

# NEWSLETTER

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## CONDUCTING A COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

**P**incipal Anthony Taylor is looking for answers. During the last four years, his school has consistently lagged behind in meeting state standards while other schools nearby have been making steady academic gains. Teachers and support staff in the school also are frustrated. They have been working hard as well and have tried new programs and initiatives. Mr. Taylor and his staff believe that the students at the school are capable of academic success, yet the standardized assessments do not reflect their efforts.

Across town, Principal Margina Wells also is looking for answers. Although students in the school consistently outperform other students in the region and have met all Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks, during the last three years student achievement has not increased. Despite the successes, staff and faculty are stymied as to how to help students achieve at increasingly higher levels.

Both scenarios typify the stories of many schools where principals and staff are searching for ways to improve student achievement. The school improvement effort might be initiated by state or district mandate, or it might be motivated by the concerns of school personnel. Teachers and administrators frequently enter the process with some idea of what needs to be reformed or improved, but issues can be overemphasized or overlooked if the process does not begin with a comprehensive needs assessment.

A needs assessment can offer an opportunity for a school to refocus and to gather insights into the school improvement process. The purpose of this newsletter is to outline a process for conducting a comprehensive needs assessment that uses data to drive school improvement and provide a focus for the school improvement team.

A comprehensive needs assessment has three primary steps. First is developing a clear and common vision and mission for the school program that takes into account the unique needs of the students and the community. Second is gathering and analyzing relevant data. Third

is interpreting the data by the entire school community—administrators, teachers, staff, families, and community members—in order to develop school improvement goals that are based on data and supported by all stakeholders.

## Developing a Vision and Mission

Many schools have vision and mission statements that are written and posted in the building. [See the text box on p. 3, “Examples of Vision and Mission statements.”] Often these statements are revisited every two or three years to reflect changing needs and priorities of students and staff. Sometimes statements are revisited when a new administrator joins the staff, the school has experienced a large turnover in staff, or a significant shift in student population has occurred.

A *vision statement* is a succinct, clear statement of the shared values of the school community. The entire school community—including family and community members—should come together and ask questions such as: What is important to us? Where do we want to be in five years?

The school’s *mission statement* is derived from the vision and typically provides a longer, more elaborate description of the vision. The vision and mission statements should serve as a framework for identifying improvement priorities and for crafting goals and objectives.

## Gathering and Analyzing Data

Once the mission and vision are established, the school leadership team can begin the process of collecting data, which can be organized into three general, but essential, categories:

- **STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC AND ACHIEVEMENT DATA:** Achievement data include regular formative assessments (such as benchmark tests or midterm examinations). These can be school- or district-based. Achievement data also include annual

standardized test scores. Achievement data that are disaggregated by ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, or disability subgroups take into account student demographics.

- **PROGRAM DATA:** These include data on all aspects of the school program instruction, intervention programs, parent involvement, professional development, and school climate, for example.
- **PERCEPTION DATA:** Perception data are typically collected through surveys that measure perceptions of the school program. The most common approach to gathering perception data in schools is a parent satisfaction survey, but some schools also gather data from teachers and students.

There are different ways to evaluate the school program. For example, classroom instruction may be evaluated through student achievement data and through program data such as classroom observations.

By working together, school and district leaders can identify existing data sources that can be used. Sometimes data are collected by districts and not housed in school buildings. Once the data are collected, they can be represented graphically (e.g., charts, graphs, tables) and the information can be compiled into concise and meaningful reports.

Research can help guide the data-gathering process. Research on effective schools can be organized around six quality indicators—*Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum, Effective Instruction, Use of Formative Assessment and Student Assessment Data, Positive School Climate Focused on Achievement, Effective School Leadership, and Parental and Community Engagement* (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008). The “Quality Indicator Data Matrix” (p. 4) outlines the six indicators and provides examples of potential sources of data that might be collected as part of a comprehensive needs assessment.

There are a variety of computer software programs and printed resources that can be used

in collecting and analyzing school data. However, dedicated computer software programs can be costly. As an alternative, standard spreadsheets can be used to compile and analyze data.

Patterns may emerge as the data are organized and analyzed. These patterns may align with what school staff perceived about strengths and weaknesses of the school programs, but some findings may be counter to previously held perceptions.

## Interpreting the Data

The final step in the needs assessment is to convene the administration, faculty, staff, and community members to review the data and begin the process of identifying the strengths and priorities that will be included in the final school reform plan. It is important to let the data “speak” for themselves. Present the data and allow the stakeholders to analyze them and draw their own conclusions and interpretations.

### Examples of Vision and Mission Statements

Following are two different vision and mission statements that reflect the uniqueness of the individual schools.

#### South Elementary School

##### VISION:

We believe South Elementary School should reflect a caring community and a safe and fair environment in which the school staff, with the support of parents, guides students toward respecting others, understanding the varied cultures of our society, and striving for academic and behavioral excellence.

##### MISSION:

- All our students, including those with special needs, will be prepared for a rapidly changing technological world and will be able to access information, solve problems, think critically, make decisions, and learn to cooperate and work productively with others.
- Ongoing communication and collaboration among classroom teachers, support staff, principal, and family members will result in an integrated program for all students, including those with special needs. Student progress in achieving the established instructional and social goals will be frequently and systematically monitored using a variety of assessment techniques.

#### Smithtown Charter School

##### VISION:

Smithtown Charter School believes that each of us is gifted with a unique potential that defines a destiny. A commitment to character development enables us to achieve personal excellence and find fulfillment in life. We strive for a school where members will be judged not by their inherent talents or native abilities but by the content of their character.

##### MISSION:

The mission of our school is to develop the mind, character, and physical well-being of our students through the creation of an environment fostering:

- Academic excellence
- Maturity
- Responsibility
- Mutual respect



One way to accomplish this objective is to divide the larger group into smaller teams and give each team time to review the data, identify key findings, and discuss the needs and possible next steps. Provide time for each group to summarize its discussion for the larger group. As a result of this process, some common themes or priorities are likely to emerge.

These common priorities will form the foundation on which the school improvement or reform plan can be built. Make sure to include the following information in the plan:

- Identify goals, objectives, and action steps for each priority area

- Delegate responsibilities for implementation
- Define timelines
- Identify resources
- Develop monitoring and evaluation strategies

Keep in mind that a good school improvement or reform plan is a dynamic, working document. Encourage members of the school community to use it throughout the year as a roadmap for achievement. The comprehensive needs assessment on which it is based is the first step in building a successful school community.

### QUALITY INDICATOR DATA MATRIX

#### Quality Indicator 1: Aligned and Rigorous Curriculum

Questions	Yes/No	If no, what data might be collected?
Are all curricula aligned with state standards?		State standards, curriculum guides for all grade levels and subject areas, pacing guides
Are all curricula articulated across grade levels and subject areas?		Curriculum maps, other planning documents
Is flexibility for differentiation built into the curricula?		Curriculum maps and/or guides

#### Quality Indicator 2: Effective Instruction

Questions	Yes/No	If no, what data might be collected?
Are all teachers qualified to teach the content to which they are assigned?		Certification records
Is there a plan to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers?		Central office hiring procedures
Are teachers evaluated at least yearly?		Teacher evaluation schedules
Is professional development aligned to the curriculum and to assessment?		Professional development calendar, student achievement data
Is professional development based on teacher needs and embedded in practice?		Professional development evaluations
Does professional development address the needs of subgroups: special education, culturally and linguistically diverse, economically disadvantaged, and gifted students?		Professional development evaluation, subgroup student achievement data
Do teachers use a variety of instructional strategies?		Teacher observations
Does classroom instruction address the needs of all students (special education, culturally and linguistically diverse, economically disadvantaged, and gifted)?		Teacher observations
Is instructional time maximized in the classroom?		Teacher observations
Are schoolwide distractions and interruptions to instruction held to a minimum?		School schedules
Are teachers held accountable for written daily lesson plans?		Lesson plans, pacing guides
Are instructional activities engaging and relevant to the content?		Classroom activities, teacher observations

## QUALITY INDICATOR DATA MATRIX (continued)

Questions	Yes/No	If no, what data might be collected?
Do teachers articulate high expectations for all student achievement?		Teacher observations
Does the school provide support for struggling learners?		Classroom instructional assistants, afterschool programs/extended learning opportunities, pullout programs, tutoring, coteaching

### Quality Indicator 3: Use of Formative Assessment and Student Assessment Data

Questions	Yes/No	If no, what data might be collected?
Are student assessments administered frequently (at least quarterly)?		Formative/benchmark assessment schedule
Are student formative assessments aligned to the state standards?		Formative/benchmark assessments
Is there a comprehensive accountability data management system?		
Is student performance reported regularly to parents (at least quarterly)?		Report card schedules
Are students kept abreast of their classroom performance, grades, and assessments at least weekly?		Teachers' grading records
Do teachers use student performance data to make instructional decisions?		Long-range instructional plans, lesson plans

### Quality Indicator 4: Positive School Climate Focused on Achievement

Questions	Yes/No	If no, what data might be collected?
Are programs/plans in place to assist with critical transitions? (PK to kindergarten, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school)?		Transition plans, orientation programs, counseling department records
Is there a written school safety plan that includes daily procedures for safety and a crisis management plan?		Student handbook, parent handbook, staff handbook
Are all school community members provided with a written copy of and training on the school safety plan?		Training records
Has the school safety plan been updated in the last three years?		
Is there a written student code of conduct that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rules and expectations?</li> <li>• Progressive and positive discipline for infractions?</li> <li>• Procedures for fair and equitable treatment of diverse groups?</li> </ul>		Written code of conduct
Are expectations for positive behavior consistent for all students?		Discipline referral, suspension, expulsion logs
Do discipline records reflect proportional representation of all students?		Discipline records
Do hallways and classrooms reflect an atmosphere conducive to learning (e.g., clean, orderly, and inviting)?		
Is there evidence of school spirit and pride among students and staff?		Activities calendar, awards assemblies, other noninstructional activities
Are the mission and vision statements posted?		

QUALITY INDICATOR DATA MATRIX (continued)

Quality Indicator 5: Effective School Leadership

Questions	Yes/No	If no, what data might be collected?
Are the vision and mission statements known by students, staff, and parents?		Surveys
Are all stakeholders represented in the school improvement planning process?		Agenda and committee rosters
Is decision making shared among the staff?		Meeting agendas, schedule of meetings, committees, evidence of teacher leadership
Is there a system for sharing information with all members of the school community?		Letters, e-mails, brochures, telephone system, homework lines, newsletters, websites, parent-teacher organizations

Quality Indicator 6: Family and Community Engagement

Questions	Yes/No	If no, what data might be collected?
Are families informed about school activities and invited to participate in school activities?		Information system, records of parent meetings and program participation, sign-in sheets, evaluations
Are families informed of extra support for struggling students (e.g., tutoring, afterschool programs)?		Parent communication records, guidance counseling office records

Reference

Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. (2008). *School review process guide*. Washington, DC: Learning Point Associates.



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