

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 Vermont's multi-tiered system of supports (VTmtss). 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 about the broader role of the EST in an educational system.

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. Student referrals 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.

The EST should consider the following when developing interventions:

- An EST plan is typically intended to address a clearly defined concern – one that is measurable.
- The EST plan includes the current level of performance, the desired change, and a schedule for review.
- The plan should clearly define what will be done, by whom, where, and when.
- The plan should address ways to enhance the capacity of the general classroom to support/accommodate the student.
- Review dates should be frequent, typically from 4 to 8 school weeks.
- If the student is not showing adequate progress when the plan is reviewed, consider changing the plan.

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In summary, an EST plan should usually be a relatively short-term, highly specific intervention. It may be a formal response to intervention plan but even if it is not, it should have measurable time-bound goals. It is intended to help build a student's skills and to increase the capacity of the educational system to support students.

The EST also provides information that can be used to improve the general education system. EST referrals may be thought of as indicators, uncovering areas where the current system lacks the capacity to address student needs through the general classroom. Rather than address the same or similar student needs over and over, the EST can help direct attention and resources to areas of need.

For a more detailed look at EST functioning, see the [Educational Support Team rubrics](#).

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 VTmtss. One such misunderstanding is the belief that EST and VTmtss are synonymous or that an EST is the most significant piece of VTmtss. It is important to keep in mind that VTmtss 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 student". Any student may, for a wide variety of reasons, need 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 or who are accommodated through 504 plans 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. Removing a student from support systems available to all other students reduces their inclusion.

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. **SU/District-based:** Typical past practice has been for the EST to be school-based. Experience has shown that this may contribute to inequity of resource allocation for schools and students in a district. These resources include staff expertise and time. A district-based EST is also better positioned to make systemic changes in response to needs discovered through the EST process.
2. **Systems approach:** EST referrals typically result from concerns related to individual students. It is important to use these referrals as an opportunity to reframe the concern

to understand how systemic changes would benefit students and reduce the need for EST intervention.

3. **Leverage collaboration:** A critical component of VTmtss 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 the 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 this information in Personalized Learning Plans.
4. **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.
5. **Transparency:** Everyone should clearly understand the process for making referrals to the EST. Train staff to make referrals by screening data for 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.
6. **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 needs for resources and professional development. 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)