

1. Engaging on Needs Assessments and Priority-Building

What is in This Part?

- 1.1 Conducting Needs Assessments
- 1.2 Community Priority-Building

1.2 Conducting Needs Assessments

Why Assess Need?

Learning more about the specific needs and assets of a district or school community and the available resources to address and support them is essential for meaningful planning. This comprehensive assessment of needs and resources should include information about student learning and school climate and is required under the law in Titles I and IV. In all cases, needs assessments must be done in consultation with stakeholders.

In other words, **priorities for action can only be determined with accurate and meaningful information.** In addition to required and publicly reported data under Title I and Title IV, schools should — and in some cases *must* — collect additional information through a comprehensive needs assessment (e.g. equity audit, self-assessment, etc.) that offers a better picture of student and school outcomes and the many factors that may lead to or change them (inputs). This is a process all schools should undertake in collaboration with stakeholders.

Promoting Equity

Needs assessments can and should tell you more information about groups of students, staff, and community members that have more and/or specific needs. It should be an explicit goal for your community to learn more about these needs and to work with communities to determine how best to meet them.



Keep in Mind

Asking questions and digging deeper on areas of concern and success within your community requires trust. You must regularly spend resources (time, personnel, funds) to build greater community trust.

Check out Partners for's worksheet "[What Does an Engaged School Community Look Like?](https://partnersforeachandeverychild.org/engageforedequity/)" for more at partnersforeachandeverychild.org/engageforedequity/.

Best Practices for the Needs Assessment Process

1. **Engage Strategically and Meaningfully with Stakeholders:** Begin by identifying an internal team (including both internal staff and key outside stakeholders, and at both the school and district levels) that will lead the effort to collect and analyze information. District and school leaders should then identify which stakeholders will be most important to include, at which stage, and how.
2. **Learn More About Outcomes and Root-Cause:** Begin with demographic data and be sure to disaggregate all collected data to understand what information is significant for particular groups of students, teachers, leaders, and school community members. A comprehensive needs assessment should target root-cause and outcomes-based analysis.

Sample: Root-cause analysis on chronic absenteeism	
Outcomes-Based Questions	Root-Cause Questions
What is the chronic absenteeism rate for all students, and each student subgroup?	<p>For the groups of students most affected by chronic absence, what do you see as the main factors causing them to miss so much school?</p> <p>Do they face major barriers such as chronic illness and lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, or lack of a safe path to school?</p> <p>Are chronically absent students experiencing negative school experiences related to bullying, ineffective discipline policies, and/or undiagnosed disabilities?</p> <p>Do students lack engaging educational experiences either during or afterschool?</p> <p>What is the rate of engagement of families of chronically absent students?</p> <p>Do students and families understand the impact of absence from school (excused or unexcused)?</p> <p>Additionally, what are the attendance data collection practices in the school and are these practices giving us actionable data?</p>

3. **Use High-Quality Data Systems:** Good systems for collection and interpretation of data are essential, including dedicated staff and communications support for making the gathered data accessible and useful to stakeholders. These systems should allow your team to look at data both over time and from the current or most recent school year and should directly or indirectly provide information in a way that is accessible to all stakeholders. Examples of data to consider include budget information, performance data, outcomes, inputs, context or environment data, etc.
4. **Collaborate with Partners:** Consider partnering with outside consultants who have expertise and resources to effectively present information and facilitate conversation. Consider reaching out to non-traditional partners like the local Chambers of Commerce, higher education/community colleges, and health organizations.

5. **Collect Additional Information:** Consider collecting additional information in addition to the data that is readily available, using trusted community voices, and input from a broad group of stakeholders. Be sure to include questions about stakeholder perceptions in addition to data about process and outcomes.
6. **Use Multiple Methods:** There are a number of specific ways to gather information from school and district communities, each a balancing act between data that is easy to collect and represent and data that might provide a deeper and/or more meaningful understanding.

Different Methods of Assessing Need		
Assessment	Value	Considerations
Rubric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Clear understanding of success · Final data is easy to represent/communicate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Can carry embedded assumptions · Can be time-consuming; Requires intimate knowledge of all aspects
Open-Ended Questions/ Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Solicits information without assumption · Good for learning new information from a community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Often requires follow-up · Difficult to represent collected information
Scaled surveys (e.g. 1-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Can reach a larger group because of ease of use · Data is easy to package and represent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Can leave survey-takers with further questions · Data may not accurately reflect the intent of the questions (misinterpretation is common)
In-person conversations (e.g. individual interview or focus group)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Meaningful conversation can lead to deeper understanding and greater buy-in from communities · Allows for reciprocal Q & A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Significantly time-consuming · Difficult to represent findings

7. **Report Back:** Share collected information with stakeholders. Partner with local community groups and in-school leadership (e.g. lead teachers) to package and communicate this information in ways that are easy for all stakeholders, including students and families, to understand. Make sure that the information is provided in the language parents speak and with accommodations for parents with disabilities. For example, remember that not all parents and families have access to the internet and providing printed copies of all information will be essential. Also, consider organizing a school-wide meeting to review the data with parents and family members.



Keep in Mind

Participation fatigue is real. Combat this experience by creating structures for families and communities to engage regularly and meaningfully. For example, inviting a group of families to participate in an advisory group that convenes monthly over dinner will be less tiring and more meaningful for the participants than 12 single and separate events.

Ask the Experts

- ✓ [Assessing School-Level & District-Level Needs](#) (National Association of School Psychologists)
- ✓ [Worksheets from Using Needs Assessments for School and District Improvement](#) (Council of Chief State School Officers)
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Looking for Resources?



Every section in this document has highlighted resources where you can learn more. For a full list, go to page 61 of this full Handbook.

Examples: State and district Needs Assessment Tools



- ✓ North Carolina's [School Turnaround assessment](#) & [School Needs Assessment: Rubric](#)
- ✓ North Dakota [Special Education Needs Assessment](#)
- ✓ Texas' [Comprehensive Needs Assessment](#)
Also check out Texas' [Title I Capacity Building Initiative](#) — one example of comprehensive resources for Texas schools and districts on Title I — and the Texas center for district and school support (TCDSS) for an even deeper dive in to the resources available to Texas districts
- ✓ Michigan's Past Event Resources: [Follow the "Comprehensive Needs Assessment Road" to "Academic Success"](#) (Event by the National Title I Association)
- ✓ Montana's [Comprehensive Needs Assessment Process](#)
- ✓ California's CORE districts use [Panorama's Survey Instruments](#)
Also check out Oakland Unified School District [Impact Assessment—Community Engagement](#)
- ✓ Georgia's [Comprehensive Needs Assessment Plan](#)
- ✓ Delaware's [Needs Assessment and Continuous Improvement Process](#)

1.2 Community Priority-Building Using Evidence to Inform Decisions

With robust information from needs assessments and other data collection tools, district or school leaders can begin to prioritize strategies to address identified need. School and district leaders must be strategic about using resources — inadequate funding is nearly always a barrier for schools — which means they must first identify priorities and the investments needed, and then shift resources in order to meet those priorities.

It is essential that stakeholders are included in decision-making at each step:

1. **Begin with collaboratively-built values** that hold goals such as equity of opportunity and whole child development at their core (e.g. closing academic achievement gaps). This will allow decisions that support these values to be made more easily and with buy-in from the school or district community.
2. **Use all knowledge and evidence** (including but not limited to needs assessment data) to make decisions and *share this evidence with stakeholders*. Proposed interventions should be grounded in what we know works, and should be transformative, not just incremental.
3. When considering specific strategies, **choose a limited set of evidence-based interventions** for consideration by a broader group of stakeholders to ensure that the conversation is not overwhelming or unfocused. Engage with stakeholders on what these interventions might offer and what they would take to implement, and how a school or LEA will evaluate its effectiveness over time. It is also helpful to be as specific as possible (e.g. instead of “literacy” choose “professional development to promote literacy skills in Grade 3 teachers”)
4. **Invest in systems that support ongoing engagement**, including training/professional development, and regular evaluation.
5. **Once you have determined local priorities, work with stakeholders — including content experts and other capacity-building partners — to commit to program strategies that support these priorities.**