Differentiated Technical Assistance for Sustainable Transformation

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Abstract

Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center's technical assistance process supports states, districts, and schools as they become excellent and equitable teaching and learning environments for all students. Each school with support from its district begins this process from its own starting point and travels its own path to create and sustain fully integrated learning environments. SWIFT differentiates its technical assistance using six evidence-based practices. These practices are briefly described here: Visioning, Data Snapshots, Priority and Practice Planning, Resource Mapping and Matching, Transformation Teaming, and Coaching and Facilitation.

Introduction

SWIFT Center engages in technical assistance (TA) partnerships with state educational agencies (SEAs), districts, schools, and their communities to transform whole education systems. The goal of each partnership is to build *excellent* teaching and learning environments that practice *equity-based inclusion* of *all* children. SWIFT employs six TA practices that support an initial transformation process while simultaneously building system capacity to sustain and scale up equity-based inclusion in additional schools and districts over time.[1-4] This brief introduces these TA practices.

Theories of Action

SWIFT TA operates with several underlying theories of action supported by research. First among these theories is that educational systems that bridge general and specialized education can create powerful learning opportunities and outcomes for all students, including those students with the most extensive needs. Thus, SWIFT works toward an equity-based inclusive framework with five mutually reinforcing evidence-based domains and features that, when implemented in a fully integrated fashion, produces achievement gains for students with and without disabilities.[5, 6]

A second SWIFT theory of action is that whole system engagement across each school, its district and state education agency, that is, the cascading levels of

influence or impact, produces sustainable reform.[7] Improved student outcomes are the ultimate *purpose* of the TA intervention efforts. But, because schools have the most direct influence on students, they are the *place of transformation*. Meanwhile, research suggests when a district is the *point of intervention*, schoolwide transformation and improved student outcomes become sustainable after incremental TA resources are gone.[4] Further, this theory holds that the SEA is the primary *source of technical support* for districts and schools to sustain the framework as well as to scale up into additional districts and schools.

Another theory of action around which SWIFT organizes TA practice is based on the belief that transformed educational systems emerge from the work of the people who are most knowledgeable about the students and local culture and values—that is, the educators already in the system, and the families and others who live in the community.[8, 9] Two key assumptions are that every SWIFT TA partner (a) has already attempted to improve student performance and therefore starts from a place of knowledge, and (b) possesses strengths upon which to build. SWIFT's role is to deploy *differentiated TA* that builds on their knowledge and strengths and helps prepare them to implement the changes they envision. SWIFT helps them access the resources they need to transform, while building up their capacity to continue the transformation and sustain it into the future. At the same time, SWIFT shares full responsibility for achieving their desired outcomes.[10]

SWIFT TA also values lessons learned by other TA providers, namely that implementation of a new program is not an event, but a process that occurs over time in *stages* that may overlap and be revisited as circumstances change.[2, 4, 11-13] Thus, SWIFT TA is a non-linear process involving multiple organizational levels and a variety of integrated practices. Likewise, other TA providers reinforce the importance of using *data to make sound decisions* about the content and efficacy of TA, and the necessity of using existing resources to accomplish better outcomes.

Technical Assistance Practices

SWIFT TA uniquely integrates six practices that are not entirely new ideas, but rest on evidence from past successes in significant school transformation.[1-4] At the same time, SWIFT continues to evolve and learn from partners as well as other TA centers. SWIFT's six TA practices described here are 1) Visioning, 2) Data Snapshots, 3) Priority and Practice Planning, 4) Resource Mapping and Matching, 5) Transformation Teaming, and 6) Coaching and Facilitation.
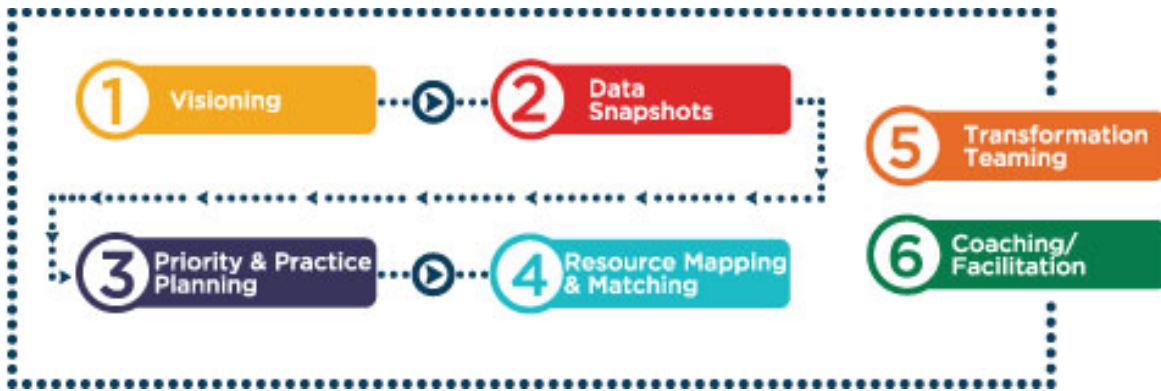
1 Visioning

SWIFT TA providers and members of a school community engage in a Visioning process that generates specific, actionable statements describing the community's ideal future, fully-transformed school. Through structured consensus-building, community members design a shared vision for which they feel strong ownership. The process also provides a context for the educational community to embrace the values of equity-based inclusion, see how the content of the SWIFT domains and features align with their desired outcomes, and formally adopt SWIFT as a comprehensive framework for education in their school, district, and/or SEA.

2 Data Snapshots

SWIFT TA's Data Snapshots practice brings people together to discuss complex data and ideas in a simple, easy to use format. Meaningful conversations about the current state of the school, district, or SEA system are intended to lead to decisions about priorities for change in relation to their shared vision.

Data Snapshots include student academic achievement, educational environments, and behavior data; assessments of the extent to which the school has implemented the SWIFT framework features; and assessments of their systemic capacity to implement and sustain new practices. Facilitated Data Snapshot reviews take place across the cascading levels of influence (school, district, SEA), and produce three or four priorities for the near term that will advance their transformation to sustainable equity-based inclusion. The priorities become the focus of the next SWIFT TA practice.

3 Priority and Practice Planning

Priority and Practice Planning is a TA practice designed for teams to develop action plans for implementing and enhancing SWIFT features in schools and districts. In this context, SWIFT defines a "priority" as an opportunity identified by the team in order to achieve their vision, and an educational "practice" as a purposefully selected intervention, action, or collection of activities that leads to the accomplishment of the priority.

This TA practice introduces the stages of implementation concept into the SWIFT TA partnership because often school or district teams are eager to implement new

practices.[2, 13] However, research suggests that new practices are less effective and sustainable when implemented before the people and systems in the environment are ready. Therefore, this process is designed to ensure educational practices can be sustained over time and result in positive outcomes for students by deliberately working through four stages of implementation. First, **Exploration stage** involves learning about the options and then choosing a specific practice to implement. Next, **Installation stage** prepares the people and systems to use the practice, including training when needed. The third stage, **Initial Implementation**, tries out the practice and then purposively reflects on and recommends improvements in how the practice is used or the system supports its use. Finally, **Full Implementation** occurs when student goals are achieved and a competent, organized, well led system exists for the practice. These four stages will necessarily overlap as different priorities related to the many SWIFT features enter and exit the Priority and Practice Planning process. The TA process may look a bit "messy" with multiple, recursive stages taking place at one time. Yet the reality is that the process is focused on the shared vision and has coherence around the SWIFT framework tailored to each unique school.

4 Resource Mapping and Matching

Transformation of a whole educational system within the SWIFT framework involves imagining new ways to use existing resources to achieve planned priorities. SWIFT TA engages in a Resource Mapping and Matching practice to align and match school, district, and SEA priorities to existing resources, including physical space, staff, time, materials, technology, and funding.

A Resource Map is a document that shows all available external support (e.g., federally funded centers, grant projects, and philanthropic) that can be mobilized to implement priorities. SWIFT TA supports initial development of this map for each SEA, and helps to build their capacity to manage and maintain the map.

Schools and districts draw on Resource Maps during Priority and Practice Planning as they learn about available options. In this practice, schools and districts naturally first look to reallocation of their local resources, and then to SEA and other resources to align with their priorities to achieve their shared vision. They may utilize existing resources in new ways (e.g., changing the way they use their building space, re-assigning staff to new roles) or utilize previously untapped resources from non-local sources (e.g., using IDEA Part B funds for continuing early intervening services, federal TA center support for professional learning, corporate donations for technology upgrades, community volunteers). This Resource Matching happens as school and district teams develop plans to prepare people and systems to implement a new educational practice.

5 Transformation Teaming

SWIFT's Transformation Teaming practice defines the roles and communication strategies involved in carrying out the planned series of activities described in this

paper. Schools form Transformation Teams to lead the work and enlist broad, schoolwide engagement, including the Principal, a school Coach, and representatives of general and special educators, support staff, family, and community members. A school Coach refers to a school staff member who, along with the Principal, assumes a role of providing site-based support for SWIFT implementation.

Districts and SEAs form Implementation Teams that represent stakeholders and systems that support school transformation. As a part of the district and SEA commitment to SWIFT, staff are designated as Coordinators who are the primary interfaces with the SWIFT TA providers, or Facilitators. Districts and SEAs also form Leadership Teams that provide direction and support for their Implementation Teams. These teams carry out the Visioning, Data Snapshots, Priority and Practice Planning, and Resource Mapping and Mapping practices.

6 Coaching and Facilitation

SWIFT's model for developing capacity extends from professional learning research.[14, 15] Coaching and Facilitation develops organizational and personnel capacity via sustained and purposeful contact among SWIFT TA Facilitators and partner Coordinators as well as teams at the district and SEA levels. In each partnership, SWIFT TA Facilitators work in unison with Coordinators toward the shared vision for transformation. Cross-team coaching and communication that occur at each point of contact are opportunities to shift practices during key points of the implementation process.

The intensity of Coaching and Facilitation vary based on partner needs at a given point in time.[16] In general, a learning and capacity building progression takes place with SWIFT TA Facilitators initially modeling the six TA practices—or transformation methods—while partner staff observe and learn the methods. After a time, district and SEA Coordinators begin to practice transformational methods and SWIFT TA Facilitators observe and provide feedback. This coaching model builds capacity within the system to implement and adapt without reliance on an external TA provider.

Conclusion

Transformation is a difficult charge. SWIFT aims to help the whole system map out a better way, where long-standing structures are able shift such that necessary resources are utilized when and where they are needed for each school. SWIFT seeks to be a full partner with educational communities as they transform, leverage their strengths, and realize a vision of delivering the intensity and range of supports that meet the needs of every child in their community. SWIFT Center is honored to join our states, districts, and schools in this work.

Suggested Citation

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