

Middle School SSESS Study

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Middle School SSESS Model: Development and Implementation

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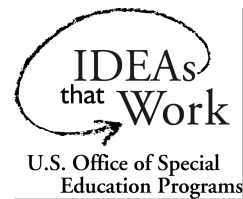


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The SSESS Project Goals and Strategies

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 middle 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 middle school enrolled 1,225 students in the 7th to 9th grade. Ten percent of its students had IEPs and 9% of its students received free or reduced lunch cost. In 2003-04 the high school moved to a new building and added the 9th grade. At the end of the SSESS project, 2004-05 school year, the middle school served 901 students in the 7th and 8th grade, seven percent of which had IEPs and 9% of which had free or reduced lunch cost.

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

	2001-02 (grades 7-9)	2004-05 (grades 7-8)
Special Education	10%	7%
Free or reduced lunch	9%	9%
Limited English Proficiency	1%	2%

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

Racial/Ethnic Categories	2001-02 (grades 7-9)	2004-05 (grades 7-8)
White (not Hispanic origin)	93%	89%
Asian or Pacific Islander`	3%	5%
Native American or Native Alaskan	1%	2%
Hispanic	1%	2%
African American (not Hispanic origin)	1%	2%

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 7-9)	2004-05 (grades 7-8)
Percentage of students inside school attendance area placed in special education programs outside school	1%	1%

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

Disability Categories	2001-02 n=66 (grades 7-9)	2004-05 n=43 (grades 7-8)
Specific Learning Disabilities	47%	49%
Emotional or Behavioral Disorders	15%	21%
Speech Impairment	17%	%
Other Health Impaired	14%	7%
Hearing Impaired	5%	0%
Physically Impaired	2%	7%
Visually Impaired	0%	2%
Mentally Impaired	2%	0%
Traumatic Brain Injury Disabled	0%	2%

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

Time Categories	2001-02 n=66 (grades 7-9)	2004-05 n=43 (grades 7-8)
100 % of the time	0%	13%
90-99%	0%	19%
75-89%	74%	34%
65-74%	21%	19%
50-64%	6%	10%
35-49%	0%	2%
25-34%	0%	3%

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 Middle School

After selecting and engaging the middle school in planning for the SSESS model, the district's high school received a referendum that included the building of a new school. With the move, at the start of the 2003-04 year, the high school would be integrating the 9th grade into its services. This left the middle school serving two grade levels, grades seven and eight. While the administration pursued whole school reform during the SSESS project, knowing that they would eventually be a two grade level school, they focused their reform efforts on the seventh and eighth grade.

Before the SSESS project began, the middle school was already in the process of revising its mission around the shared values of its stakeholders. It was identifying "core values" which would inform the development of the school's mission. The school wanted to unify its community and align its services in order to be more effective, and the starting point was to clarify its mission.

The focus of the SSESS model fitted the school leadership’s objectives nearly perfectly. As with the SSESS model, school leaders wanted to pursue reform efforts as a “total school improvement” effort, not only as a special education approach. As part of the school’s unification goals, school leaders wanted to increase collaboration between staff across the school, including general and special educators. Administrators also wanted to identify and use the needs of students as a key driver for decision-making, requiring more data collection, data utilization, and data-based decision making around student strengths and weaknesses. They also wanted to implement small learning communities within their school and were considering the “house system,” a structure of a small number of groups (houses) to which students belong throughout their middle school years.

The Middle School SSESS Model

The middle school carried out six major initiatives during the course of the SSESS project. All of them were aligned with SSESS model components: 1) Alignment of improvement processes and initiatives with school core values, 2) Alignment of assessment, curriculum, and instruction, 3) Improved instruction for all learners, 4) Increased use of data for administrative and instructional decision-making, 5) Improved collaboration around instruction, 6) Development of a co-teaching model.

Each of these six initiatives are described below:

1. Alignment of improvement processes and initiatives with school core values.

The school improvement team identified core values, which were then linked to school initiatives. In addition, the school improvement team received training in the school improvement process, using data toward increasing student achievement, and participating in learning communities.

2. Alignment of assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

As a result of the school's efforts in data collection and core values alignment, a second summer professional development program was conducted that included teacher training in identification of priority content, or *key learnings*. Key learnings provided the foundation upon which departmental curriculum was then outlined, developed, articulated in detail, analyzed, and then aligned. Teachers identified what was to be taught, learned, and assessed, leading to a common curriculum and standards that would provide a base for collaborative teaching communities.

3. Improved instruction for all learners.

The school investigated ways to improve the instruction of *all* learners. A summer professional development program was conducted to train teachers in instructional strategies that reach all learners. An emphasis on differential teaching strategies continued, with the aid of a consultant, for a year.

4. Increased use of data for administrative and instructional decision-making.

Administrators, staff, and parents were surveyed. Using these data, a school goal of improving communication, especially parent communication was identified. All parent communication was tracked throughout the school. In addition, a summer professional development program trained teachers in teaching *all* students and *curriculum mapping* – linking curriculum objectives with school core values. These efforts eventually resulted in departmentally generated *common assessments* that tracked student achievement.

5. Improved collaboration around instruction.

All teachers were trained in examining student work. Teachers communicated and collaborated around curriculum objectives, priorities, and effective ways to assess student learning of these. Curriculum maps were placed on the internet where teachers could access and update them. Assessments were eventually formulated and baseline assessment data was collected on student achievement.

6. Development of a co-teaching model.

The survey data and summer professional development program that focused on teaching strategies for *all* learners generated an interest in developing a co-teaching model in 2003-04 to support students with IEPs in the general education curriculum and classrooms. The next summer's professional development program highlighted co-teaching strategies, encouraged co-teaching, and offered co-teaching partners time for planning. Special educators were placed on school/department teams to facilitate planning and improve communication between the special and general educators. Co-teaching teams began meeting regularly to co-plan and debrief. Additional training was provided. The co-teaching model became part of

the school structure, existed in most departments, served all students, and was evaluated and discussed on a regular basis.