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## **Educational Support Team – A Deeper Look**

### **Purpose of this communication**

The Educational Support Team (EST) has been an essential element of school systems of support in Vermont as they have developed over the last two decades. The EST continues to serve an important role in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). The purpose of this paper is to define what an EST is in our current context and clarify some misconceptions that have arisen about the EST. There will be suggestions for creating and maintaining an effective EST, and finally, some thoughts as to what an EST could be.

### **What is an EST?**

An EST is a collaborative team that has regularly scheduled meetings. These meetings have shared agendas, identified roles for participants, and norms to ensure that they are safe, ordered and productive. The EST has an effective process for documenting discussion and all decisions made in the meetings. Ideally, the EST includes an administrator, teachers, a school psychologist, school counselor(s), parents/guardians, a social worker and other staff with behavioral and/or academic expertise.

The EST relies on student data. This data may refer to a student's academic progress, school behavior or both of these. Students may be brought to the team through a referral process or the team may use screening assessments to identify students who might need additional support. Student data is also used to determine the effectiveness of interventions.

Typical practice involves the EST in planning and monitoring classroom interventions, targeted support (tier 2) or intensive support (tier 3). Referral information and data are used to determine the area to address and to set targets and timeframes for improvement. These need to be specific and measurable. The team determines what evidence-based practice will be used in the intervention as well as who will be responsible and when the intervention will take place.

The EST monitors progress by planning specific dates to review data about interventions. It is helpful for the team to have clear decision rules such as how many data points below or above an aim line indicate a need to change the support. It is anticipated that these additional supports, especially targeted (tier 2), will only be needed for a limited time.

### **Common misconceptions about an EST**

Communications with school staff around Vermont have indicated that there are some common misconceptions about the functioning of an EST and where an EST fits in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports. One such misunderstanding is the belief that EST and MTSS are synonymous or that an EST is the most significant piece of an MTSS. It is important to keep in mind that MTSS is a framework for teaching and learning designed to meet all students' academic and non-academic needs. An EST is a team that operates within this framework.

Another misconception is that an EST is a pre-referral team for special education or that students referred to the EST will be “on a plan” for some indeterminate time. This has led to such unfortunate labels as “tier 2 kid”. Any student may, for a wide variety of reasons, be in need of additional supports at some point. These supports could include supplemental instruction for students who would benefit from a more advanced curriculum. It should also be noted that students who receive special education may be referred to the EST. The presence of a disability does not mean that all needs for additional instruction are due to that disability.

## Reinvigorating your EST

Vermont education law (16 V.S.A. §2902) requires each school district to have an educational support team as part of the tiered system of support. Perhaps, your EST needs re-establishing or re-invigorating. The AOE recommends the following promising practices:

1. **School-based:** Experience has shown that an EST should be school-based rather than district-wide. While this may stretch the resources of the smallest schools, the immediacy and responsiveness of communication with a school-based EST are important. It may be necessary to draw district resources in to join a school team.
2. **Leverage collaboration:** A critical component of MTSS is supporting effective collaboration to identify needs and supports.
  - a. **Parent/guardian participation** in EST meetings regarding their children is critical. Ideally, parents attend meetings but if they cannot, the EST should solicit parent input to the decisions. Connections between home and school have a demonstrated positive effect on student performance. When schools fail to include families in important educational decisions, they risk compromising the effectiveness of their efforts. Schools also have an ethical obligation to keep families informed.
  - b. **Students** should also be involved. As with all other aspects of school, supportive work is most likely to be successful when it is *done with* students rather than *done to* students. Student achievement is greater when the students know what goals they are working toward and are involved in measuring their own progress. A younger student might be included in recording data to measure progress. Older students should participate in meetings and could use information in Personalized Learning Plans.
3. **Simplify:** Many schools use an EST referral form. While such forms can provide a great deal of useful information, it is important to ensure that the form is not so complex or lengthy that it inhibits referrals. Teams might consider using a shorter form combined with a structured interview to gather data. The discussion that results is a collaborative process that could result in more appropriate and clearly targeted referrals.

4. **Transparency:** Everyone should clearly understand the process for making referrals to the EST. Train staff to make referrals by screening data those students who are having difficulty achieving or demonstrating proficiency, poor attendance, frequent health office visits, or disciplinary referrals. The EST should also have a process for parent referrals.
5. **Create Routines:** Establish standing committee meetings to ensure that all members are available. Identify how the EST will document work to ensure that there is a record of the efforts made on behalf of students.

## **Conclusion**

An EST provides benefits beyond supports to individual students. It also supports collaboration in the school community. It promotes effective instructional practices and helps underscore the usefulness of assessment and data. It can be useful in identifying resource and professional development needs. Finally, it should be a mechanism to help ensure educational equity, helping to ensure “that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income.” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2017)