Research indicates that one in five students who have academic difficulties have a physical, mental, behavioral, or emotional problem. Identifying, giving attention to, and treating these problems that affect the students will contribute to higher test scores and fewer disciplinary problems (Student Support and Special Services, 2007). To address these problems, the Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) utilizes Student Support Teams (SST).

The SST program is a three-stage model comprised of program delivery that establishes a collaborative partnership between various instructional and support staff. (Student Support and Special Services, 2007). At each stage, intervention and instruction are utilized. The stages are designed to be more progressive as each stage builds on the previous. See Figure 1.

During the 2009-2010 school year, Dallas ISD had 233 student support teams on 227 campuses. The SST is a team that works together to uncover the underlying reasons the student is experiencing academic difficulties and to create and implement interventions to address those problems. The core members of the SST were an administrator, counselor, nurse, master teachers, person making referral, parent, psychological/social service staff, student (when appropriate), and other teachers. The SST was comprised of different members in order to develop the most extensive and exhaustive plan for the student.

According to the Dallas ISD Student Support Team Manual- A Framework for Integrated Service Delivery and other Dallas ISD SST program documents, the following are the purposes of the SST:

1. Serve as a multi-disciplinary team to develop strategies that will enable students to reach their potential;
2. participate in the development of the student improvement plan;
3. provide direct delivery of or referral for services including but not limited to counseling, home visitation, youth and family centers;
4. assist members of the school community to develop an understanding of human diversity;
5. serve as a student advocacy group;
6. refer students for evaluation for a disability (IDEA) and/or Section 504 and,
7. determine if a student is Dyslexic.

**Referral Process**

Students can be referred to the SST program two ways. The first way is through the Universal Screening Instrument (USI). The USI is a standardized tool used to identify students who may be struggling with the academic curriculum due to physical, social, and emotional factors. This instrument is a screening tool and is not definitive. The results are distributed to the principal and teachers regarding their school/class.

The USI instructs teachers to select areas “where a significant concern is evidenced.” The following are the areas listed on USI:

- Attendance/Tardies
- Vision and Hearing
- Other Physical
- Difficulty attending to classroom task
- Does not respond in age/grade appropriate manner
- Recent behavioral changes
- Behavior that impacts academic performance
- Difficulty communicating in class
- Social skills concern
Recent change in academic performance
Other

The second way to refer a student is by contacting the SST leader by completing the SST referral paperwork.

**Participation**

During the 2009-2010 school year 27,439 students or 17 percent of the total number of Dallas ISD students were referred to the SST program.

**Screening**

The USI is utilized to screen students each fall semester. All first grade through ninth grade students are screened to determine whether they are experiencing difficulties related to the aforementioned tenants. According to the SST coordinator, 10th grade through 12th grade students are generally not screened unless they are from another country or district, then screening will be considered. First through fifth grade students are screened in their homeroom classes, sixth grade through eighth grade students are screened in mathematics or history classes, and ninth grade students are screened in English I or Algebra I.

**Encore**

Dallas ISD utilized a computer based program called Encore to track students referred to the SST program. The system was used to evaluate a sample of 14 in order to assess the interventions implemented and follow-up services. All students sampled were identified by a teacher or counselor through the USI. Of the students sampled, seven (50%) students had no follow-up or no intervention as of May 8, 2010 according to the Encore system. Proposed and implemented interventions included reading during instructional time, group counseling, being referred to special education, observations by a social worker, learning behavior conference, and seeing a speech consultant.

**Student Support Team Leader Feedback**

A random sample of 12 SST leaders were interviewed to determine whether they believed the SST process was effective. In general, the leaders reported that they felt the SST program was beneficial for the students but had a few suggestions about how the program could be improved. Ten of the twelve leaders interviewed stated that the process was very time consuming and that they needed additional time to complete the work. Lack of time was also a factor in preventing all of the leaders from updating the Encore system on a regular basis. The majority of the leaders requested additional SST training throughout the school year to provide sample interventions, learn of new resources, and to discuss the process with other SST leaders. Some of the leaders stated that based on the great need for the SST program and the amount of work and time involved, they believed the position should be full-time. Just less than 50 percent of the leaders interviewed stated that they did not address every student identified by the USI. Additionally, some of the leaders stated that teachers could be subjective in selecting factors for students on the USI.

**Recommendations**

The SST model has the potential to inform schools and learning communities of academic difficulties in identified students in order to address these difficulties properly. In order for this goal to be reached, the following recommendations were made:

- Since the USI is the selected tool used to identify students struggling to learn the academic curriculum, it is recommended that all identified students be addressed at some point during the school year by the SST.
- Based on the discovery that ENCORE was not updated as required and that all teams did not meet weekly, it is recommended that the SST program be fully implemented on each campus according to the model.
- It is requested that additional training be offered to the SST leaders.
- It is recommended that the program investigate staff perceptions on the possible need for additional staff.
- Based on the feedback from the SST leaders, it is requested that teachers receive training on the utilization of the USI.

For more information see EA10-163-2 at: www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/