

Needs Assessments to Support Student Learning and Wellness

Using Needs Assessments to Guide Education Policy, Practice, and Programs

In education, needs assessments are conducted to assist educators and other stakeholders in better understanding the extent to which their schools' policies, practices, and programs are achieving stated goals. Needs assessments can identify needs or gaps, which can help leaders establish systems-level priorities and action plans. Educators can also use needs assessments as a springboard for conversations with stakeholders within and outside of schools, to both better understand the identified gaps, and to collaboratively imagine and develop approaches to meet students' needs. Educators can use the same assessments to ascertain if progress was achieved over time.

Assessments are *not* evaluations but are intended to help educators recognize and prioritize opportunities for change against a standard, and to create actionable steps for reducing identified needs and gaps. Assessment results are not intended to be used to judge educators or their efforts, but rather to guide those efforts towards evidence-based policy and practice.

Educators must first begin with a clear vision for their educational systems, which generally can be characterized as supporting students towards achieving educational excellence, as measured by challenging academic standards. To help students achieve optimally, they must attend schools that provide a caring and supportive environment that encourages connectedness between students and adults in the building. Additionally, students learn best when they are healthy and attend schools that support their social and emotional wellbeing and promote healthy habits. Needs assessments of educational systems should also consider the factors that comprise a successful, well-functioning, health-promoting school, and help education leaders create school management and improvement plans that account for the wide range of student and school needs.

Principles for Effective Needs Assessments

Many entities, such as governmental agencies, organizations and associations, and institutions of higher education have generated or adapted principles of assessment. These principles also apply more generally to other types of needs assessments, such as those conducted in the community or the health-care sector. According to commonly-accepted principles, assessments should¹:

- Not be considered an end, but rather should be used to guide and inspire system-level improvements.
Be conducted for clear, explicitly stated and accepted purposes.

¹ Components are adapted from: The [General Principles of Assessment Toolkit](#). Accessed July 27, 2016; US Department of Education, Office of Migrant Education. [Comprehensive Needs Assessment](#) materials adapted from "Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide." 1995. US Department of Education: Washington, DC.; Rosenbaum S. [Principles to consider for the implementation of a community health needs assessment process](#). June 2013. George Washington University: Washington, DC.

Be designed to assess current systems-level performance against explicit evidence-based criteria.

- Use established and consistent procedures and methods.
Provide feedback with actionable steps to addressing gaps.
Align with educators' and community priorities to ensure commitment to addressing identified gaps and needs.
Promote transparency from instrument design and selection, to process, to sharing of results and findings.
Consider a range of valid and reliable data sources, if appropriate and available.

When undertaking a needs assessment process, educators should also engage a broad and diverse set of stakeholders to the extent feasible. As everyone in the education setting has different perspectives and resources that can contribute towards approaches for solutions. Potential stakeholders may include:

- School principals
- Teachers
- Food service or Child Nutrition Directors
- School support staff, including qualified health and mental health providers such as school counselors, school social workers, school nurses, etc.
- LEA leadership
- Local Boards of Education
- Local agencies such as child nutrition, health, housing, child welfare, etc.
- Parents
- Students (if appropriate)
- Businesses (if possible)
- Social service agencies
- Community partners, such as YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, etc.
- Others as appropriate.

Partners may be involved at different times throughout the process.

Federal Requirements for Needs Assessments

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), signed into law in December 2015, requires that State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) identify schools and/or students that are under-performing and in need of intervention. The SEA must then inform the LEA, who in turn, must develop a plan to improve student achievement in the identified schools or students groups. LEAs must use comprehensive needs assessments to determine the specific nature of the improvement intervention needed and to measure whether the improvements have been effective. These specific needs assessments are not defined by law but will be informed by state-selected accountability measures, at least one of which must be a non-academic measure of school quality. ESSA also requires that schools and LEAs engage stakeholders in the process and coordinate continuity between school and community services. In addition to determining school improvement interventions, ESSA requires that schools undertake needs assessments related to literacy grants, the needs of homeless children, preschool development grants, grants for Full-Service Community

Schools, and under Title IV to determine how the LEA will provide students with a well-rounded education.

The requirement for LEAs to conduct needs assessments is not new, but rather existed under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the education law preceding ESSA. Under NCLB, LEAs were required to conduct comprehensive needs assessments as part of a schoolwide program under Title I, Part A to identify both needs related to achievement on academic content standards and strategies to address the needs of underperforming schools or student groups, including those related to health and mental health. Schools that conducted comprehensive needs assessments and established relationships with local providers could also use funds under Title I, Part A to provide comprehensive services to students, if the need for those services was identified as part of the needs assessment and there were no other funds available. NCLB also required LEAs to conduct needs assessments as part of the education of migratory and homeless children (Title I, Part C and Title X, Part C), comprehensive school reform (Title I, Part F), preparing and providing professional development for teachers, principals, and other school leaders (Title II, Part A), and as part of Safe and Drug-Free Schools funding (Title IV).

Types of Needs Assessments and Examples

Needs assessments can be used to garner feedback and insights from various levels within an education system, ranging from individual level performance, perceptions, or attitudes, to an inventory of systems-level inputs and implementation of policies, practices, and programs within a school environment. Given the differing level of analysis, needs assessments may employ a variety of methodologies for gathering information, such as self-assessments, with or without scaled responses; surveys of stakeholder groups; data from educational or other sources including health departments; attendance data; data from human resources, such as the number of full-time teachers employed in a subject area; or analyses of a variety of policies in schools.

Depending on the requirements specified by Federal regulations or by SEAs, needs assessments may consider a wide range of topics including policies, practices, and programs available across an LEA or within an individual school building. Specifically, needs assessments could consider topics including:

- The number and qualifications of available staff.
- Curriculum and instructional practices.
- Frequency and relevancy of professional development.
- Student, staff, or family feedback and perceptions of their experiences.
- School climate policies and practices.
- Health-related policies and practices, such as those related to physical activity, the nutrition environment, social emotional learning, etc.
- Physical infrastructure or environmental-health related policies and practices.
- Links with community agencies and entities.

These different factors may require that education leaders access a number of data sources and engage a broad stakeholder group to assess the full range of needs and assets.

School needs assessment tools that consider these topics either exclusively or as part of a comprehensive instrument are publicly available and accessible. For example, many commercial

vendors and non-profit organizations offer tools that schools can use to assess instructional practices or curriculum design and implementation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) [School Health Index](#) is an online self-assessment and planning tool that schools can use to improve their health and safety policies and programs. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, an organization dedicated to promoting healthy school and community environments, offers the [Healthy Schools Program Assessment](#), which focuses on schools' physical activity and nutrition environments. ASCD, an organization representing educators dedicated to supporting teaching and learning, offers the [School Improvement Tool](#) that combines educationally-focused components, such as curriculum and instruction, with policies and programs to support the development and nurturing of children's educational and developmental needs. Still other tools, such as the Coalition for Community Schools' tool, the [Community Schools Assessment Checklist](#), can serve as a planning tool for schools to develop strategies to strengthen school-community partnerships, improve coordination of existing programs and services, and to assess levels of financial and material support. The YMCA's [Community Healthy Living Index](#) can provide insights to community resources that can complement or supplement a schools' offerings.

SEAs often provide guidance or sample needs assessments to assist LEAs in their needs assessment process. Several states already have existing robust examples of needs assessments that, depending on the new accountability measures adopted by states, could be easily adapted and are comprehensive enough to consider the wide range of needs. Below are three examples of state needs assessment resources.

- *The **Colorado** Department of Education*, with assistance from the Southwest Comprehensive Center of WestEd and in partnership with RMC Research Corporation, developed [A Guide for Comprehensive Needs Assessment](#) related specifically to NCLB-required needs assessments. Tools and resources on their [website](#) include links to data systems, needs assessment tools, and survey templates. Their tools encompass a full array of educational issues and consider such wide-ranging factors as student data analytics, healthy youth, school climate, and family feedback surveys on school improvement.
- *The **Maine** Department of Education* created a guide and [comprehensive needs assessment tool](#) that provides background and guidance on the process for needs assessments, as well as sample probing questions for consideration. Topics covered include: demographics; student achievement; climate and culture; staff quality, recruitment, and retention; curriculum and instruction; family and community involvement; school organization; and technology.
- *The **North Carolina** Department of Public Instruction* offers a [comprehensive needs assessment rubric](#) to help school districts understand their standing along a continuum of progress (Leading, Developing, Emerging, or Lacking) across domains such as instructional alignment, support for student achievement (including social emotional support), leadership and professional capacity (including teacher recruitment and retention), resource allocation (including technology and facilities), planning and operational effectiveness, and family and community engagement. The rubric provides questions for consideration and guides districts to build action plans towards a high standard.

Because many organizations and states already offer existing models for needs assessments, from basic to comprehensive levels, education leaders could consider adapting these existing tools to meet the requirements of ESSA instead of creating new tools.

Conclusion and Questions for Discussion

Needs assessments, required by ESSA, help LEAs and schools identify opportunities to develop and enhance policy and practice areas based on evidence-based criteria. Education leaders can choose from an array of existing models focused either topically or comprehensively, and ranging from individual-level perceptions or experiences to analyses of systems-level policies and practices. These models include wide-ranging topics from curriculum and instruction to health and wellness.

To help provide guidance to states on selecting optimal needs assessments for health and wellness, education leaders should consider the following discussion questions.

1. At what level should comprehensive needs assessments focus (individual, school, etc.)?
2. Should needs assessments for Title I include components related to school climate and health-related metrics, regardless of whether the accountability system include these measures?
3. Should SEAs encourage LEAs to undertake comprehensive health assessment tools such as the School Health Index or selected modules (or other)?
4. Who should be engaged in the health components of the needs assessment process?
5. What other tools or models should be considered?