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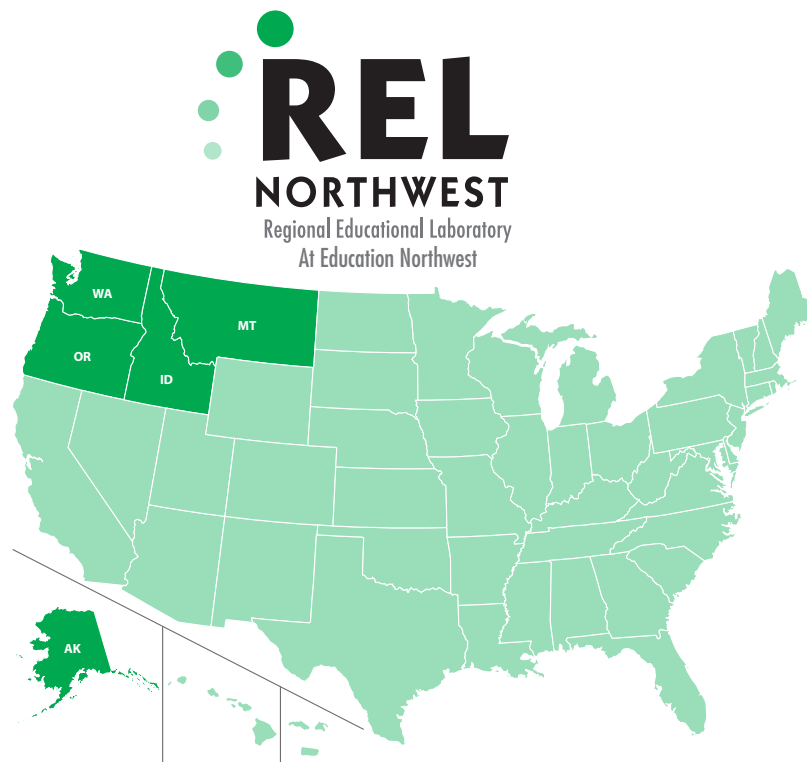
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What are the characteristics, qualifications, roles, and functions of school support teams? An examination of survey results for four Northwest Region states

School support teams work as external facilitators of improvement in schools and districts designated as in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act. This study finds that team members in four Northwest region states share many characteristics and qualifications and work primarily in schools, meeting with administrators on school improvement planning and implementation. Team members differ in time spent on the activities that support these functions.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) requires state education agencies to assist chronically low-performing schools and districts by providing statewide systems of intensive and sustained support. One element of this support is the deployment of school support teams that work as external facilitators of improvement in schools and districts designated as in need of improvement. State approaches to this requirement depend on the number of schools in need of improvement, resources available, state-level priorities, and staff capacity to establish and oversee school support teams. Some states have used school support teams for as many as seven years;

others established their first cadre as recently as 2008/09. Across states, the basic roles of school support team members are comparable, but titles, qualifications, and functions vary.

While existing research describes statewide systems of support and school support team structures, it does not provide information about individuals who serve on the teams. An early case study examined the role of experienced educators who were contracted to help build capacity for change, but it gave no insight into their functions. There has been little study of school support team members as currently deployed in schools and districts across the Northwest Region. This study expands on the current literature by focusing on school support team member characteristics, qualifications, roles, and functions in four Northwest Region states: Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming.

Existing survey data from the Northwest Regional Comprehensive Center were analyzed to address two research questions:

- What are the characteristics and qualifications of school support team members working with schools and districts in

improvement status in four Northwest Region states?

- What are the roles and functions of school support team members working with schools and districts in improvement status in four Northwest Region states?

The total population of 109 school support team members in this study represents the entire 2008/09 cadre across the four study states. This study analyzed survey questions capturing demographic background, educational attainment, professional experience, school- or district-level work focus, and functions of individual school support team members. State education agencies invited the 109 school support team members across the four states to complete the survey, and 91 responded, for an overall response rate of 83 percent. The item-level response rates did not fall below 88 percent and were 95 percent or higher for all but one item.

To report the characteristics and qualifications and the roles and functions of school support team members, summary descriptive statistics (percentages or averages and ranges, depending on the type of data) were calculated for the survey data. The data were calculated for each participating state and across the four states.

Findings indicate that the school support team members in the four study states are highly educated and hold multiple certifications:

- Across the four states, 66 percent of school support team members are women, 72 percent are between the ages of 56 and 64, 80 percent previously retired from a career in education, and 58 percent were most recently employed as a school or district administrator before becoming a school support team member.
- Virtually all hold teaching certificates (99 percent) and administrator certificates (88 percent), with 21 percent certified as superintendents.
- Ninety-six percent hold master's degrees, and 19 percent hold doctorates.
- They work primarily in schools, directly with school principals and leadership teams.
- Top areas of self-identified expertise are professional development for adult learners, literacy, math, and areas other than those in the survey question, such as school reform, change management, and leadership.

Across the four study states, there are similarities in the functions these school support team members performed:

- Ninety percent of the school support team members reported two functions equally among the top three ranked functions that they perform: meeting with district or school administrators about school improvement planning and implementation, and communicating with stakeholders.
- Also reported among the top three ranked functions were facilitating meetings related to school or district improvement (54 percent); collecting, organizing, and analyzing data for decisionmaking (48 percent); leading or supporting

professional development (43 percent); locating and recommending resources (30 percent); observing in classrooms (26 percent); and meeting with administrators on issues other than school improvement (23 percent).

While engaging in similar functions, school support team members across the four states reported spending varying time and energy on the activities that supported these functions.

States are taking different approaches to deploying school support team members for school and district improvement. Their practices are modified each year as experience grows.

The effectiveness of school support teams has not been explored, and the findings raise the question of whether there is a match between the skills of current school support team members and the needs of underachieving student populations. There are also unanswered questions about how state education agencies might plan for school support team cadre

sustainability and about the transfer of role-specific knowledge. The retirement status of these school support team members, the fact that their job is predominantly part-time, and the fact that the median tenure of employment is only four years all have implications for state education agencies that are planning professional development for newly hired school support team members.

The study was requested by the Montana state education agency staff, who want the information to support hiring and utilization decisions for school support teams. Future studies might look at using complementary data from state education agency staff members responsible for the recruitment, assignment, professional development, and retention of school support team members. Another avenue for study might be determining appropriate measures of the effectiveness of school support team members in changing improvement status in schools and districts.

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