



Connecting to Your Special Interests

General Membership Program Director
Jennifer Ragan-Fore discusses changes
to ISTE's Special Interest Groups.

For much of ISTE's history, Special Interest Groups have been an integral part of the ISTE member experience. Supporting both job roles (e.g., teacher educators, tech coordinators) and focused topics (e.g., distance learning, digital equity), SIGs are professional communities of practice that offer our member population avenues for rich discussion, knowledge sharing, and leadership. Working collaboratively with a cross-section of ISTE and SIG leadership, we recently introduced wide-ranging changes to the ways in which SIGs are formed, developed, and supported.

Historically, prospective SIGs have needed to demonstrate long-term viability and a pre-organized membership base to successfully propose a new group. What the historical model does not fully address, however, is the interest in cutting-edge topics or technologies that may ebb and flow within a relatively short timeframe. It's not necessarily the aim of every special interest segment to exist indefinitely or to structure activities and communications following a "one size fits all" approach.

Our new model creates a reasonable development path for those SIGs wishing to operate (eventually) at higher activity levels, while at the

same time allowing the organization to be nimble in how it fosters new ideas and encourages groups to customize their activities and content.

To meet these needs, we developed the new program around a concept that embraces multiple SIG models:

Special Interest Topics are informal, loosely affiliated groups of members who convene to discuss narrowly focused topics or leading edge innovations. SITs are coordinated by 1–2 facilitators and mainly convene at ISTE's annual conference, with a handful of communications during the year. The changing nature of these emerging topics means that there is a high degree of flux in this SIG type, with groups forming and disbanding on a regular basis.

More structured than SITs, *Special Interest Forums* offer additional venues for convening members and building a cohesive member base. SIFs provide a combination of year-round and conference programming, and are formally led by 1–3 coordinators. ISTE members can officially join SIFs and help with group and programming direction and leadership.

Special Interest Divisions are long-term SIGs with considerable membership bases and established sets of formalized programming, officer gov-

ernance, and long-term goal-setting. Annually, SIDs produce significant member benefits, which may include an online publication, an array of events and programming at ISTE's annual conference, and year-round professional development opportunities for their members.

Groups can move up to higher SIG levels by meeting minimum membership and activity goals, and by petitioning during the annual planning process.

One of the really remarkable aspects of this project has been the high degree of cross-organization collaboration. Membership staff and the SIG Board Committee worked together closely over months of intense brainstorming, wordsmithing, and stakeholder engagement to create a model that would best support the vision we had defined for the SIG Program. SIG officers, association staff, and the Membership Board Committee added perspective and helped us bring the concept to the next level.

ISTE members may join as many Special Interest Groups as they like. To learn more and to select your SIGs, visit <http://www.iste.org/sigs>. If you'd like to explore forming a Special Interest Group, contact General Membership Program Director Jennifer Ragan-Fore at jraganfore@iste.org. ■