

Instructional Support Teams (IST)
in
VIRGINIA

Philosophy and Practices

Virginia Department of Education
Office of Student Services
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Philosophy

Instructional Support Teams are multi-disciplinary school-based teams specially trained in communication, collaboration, instructional assessment, data gathering, data analysis, and problem-solving skills. Instructional Support Teams have been established, and are conscientiously maintained, to aid teachers in improving instruction to ensure that all students learn. VDOE, through its Training/Technical Assistance Centers, actively recruits and orients interested school personnel to the benefits of the Instructional Support Team initiative. The Virginia Department of Education does not require all school divisions to develop instructional support teams in their schools but it does endorse and promote many principles that underlie instructional support team operations. A few of these principles are:

- all children can learn;
- instruction to meet each child's needs should be delivered in the child's home classroom;
- instruction is designed from instructional assessment and evaluated through curriculum-based assessment and ongoing student progress monitoring;
- the classroom teacher is in the best position to identify a student's needs and implement corrective action;
- because no one person is trained to meet all children's needs, a competent and dedicated team of colleagues is the best ally a teacher can have.

Leadership of the Initiative

Virginia's Instructional Support Team (IST) initiative is overseen by the Office of Student Services at the Virginia Department of Education. Student Services staff collaborate with the Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T/TACs) of the Office of Special Education Instructional Services in delivering training, professional development, and ongoing technical support to schools that are maintaining or developing instructional support teams. An ongoing cadre of general and special educators from these two state operated entities meets regularly to plan, coordinate, and collaborate on the needs of the IST initiative. The VDOE T-TACs provide ongoing technical assistance to instructional support teams after they have been established to help sustain the quality and integrity of the model.

Forming an Instructional Support Team

A. Overview Training

Each December or January a one day overview of the IST initiative has been conducted. Overview training is an opportunity for interested school professionals to learn about the purpose and function of instructional support teams. Administrators from schools and central offices, along with key staff members, typically attend this training as a team because it provides a picture of all of the elements of IST and the essential considerations and requirements that confront those wishing to organize one. Through demonstration, discussion, direct teaching, and dialogue, all of the aspects of IST are shared and discussed. Lunch is provided by VDOE and mileage reimbursement is paid to participants. An application is offered after all participants' questions have been answered to their satisfaction.

B. Application

VDOE and the T/TACs have designed an application process that will help school teams assess their personnel and professional resources in anticipation of forming a team in their school. Questions have been kept to a minimum and their intent is to assess team readiness for training in the initiative. The T/TACs, in consultation with other VDOE staff, review the applications. In the event that the application review team assesses a school team as not fully ready, it will strive to give the school application team feedback that would assist it in approaching readiness for the next available training cycle. T/TAC and VDOE staff will work closely with interested school teams in successfully complying with the application requirements. Final acceptance is determined by the Office of Student Services.

If a school is denied entry into a new cohort of teams because of the state's lack of capacity, this information will be shared with the school team; support services may be provided in the interim. The purpose of the application process is to determine if the IST initiative is a match for the school's needs.

C. Application Considerations

VDOE has a vested interest in schools receiving the best in professional development and technical assistance as these relate to the delivery of quality instruction. The VDOE bias will always be working toward accepting the application rather than rejecting it. However, VDOE needs to determine that competing (school improvement) initiatives are at a minimum and can be aligned with IST practices, that staff investment is optimal, and that unrealistic expectations for what IST can do for a school are tempered with reality.

A deadline for submitting the application is provided at Overview Training, and every effort is made to assist interested teams in completing and submitting their application on time. Additional timeline items include: setting a timeline for a school visit and staff interview; informing the school team their application is accepted; establishing a contractual relationship, etc. Timelines and dates are established at the beginning of each school year.

D. Contracting with T/TAC

Acceptance of the IST application leads to a VDOE T-TAC school visit and contracting meeting. It is important that expectations by each party be clearly stated and agreed upon, and that any unanswered questions be addressed. Contracts can be re-negotiated and revised as agreed upon by the parties involved.

E. Formal VDOE agreement and inclusion

After the application team visits the school, a formal written agreement with VDOE is developed. Conditions of the agreement are stated as clearly as possible and can be revisited at any time. VDOE has every interest in making this initiative succeed and will invest itself to the extent possible in maximizing the benefits of the working relationship. Annual evaluation will provide an opportunity for renegotiating expectations though it would be possible to do this more frequently if needed.

It is important to include central office staff in the development and formalization of any agreement.

Training of IST Team Members

A. New Member Training

All instructional support team members receive three full days of professional development. This professional development involves direct instruction, demonstration, and practice in:

- communication skills;
- consultation skills;
- instructional assessment skills;
- graphing and record-keeping skills;
- student progress monitoring;
- instructional strategies in reading, math and written language;
- group team-building skills; and
- skills in applying the problem-solving method.

The professional development of teams is done regionally whenever possible.

B. IST Teacher Training

In addition to the IST New Member Training, the IST teacher receives 13 additional days of professional development. This training focuses on developing skills in instructional assessment in reading, math, and writing and skills in behavioral assessment. In addition, three of the professional development days focus on developing the IST teacher's skills in facilitating the instructional support team's interactions.

C. Site Visits and other TTAC support

After delivering training in all of the facets of IST implementation, TTAC trainers visit IST school sites in their region to ensure that difficulties school staff have in applying what they've learned in the "classroom" are promptly addressed. Other school staff is included in this site-based learning as possible.

Ongoing professional development of IST Teachers

A. Networking sessions

Throughout the school year, VDOE and T/TAC staff offer opportunities for veteran IST teachers to come together to network with each other. Part of the day includes professional development and part of the day provides opportunities for the IST teachers to share successes and challenges in a networking format. The content of the professional development opportunities is driven by the needs of the IST teachers and their school teams. Lunch is provided by VDOE and mileage is reimbursed.

B. Summer Institute

VDOE and T/TACs will seek to sponsor an IST institute each summer. Content offered in the institute will be selected according to the needs and desires of IST teams. It is hoped that these institutes can be offered at one of the state universities in a retreat-like atmosphere.

Selection, orientation, and professional development of T/TAC IST trainers

VDOE is working closely with Instructional Consultation, Assessment and Teaming Resources, LLC (ICAT) to ensure the highest quality of consultation offered by T/TAC and VDOE personnel. It is expected that T/TAC consultants and VDOE personnel will have ongoing familiarity with the ongoing demands and developments of the IST process.

Evaluation

Thorough and systematic evaluation of any endeavor is critical to its ongoing growth and success. A core belief of VDOE is that fidelity to the IST model will produce desired results. Therefore, evaluation is designed to ensure fidelity of implementation of the model.

IST training is evaluated on a session by session basis (content and presentation are evaluated). IST teams are asked to provide end-of-year data to VDOE and LICT to help in their self-assessment of progress toward program fidelity and goal attainment. All evaluation is designed to facilitate both program and personnel improvement.

Schools failing to maintain high levels of implementation may need to reapply to the initiative.

Model sites and expansion schools

Schools with instructional support teams are of two types: model sites or expansion sites. The Virginia Department of Education originally intended for each of the Commonwealth's 8 Superintendent regions to develop and maintain a model site. Model site status was earned by successfully responding to (2) validation visits from external evaluators. The Phase I validation process ensured conformity to all formal and procedural requirements of the IST process while

Phase II validation ensured conformity to practices regarding teacher consultation, problem identification, student evaluation, progress monitoring, and team collaboration.

There are 5 model sites in the Commonwealth:

- Surry Elementary School in Surry County;
- Applepie Ridge Elementary, Frederick County;
- Lee-Jackson Elementary in Mathews County;
- Chase City Elementary, Mecklenburg County;
- Oceanair Elementary in Norfolk city.

There are an additional 27 schools that implement the IST process in the following counties or cities: Accomack, Campbell, Charlotte, Essex, Fluvanna, Hopewell, Northampton, Powhatan, Prince Edward, Prince William, and Stafford. These IST sites participate in the same LOI evaluation and professional development activities as model sites do.

Administrative support to the state initiative

State Department of Education staff in Richmond oversee the training and professional development offered by the T/TAC professionals. These two groups meet in both face-to-face and videoconference formats once a month (on average). They are in constant telephone and telecommunication contact. Meetings follow a pre-determined and agreed upon agenda; team facilitation, minute-keeping, and timekeeping responsibilities of each meeting rotate through the team membership. Decision-making by consensus is the preferred format but there are occasions when this is not possible or practical. Minutes are kept of each meeting and are reviewed at the beginning of the next meeting for accuracy.

State authorities underwrite the IST/T-TAC Priority Project meetings and will continue to underwrite the new member orientation event and summer institutes. They will also assist in the provision and procurement of additional resources as necessary.

History of the initiative

Inspired by Joe Kovalski and Jim Tucker's work with instructional *support* teams (Pennsylvania), and Todd Gravois and Sylvia Rosenfield's work with instructional *consultation* teams (University of Maryland), Don Fleming, a psychologist working in the Virginia Department of Education, was tasked with finding ways that Virginia might address problems of growing special education referrals and the disproportionate number of minority students identified as having mental retardation and/or emotional disturbance. Contracting with Todd Gravois and Ed Gickling in 1998, educational leaders from within the Virginia Department of Education – both in Richmond and in the T/TAC centers – emerged to take over the development, maintenance, and propagation of instructional support teams within the Commonwealth. The Virginia model seeks to capture the best practices regarding instruction and consultation as outlined in the research of Todd Gravois and Sylvia Rosenfield.

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**School divisions with IST schools, school name(s), cohort membership, and teacher:
* indicates model school**

Campbell County

Concord Elementary (5) Vernell Kain
Leesville Road Elementary (8) Laura Roach

Charlotte County

Central Middle School (8) Beverly Jones

Essex County

Tappahannock Elementary (7) Mary Jones

Fluvana County

Central Elementary (5)

Frederick County

*Applepie Ridge Elementary (3) Mark Weisbrod

Hopewell City

Dupont Elementary (7) Carol Shepherd

Mathews County

*Lee-Jackson Elementary (2) Judy Martin
Thomas Hunter Middle School (2) Cindy Gray

Mecklenberg County

Boydton Elementary School (2) Sylvia Coleman
Buckhorn Elementary (8) Sylvia Coleman
*Chase City Elementary (2) Sandra Boswell
Clarksville Elementary (8) Carla Gravitt
Lacrosse Elementary (2) Linda Goodman
South Hill Primary School (2) Nancy Merrell

Norfolk City

Jacox Elementary (8) Jennifer Brown
Little Creek Elementary (8) Danielle Medley
*Oceanair Elementary (3) Gabriel Simoncini

Northampton County

Kiptopeke Elementary (7) Cathleen Buyrn
Northampton Middle (8) Karen Aita
Occohannock Elementary (7) Sallie James

Powhatan County

Pocahontas Elementary
Powhatan Elementary

Prince Edward County

Prince Edward Elementary

Pulaski County

Dublin Elementary (8)

Patty Baker

Pulaski Elementary (7)

Barbara Cain

Stafford County

Conway Elementary (7)

Darlene Sottiaux

Surry County

*Surry Elementary School (1)

Ann Marie Nelin