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A Solution-finding Report

Title: *Schoolwide Needs Assessments*
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Introduction
      This report provides information concerning schoolwide needs assessments, including information on visits to classrooms and a district component. This *Solution-finding Report* is intended to provide a quick response to the request for information; it is not intended to be a definitive literature survey or synthesis of the topic. Its contents are divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of schoolwide needs assessments. The second section is a selection of local, state, and federal websites, as a demonstration of the variety of materials available. (Individual documents on these websites may also prove useful, but they have not been specifically examined for this report.) The third section is comprised of references and brief summaries of published research and evaluation studies, and policy statements.

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I.   Schoolwide Needs Assessments

In *Needs Assessment in Education: A Planning Handbook for Districts*, the New Jersey Department of Education says, "There can be many reasons for and benefits from conducting a needs assessment. Different districts can benefit in different ways depending on their individual needs and circumstances. In some cases there is already community pressure for citizens to express their views. A needs assessment will provide greater citizen involvement, and do it in such as way as to substantially tap those views. A knowledge of these views can be especially valuable in districts which have been suffering school budget defeats. A needs assessment can also be the ideal approach for districts which have problems, but cannot pinpoint precisely where they lie. For districts with new programs that haven't worked, a needs assessment might show that the real problems were not attacked. An assessment can help develop well-defined, verifiable educational goals and clears a smoother path toward achieving those goals. This advantage is important for those districts which have already developed goals, but don't know what to do next.

"By conducting a needs assessment, districts will also be developing a database for future educational decisions and establishing a resource bank of information on the district. They will provide themselves with a means for reducing internal and external problems, and for developing an organizational structure and process for continued self-evaluation, as well as a basis for further planning and problem solving. Finally, the process provides a basis for the allocation of limited funds to solve identified problems and needs."

According to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) website, a first step in planning schoolwide program change, before implementation of schoolwide needs assessments, is to identify the right planning team. It says, "The principal, a school leader, or a district official usually convenes a small representative group from the school to begin preplanning. The team should include widely respected individuals who know and have the confidence of the school's various constituency groups. This group, and the planners it appoints, should be committed to the concept of whole-school reform and should recognize the possibilities for children that the schoolwide option offers. Usually, the preplanning group includes the principal or his or her designee; teachers; school staff familiar with Title I, Part A, and other federal programs; and parents or community leaders who have already been involved with ESEA programs…This group can convene as a steering committee to frame the basic planning issues and initiate the planning process."

Among the issues it suggests the planning committee considers are: (1) Is there an existing team or committee (e.g., a school improvement team or site council) that can serve as a schoolwide planning team, thereby avoiding duplication of ongoing planning activities and using the developed expertise of staff within the school? (2) If a new team needs to be established, how will its members be recruited, selected, and replaced over time? (3) How will the planning team develop a collaborative working relationship among its members? (4) How will the planning team coordinate with other committees or teams in the school and district? (5) What autonomy will the schoolwide planning team have to make decisions or recommendations? (6) How will the planning team communicate with the groups it represents and with community members who have a stake in the success of the school and its schoolwide program? The schoolwide planning team should include school and district administrators; teachers representing all grades, content areas, and teams; representatives of other professional staff, including social workers, psychologists, counselors or diagnostic specialists, and curriculum leaders; parents and community representatives; representatives of organizations, groups, and parents of students served by the federal programs whose funds are used in the schoolwide program; and students.

According to DOE, "In early meetings, planning team members typically exchange ideas, build rapport, and develop a common understanding of personal and team goals. This is a time to assess the strengths of group members and determine the role(s) each individual will play. If the skills within the group are not well matched to some of the important activities to be conducted, the team can add members. The roles that various members will need to assume include: group process facilitator; data coordinator; technology specialist; logistics coordinator; assessment expert; and liaisons to various school groups including teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, parents, community organizations, and the central office."

Only after the planning team is established and functioning smoothly should Step 2 be taken: conducting a comprehensive needs assessment. A comprehensive needs assessment should be the centerpiece of the planning process—the database from which the planning team develops its vision of the future. Through the needs assessment, a school identifies its strengths and weaknesses and specifies priorities for improving student achievement and meeting challenging academic standards. DOE then gives suggestions that come from members of planning teams in schools across the country who have conducted successful assessments.

Every aspect of the school is a candidate for assessment. However, experienced planners advise concentrating on how the school addresses the comprehensive academic needs of all the students in the school, especially those who are educationally disadvantaged, neglected or delinquent, migrant, limited-English speaking, or vulnerable to the dangers of drug or alcohol addiction. Assessing needs comprehensively means getting "the full *breadth* of information for *depth* of understanding" (WestEd, 1996, p. III–14). It requires examining many aspects of students' lives and experiences from the perspectives of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other community members. The team must

gather enough data to direct its planning, but not so much data that the group is unable to determine a program focus.

Some teams begin the assessment process with a dialogue among members that leads to a vision or mission statement, answering the questions: What are our central program goals? After implementing our schoolwide program, how will the school be different and improved for students? Other teams wait to define the program mission until after the needs assessment has taken place. The needs assessment is the vehicle for clarifying the direction the new schoolwide program will take.

A Checklist for Creating A School Profile
(Bernhardt, 1994; Oregon Department of Education/RMC Research Corporation, 1997)

- Decide what you want to measure and report.
- Determine who will be responsible for organizing, developing, and updating the profile.
- Develop a management system for collecting and organizing the data in the profile.
- Be selective about the type and amount of data to collect.
- Take a baseline assessment of the data available in each area of focus.
- Determine any additional information that is needed and the procedures for collecting it.
- Write a narrative to support the story the data present; use varied formats for illustrating the narrative with charts, graphs, and tables.
- Arrange to print the profile, if necessary, in the several languages of the school community. Distribute it through libraries, community and parent organizations, and students.

Planning the school profile provides a starting point for discussion and is useful for organizing the remainder of the needs assessment. A school profile is a data-based snapshot that describes the school's students, faculty, community, and programs; its mission and planning processes; and its achievements and challenges. The profile answers fundamental questions that will guide planning, such as: How well are the students doing? What are the curriculum strengths? Is there a coherent vision with clear goals for achieving the vision? Profile development begins when the planning team decides what types of information it needs for each dimension on the profile. The profile gathers baseline information in one place so the planning team can identify "focus areas" and indicators of the school's status with respect to each one. Some focus areas to consider include:

- *Student Achievement*: How well are the students attaining the challenging academic standards set by the state and school district? What are school completion or mobility rates? How many students are making smooth transitions from one school to the next? Is the school reducing the rate of students leaving the school, either as a result of making a voluntary transfer or because they are dropping out of the system?
- *Curriculum and Instruction*: What are teachers and administrators doing to ensure that teaching methods are up-to-date and the curriculum reflects state, local, and national content standards? What opportunities are there on the job to improve the curriculum, raise expectations of staff, and secure top-quality instructional materials?
- *Professional Development*: Are there on-the-job opportunities for teachers to participate in meaningful professional development? Do teachers select the professional development opportunities available to them? What topics attract the largest groups of participants? Who

participates? What follow-up takes place? Are teachers working as collaborating team members and mentors? What instrument can reliably assess the extent to which teachers are collaborating? What can be done to further promote and enhance collaboration among teachers?

- *Family and Community Involvement*: In what ways are parents and the community involved in meaningful activities that support students' learning? How are parents and the community involved in school decisions? Are health and human services available to support students and encourage healthy family relationships? If families speak languages other than English, are school messages communicated in those languages? Do services for families include students with disabilities, both physical and educational? Can parents develop their own parenting skills or gain access to other educational opportunities through the school?
- *School Context and Organization*: How large are classes? Is adequate time devoted to subjects in which students perform poorly? Do teachers have a voice in decision making and school policies? What role do teachers have in deciding what assessments will be used to evaluate individual students or the program as a whole? Do school committees and decision-making bodies make it easy for teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, support staff, and students to be heard and, in turn, for all groups to be part of solutions to identified problems?

Profiles convey a descriptive picture of the school. The documents should be substantive, based on reliable information, and presented in an easily understood manner, using charts and table formats. If the profile is not too long, it will appeal to many audiences. It is more likely to be used if the information is presented in varied formats, with the most important points first. For example, Blanco School in Langlois, OR, serving 237 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, effectively used its school profile to engage its small community of rural families in dialogue about the school. The opening page of Blanco's school profile challenges readers to consider the following questions and to suggest other important aspects of "the Blanco Experience" that could be included in future profiles:

- What is working well at Blanco that we can build on?
- What is not working well and needs to be modified or changed?
- Who is falling through the cracks?

The Blanco profile summarizes information about students, families, and the socioeconomic status of the community; details about the school's curriculum, guidance program for individual students, and extracurricular activities; the results of surveys of parent and student attitudes and involvement; and longitudinal results from the Oregon Statewide Assessment.

Issues to consider in collecting information include:

- Do data collection tools (surveys, etc.) need to be newly developed or "piloted" before they are used widely?
- Are tools for collecting information easy to use? Do they gather data in a format that is easy to summarize and analyze?
- Have different stakeholder groups been included in selecting the tools, deciding about sampling and collecting data, and planning to analyze and report results?
- What plans have been made to report the results of data collection so they can be understood easily by interested parties and, when necessary, translated into the languages of parents whose children attend the school?
- Where will the raw data (notes from interviews, original questionnaires, etc.) be stored so that the responses are kept confidential?

After the team completes the school profile, members can assess what additional data must be collected. Using many sources and types of information on the school and its students will yield the most accurate picture of students' educational needs. Data sources include school and district records and reports; statistics from community-based organizations; face-to-face or telephone interviews; focus groups;

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classroom and schoolwide observations; examples of students' work; and evaluation results. A uniquely personal but powerful way to understand a school is to shadow students as they follow their schedules to experience what a day feels like to students with different educational needs. Shadowing students can be as useful for teachers and administrators as it is for parents.

During classroom visits, all observers should use the same classroom observation checklist. Sample items on the list might include:

Class Structure
- Reviews previous day's course content
- Gives overview of day's course content
- Summarizes course content covered
- Directs student preparation for next class

Methods
- Provides well-designed materials
- Employs non-lecture learning activities (i.e. small group discussion, student-led activities)
- Invites class discussion
- Employs other tools/instructional aids (i.e. technology, computer, video, overheads)
- Delivers well-planned lecture

Teacher-Student Interaction
- Solicits student input
- Involves a variety of students
- Demonstrates awareness of individual student learning needs

Content
- Appears knowledgeable
- Appears well organized
- Explains concepts clearly
- Relates concepts to students' experience
- Selects learning experiences appropriate to level of learning

Other Comments: Note either effective or ineffective teaching practices observed

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The information a planning team collects and the methods used to collect the data depend on available fiscal and human resources. Planners can save time and money by using or adapting pre-developed, standardized, or locally developed surveys or interview protocols, as long as the tools and methods for collecting information are appropriate for the setting. For example, lengthy written surveys are not appropriate for parents who lack formal education or have limited knowledge of written English. Focus groups may be useful in this situation. Focus groups elicit opinions about school needs from individuals who reflect diverse viewpoints. Focus groups work well with many types of stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, and community members. The exchange among peers raises ideas and concerns that may not emerge from other data collection approaches. One or two discussion leaders should lead the focus group informally, using a conversational style. Serving a light snack may help promote thoughtful candor, as well. On the other hand, focus groups are not useful if cultural traditions discourage families from speaking openly about problems in public. Instead, a school might select among varied data collection methods that respond to a community's styles to generate more accurate and detailed information. Often it is also effective to ask colleagues or parents with strong credibility among key school constituencies to lead the data gathering—by signing a letter of introduction or leading focus groups—in specific communities.

Planning teams also need to determine whether to collect data from the entire school population—all parents, teachers, administrators, and major community participants—or from a systematic sample. A good rule to follow is that if the group being surveyed is small (typically fewer than 30 individuals), asking for everyone's response will ensure that each point of view is represented. For larger groups, it may not be as important to survey the total group directly. Of course, some people may view the planning process with suspicion if it is not fully inclusive, especially if controversial issues are involved, so decisions about sample size are important and should be made carefully by planning team members who know the faculty and community well.

Good planning makes the process of collecting and analyzing information more efficient. For example, if your team decides to use or adapt existing surveys, questionnaires, and other tools for gathering information, it's a good idea to try the instruments out with people in your school to make sure they are easy to administer and the questions they contain elicit accurate information. Experienced planning teams offer the following tips:

- Make sure questions are phrased appropriately and every question is necessary. Be sure to proofread forms.
- Explain the purpose of each data collection strategy. Some teams write letters explaining the purpose of each activity and why these questions are being asked. The letters should also describe how the information will be used, emphasizing the fact that participation is voluntary.
- Assure those surveyed that their individual answers will be kept confidential.
- Give people enough time to think about their answers and return surveys without being rushed.
- Be available to answer questions.
- Make sure every data collection tool is brief and to the point. Although information gathering is important, try not to collect more information than your team can handle.
- Think about how your team will summarize the information that the tool will generate.

After selecting surveys and other data collection tools, make logistical arrangements for obtaining and summarizing the information. This involves: (1) duplicating and distributing data collection forms, (2) identifying individuals to be surveyed or interviewed, (3) planning ways to receive the information and follow up with people who have not returned surveys or responded to requests for interviews, and (4) determining how to tabulate information and display the results in charts or graphs.

As information forms, interview notes, or focus group summaries are returned to the subcommittee or the planning team, team members collate, count, and record the results in a format for easy analysis. This is a process researchers call "cleaning the data." To protect individual privacy, no names or potentially identifying demographic information should appear on questionnaires or other data collection sources. Subcommittees of the planning team can decide on formats for arranging information so it relates to specific questions, but core team members should actively guide the actual interpretation and presentation data. One way to clarify the process of organizing information is to arrange it in the categories used by the school profile. Charts, tables, and tally sheets also help organize data in ways that reveal patterns and highlights.

Before the planning team distributes any information or draws conclusions from the data, committee members should review it closely. Can the summaries be read easily and understood by varied audiences? Do the results reveal clearly explained program strengths and needs so that new goals can be set? At this stage, planning team members should try to identify any possible sources of confusion and recast the way the information is presented to encourage an objective and accurate analysis.

As an example of data collection activities, P.S. 172 in Brooklyn, New York, conducted these data collection activities for needs assessment during its schoolwide program planning phase:

- Examined student achievement data
- Examined classroom performance
- Reviewed staffing patterns and class size
- Reviewed parent involvement
- Surveyed parents' perceptions about grouping, team teaching, and extracurricular activities
- Reviewed the adequacy and effectiveness of professional development activities

Moving from data collection to planning specific goals is a labor-intensive activity—and it is not a linear process. Data can be contradictory or unclear, requiring extensive discussion to determine their implications. Using more than one set of reviewers to examine the data ensures a more accurate analysis and more appropriate responses or recommendations. It is also a good idea to work slowly, over several weeks or months, so the planning team can sift information, reflect on its meaning, and debate its implications before drawing conclusions or designing plans. Analyzing data is one of the most important steps in the needs assessment because it determines the planning team's goals for reconfiguring teaching and learning in the school. Data analysis should seek to answer the following types of questions (WestEd, 1996, p. III-22):

- What are the strengths and needs of the current educational program in the school?
- Does the evidence support the assertions about strengths and needs?
- What more do we need to know? If more information is needed, how will we follow up?
- What priorities does the information suggest?
- What did we learn about how needs vary for different groups in the school—for example, among girls and boys, various ethnic groups, students with limited English proficiency or with disabilities, migrant students, or new immigrants?
- From our review of the data, can we state student needs in ways that specify goals, benchmarks for progress, and outcome expectations in measurable terms?

After preliminary, open-ended discussions of these issues among subcommittee members, the findings should be summarized. Because it is difficult for a school to address many large issues in any one year, most planning experts suggest that teams prioritize the major topics they will address and begin with just one or two major issues the first year, setting longer-term goals or focus areas that can be addressed two or three years down the road.

When these activities have been finished, the comprehensive needs assessment step is complete. The planning team is prepared to explore and verify the underlying causes for each identified issue and to select appropriate solutions and goals. The team is ready for the next planning step—prioritizing areas of focus based on the urgency of the issues and problems just identified.

II.   Helpful State and Organization Websites

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (website)

     http://www.annenberginstitute.org/

     The Annenberg Institute works with school system central offices and community constituencies, to explore and refine the concept of "smart education systems," networks of schools, community organizations and services that promote high-quality student learning and development inside and outside of schools.

International Center for Leadership in Education (website).

http://www.daggett.com/

The website states that the International Center for Leadership in Education has a wealth of experience in assisting schools and districts in implementing organizational changes that translate into world-class curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems. Its work is based on the premise that students are living in a world that is changing dramatically and the education system needs to adapt to those changes in order to prepare students for the world in which they will live and work. Helping to nurture the shared vision and other crucial elements of school improvement is one portion of the International Center's work, and showcasing the results is an equally important part. The International Center has developed an extraordinary reservoir of resources and relationships to advance school improvement. Its publications enable districts and schools to identify specific learning goals and focus on priority standards. Each one can be used to make data-driven decisions regarding curriculum, assessment, and learning.

Looking At Students Work (website)

http://www.lasw.org/index.html

This web site presents the work of educators committed to new ways of looking at student work, ways that emphasize: teachers looking together at student work with colleagues, focusing on small samples of student work, reflecting on important questions about teaching and learning, and using structures and guidelines ("protocols") for looking at and talking about student work. The website represents an association of individuals and educational organizations that focus on looking at student work to strengthen connections between instruction, curriculum, and other aspects of school life to students' learning. This association grew from a meeting on "Examining Student Work and School Change" held in Chicago in October 1998, hosted by the Chicago Learning Collaborative and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. The site is offered as a resource for teachers, administrators, staff developers, and others who work with teachers, schools, and students.

Schoolwide Programs: An Idea Book on Planning (website)

http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/Idea_Planning/index.html

This U.S. Department of Education site contains an Overview of the Schoolwide Planning Process, and sections on Establishing a Planning Team, Conducting a Comprehensive Needs Assessment, Clarifying Needs and Finding Research-Based Strategies, Setting Schoolwide Program Goals, Writing the Schoolwide Plan, Finalizing the Schoolwide Plan, High-Quality Technical Assistance and Support for Schoolwide Planning, and Sustaining Schoolwide Programs through Accountability and Continuous Improvement.

III.   Research Documents

Classroom Observation Checklist (tool)

> http://www.austincc.edu/hr/eval/procedures/ClassObservCheck.pdf

> This checklist includes Likert ratings for Class Structure, Methods, Teacher-Student Interaction, and Content.

Conducting a Comprehensive Needs Assessment – A Management Plan (tool)

> http://www.mc3edsupport.org/community/kb_files/Data_Collection_Plan.pdf

> This matrix

How Walkthroughs Open Doors (article)

> http://bonfire.learnnc.org/pep2/DPI_NCsite/Lessons%20files/How%20Walkthroughs%20Open%20Doors.rtf

> This article, by Margery B. Ginsberg and Damon Murphy, makes the case that frequent, brief, unscheduled walkthroughs can foster a school culture of collaborative learning and dialogue. It includes basic procedures and questions, observation follow-up, and walkthroughs in context.

Leadership by Walking Around: Walkthroughs and Instructional Improvement (article)

> http://www.principalspartnership.com/feature203.html

> This featured article from The Principals' Partnership discusses the importance of the walk-through as a leadership tool for instructional improvement.

Looking Collaboratively at Student Work: An Essential Toolkit (toolkit)

> http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/57

> According to its introduction, "Looking closely together at student work can unveil a treasure trove of insights to guide school communities as they reflect on their purpose, assess their progress, and plan strategies for reaching all children better. It's scary work, though, and respectful protocols can help."

Needs Assessment in Education: A Planning Handbook for Districts (handbook)

> http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/35/25/cd.pdf

> According to this document, a needs assessment is a procedure or process that identifies the perceived or expressed needs of a school district. The process involves the use of various measurements and activities to obtain the data needed to define the gap between "what is" and "what should be." This handbook reviews four such processes or models for identifying needs.

Providing Instructional Leadership Through Classroom Walk-Throughs (presentation).

> http://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/2008conferences/providing.pdf

> This pdf documents—the equivalent of a PowerPoint presentation—was a presentation at the Reading First Conference in Nashville, TN in July 2008. It deals with the reasons for classroom walk-throughs, preparations, the walk-through team, the classroom observation form, follow-up activities, the action plan, and outcomes.

Using Existing Data in Your Needs Assessment (online continuing education training)

> http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/assessment/assess_pg4.html

> This U.S. department of Education online continuing education training contains sections on Needs Assessment and the Value of Existing Data, Finding Local Data, Setting Priorities to Guide Program Selection, and Event Summary and Wrap-up.

The Walk-Through Crew (article)

> http://www.principals.org/Portals/0/Content/46964.pdf

> This article, by John Skretta and Vernon Fisher, states, "Shared leadership and a focused evaluation tool make administrators' presence in classrooms a valuable and informative part of instructional leadership." It includes a classroom observation checklist.

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