Plan4Learning

A GUIDE FOR COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

White Paper

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A Guide for Comprehensive Needs Assessments

1.0 What is a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is a process to assess and interpret a wide range of current and longitudinal information about the school and then identify strengths and problems. The school also attempts to discover the main reasons why the problems exist, or root causes. Needs are prioritized so that the school can determine a path for improvement.

In order to be in compliance with federal funding programs, certain requirements must be met for properly conducting a needs assessment. Requirements are outlined in the following funding programs:

- Title I, Part A - programs for students with economically disadvantaged backgrounds
- Title I, Part C - programs for migrant education (see non-regulatory Title I-A guidance)
- Title II, Part A - programs for high quality teachers and principals
- Title III, Part A - programs for English Learners and immigrant students
- Title IV, Part A - programs for student support and academic enrichment
- HeadStart
- McKinney-Vento

Note that other federal programs, such as Title I, Part D, may not overtly prescribe a needs assessment; however, it can be presumed that one must be undertaken to determine "the unique educational needs of children and youth." Other federal programs require needs assessments at the state level and certain states pass those requirements on to LEAs. In addition, state programs, such as compensatory education programs, often require needs assessments. Be sure to check LEA board policies for a complete list of requirements.

1.1 Title I, Part A Needs Assessment

Schools with targeted or schoolwide programs must conduct a comprehensive needs assessment (CNA) annually. A Title I, Part A CNA requires the analysis of student achievement data in relation to proficiency expectations and in relation to the involvement of parents, community members, teachers, principals, and administrators (and pupil services personnel, technical assistance providers, school staff, and students, if applicable).

The intent of this CNA is to "identify gaps between the current status of the school and its vision of where it wants to be, relative to key indicators or focus areas."

This process suggests that a planning team needs to be established to work on the following:
- Clarify the vision of school reform (identify strengths and weaknesses)
- Create a school profile
- Identify data sources for the assessment
- Analyze the data

1.2 Title I, Part C Needs Assessment

Schools with these education programs may be required to conduct a CNA to identify the special needs of migratory students. This is usually led by the state education agency (SEA).

1.3 Title II, Part A Needs Assessment

Schools with these education programs must conduct a CNA to determine 1) the knowledge and skills required by teachers and 2) the instructional leadership skills required by principals to ensure that students meet academic standards.

Data source recommendations include:
- Student achievement and enrollment data
- National and state initiatives
- Professional development needs for core subject area teachers
- Potential supply and demand for teachers
- Program evaluation results
- Community and business input

1.4 Title III, Part A Needs Assessment

Schools with these education programs must conduct a CNA to determine the needs of EL and immigrant students.

Data sources include:
- Number of EL students
- Information on the students' characteristics (i.e. native language, English proficiency, native language proficiency, achievement data, summary of previous schooling experiences)
- Professional development needs for instructional personnel providing services to EL students

1.5 Title IV, Part A Needs Assessment

- Schools with these education programs must conduct a CNA to determine the need for student support services and academic enrichment

2.0 What is a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is:

- A process to collect, examine, and summarize a breadth of information about the current status of the district or school and then identify strengths, problems and root causes.

- A process to layer data with school context giving stakeholders opportunities to regularly analyze, interpret and communicate the school's achievement and progress with great depth of understanding.
- The pre-work necessary for building an improvement plan to respond to the academic needs of all students and provide opportunities for them to meet challenging state standards.

3.0 Elements of a CNA

There's not a single right way to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment (CNA). The requirements outlined by ESSA allow schools flexibility in the design of their CNA to acquire maximum results.

Requirements get more specific at the state-level. Commonly recommended elements for a successful CNA include:
- Covers a range of needs or issues
- Gathers information from a variety of sources
- Utilizes valid, reliable data
- Involves multiple individuals who represent a range of knowledge, skills, and expertise
- Identifies problems and root causes
- Results in the creation of goals and action plans
- Serves as the foundation for resource allocation
- Regular follow up and evaluation of action plans and strategies

3.1 Focus

The greatest focus of the CNA should be placed on factors which have the greatest potential to impact student achievement. At the least, a CNA should address the following:
- Test score results
- Dropout rates
- Student mobility
- Attendance rates
- Graduation rates

Other focus areas may include:
- Curriculum and instruction issues
- Professional development needs (i.e. teacher qualifications, the nature of professional development, planning time for teachers)
- Family and community engagement (i.e. communication with parents about student achievement, their involvement in decision making, support provided, business partnerships)

- Context for framework (i.e. school vision and mission statement, decision making structure, central office support, budget restrictions)

3.2 Information Collection

A CNA relies heavily on the collection of data from a variety of sources.

Quantitative data sources include:
- Student Achievement scores
- EL acquisition scores
- SAT/ACT results
- School accountability reports
- Graduation rates
- Attendance rates
- Demographics
- Formative and summative assessments

Qualitative data sources include:
- Focus group data
- Interview data
- Written surveys
- Classroom observations

3.3 Planning Teams

An important part of a successful CNA is a formal planning team. This team is comprised of all all stakeholders, including:
- Superintendents
- Central office staff
- Principals
- Teachers
- Paraprofessionals
- School office staff
- Parents/guardians
- Community members
- Students

3.4 Use of Results

The result of a successful CNA is an action plan and the creation of goals. After all data analysis is complete, goals can be identified and action plans can be created. Results of a CNA can also help schools to prioritize limited resources. This is done by monitoring whether needs (or gaps) have been impacted or not.

4.0 Planning for a CNA

To properly plan for a successful CNA, the following steps should be taken:

4.1 Put together a needs assessment committee.

The committee consists of a variety of people from the stakeholder list above. Some school districts have policies addressing the required stakeholders. Sub-committees are often helpful in the data collection and analysis stage. A wide variety of stakeholders are essential during the data interpretation and application stage. Organizational leadership should be a part of the committee.

4.2 Determine which internal and external stakeholders need to be involved in collecting data.

It's important to pursue a data set that combines breadth and depth so that a comprehensive perspective can be established. Therefore, a variety of administrators, staff, and external stakeholders should be consulted.

Review the district's resources and staff to involve the right stakeholders.

Consider consulting the following:
- Accountability and assessment staff
- Budgeting office
- Planning division
- Curriculum and instruction
- Federal program administrators
- Support staff

External stakeholders should also be consulted.

Consider consulting the following:
- Parents and guardians
- Community leaders/individuals
- Business leaders
- Chamber of Commerce members
- Family/children service providers
- Public agencies

4.3 Prepare a management plan.

A management plan with a timeline will help the CNA committee guide CNA efforts and keep the assessment process on track. If too much time has passed, data results will no longer be valid

or reliable. Therefore, it's important to have a management plan so that CNAs are conducted in a timely manner.

4.4 Identify concerns and issues.

Brainstorming sessions are a great way to identify concerns and issues. After getting all ideas onto paper, these concerns and issues can then be organized by goal area. The final step is to prioritize these goals for the assessment.

4.5 Identify data collection methods and sources.

A comprehensive needs assessment relies on data collected in a variety of different ways. Although data collection via survey is most common, a CNA should triangulate data collection methods. This means that data is collected in at least three different ways or from at least three varying sources. When data is triangulated, it helps establish greater validity.

4.6 Choose preliminary priorities.

In order to preemptively prioritize needs, ask the following questions:
- Does the CNA committee have all of the information it requires?
- Does the CNA committee need to collect new or different information?
    - If so, from whom? At what cost? How long will it take? Who needs to be involved?

4.7 Design the CNA.

A successful CNA addresses multiple education issues. Make sure to triangulate data collection methods and sources.

5.0 Collecting and Analyzing Data

Collecting and analyzing data requires that the CNA committee review the following:
- Collecting existing data
- Collecting new data
- Analyzing data to identify needs

When reviewing data, it's important to note that data has a time value. Sometimes, data is no longer relevant after a certain period of time. Therefore, every effort should be made to collect and use the most recent data available.

Data can become more powerful when disaggregated. Disaggregated data can help address gaps. Such categories include: race, ethnicity, gender, disability status, migrant status, English proficiency, and status as economically disadvantaged.

Common data sources for CNAs include:

Data Source	Pros of Method
Surveys	● Efficient ● Easy to administer ● Provides accessible data
Interviews	● Helps clarify issues not well-understood ● A way to gain critical information from key stakeholders ● Allows for follow-up questions and elaboration on issues
Focus Groups	● Efficiently tests ideas with groups ● Inspires novel thinking and problem-solving ● Promotes interaction
Observations	● Offers insight into the organization's operations ● Examples: classrooms, after-school programs, summer programs, staff meetings, community meetings)
Document Analysis	● Provides greater insight to the CNA process ● Examples: school improvement plans, district improvement plans, annual reports, budgets, meeting minutes, local media coverage, school board agendas
Program Evaluations	● Identifies gaps, needs areas, and problems being addressed ● Provides data-based recommendations for project improvement and the effectiveness of programs ● Example: formative assessments, summative assessments
Budgets	● Reveals what the school, district, or organization believe is important for investment ● Indicator of priorities
Strategic Planning Documents	● Offers insight into internal capacity and changing external circumstances ● Identifies gaps
Environmental Scans	● Locates important new educational developments ● Offers insight into internal capacity and external conditions relevant to schools, districts, and stakeholders
Proposals	● May be specific to a particular effort but can provide valuable insight for a more comprehensive approach
Research Reports	● Provides contextualized information based on current literature pertaining to local studies ● Serves as a source of scientifically based research (SBR) related to the schools and districts
Census Data	● Provides data population estimates, trend monitoring, and

	demographic tracking (which has a great impact on socioeconomic status, family structure, and language spoken at home)
Suggestion Boxes	● Provides an opportunity to suggest improvements from internal and external stakeholders

5.1 Areas for Data Collection

There are a number of nationally recognized frameworks that support different areas for data collection. While the wording might differ among the frameworks, most center around these areas:

5.1.1 Demographics

Changing student demographics can greatly affect a school's success. It's important for schools to closely monitor the following in order to best serve their students: socioeconomic status, language spoken at home, and family structure. Demographics also include looking at the staff and community.

5.1.2 Student Achievement Data

Student achievement is best understood when a variety of data are addressed. State testing results, district benchmark assessments and classroom assessments are all important. Formative reviews monitoring student progress throughout the year and disaggregated by race, sex, special programs, and attendance levels also tell part of the story.

5.1.3 Processes and Programs

Reviewing processes, curriculum and instruction helps schools to better align with state frameworks and assessments. A thorough review of their implementation can reveal unintentional barriers to instructional effectiveness. Reviewing this area helps identify the conditions needed to establish a positive correlation between the curriculum, instruction and student achievement. Professional development (PD) needs and technology needs are often identified as schools analyze their processes and programs. PD data is commonly collected via teacher surveys that evaluate current PD offerings, ratings, and overall coherence of the PD offered.

5.1.4 Family/Community Engagement

Studies show that family and community engagement positively impacts student achievement. There are 6 types of parent/community engagement which contribute to a student's success: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating. For this reason, it is important to include parents and communities in your CNA to obtain valuable information regarding home interactions.

5.1.5 Perceptions

How people feel about school impacts its success. Perception data tells us what students, staff, and parents are thinking about the learning organization. Common data to collect include interviews, surveys, focus groups and questionnaires. Perceptions ties closely with family/community engagement and sometimes you see these two areas grouped together.

5.2 Data Analysis

There are a number of statistical strategies that can be used to analyze the data collected. The central office should have appropriate expertise for interpreting collected data. Consult the central office when in doubt.

5.2.1 Prioritizing Needs

There are a number of ways that you can prioritize identified needs.

Common prioritization methods include:

Prioritization Method	Ideal for...
Rank Ordering of Needs	Situations that are not complex
Multiple Criteria Approach (Weighted Scoring)	Addressing importance and feasibility
Rank Ordering of Criteria (Disaggregated Prioritization)	Addressing highest-ranked criteria first
Risk Assessment	Situations where not addressing a need is related to a risk of major importance

5.2.2 Identifying Root Causes

Identifying root causes is not always so straight-forward. One common method for drilling down to the root cause of a matter is to ask the question "why" 5 times. By asking "why" several times, the core cause or underlying cause can be identified.

5.2.3 Decision Making

Your CNA serves as a way to structure your decision making. It allows schools to make clear decisions on how to best allocate limited resources in areas that will have the greatest impact.

6.0 Reporting Results

Your CNA can be reported in multiple ways, depending on the purpose and the audience of the assessment. As a general rule of thumb, it is always wise to include the following components when reporting CNA results:
- General description of what the CNA was designed to measure
- Explanation of how the CNA was administered
- How many people responded out of the targeted population
- Any sampling or convenience techniques used
- Descriptions of focus group and interview results (including information about who participated, their roles, number of participants, and how long the activities lasted)
- Student assessment information (including grade level, subject areas, and years of testing administered)
- Reference to any external sources

Student names should <u>never</u> be used in reports.

7.0 Applying CNA Results

Your CNA is a tool for how to implement school improvement planning. The data and conclusions drawn from your CNA will be used as a foundation for your comprehensive planning efforts.

7.1 Creating Goals

Prioritized needs should be translated into school goals. The quickest way to acquire consolidated grant and schoolwide resources is to create planning goals which clearly connect to the CNA and utilize a SMART framework.

Goals should be:
- **S**pecific
- **M**easureable
- **A**ttainable
- **R**ealistic
- **T**imely

7.2 Selecting Strategies

After a SMART goal has been established, strategies should be discussed and decided on for how to best meet that goal. This is what is outlined in the school improvement plans.

The comprehensive needs assessment will determine highest prioritized needs. Goals should be created to address those needs. Then strategies must be developed for hitting those goals.

There are four approaches that can help schools to select the best strategies:
- **Reviewing literature** - examine research-based literature to identify strategies
- **Benchmarking** - examine how similar organizations have implemented solutions comparable to your school's needs
- **Multi-Attribute Utility Technique (MAUT)** - develop criteria against which each strategy is rated to prioritize best possible solutions
- **Quality Function Deployment** - identify essential or key components of program design features to determine the likelihood of resolving those needs

The next step is to take action on those strategies, then track and monitor the success of those strategies to see how they are impacting set goals.

If a strategy is not meeting needs after being evaluated, the strategy should be modified or replaced with a new strategy.

Improving school performance is hard work that requires sustained and focused efforts, therefore successes should be celebrated along the way.

8.0 Checklist of Essential CNA Steps

1. Determine what data needs to be collected.
   a. What is the question you need to answer regarding student needs?
   b. For whom is the evaluation being conducted?
   c. What is the purpose of this CNA?
   d. What information must you collect? What is the minimum information required by stakeholders/your program?
   e. Who can help?
   f. Have you documented special needs and available resources?
2. Choose several key questions that your CNA will evaluate.
3. Decide on your data collection methods.
   a. How will you collect the information you need?
   b. Are you collecting enough *objective* information?
   c. Do you need to write your own assessment measure?
   d. Who will you need to speak with? Who will be your data sources?
   e. Which assessment methods would meet your needs?
   f. How often will you need to collect the data to get a clear picture?
4. Decide on how you will organize the data.
   a. Does the data you collected answer your questions?
   b. Is there anything missing?
5. Decide on how you will analyze the data.
   a. Can you define needed services?
   b. Can the data you collected help you to develop a reasonable and appropriate goal?

Reference:
https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/10/needsassessmentguidebook-508_003.pdf

9.0 About 806 Technologies

In 2006, Lesli, an assistant superintendent, was stressing about the complicated regulations around federal and state improvement planning. Her son, Ross, wanted to help. After listening to her needs, he developed a software program to help her quickly manage these compliance responsibilities so that she could focus on innovative ways to help students learn. This software program became what we know today as Plan4Learning. And 806 Technologies was born.

806 Technologies is an education software company dedicated to creating a world of innovative schools by streamlining administrative paperwork. 806 Technologies offers LEA administrators a full suite of software solutions, including Plan4Learning, Title1Crate, CTE Crate, SpEd Crate, and Safety Crate. Our educators provide professional development on improvement/strategic planning and compliance documentation. Free up more time in your day so that you can get back to focusing on what matters most - your students.

We want to be your trusted partner for all your planning and compliance software needs. We're committed to seeing your LEA improve, your administrators succeed, and your students thrive. Contact us today at 877-331-6160 or sales@806technologies.com.

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