DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Sub Directorate:
Inclusive Education

The aim of this booklet is to provide educators in the Free State Province with guidelines for the effective functioning of a Site Based Support Team. The contents cover the following:

- Diverse learning needs
- Barriers to learning
- Definition of a Site Based Support Team
- Rationale on which the establishment of Site Based Support Teams is based
- Core and key functions of a Site Based Support Team
- Members of a Site Based Support Team
- Duties of the coordinator
- Functions of the principal
- The role of the District Based Support Team in establishing and developing a Site Based Support Team
- Meetings of a Site Based Support Team
- When to approach a Site Based Support Team
- Steps in conducting a Site Based Support Team meeting
- Procedure in cases of insufficient progress
- Indicators that a Site Based Support Team is functioning effectively
- Meeting with parents/caregivers
- Working with problem parents/caregivers

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The Effective Functioning of a Site Based Support Team

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The Sub-Directorate: Inclusive Education of the
Free State Department of Education

Contents

Foreword

In line with White Paper 6 the Sub-Directorate Inclusive Education produced a VHS video/DVD and this booklet as a guide for the establishment and proper functioning of a Site Based Support Team (SBST), also known as an Institutional Level Support Team (ILST). This will path the way for the creation of a safe and supportive environment where educators are motivated and strengthened to support learners experiencing barriers to learning and development. The magic of a Site Based Support Team is based on the concept of sharing.

The manner in which SBST meetings can be conducted, will also receive attention.. The Site Based Support Team is anchored on the premise that educators working together can help one another support learners experiencing barriers to learning and development. It is important to note that the Site Based Support Team approach is not a quick fix. Suggestions generated from the team meetings should be put into practice, monitored and reworked according to the learner's needs.

While a Site Based Support Team is not a panacea for all problems in education, it is nevertheless a healthy, cooperative process with benefits for the team, the individual educator and the learners.

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Diverse Learning Needs

In our classrooms we have a diversity of learners with diverse learning needs. Although educators in regular classrooms can meet the needs of many learners in the mainstream, situations arise when educators need assistance. In such instances educators often have no place to turn to for help to enable them to support learners appropriately. The learners who are not supported end up experiencing barriers to learning and development which may lead to them failing or dropping out of school.

Barriers to Learning

A barrier to learning is anything that prohibits or impedes a learner from learning up to his or her potential.

Barriers to learning can be located:

- within the learner (for example: dyslexia)
- within the centre of learning (for example: over-crowded class-rooms)
- within the education system (for example: a lack of teaching and learning aids or an inappropriate language of teaching)
- within the economic or political context (for example: poverty or a lack of parent involvement)

To address such barriers to learning in the educational environment, Site Based Support Teams should be established.

Definition of a Site Based Support Team

A Site Based Support Team (SBST) or an Institutional Level Support Team, (ILST), is an internal support team of educators within the school and can simply be defined as:

"a system whereby educators within a school support each other in order to address barriers to learning and development".

It is a committee of staff members whose purpose is to consult with individual educators who request assistance regarding learners experiencing barriers to learning and development.

Rationale on which the Establishment of Site Based Support Teams is based

- The Inclusive Education concept is based on the notion that all learners can learn and regular classroom educators need support to assist learners experiencing barriers to learning.
- The Site Based Support Team notion is a strategy to put in place a properly coordinated learner and educator support service.

Core and Key Functions of a Site Based Support Team

The core function of this team is to support the teaching and learning process.

Key functions include:

- coordinating all learner, educator, curriculum and school development support in the school
- collectively identifying school needs and in particular, barriers to learning at learner, educator, curriculum and school level
- collectively developing strategies to address these needs and barriers to learning, for example: to get all staff on board, arrange discussion time once a month

and to address different support strategies

- drawing in the resources needed, from within and outside the school, to address challenges
- monitoring and evaluating the work of the team within an action–reflection framework, for example, to compile and work towards an action plan
- ensuring that all partners in education clearly understand their roles, are accountable to the communities they serve and feel supported by their peers

Members of a Site Based Support Team

Core Members:

- The principal and/or the deputy principal plus one or two heads of Department. *It is crucial that the principal must be a member of the Site Based Support Team to ensure its success. In a case where he/she cannot act as a member, he/she must delegate his/her deputy or a member of the SMT.*
- Educators with skills and knowledge in areas such as learning support, life skills, guidance or counseling, or who

have particular expertise to offer around a specific need or challenge, or educators who volunteered.

- The team might consist of 3 to 5 permanent members (depending on the size of the school), plus other educators, depending on their involvement in the specific learner experiencing barriers to learning and development.
- The school may designate a "learning support" educator or any other educator who is competent and experienced with collaborative and facilitation skills, to be the coordinator of the SBST.

Additional members:

- parents or caregivers of a learner experiencing barriers to learning and development should be included - this will depend on the barrier to learning the learner experiences
- specific members of the District Based Support Team when the need arises
- members of the local community who have a particular contribution to make in addressing specific challenges

- NGO, CBO, FBO, etc.
- educators from other schools

Duties of the Coordinator

The duties of the coordinator include the following:

- handle case referrals
- set case priorities
- schedule meetings
- consult with referring educators
- arrange for implementing recommendations and actions taken on each case
- ensure that follow-up takes place

Functions of the Principal

Functions of the principal entail the following:

- responsible for the establishment of a Site Based Support Team
- responsible for appointing a coordinator for the Site Based Support Team
- support the SBST in the implementation of policy, i.e. making time available for the team to meet on a regular basis
- motivation and encouragement of the team
- attend problem solving meetings

The Role of the District Based Support Team in Establishing and Developing a Site Based Support Team

The District Based Support Team (DBST) should:

- assist schools in establishing Site Based Support Teams

- ensure that the Site Based Support Team functions effectively and that the needs of the team and school are addressed

- build the capacity of the SBST to identify and address barriers to learning and development

- inform the SBST of available expertise in the DBST, community and other institutions

- assist the SBST in developing preventative and early intervention programmes for learners experiencing barriers to learning and development

Meetings of a Site Based Support Team

- A Site Based Support Team should meet at least once a month (when the team is more established, it may meet less frequently – at least once a quarter).

- All proceedings of the meeting should be recorded and a file of minutes should be kept.

- Ideally meetings should last 30 minutes – no meeting should last longer than 45 minutes.

When to Approach a Site Based Support Team

White Paper 6 on building an Inclusive Education system states that learners experiencing barriers to learning and development should be supported in the regular classroom as much as possible. Any educator who is facing a difficulty with a learner can approach the coordinator of the SBST for help.

Naturally this is not for each and every difficulty that the classroom educator faces from day to day. The educator should be encouraged to use this approach after exhausting other options, like informal discussions with other educators, visits to the library, surfing the internet, consulting with parents or seeking advice from the support educator.

The concept of Site Based Support Teams rests on the assumption that there is considerable knowledge, talent and skills among educators and that educators can address more barriers when working together than by working alone.

It is important to note that the responsibility for the learner learning always remains with the classroom educator. This is the essence of professional accountability.

Steps in Conducting a Site Based Support Team Meeting

Once approached, the SBST coordinator assesses the problem and if need be, calls a meeting of the SBST members. A Site Based Support Team meeting can be divided into the following 7 steps:

Step 1:

- During the first stage of the meeting the coordinator briefly explains the purpose of the meeting.

- One member acts as a scribe.

- The coordinator and the referring educator concisely explain the barrier to learning and development the learner experiences and what they want to happen that is not happening, while also identifying what assistance they need from the team. (This stage should last no longer than three minutes.)

Step 2:

- If necessary, the coordinator invites the referring educator to provide background information.

- Other members of the SBST should listen attentively and model a non-judgmental attitude towards the referring educator.

- The scribe should capture the important details of the educator's statement in point form.

- Ideally these points should be written either on a flip chart or a chalk-board that is visible to all members of the team. (Step 2 should be completed in two or three minutes.)

Step 3:

- The coordinator invites the team members in sequence to ask the referring educator questions for clarification purposes.

- The scribe captures only the essential points.

- The coordinator redirects questions that criticize the referring educator.

Step 4:

- The team members brainstorm constructive ideas. Suggestions should be brief and practical.

Keep the focus on simple, "do-able", non-intrusive options that accentuate the positive and can be implemented immediately.

- The coordinator, together with the other members of the team, has to ensure a climate of respect and acceptance.

- Team members should direct their suggestions to the coordinator, not the referring educator.

- Members should not comment on one another's suggestions. This arrangement has been found helpful in creating a climate that puts each team member at ease to give inputs without fear of ridicule or being put down.

Step 5:

- The coordinator gives the referring educator an opportunity to select workable ideas, that is, those suggestions that seem to have the potential to immediately address the barrier the learner is experiencing. (This process should last no longer than five minutes.)

Step 6:

- The implementation strategy is now discussed.

- A plan to support the learner is developed; responsibilities and timeframes are identified.

- The scribe ensures that all decisions are captured and that the minutes taken, are signed by all members.

- A follow-up meeting is determined.

Step 7:

- The coordinator wraps up by pointing to what has been achieved in the meeting. At this stage the coordinator has got good reason to thank all team members.

- It is important for the team to realize that solutions developed in one meeting may be relevant to many problems faced not only by the referring educator but by other team members and educators as well.

During the arranged follow-up meeting the referring educator gives feedback on the intervention strategy or strategies. If the strategies implemented have worked and the learner shows progress, the process ends here.

Procedure in Cases of Insufficient Progress

External consultation will now be arranged. The coordinator of the SBST and the referring educator invite the Learning Support Facilitator of the school for consultation.

This interaction can take on the following form:

- A meeting between the Learning Support Facilitator, SBST coordinator, referring educator and principal is held - other members of the SBST may be included.

- The SBST coordinator, referring educator and principal present the case to the Learning Support Facilitator by providing the minutes of the SBST meetings and portfolio of the learner.

- The Learning Support Facilitator evaluates the problem and assists the school with strategies to further address the identified barrier.

- Depending on the nature of the barrier, the Learning Support Facilitator may request the school to complete a referral form to be used by the District Based Support Team for external evaluation.

- Once the referral form is received by the District Based Support Team, the Learning Support Facilitator discusses the case with the Deputy Chief Education Specialist Inclusive Education and a case conference or meeting with relevant DBST members is arranged.

- During the case conference or meeting, the Learning Support Facilitator explains the problem and provides the necessary background information.

- Questions are asked and constructive ideas for intervention are brainstormed.

- Relevant officials from the District Based Support Team will capacitate the educator to support the learner and his/her parent or caregiver.

- The Learning Support Facilitator takes the report back to the SBST to provide feedback.

- It will be the responsibility of the school to inform the parent or caregiver of the learner about the decision/s taken.

- If it is decided that the learner is eligible for special education and has to be accommodated in a special school, it becomes the responsibility of the Deputy Chief

Education Specialist: Inclusive Education to make the necessary arrangements for the learner's placement.

• The learner's parents or care-givers must be part of all decisions.

It is important to remember that the District Based Support Team, not individual members, determines whether a higher level of support, that is special education, is neces-sary or whether intervention in the regular classroom will suffice.

Indicators that a Site Based Support Team is Functioning Effectively

A school's SBST is functioning effectively when:

• the classroom educator takes responsibility in supporting learners who experience barriers to learning and development

• SBST meetings take place on a regular basis

• strategies are captured in a file on educator development and support

• minutes of all referred learners are also recorded in a file and signed by all members

• learners who experience barriers to learning and development get support in the mainstream classes

Meeting with Parents/ caregivers

When meeting with the parents or caregivers of learners with barriers to learning, members of SBSTs must note the following:

• prepare carefully

• ensure privacy

• provide an informal setting and establish rapport

• begin on a positive note and set a time limit

• encourage the parents to talk and listen attentively

• develop an attitude of mutual cooperation

• delay making definite sugges-tions yourself, but encourage suggestions from parents

• use parents' practical sugges-tions as a springboard for action

• end on a note of continuing co-operation

• make notes after parents have left

Working with Problem Parents/caregivers

Here we can distinguish between the following types of parents/ caregivers often encountered in the SBST environment:

The timid parent/caregiver: He/she usually has a very high re-gard for teachers and is speechless before you. He/she also considers education a one-way street and nothing seem to spark a reply.

In working with the timid parent/ caregiver the educator or district official can:

• offer several sincere compli-ments

• ask questions which can't be answered with a "yes" or "no"

• be as friendly as possible without overdoing it

The worried parent/caregiver: He/she is usually worried about a lot more than just the child. He/she also believes that, no matter what you said in your invitation, the learner must be in some kind of trouble.

How to deal with the worried parent/caregiver:

• If worry is expressed, recognize and respect it.

• If the child is doing satisfactorily, assure the parent of this imme-diately.

• Assure the parent that few problems in child adjustment or learning are insoluble.

• Plan a joint attack on the prob-lem. This step usually relieves a worried parent.

The egoistical parent/caregiver: He/she will probably enter the meeting venue smiling and self-confident. He/she usually regards himself/herself as very intelligent and insightful.

What to do when working with the egoistical parent/caregiver:

• Do not inflate the balloon or you will have a lifelong enemy.

• Acknowledge his/her abilities.

• Use the parent/caregiver's abilities to the advantage of the learner and if possible, as a resource of the entire class.

The critical parent/caregiver:
He/she comes to a meeting armed with "expert" opinions on how to teach children. He/she has also read all about "progressive edu-cation" (inclusive education) and wants none of it.

How to approach the critical parent/caregiver:

- Do not argue, but try to inform by using facts and an appeal to the emotions.
- Talk about only those areas in which you are well equipped to speak.
- Admit educators don't have all the answers. What profession does?

Conclusion

The Sub-Directorate: Inclusive Education trusts that this booklet has indeed provided you with some guidance for the establish-ment and proper functioning of Site Based Support Teams at our schools in the Free State. We count on you to assist in creating a safe and supportive environment where educators are motivated and strengthened to support learners experiencing barriers to learning and development.

For more support and guidance schools are encouraged to call upon the Inclusive Education officials in their respective districts.