

# STUDENT SUPPORT TEAMS (SST)

## Structure and Process



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# Preface

This document supersedes the 2000-2001 Georgia Department of Education SST Manual and its 2008 update. Since that time, the process known as Response to Intervention (RTI) has become an overall framework for educational decision making with student learning and behavior problems. *Georgia's SST structure fits perfectly within this process.* A separate RTI Guide (2008, revised 2011) has been produced by the Georgia Department of Education; much of the 2000-2001 SST Manual's resource and process content has been reworked and added to that RTI guide or eliminated.

While RTI has evolved into a nationally accepted problem solving approach, one fact remains constant: ***an SST team is required by federal judicial order to be in every public school in Georgia and will continue to be.*** For that reality, this manual has been condensed to assist schools and parents with understanding the basic structure of SST and what procedures are required by state regulation. The evolving nature of educational best practices will be left to other documents to follow, explain and change as those best practices change.

Previous SST Manual sections on related legal requirements have either been eliminated or condensed herein to only the information most pertinent for SST. There are many other sources where one can access and study topics such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act; FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act); and IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). The Georgia Department of Education website ([www.gadoe.org](http://www.gadoe.org)) is one option.

If you have questions about SST, contact the AskDOE desk at 404-656-2800 or 800-311-3627, or by fax (404-651-6867), or e-mail [askdoe@doe.k12.ga.us](mailto:askdoe@doe.k12.ga.us)

# Overview of the Student Support Team Process

It is important to know that Georgia SST teams had their origin in a federal lawsuit known as Marshall vs. Georgia (1984). It dealt primarily with disproportionate placement of minority students in Special Education. While the state prevailed in this case, a shortcoming in Georgia education became obvious: there was no standard process for students to obtain individualized help *in the regular classroom* for learning or behavior difficulties. Instead, the route to such help usually led to placement in Special Education, often involving removal from the general classroom.

As part of its commitment to federal court to remedy technical violations found in the trial, the State of Georgia mandated that a Student Support Team would be established in every Georgia public school, K-12. The court accepted this commitment, thereby making the SST mandate a permanent injunction. Below is the exact text of the state's commitment regarding SST teams:

## "A. Student Support Teams

"Each local agency shall develop a Student Support Team. The Student Support Team is a joint effort of regular education and special education to identify and plan alternative instructional strategies for children prior to or in lieu of a special education referral. Each building level team is comprised of such persons as administrator, classroom teacher, requesting teacher, special education teacher, counselor, school psychologist, special education resource person, school social worker or central office personnel. Parental involvement is also a critical part of the Student Support Team process.

"This interdisciplinary group which plans for modification in a student's education program shall engage in a six step process to include: (1) identification of needs, (2) assessment, if necessary, (3) educational plan, (4) implementation, (5) follow-up and support, and (6) continuous monitoring and evaluation. The Student Support Team functions under the auspices of regular education curriculum services and is based upon the child study team concept.

"Requests for service for the student from the Student Support Team may include curriculum modification, learning style assessment, behavior management techniques, achievement evaluation, home-school communication, or study skill assistance. Requests for special education services may also be made. Prior to consideration for special education referral, non-special education options should be considered, interventions used, documented, described, and discussed at the special education placement meeting. In limited instances, initial referral to the Student Support Team prior to special education referral will not be necessary. These cases are those in which the necessity for special education is so clear that use of non-special education options would be non-productive or harmful to the child. In those cases where initial referral is not to the Student Support Team, the reasons therefor will be documented."

[Excerpt from state commitment to federal court, Southern District of GA, 1984]

Several points deserve to be highlighted here. Clearly, the primary intent of this mandate, given the trial from which it arose, *was to prevent inappropriate referrals to Special Education*. The way to accomplish that was to marshal multiple resources of the school and system, including both General and Special Education expertise, and engage in a prescribed set of problem solving processes. The expectation for active parental input and involvement was unequivocal.

It should also be noted that this case was appealed to the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals, who refused to hear it. Thus, *it is only binding on public schools in Georgia*. This has sometimes led to confusion about the scope of SST's responsibility when considering the requirements and provisions of other laws and programs.

Requirements for SST come from two places: a State Board rule (below) and local school system policies which comply with and may elaborate on the state rule. The state rule applies to all SSTs, but local school system policies only apply to SSTs in their district. These may be quite different across districts. Local school and district policies may be obtained from the central office of a school system.

# Georgia Board of Education Rule on Student Support Teams

160-4-2-.32 STUDENT SUPPORT TEAM.

Code: IGB

## (1) DEFINITIONS.

(a) **Student Support Team (SST)** - an interdisciplinary group that uses a systematic process to address learning and/or behavior problems of students, K-12, in a school.

## (2) REQUIREMENTS.

(a) Each school shall have a minimum of one SST and shall establish support team procedures.

(b) Before a referral is made for other supplemental or support services an evaluation and/or assessment shall be conducted.

1. Prior evaluation(s) and/or assessment(s) of a student for a state or federal program shall be considered as having met this requirement.

(c) The SST shall include at a minimum the referring teacher and at least two of the following participants, as appropriate to the needs of the student:

1. Principal.
2. General education teacher.
3. Counselor.
4. Lead teacher.
5. School psychologist.
6. Subject area specialist.
7. ESOL teacher.
8. Special education teacher.
9. School social worker.
10. Central office personnel.
11. Section 504 coordinator.
12. Other appropriate personnel.

(d) Parents/guardians shall be invited to participate in all meetings of their child's SST and in the development of interventions for their child.

(e) Each school shall include the following steps in the SST process:

160-4-2-.32 (Continued)

1. Identification of learning and/or behavior problems.
2. Assessment, if necessary.
3. Educational plan.
4. Implementation.
5. Follow-up and support.
6. Continuous monitoring and evaluation

- (f) Documentation of SST activities shall include the following:
1. Student's name.
  2. Names of team members.
  3. Meeting dates.
  4. Identification of student learning and/or behavior problems.
  5. Any records of assessment.
  6. Educational plan and implementation results.
  7. Follow-up and, as appropriate continuous evaluation.

**(3) EXCEPTIONS TO THE USE OF THE SST PROCESS.**

School personnel and parents/guardians may determine that there is a reasonable cause to bypass the SST process an individual student. Documentation in the student's record shall clearly justify such action, including whether the parent or guardian agreed with such a decision. In cases where immediate referral is sought, the SST shall still determine what interim strategies, interventions, and modifications shall be attempted for the student.

It is not necessary for students who transfer into the local school system/state operated program with a current Individualized Education Program or Section 504 plan to go through the SST process.

Authority O.C.G. § 20-2-152; 20-2-240.

Adopted: September 14, 2000

Effective: October 5, 2000

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**Notes on the State Board rule**

- **A parent can be one of the two participants specified in 2 (c)**
- **Schools that only serve pre-kindergarten students are not required to have an SST**
- **A parent must be invited but is not required to participate; a meeting can proceed without the parent in attendance**
- **SST records are part of a student's permanent cumulative file unless their timely purging is provided for in the system's Records Retention Schedule**

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **How does SST relate to the Response to Intervention (RTI) process?**

SST provides the structure and RTI the process for individualized interventions at Tier 3 of RTI, that is, the RTI process should meet the SST state board rule basic requirements. Over time, RTI may evolve into something else, but the SST requirement in Georgia public schools is permanent!

### **What happens when SST addresses a problem?**

A systemic, collaborative problem solving process is used to generate recommendations that are targeted to the student's learning or behavior problem. These recommendations, which include a specific academic and/or behavior plan, are documented in SST records and provided to the student's teacher(s) and/or others to implement with the student. The team then meets periodically to review the student's progress monitoring data and determine the need for continuing, modifying, or concluding the intervention (e.g., increase time, additional supports).

### **How long is the research based SST intervention implemented?**

Interventions used should be those that have a proven record of success, supported by rigorous, objective research methods. The length of time an intervention is implemented is typically indicated in the intervention, which specifies the length of time needed for the process to attain reasonable success (e.g., how many weeks, days and minutes are indicated for each intervention based on how it was researched and designed). Interventions must be implemented with fidelity in the way they were designed and researched, following the specific steps of the intervention and reviewing progress monitoring/student response to the intervention. It is vital that progress monitoring is analyzed on a consistent/frequent basis so that the SST problem-solves next steps based on reliable, current data.

### **Should the SST refer students for a hearing/vision screening?**

This is left to the discretion of the local school system. However, difficulties with hearing and/or vision can have a profound impact on a student's ability to learn. It is beneficial to complete a screening early in the SST process. Any problems should be addressed immediately and the impact of the problem on the student's learning should be carefully considered. Consent is required for any screening or evaluation in which students are singled out from their peers. Hearing and vision screenings given to every student in a particular grade do not require consent and can be used as part of the SST process.

### **Can the SST refer students for evaluation for special education consideration?**

Yes, but only after several important decision criteria are met: 1) that reasonable SST interventions of sufficient duration have been carefully attempted, without success; and 2) that the cause of the problem is suspected to be a disability that cannot be resolved without special education services. Interventions to support the student must be continued during the special education evaluation period.

### **Do all referrals for special education need to go through the SST?**

The state's court commitment (unique to Georgia) was that virtually all referrals should go through the SST referral process. The exception-- or "Bypassing SST"--was outlined in the directives from the Marshall Court Case: "These cases are those in which the necessity for special education is so clear that use of non- special education options would be non-productive or harmful to the child. In those cases where initial referral is not to the Student Support Team, the reasons therefor will be documented. (Marshall v. GA, 1984 )"



### **How can local school systems determine the effectiveness of their SST process?**

Many indicators can show success of the SST process, from parent/faculty satisfaction; to pre/post student performance; to placement rate for initial referrals to special education, i.e., that a high percentage of referrals to special education indeed were found eligible.

### **What factors impact the effectiveness of SST?**

The most important factor in the success of an SST is the attitude with which school personnel view the process. It is most effective when looked upon as a team process for supporting the teacher and student. The effectiveness is greatly reduced when administrators and/or teachers see the process as being simply a paperwork requirement for special education placement.

Secondly, the SST must use a data-driven problem solving process, be well organized and have clear definitions of roles and responsibilities. All participants should be well trained in the process, procedures and legal aspects.

Finally, the paperwork should be teacher friendly and efficient while still meeting legal requirements and providing enough information to future teachers and service providers. Ultimately, the success of any SST relies on the foundation of supports at tier 1 and 2. Success is defined by schools analyzing their data to identify school-wide, classroom, and individual student needs and their use of research based strategies and interventions led by ongoing professional learning, coaching, and measurement of student response to these supports. When these are successful, the number of students referred for SST is reduced, which increases the time and opportunity to provide intensive/individualized supports with better outcomes.

### **What incentives can be used to encourage educators to serve on an SST?**

Schools may want to consider extended year or extended day contracts, a lighter teaching load or fewer administrative duties, PLU credits, and/or stipends.

### **What benefits can accrue to a school from successful SST efforts?**

An effective SST and RTI are highly correlated with positive school climate and successful outcomes for students. Some benefits of an effective SST often include: higher graduation rate, better test scores, fewer students retained in grade, better attendance (by teachers and students), less teacher turnover, better discipline, ready-made needs assessment on teacher needs, more parent involvement, more successful inclusion of special education students in regular classes, and more.

### **Must parents be invited to all SST meetings held on their child?**

Yes. The Student support Team Rule 160-4-2-.32 requires that parents be invited to all SST meetings held on their child.

### **Must parents give consent for an SST meeting?**

Although parents must be invited to all SST meetings, they do not have to give consent for the SST meeting to take place or to give consent for the SST plan to be implemented. Every effort should be made, however, to help parents view the student support team process in a positive light and to understand that this process is not a special education placement.

### **The SST has referred a student to special education. What should happen while the special education evaluation is in process?**

Everyone who works with the student should continue to implement the research-based

interventions and other efforts outlined in the student's SST plan.

**Do students who have difficulty with communication such as articulating their words have to be assisted by the SST before they can be referred to special education for a speech evaluation?**

Yes. The SST process applies to all students. Attempts to assist students should occur through the SST with interventions targeting articulation, speech or language difficulties documented with progress monitoring before a referral to special education is made. Of course, if there is clear evidence that strongly suggests the presence of a disability, the school may bypass SST interventions and refer the student to special education. "These cases are those in which the necessity for special education is so clear that use of non-special education options would be non-productive or harmful to the child. In those cases where initial referral is not to the Student Support Team, the reasons therefor will be documented." (Marshall v. GA, 1984) The evidence considered and the reasons for the SST bypass must be clearly documented by the SST team.

**Can special educators be members of a school's Student Support Team?**

It is generally good practice for SSTs to consider individual situations in which a "specialist" might be requested to attend a certain SST meeting for a particular student. These specialists may include special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, or any other individuals with specialized training who can provide insight about the student and focus on matching research-based interventions to student need(s) and analysis of response to intervention/progress monitoring. *It is important to note that the State of Georgia's description of the SST process in its commitment to federal court specifically envisioned SST as a collaboration between general and special education.*

**IDEA contains a provision that addresses "protections for [students] not yet eligible for special education and related services. What does this mean for the SST Process?**

Simply stated, a general education student whose behavior elicits disciplinary action of the school or school system must be afforded all of the rights and procedural safeguards under the IDEA if the school or school system **knew or should have known** that the student was a student with a disability. At the very least, the SST should consider inviting the school psychologist and/or the special education teacher to attend an SST meeting for the student in order to assist the team in decision making about a special education referral. Students with persistent or escalating behaviors should not remain on the same SST plan when there is documentation of lack of, or poor response to, research-based interventions matched to their need(s).

## Documentation of the SST Process

- Proper documentation is essential in the SST process. Forms (which may be paper or electronic) should be easy to use and efficient while still providing adequate documentation of the team's activities and the student's performance. Written summaries of the team's actions should be kept for every meeting. The actions of the SST should be so clear that new teachers each year will have no difficulty determining what has been tried and found successful for the student in the past. All information should be dated.
- Documentation of SST activities should include the following (taken from SST rule):
  - Student's name
  - Name of team members
  - Meeting dates
  - Identification of student learning or behavior problems in objective and observable terms
  - Any records of assessment, including progress monitoring data
  - Educational plan and implementation results
  - Follow-up and, as appropriate, continuous evaluation.
- A suggested list of forms, some required, some optional, to document SST activities:
- **Organizational Checklist:** helpful in tracking the activities of the SST and assuring that all necessary procedures are implemented in a timely manner.
- **SST Request:** The form should be easy to complete while still providing information about the student's difficulties, strengths, and weaknesses. Request forms which are a combination of checklist, narrative, and incorporate student records are most beneficial.
- **Parent Invitation to Meeting:** should clearly inform parents of the purpose of the request and invite their participation in the process.
- **Meeting Summary:** must document the actions of the SST in each meeting. Parents should be given a copy of the summary from each meeting. SST members should refrain from making diagnoses or judgment statements in SST summaries. The student's problems should be clearly defined in objective language. The discussion of the team should be summarized, and the recommendations should be documented. If the student is being referred to special education, considered for Section 504 eligibility, or no longer needs the services of the Student Support Team, the summary must reflect this decision.
- **Educational Plan:** must state the specific goals selected to address the student's needs, the interventions to be used, what and when progress monitoring data will be collected., and the outcomes after implementation. This may be included with the summaries or developed as a separate document. Team members should develop an appropriate Educational Plan based on the student's strengths and weaknesses. The plan should be implemented for an appropriate period of time as designed/researched in the intervention. Plans should be updated as needed based on student response to the intervention. The outcome for each intervention should be clearly documented with the student's specific response in progress monitoring data clearly documented with analysis of trends.

- **Behavior Documentation:** should contain progress monitoring data compared to baseline information which documents the student's behavior difficulties. The information is most helpful when it includes antecedent, behavior, and consequences, such as a functional behavioral assessment.
- **Dismissal Letter:** may be used to explain the decision to dismiss a student from SST if the parents do not attend the SST meeting.

## **Re: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004)**

IDEA is the federal legislation which governs special education and related services, particularly funding and eligibility. Although the Student Support Team process is not mandated by IDEA, SST members must have some general knowledge about the requirements of the law in order to make informed decisions when considering referrals to special education. However, Response to Intervention is referenced as one option in the eligibility determination process for students with specific learning disabilities. In addition, the regulation outlines several exclusionary factors that must be considered before determining that a child has a disability:

1) Lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction as defined in section 1208(3) of ESEA); 2) Lack of appropriate instruction in mathematics; and/or 3) Limited English proficiency. RTI and SST practices help ensure that children suspected of having a disability have indeed had access to appropriate instruction.

It is important to note that it is **not** up to SST members to judge whether a student **would or would not qualify** for a category as a factor in their decision to refer. That is for the IDEA eligibility team to answer after a comprehensive, individualized evaluation by a multidisciplinary evaluation team.

The role of the SST is to answer a basic question regarding a student with learning or behavior difficulties. That is, can this difficulty be resolved in a reasonable time with proven interventions in the regular classroom? Federal regulations for IDEA require that, in order to be referred for a special education evaluation, not only must 1) a disability be suspected as the source of the student's problem, but also 2) the student's identified difficulties must be judged to be unable to be resolved without a special education program.

For additional information, please refer to the Georgia Department of Education website:

[http://gadoe.org/ci\\_exceptional.aspx](http://gadoe.org/ci_exceptional.aspx)

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