

High School SSESS Study

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High School SSESS Model: Development and Implementation

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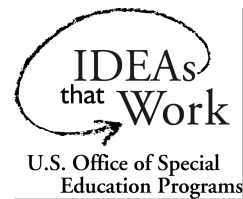


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The SSESS Project Goals and Strategies

The Student Success Equals School Success (SSESS) project is a demonstration project that is aimed at developing, implementing, and evaluating a data-based school-wide improvement model founded on lessons learned from our Beacons research (Bartholomay, Wallace, & Mason, 2001), which identified factors associated with the success of four high schools across the country. The intent of the model is to promote the achievement of all students, including students with disabilities, in secondary education. The four broad goals of this project are:

1. Develop SSESS Model of Success from Beacons of Excellence research.
2. Implement SSESS Model to improve learning outcomes of *all* youth.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the SSESS Model.
4. Disseminate SSESS model, practices, and evaluation results.

The SSESS researchers worked with a middle school and high school in Minnesota to collect pre-model implementation data, set goals to increase the inclusion of students with IEPs in general education curriculum, improve educational outcomes and related activities, assess progress, and report results. The goals and strategies were established by the school team and based on data and stakeholder input. University researchers worked to support the team by helping the schools with data collection and analysis, information on strategies learned through research, and planning.

Beacons research (Bartholomay et al., 2001) suggests that what happens in a school in the following areas greatly influences inclusion and success for all students: (a) leadership, (b) school improvement planning facilitated through data-based decision making, (c)

stakeholder involvement; and (d) faculty and staff focus (collaboration, staff development, etc.). Early results of the SSESS project provide additional support for this view.

SSESS Model

The SSESS model was based on the findings of the Beacons of Excellence study (Bartholomay, Wallace, & Mason, 2001) which identified seven leadership factors associated with the success of four high schools achieving exemplary results for all students, students with and without disabilities. These factors included school leaders ability to:

- Challenge all students and their teachers to high standards
- Build an inclusive and collaborative community of learning
- Foster a school culture of innovation and creativity
- Engage stakeholders in school leadership
- Promote professional development
- Hire staff who reinforce school values and vision
- Use data for decision-making and school improvement planning

The SSESS model is a whole school reform model that emphasizes the inclusion of everyone in the school as part of a common community that values and is challenged by high standards, collaboration, and inclusiveness for all its members – students, teachers, and administrators – in the pursuit of continuous improvement.

Although the SSESS model consists of these parts, the interpretation of what each part should effectively look like at a particular setting is up to school leaders.

School Characteristics

The high school is located in an outer ring suburb of the city of Minneapolis. The district supports five elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. During the 2001-02 year, the high school enrolled 1,229 students in the 10th to 12th grade. Five percent of its students had IEPs and 5% of its students received free or reduced lunch cost. In 2003-04 the high school moved to a new building which included the 9th grade. At the end of the SSESS project, 2004-05 school year, the school served 1,717 students, six percent of which had IEPs and 7% of which had free or reduced lunch cost.

Table 1: Basic demographic characteristics: Percentage of students per category

	2001-02 (grades 10-12)	2004-05 (grades 9-12)
Special Education	6.0%	8.0%
Free or reduced lunch	5.0%	6.6%
Limited English Proficiency	1.6%	1.3%

Table 2: Racial/Ethnic Characteristics: Percentage of students within racial/ethnic categories

Racial/Ethnic Categories	2001-02 (grades 10-12)	2004-05 (grades 9-12)
White (not Hispanic origin)	95.3%	94.4%
Asian or Pacific Islander`	2.8%	3.3%
Native American or Native Alaskan	0.7%	1.0%
Hispanic	0.6%	0.8%
African American (not Hispanic origin)	0.5%	0.5%

Students with Individualized Education Plans

Table 3: Referrals to “outside programs”: Percentage of students referred to outside programs for special education services

	2001-02 (grades 10-12)	2004-05 (grades 9-12)
Percentage of students inside school attendance area placed in special education programs outside school	2%	2%

Table 4: Types of Disabilities: Percentage of students with IEPs per disability category

Disability Categories	2001-02 n=67 (grades 10-12)	2004-05 n=131 (grades 9-12)
Specific Learning Disabilities	36%	57%
Emotional or Behavioral Disorders	15%	12%
Speech Impairment	14%	13%
Other Health Impaired	1%	12%
Autism	0%	5%
Visually Handicapped	0%	1%

Table 5: Inclusion for students with IEPs: Percentage of students with IEPs attending general education classes per time category

Time Categories	2001-02 n=67 (grades 10-12)	2004-05 n=131 (grades 9-12)
100 % of the time	0%	10%
90-99%	0%	14%
75-89%	100%	39%
65-74%	0%	22%
50-64%	0%	15%

The SSESS Project: Joint Activities between the High School and Middle School

Participants in the SSESS project included the school district, the high school, and the middle school. Initially, leadership from each of these levels met monthly to discuss the model, SSESS plans, and leadership actions. These *leadership meetings* included the district student services coordinator, the district director of human resources, a principal or assistant principal and special education coordinator from each school, and two University of Minnesota project staff. In addition, other relevant people attended when appropriate.

Discussions at the SSESS leadership meetings focused around descriptions of the SSESS model described above and findings from the Beacons of Excellence study ((Bartholomay, Wallace, & Mason, 2001) on which the SSESS model was developed. Discussions also focused on the goals and parameters of the project, how each of the two schools would interpret the model, and what steps each school would take to reach their objectives. There was an open sharing of ideas and information about school challenges, plans, and actions, and participants regularly commented that this particular meeting was a favorite of each month.

Before any actions were taken as a result of the SSESS project, baseline data was collected in the spring of 2002 (as described later in the document). After collection of baseline data, a document was developed that reported all baseline results to the schools and district. The intent was for school leaders to use the data in goal setting and planning.

Shortly after baseline reporting, most of the participants of the SSESS leadership team attended a two-day leadership workshop offered by the state of Minnesota for Minnesota school leadership. This workshop included a focus on the Beacons of Excellence study leadership findings that became the foundation of the SSESS model. A Beacons of Excellence report, *The Leadership Factor: A Key to Effective Inclusive High Schools*, was distributed to all participants and its key findings were discussed.

In addition to attending the state of Minnesota's workshop, the SSESS team took the opportunity to meet for an afternoon in discrete school groups to discuss the implications of SSESS baseline data. Also discussed were SSESS model components and how each school might best apply them. The district and university staff moved between the two groups, answering questions related to the district, baseline data, or SSESS project.

The SSESS leadership team continued to meet monthly during two school years. After two years it began to meet every 2-3 months, as schools developed SSESS committees and began to increase sustainability.

In addition to attending these meetings, the two participating schools collaborated with each other around two workshops, called *Summer Institutes*, which were two days in length during the summers of 2002 and 2003. Together they conducted a third workshop as well, which was four days in length. The topics of these workshops were negotiated between administrators from the two schools, and represented staff development needs associated with the implementation of the SSESS model. Both workshops represented mutual foci of both schools, and included general and special educators addressing the needs of students with and without IEPs.

The first Summer Institute in 2002 focused on the needs of *inclusion* classes, and was attended by a mixed group of 16 high school and 18 middle school general educators and special educators per day. An expert in *inclusion* conducted the workshop, including topics related to co-teaching and collaboration between general and special educators, differentiation of instruction, and strategies for meeting the needs of all students.

The second Summer Institute in 2003 focused on general educator and special educator collaboration, the utilization of school data and classroom assessments for instructional improvement, and positive behavior management strategies. This two day workshop was attended by 12 high school and 15 middle school general educators and special educators per day. The data utilization part of the workshop was conducted by an administrator from a high school that follows best-practices in the use of data within a professional learning community model. The behavior strategies portion was conducted by a local expert in positive behavior management.

In addition to these two workshops, a third workshop of four days length was conducted in August of 2003, about six weeks after the *Summer Institute*. This workshop focused for two days on Collaborating to Accommodate Performance Standard (CAPS) Training and for two days on the contents of a book, called *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* (2003). The first two days of CAPS training involved teams or partners of special educators and general educators and included time for these groups to meet separately during afternoons. The second two, focusing on *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* (2003), was open to all 7-12 grade staff. This book, and subsequently this part of the workshop, addressed research-based practices related to student

standards, instructional strategies, curriculum management, classroom management, and how teachers can be most effective with students.

The SSESS Project and the High School

After selecting and engaging the high school in planning for the SSESS model, the high school received a referendum that included the building of a new school. At the start of the SSESS project in 2001-02, the high school was housed in a building that supported the 10th to 12th grade. At the start of the 2003-04 the school moved to a new building and incorporated the district's ninth grade. As a result, during much of the SSESS project the high school was occupied with planning for its new school. Although planning for the move was largest of the school's initiatives, with the potential of subsuming the SSESS model components, it was an opportunity for programmatic and school system change as well. As the assistant principal noted in the early stages of the SSESS project, "the move is essentially an improvement process as it requires thinking of what, where, and how things are to be done."

The primary challenges cited by the personnel participating in the SSESS leadership team was a lack of collaboration among staff. Teachers "tend to exist independently of each other," explained an assistant principal. The lack of collaboration was symptomatic of a lack of program alignment and a shortage of structures to facilitate collaboration and alignment, such as collaborative planning time, systematic collection and use of data, and staff engagement in critical school issues.

The school's interpretation of the SSESS model depended on the school's environment, challenges, goals, and resources. First the leadership team narrowed its interpretation of SSESS to the special education program. The idea was that, in order to

increase the effect of SSESS model components amid the school move initiative, successes could be more easily achieved within the narrowed focus of the special education department and then those successes could be more effectively “sold” to other departments later. This approach was eventually modified to narrow the focus to the incoming 9th grade. The idea here was that the incoming 9th grade teachers were more skilled in and acclimated to collaborating, as the middle school teachers were known to have some systems in place for this. It was also believed that the teachers would be more amiable to the components of SSESS as they would already be changing to adjust to a new setting. It should be noted that one of the schools that participated in the Beacons of Excellence study approached its goals incrementally, by grade level. Eventually, success was contagious and strategically spread from level to level until the whole school was functionally unified. However, the 9th grade would not be moving to the high school for a year and the approach that focused on the 9th grade would consequently delay the SSESS implementation of SSESS model by over a year.

It was reported that the SSESS model’s emphasis on serving students with IEPs in the general education setting became attractive, early on, for three particular departments – physical education, business, and family and consumer sciences. These three departments, it was said, served the most students with IEPs. It was reported that there was a noticeable absence of negative responses to the SSESS model from other departments, and there was speculation it was because of a pervasive belief that the SSESS model would eventually dissolve and not affect them.

Ultimately, the high school decided to focus their SSESS model on the whole school, emphasizing the expansion of collaboration, staff involvement in critical issues, and the improvement of its service delivery model for students with IEPs and students who did not

have IEPs but were having difficulties. The overall goal was to develop unity between staff with a focus on continuous improvement. These goals became initiatives that required resources, training, changes in teacher roles, and facilitative structural changes.

The High School SSESS Model

The high school's SSESS model consisted of pursuing a staff community characterized by collaboration and alignment. Previously, the staff community operated on a model characterized by staff independence and "disconnectedness." This model did not reflect current best practice as viewed by administrators. After considerable contemplation, high school administrators identified and adapted specific parts of the SSESS model that best fit their situation and objectives. Their SSESS model consisted of 3 parts: 1) Build a culture of collaboration, 2) Engage teacher leadership on critical issues, 3) Develop a special education service delivery model that serves students more effectively.

It was determined that the development of these aspects of the school would, above all other parts of the SSESS model, most effectively bring about their objective of a staff community characterized by collaboration and alignment, which would lead to increased student success.

The efforts that the high school took to develop their SSESS model characteristics are described in more detail below.

1: Build a culture of collaboration

One of the goals of administrators at The high school was to build a culture of collaboration between staff around the needs of students. It was believed that a culture of collaboration

would lead to improved coordination and unity around common goals and that this unity would lead to better services for students.

Building a culture of collaboration involved two related goals: One was to develop teacher teams across the school that focused on improvement of particular programs or methods. The other supporting goal was to develop a professional learning community (PLC) within the school, as described by Rick DuFour. Both of these goals were pursued simultaneously.

After baseline data was collected, the high school established a professional learning community group in the spring of 2002. This was the first step toward developing a professional learning community. A professional learning community was characterized as a community that has shared mission, vision, values, and goals; is driven by collective inquiry; is supported by collaborative teams; holds a value of action-oriented experimentation; is results-oriented; and pursues continuous improvement. The role of the professional learning community group was to learn about PLCs and identify strategies for developing a PLC at the high school.

During the same spring that the professional learning community group was established, a large group of staff attended a workshop presented by professional learning community expert Rick DuFour. Following this workshop, a group of staff visited a variety of schools that utilized best practices around professional learning communities, one of which was Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, IL. Finding these experiences to be beneficial, the high school repeated the process again during the spring of 2003, attending another Rick DuFour workshop and visiting more “best-practice” schools.

In the spring of 2002, the high school slowly proposed the development of “collaborative teaming” by requesting volunteers to establish a couple of formal collaborative teams around curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment for the next year. Resources, financial or otherwise, were made available. While the high school was expanding its understanding of PLCs, it dedicated a teacher professional development day to the topic of *collaboration* in the fall of 2002. This training was presented by a school collaboration expert from the University of Minnesota. Following this training, the high school identified a variety of topics around which teacher teams could be developed. For example, a technology team, an alternative programs team, and a team focused on privilege-based discipline was developed. All teachers were then required to participate in at least one team. These teams were charged with improving their areas of focus, and they continued to meet regularly.

In the summer of 2003, the high school conducted a two day staff workshop, called the *Summer Institute*, which focused largely on using data to improve student instruction and services for all students. This content, which is a critical part of a PLC, was presented by an administrator of Stevenson High School, which had been visited as a PLC best-practice site by staff twice before. The following 2004-05 school year, the high school extended its collaboration focus and use of data beyond the school to obtain and incorporate student and parent perspectives regarding school goals, priorities, and approaches.

Through training, site visits, and engaging teachers in collaboration teams that focused on improvement, the high school pursued greater collaboration and effectiveness for all students. After the SSESS evaluation was concluded, the school added an *Action*

Plan Team to their PLC model during the 2005-06 year to provide more direction with regard to identifying norms for collaboration, prioritizing projects, and identifying staff to participants in them.

2. Engage teacher leadership on critical issues.

An overall focus of administrators at the high school was on continuous improvement, based on a belief that the pursuit of improvement needed to be constant and at all levels. This focus was based on the understanding that nothing was really static and that challenges were always shifting and transforming. As a result, school practices were adjusted to meet the changing challenges. To facilitate this overall focus, administrators wanted to engage teacher leadership on critical issues. This engagement, it was believed, would lead to reassessment of current practices and the generation of new and improved practices.

As mentioned earlier, collaboration teams were developed in the school. Among these teacher collaboration teams were some groups that were specifically organized in the fall of 2002 around issues that had been determined by the school to be critical. Three of these groups were 1) supporting at-risk students, 2) building ties to the community, and 3) reviewing the rigor of honors/AP classes. Initially, these groups formulated procedures for planning and decision making around these critical issues. This step was followed by an analysis of the issues along with lengthy discussions. After about 7 months, each group had developed improvement plans for each issue and presented their plans to all staff. Feedback was collected and the plans were reviewed. Afterward, implementation of each plan was begun and carried out over the 2003-04 school year.

In addition to “critical issue groups,” the administration established a committee in charge of developing “commonality” in the school mission and vision. The updated school mission and vision, it was expected, would set the groundwork for aligning building and district goals and unifying efforts. Greater unity would theoretically result in greater engagement and involvement in school goals. This committee met throughout the 2004-05 school year.

Part of the effort to engage staff in critical issues was focused on professional development as well. High quality and relevant professional development was viewed as a way to prepare staff for more effectively meeting critical issues. By the end of 2003-04 administrators recognized a need to improve staff training sessions and increase support for staff development. As a result, they created a new position for the 2004-05 year that would incorporate a teacher in a leadership role toward improving training sessions and increasing support for staff development.

3. Develop a special education service delivery model that serves students more effectively.

At the start of the SSESS project the high school’s service delivery model for students with IEPs basically consisted of traditional special educator roles: 1) supporting students in *inclusion classes*, classes in which students with and without IEPs attended; 2) supporting students in “*pull-out*” classes, classes attended only by students with IEPs; and 3) supporting students for whom each special educator managed IEPs, when time/opportunity permitted or need required. These three roles were not well defined but understood as the basic responsibilities of a special educator’s position.

The high school administration and special education staff believed that the school's service delivery model for students with IEPs could be improved to more effectively serve students. In addition to students with IEPs, there was a concern about the support for a substantial number of students who were having difficulty but did not have an IEP. As a first step, The high school conducted department-based meetings during the winter of 2002 to evaluate the school's existing service delivery model for students with IEPs. These meetings included department personnel, building administration, and district special education leadership. The goals of the evaluation were to identify problems with the current model and generate new ideas for improvement. Ideas were generated and considered over the course of most of the next year.

By the spring of 2003, about a year later, the school was ready to look at other sites that provided alternative and effective approaches to meeting the needs of students with IEPs and struggling students. The necessity for a more rigorous approach to develop a better service delivery model partly stemmed from the fact that students with IEPs were having particular difficulty transitioning to the new school building. Teachers visited several schools in the spring of 2003 that represented best practices regarding service delivery models for students with IEPs. These site visits provided the school with a clearer sense of what model would be effective and appropriate for their needs. As a result, the school developed a plan for improving its services for students with IEPs. In addition to the plan, the process of developing the plan was said to have engaged and empowered teachers with a process for identify and addressing critical special education needs. At the start of the following year (fall of 2003) the school began to implement its plan for an improved service delivery model.

The new service delivery plan focused on clarifying and formalizing the previously undefined roles of special educators around six basic roles. Each special educator would be assigned to one or a set of primary roles around which they would specialize. Special educator roles were formalized as: 1) *Intervention specialist* – a special educator who would assist other teachers with intervention strategies; 2) *Inclusion specialists* – special educators whose focus was on supporting students and collaborating with general educators in general education classes; 3) *Pre-period specialist* – special educators who focuses on working with individual students before school begins; 4) *Pull-out class specialist* – special educators who focus on curriculum and instruction for students with IEPs in separate special education classes; 5) *Resource room supervision* – special educators who focus on the management and student support within the resource room; 6) *Assessment specialist* – a special educator whose focus was on assessment, relieving others of that responsibility. When assigning special educators to roles, administrators were able to leverage, to a greater degree than before, the strengths of each special educator.

The new delivery model also included some important structural changes. *Common planning time*: A new effort was made to build planning time into the day schedule of general educators and special educators who collaborated in “inclusion classes.” A new social skills training for students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders was developed. In addition, *guided study halls* were established to support “struggling students.” Guided study halls differed from typical study halls in that they were more structured, smaller (15 students), and included a volunteer peer tutor in addition to the supervisor.

Throughout the 2003-04 year, the school evaluated and revised their service delivery model, which was a process described as “exciting, but difficult.” By the end of the year the

administration recognized the need for a new special education administrator position, which was put in effect at the beginning of the 2004-05 year.

Other Major High School Initiatives to Consider

The following two school initiatives resulted less from the SSESS model than from particular issues arising out of school circumstances. They are included here because they are important factors associated with the changes in the high school.

1. Ease the transition of students into the high school.

Moving into a new building at the start of the 2003-04 year included the addition of the 9th grade. There was a concern among administrators that the new 9th graders may have difficulty with the transition to high school.

To respond to this concern, during the 1002-03 year the high school gathered information on best practices related to improving school-to-school transition outcomes. After evaluating their findings, the high school chose to implement a 9th grade mentoring program called *Link Crew*.

Link Crew was a transition program designed to link 9th grade students with eleventh and twelfth graders trained to assist transitioning ninth graders by coaching and motivating them while acting as positive role models. The school wanted to increase the distribution of leadership (i.e., role models) among students, with the goal of starting the *Link Crew* program at the beginning of the 2003-04 year. To accomplish this, students along with a select group of staff were given training in leadership skills during the summer of 2003. With this preparation, the program was implemented in the fall.

The school began to evaluate the effectiveness of the program a few months after the start of the *Link Crew* program and adjustments were made toward the end of the school year. *[This happened after the SSESS project: A year later Link Crew members were provided additional training with the prospect of receiving high school credit for participating in the program during the following school year (summer of 2005).]*

2. Evaluate and improve the effectiveness of discipline policies and procedures.

High school administrators recognized that discipline policies and procedures were sometimes inconsistent and that useful data on behavior was not centralized. To address this problem, administrators reviewed the school discipline policies for possible improvements during the 2002-03 year. Supporting these efforts, administrators conducted a literature review of discipline policy best practices and reviewed the discipline guidelines of other schools. The findings of these probes led to the development of a proposed improvement plan in the spring, a product of school administrators, deans, and a group of teachers.

Shortly after completion, the improvement proposal was presented to all school staff. The presentation was followed by discussions with staff to check its validity. When finalized, the improvements were implemented incrementally at the beginning of the following year, 2003-2004.

Besides establishing discipline codes and procedures that were representative of the high school's current standards, the proposal included the development of a centralized system for monitoring and identifying "at-risk" students, based on behavior, attendance (excused/unexcused), and grades. In addition, a part-time attendance coordinator position

was eventually added to improve accuracy in attendance and streamline the attendance procedures.