THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DISCUSSING A STUDENT AND HELPING ONE

An Independent School Protocol for Student Support Meetings

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The Problem

The Student Support Meetings That Exhaust Staff and Don't Help Students

The Meeting

The file had been sitting on Margaret's desk for two weeks.

She wasn't avoiding it. She had read it three times. Oliver, fifth grade, brought to her by his classroom teacher, Ms. Hopkins, for "difficulty staying on task, inconsistent work completion, and what feels like a processing issue."

What feels like a processing issue.

Margaret had underlined that. She understood exactly what it meant: Ms. Hopkins had been watching this child for eight weeks and had arrived at the edge of her own ability to explain what she was seeing.

The meeting was scheduled for 3:15. Seven people around a table that seated five comfortably. Everyone had been teaching since 8:10 that morning.

Margaret opened the meeting the way she always did. They were here to talk about Oliver, to think together about what he needed, to figure out how they could help.

"So, who wants to start?"

Ms. Hopkins started. She had Oliver in language arts and social studies. He was bright, but he couldn't seem to get his ideas onto the page. "It's like there's a disconnect between what he knows and what he produces. He'll talk about a topic, and he clearly understands it, and then the written work comes in, and it's three sentences, and two of them don't finish."

"I see the same thing in science," said Mr. Tamboli. "Verbally, he's one of the strongest kids in the room. Written work is a different story."

"Has anyone talked to his parents?" the reading specialist, Jana, asked.

"They know he's being discussed today," Margaret said.

"Because I'm wondering if something is happening at home. He seems distracted lately. More than usual."

"He's always been a bit scattered," Ms. Hopkins said. "Since third grade, from what I understand."

"Third grade is a hard year for a lot of kids," someone said.

"Do we have any data on him?" Margaret asked.

Jana pulled out the fall screener results. She had printed copies. She passed them around. The table looked at the numbers.

"His reading fluency is lower than I'd expect," Jana said. "He's at the 38th percentile. That surprises me, given how verbal he is."

"He raced through that assessment," Ms. Hopkins said immediately. "I was in the room. He finished in about six minutes, and I don't think he was really trying. I wouldn't put a lot of weight on that number."

"Even so," Jana said, "38th is —"

"I just don't think it's accurate for him."

A small silence.

"What about the writing samples?" Margaret asked. "I brought some," Ms. Hopkins said. She slid a folder into the middle of the table. Three people glanced at it. Nobody picked it up.

"Could be an attention thing," Mr. Tamboli said. "The not-finishing, the scatteredness. I have a few kids like that, and usually it comes down to attention."

"Or processing speed," Jana offered. "Sometimes verbally strong kids have slower processing when it comes to written output. The brain is doing two jobs at once."

"His brother has a diagnosis," said the fifth-grade advisor, quietly.

"I'm not saying Oliver has the same thing. I'm just … His mom mentioned it at back-to-school night. ADHD. She said she's wondered about Oliver, too."

"That would explain a lot," Mr. Tamboli said.

"It might," Margaret said. "What would we do differently if that were the case?"

A pause.

"Extended time?" Jana said. "Preferential seating?" someone offered. "He already sits next to my desk," Ms. Hopkins said. "Chunking assignments," Mr. Tamboli said. "I do that," Ms. Hopkins said. "I've been doing that since October."

The room absorbed this.

"What if we referred him for an outside evaluation?" the advisor said. "If the family is already wondering, maybe this is the nudge." "I don't want to alarm them," Ms. Hopkins said. "They might not be alarmed. They might be relieved." "Or they might feel like we're passing him off."

Margaret looked at the clock. Thirty-one minutes. She had a list in front of her: processing speed, attention, home factors, brother's diagnosis, output issue, and rushed through the assessment. Six threads. None of them connected. None of them led to a plan.

"What is Oliver experiencing every day in your classroom right now?" she asked Ms. Hopkins. "What does a typical writing assignment look like for him?"

Ms. Hopkins thought about it. "He starts. He writes a sentence or two. Then he stops and looks around the room. Sometimes he erases what he wrote and starts again. By the time I collect, he has much less than everyone else."

"Does he seem frustrated?"

"Sometimes. Mostly, he seems resigned. Like he already knows it is not going to turn out well."

The room was quiet for a moment. "We should probably get the psychologist involved," someone said. Margaret wrote it down. She wrote down a name next to it. She had learned that without a name, it would not happen. She was not sure it would happen anyway.

Three more suggestions followed. A homework modification. A check-in system. Possibly a reading intervention, pending further observation. Margaret wrote them all down. She assigned names where she could. She set a follow-up for six weeks, which meant February, which meant after winter break, which meant the follow-up might quietly become March. Or not happen at all. She thanked everyone for coming.

Three weeks later, Margaret passed Oliver in the hallway. He was walking slowly, backpack half-open, looking at the floor in the way of a child who has learned that the floor is a reliable place to look when you don't want to be noticed.

She thought about the meeting. Seven people. Forty minutes. Six possible explanations, a list of suggestions that may or may not have been tried, and a folder of writing samples that sat in the middle of the table and never got opened.

The Meeting That Produces Zero Change

Circular Discussion

Margaret is an excellent student support director. Everyone in that room cares about Oliver. Collectively, there is tremendous experience and expertise. Nobody said anything false.

And Oliver will be in the same situation in February.

Here is how that happened.

1 Without structure, the meeting becomes a wide-ranging exploration of "what is wrong with the student."

There is no agenda that dictates what question the team is trying to answer. There is no protocol that defines the order of events. There are no roles assigned to keep the conversation from drifting. So the meeting does what unstructured conversations about struggling students always do: it becomes a collective attempt to figure out the child.

Everyone contributes what they know. The classroom teacher describes what she sees. The learning specialist offers a theory. Someone mentions the brother's diagnosis. Someone else wonders about home. The data gets presented and immediately disputed. Each contribution opens a new thread. None of the threads connect. The conversation moves in a circle because there is nothing organizing it in a line.

This feels productive. Seven people are engaged. Ideas are being generated. The room is alive with professional concern and wisdom.

It is not productive. It is a very thorough, very collaborative, very well-intentioned process of building a case for why Oliver struggles.

2 When the meeting focuses on what is wrong with the student, it moves away from the solution, not toward it.

By the time the meeting ends, the team has done something they did not intend to do. They have constructed a detailed account of Oliver's limitations. Processing speed. Attention. Output issues. Possible diagnosis. A brother with the same thing.

Speculating why Oliver struggles is not the same as determining what to do next.

The team has spent forty minutes building a complete picture of what is wrong with Oliver. They have talked themselves into a corner. Oliver can not be changed. His instruction can be changed. His environment can be changed. His relationships can be changed. But none of those were explored.

Every minute spent establishing what is wrong with Oliver is a minute not spent asking what has not yet been taught, in what way, at what level. The meeting that was supposed to help him has produced a detailed list of his problems and no plan to solve them.

Nobody in that room asked: What does the instruction need to do differently? Because the meeting just spent forty minutes proving that instruction is not the problem.

The meeting produced lots of ideas about the problem and no path out of it.

Meeting Types

Decide which meeting you're running before you start. Mixing them is a common reason meetings don't lead to meaningful change.

Student support meetings work best when they commit to one focus before the meeting begins. The team might discuss three individual students in sequence. Or it might review second-grade reading progress as a whole. Either is productive. What creates confusion is jumping between the two. Decide the focus before anyone sits down. The agenda follows from that decision.

SWEEP MEETING

Review the full roster. Identify who needs attention. Thirty minutes.

Purpose:	Review all students. Identify who needs further discussion or something different.
Duration:	30 minutes total. 1–2 minutes per student.
Students:	15-25 students per meeting.

Two questions for every student.

Question 1: Is the student at the level the curriculum expects? (Above level, on level, or below level?)

Question 2: Is the student making expected and meaningful progress?

Both answers yes → Continue with core instruction.

Any answer no → Mark for discussion. Do not problem-solve during the Sweep. Schedule it.

FOCUS MEETING

Discuss individual students. Five minutes per student.

Purpose:	Decide on the next step. No student leaves the meeting without a defined next step. More complex situations are assigned to the Discovery meeting as the next step.
Duration:	5 minutes per student.
Students:	Six per meeting.
When:	The Scan identifies a student for discussion.

The key is having all available next steps clearly defined so the team is picking from a menu, not recreating a meal from scratch for each student.

DISCOVERY MEETING

Discuss one student only. Thirty minutes. Deep investigation.

Purpose:	Identify the unmet need. What does this student need that we have not provided?
Duration:	30 minutes per student.
Students:	One per meeting.
When:	The Focus Meeting identifies a student for discovery.

The Discovery Meeting is a disciplined search for the unmet need that is keeping the student from meaningful progress.

Bring assessment, classroom, and intervention data organized so the team can easily see progress or lack of progress, as well as on-level and below-level.

PROCESS MEETING

Examine the team's process, not individual students. Scheduled at least quarterly. Don't wait for a team breakdown. Schedule it now.

Purpose:	Discuss the team's effectiveness and concerns. Scheduled regularly.
Duration:	30 minutes.
Scope:	The team's process, not individual students.
When:	At least once every three months.

The Process Meeting is an examination of whether the system the team has built is having the intended results and to address team members' concerns.

The key is arriving with honest observations about what has worked and what the team has been avoiding.

FOUR MEETINGS. ONE SYSTEM.

Sweep Meeting processes a class or grade level in 30 minutes and tells you who needs attention.

Focus Meeting takes that list and moves efficiently through each student, picking the next step from a menu, not building each next step from scratch.

Discovery Meeting goes deep on the student that the Focus Meeting couldn't resolve. It is a disciplined search for the unmet need and next step.

Process Meeting steps back from the students entirely and asks whether the system the team has built is working as intended.

Each meeting feeds the next. None of them works without the others.

Self Survey

Is your current Student Support Meeting looking for the problem in the student, or in the instruction?

There are two kinds of student support meetings. In the first, the team is trying to understand what is wrong with the student. In the second, the team is trying to understand what is wrong with the instruction. Only one of them ends with a next step for solving the problem.

A meeting focused on the student produces rich discussion and wandering speculation. The team understands Oliver more deeply. They do not have next steps to close the gap. A meeting focused on the instruction produces a specific hypothesis and a specific plan to close the gap. The team leaves knowing what to try, for how long, and how they will know if it is working.

The survey below helps reveal what kind of meeting you have been running. Read each row and circle the statement that more accurately describes what happens in your current meetings.

Column A - Looking for the problem in the student	#	**Column B -** Looking for the problem in the instruction
☐ "What's going on with this student?"	**1**	☐ "Where is the gap between what this student can do and what the curriculum asks her to do?"
☐ Data gets presented and soon debated. Different people see it differently.	**2**	☐ Data was prepared in advance per meeting protocol. It clearly indicates where the student is and what she needs.
☐ The meeting produces a variety of theories about why the student struggles.	**3**	☐ The meeting produces one precision problem statement that the whole team agrees on.
☐ Interventions cluster around the same handful: counseling, modified work, extended time, tutoring, and waiting.	**4**	☐ Interventions are designed to address the specific gap between what the student can do and what the curriculum demands.

Column A - Looking for the problem in the student	#	**Column B -** Looking for the problem in the instruction
☐ Responsibility is assigned to "the teacher" — no specific action or progress check date.	**5**	☐ One person owns one specific task with one specific progress check deadline. Everyone knows who is doing what by when.
☐ No follow-up meeting is scheduled. Or it quietly slides from six weeks to an undefined time in the future.	**6**	☐ The follow-up meeting is built into the team's progress cycle. The student will be revisited in six weeks, automatically.
☐ The teacher leaves with a list she isn't sure how to use.	**7**	☐ The teacher or interventionist leaves knowing exactly what she is doing differently on Monday and who is supporting her.
☐ The same student comes up for discussion in February because the parents sent another email. The team has the same conversation.	**8**	☐ The student comes up for discussion with data that tells the team whether the plan worked and what to do next. The parents are updated before they reach out again.

Mostly Column A

Your meetings are oriented toward understanding why the student can't be helped. The Student Success Meeting System is designed to move you toward how you can help the student.

Mostly Column B

Your meetings are already focused on finding gaps and what you can do to move the student forward. The Student Success Meeting System will sharpen and systematize what you're already doing.

The Solution

The Student Success Meeting System: Four decades of research adapted for independent schools.

Research on school-based problem-solving teams is extensive and consistently arrives at this finding: the model works when it's structured and fails when it's improvised. Burns and Symington's meta-analysis found that structured teams produced **more than a full year's additional academic growth**. The difference was whether the meeting followed a defined process or ran only on instinct and good intentions.

TIPS	IC TEAMS
Team-Initiated Problem Solving University of Oregon	*Instructional Consultation Teams* University of Maryland
Defined roles. Precision problem statements. Structured follow-up. Met What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations.	The philosophical reframe: from "what's wrong with this student?" to "where is the mismatch?" Reduced unnecessary special education referrals through better problem definition.

Neither model was designed for independent schools. Both assume district infrastructure, compliance mandates, and multi-year implementation teams. The language is regulatory. The training requirements are intensive.

The Student Success Meeting System takes the principles that made these models effective and adapts them for the way independent schools work — smaller teams, no compliance mandate, no data coaches, and a culture that values professional judgment over standardized procedure.

The structure is what produces the outcome. This puts that structure in your hands.

Guiding Principles

Not the rules for one conversation. The logic that runs the entire system.

The Core Reframe

Where is the mismatch between what this student can do and what we are asking her to do?

When the meeting is organized around a deficit in the student, the options for helping are limited. When the meeting is organized to find the mismatch between the student and the instruction, the options expand to everything the adults can change. The reframe shifts accountability from the student's profile to the team's response. That shift is where the solution comes from.

Prepare Before You Meet

Every meeting in this system requires preparation. The meeting that runs on impressions and memory produces impressions and memory. The meeting that runs on prepared data produces clarity and impactful decisions.

The key is bringing data to the meeting that is already organized in a meaningful presentation. The data clearly indicates where the student is on level or below level and where the student is making expected progress or less than expected progress. The agenda identifies which students will be discussed and how much time is allocated to each. Before the Focus or Discovery Meeting, the teacher provides a short written description of the concern: what she observes, when and where, what she has already tried, and what "progress" would look like in her classroom.

Preparation and structure is what separate a meeting that identifies next steps from one that speculates about what the problem might be.

Four Roles

Assign the roles before every meeting. Assigned roles help keep meetings from drifting into speculation.

Role	Job	The Rule
Facilitator	Runs the meeting. Holds the sequence. Moves the team from question to question. Redirects when the conversation drifts toward speculation.	*Manages the process*
Data Presenter	Presents the prepared data. Keeps the team focused on what the data shows vs. what it doesn't show. Distinguishes signal from speculation.	*Presents data in a meaningful format.*
Recorder	Documents decisions, assigned actions, owners, and timelines in real time.	*Records decisions and next steps.*
Contrarian	Challenge the team's ideas before they become plans. Contrarian asks what evidence points the other way or what we might be missing. Find a gap in the logic before the team commits to six weeks of the wrong intervention.	*Questions conclusions, asks for evidence.*

Roles can rotate from meeting to meeting. They cannot be skipped. A meeting without assigned roles is a meeting where the most important functions happen accidentally, if at all.

The Four Questions

In this order. Every time. For each student.



The facilitator does not move to the next question until the current one is answered with specificity. Vague answers are redirected. Speculation about the child are redirected. The sequence of questions prevents the drift.

Q1	**What exactly is the problem?** Describe the specific skill or behavior. When does it occur? Where? How often? What does it look like? State the current level using data. Combine the answers into one precision problem statement before moving on.
Q2	**Where is the gap between what this student can do and what we are asking them to do?** Examine the fit between the student's current level and the curriculum demands. Is the curriculum meeting this student where she is? What do the adults need to change?

For students who already have an active intervention, examine what they have been receiving before examining the student.

Targeting - Is the intervention aimed at the right skill? Not the right subject — the right skill. "Reading intervention" is not a target. "Phonemic segmentation at the four-phoneme level" is a target. Have we run a diagnostic precise enough to identify where the gap is?

Power - Is the intervention intensity sufficient? How many minutes per session? How many sessions per week? What is the group size? A student with a two-year gap receiving two 30-minute sessions per week in a group of six is not receiving an intervention with enough power to meaningfully close the gap.

Level - Is the intervention at the student's level? An intervention aimed above the student's zone of learning produces frustration or disengagement without progress.

Delivery - Was the intervention actually delivered? How many sessions occurred versus how many were planned? Was it delivered correctly?

Instructor match - Does the person delivering the intervention have the specific training the intervention requires? An intervention without a specialist with training in the specific methodology the student needs is not sufficient.

Q3	**What is the specific goal — and how will we know when we've reached it?** A defined performance level, a timeframe, and a measurement method. The goal determines whether the intervention worked. Without it, there is no way to make the follow-up decision.
Q4	**What specifically will we do, who will do it, and by when?** Select interventions aligned to the gap identified in Q2. For every action: name the specific task, the specific person, and the specific date.

The Four Situations

We can improve the efficiency of meetings by translating data into one of a few meaningful conclusions.

1	**Data is meaningfully rising. Intervention delivered as designed. Student is engaged.**
CONTINUE. This is a 30-second conversation. Do not fix what is working. Note it. Continue the current plan. Review again in six weeks.	

2	**Data is flat. Intervention was NOT delivered as designed.**
FIX DELIVERY FIRST. The student did not receive the intervention. Do not change the plan. It was never tested. Protect the schedule. Arrange coverage. Remove competing demands. Deliver it as designed for one full cycle before evaluating effectiveness.	

3	**Data is flat. Intervention was delivered as designed. Student is engaged.**

THE TARGETING IS WRONG. The intervention reached the student, the student was available for learning, and the skill still did not move. Return to Q2. Run the five-question audit. Find the more foundational skill underneath the one being addressed. Redesign.

4	**Data is flat. Intervention was delivered as designed. Student is disengaged or depleted.**

WIDEN THE LENS. The student is not engaged by the intervention. An intervention that alienates is worse than no intervention at all. Solve for engagement first. Ask about fuel, sleep, movement, safety, belonging. Address the foundational need before returning to the academic target.

The Focus Meeting Menu

Four possible next steps. One per student.

Five minutes per student only works if the team knows what they're deciding before they sit down. The menu below defines every possible outcome of a Focus Meeting. For each student, the team identifies which of these four applies.

1	**Run a Diagnostic** **When:** The data flags a concern, but the specific skill gap is not clear. **Next step:** Administer a diagnostic to identify the specific area of need. *Guessing at an intervention without an identified skill gap leads to weak interventions.*
2	**Assign an Intervention** **When:** Diagnostic data is available. The gap is identified. No intervention is currently in place. **Next step:** Select and assign an intervention targeted to the specific skill gap. Focus on the needed skill, intensity, level, delivery, and instructor match criteria.
3	**Revise the Active Intervention** **When:** An intervention is in place, and data is flat. **Next step:** Run the five-question audit: targeting, power, level, delivery, instructor match. One or more is the problem. Identify and revise accordingly. *Do not change what is working. Do not abandon what has not yet been tested at proper power.*
4	**Escalate to Discovery** **When:** The situation analysis points to an unmet need that the Focus Meeting cannot identify in five minutes. **Next step:** Schedule to discuss at a Discovery Meeting.

⚠ **If the team cannot determine which of these four applies in five minutes, that student needs to be discussed at a Discovery Meeting.**

Running the Meetings

What you need to launch the Student Success Meeting System

The Student Success Meeting System does not require a school-wide initiative or a training program. It requires three things: assigned roles, prepared data, and a follow-up date on the calendar before the first meeting ends.

☐ **Assign the four roles.**

Identify who serves as Facilitator, Data Presenter, Recorder, and Contrarian. Roles can rotate meeting to meeting but must be assigned before the meeting starts.

OWNER: Before the first meeting

☐ **Prepare data in advance.**

Current screener scores, work samples, teacher observations formatted in a meaningful way. The team looks at the same data at the same time and it is clear what the indications are.

OWNER: Before each meeting

☐ **Schedule the follow-up meeting before first meeting ends.**

Put the date on the calendar. If it is not scheduled, it will not happen.

OWNER: Before meeting adjourns

☐ **Hold the facilitator to the sequence.**

The Facilitator's job is to hold the Four Questions in order and redirect the conversation when it drifts toward speculation.

OWNER: During every meeting

What changes immediately:

The teacher walks out of the meeting knowing what she is doing, who is helping her, and when she will know if it is working.

The student stops cycling back to meetings with no progress.

The team stops spending an hour speculating on why students can't be helped.

Meeting Preparation Guide

What the team needs before — or at the start of — each meeting.

SWEEP MEETING

- ☐ **Universal screening scores** for all students to review
- ☐ **Classroom or curriculum data** for students
- ☐ **Data organized by level** above level, on level, or below level — visible at a glance

⚠ **The Sweep Meeting is not the time to debate where the lines are. The school's level thresholds must be established before the meeting runs. If they do not exist yet, set them first.**

FOCUS MEETING

- ☐ **The data that prompted the move from the Sweep Meeting**
- ☐ **Teacher's written description of the concern,** what she observes, when, where, and what she has already tried

FOCUS MEETING

- ☐ **Classroom or curriculum-based data** for any student currently receiving intervention
- ☐ **Any diagnostic data** that helps identify the specific area of need

DISCOVERY MEETING

- ☐ **Relevant assessment, classroom, and intervention data**
- ☐ **Data in readable formats** organized so above / on / below level and expected / below expected progress is immediately visible to everyone
- ☐ **Intervention history and intensity log**
- ☐ **Work samples** organized chronologically

> In some cases parents may be invited. In some cases the student may be invited — to be heard and to contribute to the discovery process.

PROCESS MEETING

- ☐ **No student data**
- ☐ **Honest observations from each team member on** what is working, what is not, and what the team has been avoiding

Additional Resources

"How School Teams Use Data to Make Effective Decisions: Team-Initiated Problem Solving (TIPS)"

Chaparro, Horner, Algozzine, Daily, & Nese (2022). Free PDF from Center on PBIS.

https://www.pbis.org/resource/how-school-teams-use-data-to-make-effective-decisions-team-initiated-problem-solving-tips

Instructional Consultation Teams: Collaborating for Change

Rosenfield, S.A., & Gravois, T.A. (1996). New York: Guilford Press. Includes implementation forms, Level of Implementation Scale, and the full IC Teams model.

https://www.amazon.com/Instructional-Consultation-Teams-Collaborating-Practitioner/dp/1572300132

"School-Based Problem-Solving Teams: Educator-Reported Implementation Trends and Outcomes"

Contemporary School Psychology (2022). Survey of 3,233 educators.

https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40688-021-00405-1



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