students; and
- developing a School Support System Plan for strengthening programs and correcting essential areas in order to improve student performance.

The School Support System, piloted in Westerly during the spring of 1995, is an evolving process currently in its second full 5-year cycle. The Office of Special Needs, in conjunction with the Rhode Island Technical Assistance Project has continuously refined the School Support System in order to ensure alignment with the newly authorized federal IDEA legislation. Moreover, the School Support System addresses the Comprehensive Education Strategy and the R.I. Student Investment Initiative. These are state general education initiatives designed to close gaps in student performance and prepare students for the 21st century. Hence, the School Support System is designed to align with current standards-based reform efforts and supports the following beliefs and assumptions:

- An assigned category or level of special need does not define the educational needs of students.
- To the maximum extent possible, students with special needs are meaningfully included in the general education program.
- The curricula are based on standards that are sufficiently broad to support the learning needs of all students and include academic and skill areas.
- Individual Education Plans reflect state and local standards for student performance, incorporate varied assessments, and utilize a broad array of accommodations for testing and learning.
- A comprehensive system of professional training must support and encourage the involvement of all personnel in addressing the learning needs of students with the full range of abilities and exceptionalities.

The School Support System integrates multiple sources of information in order to develop a support plan that is directed at increasing student performance and is founded on proven practice. Moreover, the Rhode Island Department of Education, Office of Special Needs seeks to create collegial and collaborative relationships with the school district, thereby involving the entire district in evaluating the quality of special education services. As a result, the process delineates the district's strengths and needs, culminating in the development of a plan to improve service delivery. Our goal is to implement agreements in a timely and systematic way to get corrective actions (support plans) instituted in order to assure continuous high performance of all children.

Information Gathering

Before visiting the district, the Office of Special Needs and the district meet to initiate the process that provides an emerging picture of the present status of programs and services for students with exceptionalities. The School Support System not only looks at the school district's degree of compliance with special education laws and regulations, but also the relationships among the district's teaching and learning practices and the performance indicators for students with exceptionalities. Hence, the system not only examines the district's compliance with the re-authorized Individuals with Exceptionalities Education Act and the State's Regent's Regulations, but how the district's practices relate to critical performance indicators for students with exceptionalities. The process includes a review of qualitative and quantitative data sources that have the most direct relationship with student performance and program effectiveness. These include:

- collecting and reviewing a range of performance measures (e.g., data from Information Works! and the SALT Survey, graduation and drop-out rates of special education students, drop-out/graduation rates, suspensions, expulsions)
- reviewing a sample of students' special education records
- surveying administrators, special educators, general educators, parents, and related personnel
- observing special education students randomly selected for the SSS visit
- engaging in on-site discussions/interviews with students randomly selected for the SSS visit
- interviewing special and general education personnel, and parents

The data-analysis provides the opportunity for collaborative reflection by teachers, parents, and administrators in order to inform the School Support System. In accord with federal mandates under I.D.E.A., and the recommendations of the National Center for Educational Outcomes, the Office of Special Needs recommends that the district focus on central questions such as:

1. Do students have access to a full range of programs and services available to non-disabled children, including general and vocational education programs and the core curricula?

2. How many IEPs reference the local or state curricula? How do students perform in these pinpointed areas?
3. Are students with exceptionalities educated in the general education program, unless their education cannot – with the use of supplementary aids and service – be achieved satisfactorily without removal from the general education program?
4. Do all students have the opportunity to access the core curriculum in a manner that takes into consideration their individual exceptionalities and learning styles?
5. What processes and provisions are available for adapting or modifying the curriculum to meet the needs of a variety of students?
6. Does the district utilize instructional methods and materials that are responsible to the needs of a heterogeneous school population? Has the district established specific instructional priorities and goals for meeting the learning needs of each and every child?

On-Site Visits

The on-site visits begin with the district's presentation to the School Support System team. This includes an overview of specific programs and/or issues and provides the district with the opportunity to showcase its programs. During the next three days, the School Support System team members visit all schools in order to interview school administrators, teaching staff, central administrators, and parents about programs and services for students with exceptionalities. The team will also engage in on-site discussions/interviews with students. In addition, the team members conduct observations of special education students in both special and general education settings.

Focus on the Student

In order to determine the appropriateness of special education delivery systems, the School Support System studies programs and services in relation to specific students. Students with exceptionalities within schools are selected randomly. The School Support System team reviews these students' records, observes the students in their classroom, and/or interviews the student. Additionally, the team interviews their parents and teachers and other service providers. In the review of the student's record, the consultant looks at the Individual Education Program (IEP) to determine if the student has made progress from one year to the next. Reviewing student growth and progress clarifies how the student performs in the school setting.

The School Support System Report and Support Plan

At the end of the School Support System visit, the SSS Team writes a report detailing indicators and findings. Next, the School Support System team reviews the draft with the district. And finally, the SSS Team and the district jointly develop the Support Plan. The final report describes the nature and extent of programs and services. It also describes areas of non-compliance and how the school district will correct them. Furthermore, the Support Plan details technical assistance and training needed to enable the schools and district to

strengthen selected educational programs and correct essential areas. Resources are identified and made available to the district to assist in carrying out their support plans.

The School Support System Plan will include action plans, specific resources, staff responsibilities, timelines for completion, and mechanisms for verification. It is critical that these plans focus on continuous improvement in delivery systems and curricula that lead to higher achievement for students with exceptionalities.

School Support System Elements

1. District and RIDE Orientation Meeting
2. District and RIDE Data Analysis Meeting
3. Team Visit Preparation
4. District Presentation, School/District Visits, and Staff, Parent and Student Interviews
5. District/RIDE Meeting to Develop SSS Report that includes Support Plan
6. Implementation and Verification of Support Plan

I. District and RIDE Orientation Meeting

Purpose

District representatives meet with members of the School Support System core team to receive an orientation and overview of the School Support System, to plan for the site visit, to discuss local issues, and to begin collecting key indicators on special education services. The orientation includes a description by the core team of the elements of the School Support System, as well as a schedule of School Support System activities. The core members assist the district in planning for its presentation to the full School Support System Team.

Persons Involved

- District Personnel, usually Special Education administrator(s), a key person acting as an information liaison on behalf of the district to the OSN School Support System Team, principals, and selected staff
- The School Support System Core Team, including the following RIDE representatives:
 - School Support System Coordinator
 - School Support System Specialist
 - Educational Specialist to the District
 - Rhode Island Technical Assistance Project Staff
 - LAC Representative
 - Other RIDE Representation (as appropriate)

During the orientation meeting, district representatives inform the School Support System core team members of any initiatives or significant issues that influence service delivery. The Office of Special Needs works with the district to collect and analyze various indicators including:

- Access to core curriculum and participation in general education
- Results of Surveys, Record Reviews
- State Performance Assessments (district/school aggregates, individual data for 30 special education students)
- SALT Surveys, Information Works!
- Child Find Data
- Instructional and Assessment Modifications

Benefits

The district personnel are informed of their role and responsibility in the process prior to the school visits. They will become aware of their participation in the study of their program and services for students with special needs. They will also become aware of their role in the SSS visit and their contribution in the development of the final SSS Report and Support Plan. In addition, the district will receive information pertaining to scheduling with school staff and parents, and preparing necessary information for the visiting on-site team. Core team members receive pertinent information on district issues.

II. District Data Analysis Meeting

Purpose

District personnel and the School Support System Core Team meet to review district information. Both RIDE and the school district will provide information sources to address the status of programs and services within the district. All analyses begin with the child. In this effort, RIDE will review a sample of approximately 30 randomly selected students with exceptionalities for purposes of intensive case review.

Persons Involved

- District Personnel
- Principals, particularly those principals of schools hosting SALT visits
- School Support System Core Team

Description

District personnel and the School Support Core Team meet to review district information to identify the district's strengths and weaknesses. Data sources include:

1. Description of district and student population (LEA.)
2. Statistical information on services and placements (OSN census)
3. Indicators related to Child Find, vocational programs, graduation/drop rates. (LEA)
4. District's Strategic Plan and School Improvement Plans; last monitoring report
5. Compliance information - complaints, hearings, mediations and waivers (OSN compiles data.)
6. Student record reviews and parent surveys (Completed by SSS teams.)
7. Summary of staff surveys (Completed by district staff and compiled by SSS.)
8. Analysis of performance on state assessments (LEA)
9. Review of SALT SURVEY information:
 - Staff attitudes towards educational practices
 - Staff reports of classroom practices
 - Nature and extent of staff contact with parents
 - Professional development activities
 - Collegiality and team decision making
 - Students' responses on instructional practices and school climate
 - Students' coping mechanisms

The district may choose to look at other indices from the SALT Survey related to particular contextual variables of the district or individual schools.

Results Anticipated

The data analysis meeting targets specific issues related to the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with special needs. Moreover, the examination of both special education services and outcomes provides a framework for the on-site visit.

Benefits

Reliable information from multiple sources provides an emerging picture of the present status of programs and services for students with exceptionalities. Gathering data beforehand enables the team to focus on the student during the on-site visit.

III. Team Visit Preparation

Persons Involved

The full School Support System Team, including:

- The School Support System Core Team
- Personnel from other school districts
- Representatives from the State Special Education Advisory Committee

Purpose

The Team Visit Preparation meeting provides the team members with an overview of the elements of the School Support System, a detailed description of the schedule and activities (See Schedule of Visits) and a review of school assignments. The preliminary findings generated from the Data Analysis Meeting are provided to the team members with a brief overview of significant issues. Team members also receive policy information pertaining to confidentiality and a code of conduct.

Results Anticipated

All School Support System team members, particularly those from outside the Core Team, become familiar with the components of the School Support System and are prepared to be active participants in the school visits.

Benefits

Team members will begin to become familiar with their role in the monitoring process. Based on the data-analysis meeting, they will receive information regarding the district strengths, needs and priorities for improving services to students with exceptionalities.

IV. LEA Presentation and School Visits

Purpose

The district will present a general overview on the nature and type of delivery programs for students with exceptionalities. Visits to the schools will focus on programs, classrooms and services for selected students. Teachers and service providers are interviewed, as well as administrators, parents, students, and central administration staff. In addition, team members will observe students with exceptionalities in various educational settings.

Persons Involved

- District Personnel
- Full School Support System Team
- District Parents

Description

The following is a typical schedule (some districts may require more time):

Monday a.m.: Presentation by the district that provides a summary of its self-study and an overview of its programs and services.

Monday a.m./p.m. -through-Thursday am: Visits to all schools within the district.

Thursday p.m.: Full team meets to provide feedback on information gathering and begin draft of report.

Friday: Designated Report Writing Team of RIDE, OSN staff drafts an initial report.

Wednesday a.m.: Report Writing Team meets with district representatives, usually special education administrators, principals and selected staff, to review and discuss the report.

Results Anticipated

From the information gathered, a report is generated on:

- the quality and effectiveness of programs and services provided by the district
- the district's compliance with state and federal regulations and requirements relative to the education of students with exceptionalities
- a plan for professional development and technical assistance that will enable the district to improve programs and services.

Benefits

The district will have an opportunity to showcase its programs. This process provides a comprehensive picture of the quality and effectiveness of students' programs. It is the starting point for development of the School Support Plan.

V. Development of School Support System Report and Support Plan

Purpose

The district and RIDE meet to finalize the School Support System report and to develop professional development/technical assistance plan (School Support Plan) with timelines for implementation and procedures for verification.

Persons Involved

- Central Office and Building Administrators
- Educational Specialist to the District, SSS Core Team, and Team Leaders

Description

The final SSS Report summarizes the findings from the various data sources. Elements include:

- **Indicators** - describe performance or compliance.
- **Findings** - include various categories, from school improvement to least restrictive environment.
- **Documentation** - distinguishes the source of the report's findings.
- **Support Plan** - reflects the response to the described findings and the corrective action required by the district, identifies training and technical assistance available, and outlines procedures for verification.

Results Anticipated

The report will provide a clear and comprehensive description of special education services and supports. It will enable schools and the district to focus on clearer expectations of performance for each student. The Support Plan enables the school and district to continue expanding the continuum of programs and services for students as well as to address areas of non-compliance.

Benefits

The district and RIDE work in a partnership that results in a joint ownership of the report and mutually directed and supported goals.