State Support Network

Partnering for School Improvement

Needs Assessment Guidebook

Supporting the Development of District and School Needs Assessments

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Introduction

The Needs Assessment Process

Needs assessment is, first and foremost, a *process*—a process that can help educators at all levels successfully identify, understand, and better address education challenges. Needs assessment is generally defined as a systematic examination of the gap that exists between the current state and desired state of an organization and the factors that can be attributed to this gap. The needs assessment process is an important first step in improving the effectiveness of education investments that lead to better outcomes for students.

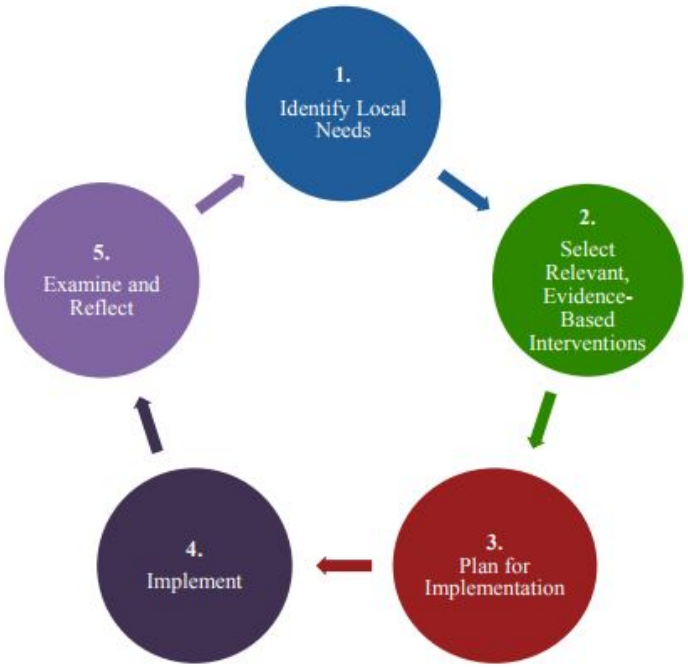
Why Conduct a Needs Assessment?

An effective needs assessment helps local stakeholders and system leaders understand how the pieces of a complex educational system interact. Whether that system reflects a school, a district, or an entire state, a needs assessment can uncover both strengths and challenges that will inform growth and improvement.

The goal of a needs assessment is to help educators identify, understand, and prioritize the needs that districts and schools must address to improve performance. Identifying priority needs is the first in a series of closely tied steps that also include understanding root causes that contribute to the areas of need, selecting evidence-based strategies that address those areas, preparing for and implementing selected strategies, and evaluating whether those strategies are addressing improvement needs and achieving desired results. The needs assessment becomes the beginning step of each iteration of a continuous improvement cycle.

The U.S. Department of Education, in its 2016 non-regulatory guidance on *Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments* (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), presents this process as a five-step cycle (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Continuous Improvement Cycle



Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2016

The importance of continuous improvement (and needs assessment) in the effective selection and implementation of evidence-based practices is described within the non-regulatory guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2016):

> Ways to strengthen the effectiveness of ESEA [Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965] investments include identifying local needs, selecting evidence-based interventions that SEAs [state educational agencies], LEAs [local educational agencies], and schools have the capacity to implement, planning for and then supporting the intervention, and examining and reflecting upon how the intervention is working. These steps, when taken together, promote continuous improvement and can support better outcomes for students. (p. 3)

About This Guidebook

This guidebook is designed to support state and local leaders in the first step in the improvement process, the development and facilitation of a needs assessment. The guidebook does the following:

- Reviews some of the major school-improvement-related needs assessment requirements found in ESEA, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
- Introduces the elements of a successful needs assessment
- Presents a practical approach to addressing those elements across the phases of needs assessment implementation
- Describes supports that states can provide to districts, and districts to schools, in the implementation of effective needs assessments
- Discusses the role of needs assessment within a continuous improvement process

Links to publicly available tools and resources on this topic can be found in the Resources section. In addition, Appendix A includes a two-page *Quick Reference Guide* summarizing the main framework of the guidebook.

Needs Assessment and the Every Student Succeeds Act

ESEA, as amended by ESSA,[1] reflects a shift in U.S. education policy toward state and local decision making. ESEA recognizes that context matters and that states and districts should have the flexibility to determine the solutions that will best address the specific needs of their students, schools, and communities.

ESEA Requirements

ESEA requires states and districts to complete a needs assessment in several areas across the major programs included in the law. Table 1 summarizes many of the school-improvement-related requirements; language taken directly from the legislation is quoted. Please note that this table is presented as a reference only and should not be construed as official guidance.

Table 1. Highlighted Needs Assessment Requirements Within ESEA

Title/ Program	Requirement	Section
Title I, Part A **Comprehensive Support and Improvement Plans**	To assist schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement, the local educational agency (LEA) must "for each school identified by the state and in partnership with stakeholders (including principals and other school leaders, teachers, and parents), locally develop and implement a comprehensive support and improvement plan for the school to improve student outcomes, that…is based on a school-level needs assessment." In addition, the comprehensive support and improvement plan must be informed by all of the statewide accountability indicators, identify resource inequities, include evidence-based interventions, and be approved by the school, LEA, and state.	ESEA Section 1111(d)(1)(B)
Title I, Part A **Schoolwide Programs**	To inform a comprehensive plan for schools operating a schoolwide program, the school will conduct a comprehensive needs assessment that "takes into account information on the academic achievement of children in relation to the challenging state academic standards, particularly the needs of those children who are failing, or are at-risk of failing, to meet the challenging state academic standards."	ESEA Section 1114(b)(6)
Title I, Part A **Targeted Assistance Schools**	A targeted assistance school may provide comprehensive services (such as "health, nutrition, and other social services"), if these services are not otherwise available to eligible children. The school must have "engaged in a comprehensive needs assessment and established a collaborative partnership with local service providers" and it must be determined that "funds are not reasonably available from other public or private sources to provide such services."	ESEA Section 1115(e)(2)
Title II, Part B **Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grants**	As part of a state's application for a Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant, it must include "[a] needs assessment that analyzes literacy needs across the state and in high-need schools and LEAs that serve high-need schools, including identifying the most significant gaps in literacy proficiency and inequities in student access to effective teachers of literacy, considering each of the subgroups of students, as defined in section 1111(c) (2)" of the ESEA.	ESEA Section 2222(d)(2)(A)

[1] Throughout this document, ESEA refers to ESEA as amended by ESSA, unless otherwise noted.

Title/ Program	Requirement	Section
Title IV, Part A **Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants**	States award Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) sub-grants to eligible LEAs or consortia of LEAs by formula in the same proportion as the LEAs' prior-year Title I, Part A allocations or on a competitive basis (ESEA section 4105(a)(1); Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2017 (Public Law 115-31). Any LEA or consortium of LEAs that receives an SSAE allocation or award in the amount of $30,000 or more must complete a comprehensive needs assessment prior to receiving its allocation "to examine needs for improvement of—(A) access to, and opportunities for, a well-rounded education for all students; (B) school conditions for student learning in order to create a healthy and safe school environment; and (C) access to personalized learning experiences supported by technology and professional development for the effective use of data and technology." Each LEA or consortium must conduct the needs assessment once every three years.	ESEA Section 4106(d)
Title IV, Part F **Promise Neighborhoods Program**	Although the term *"needs assessment"* does not appear in the text, it is helpful to consider the following provision, which requires applications for Promise Neighborhoods funding to include the following: "…(4) An analysis of the needs and assets of the neighborhood …, including—(A) the size and scope of the population affected; (B) a description of the process through which the needs analysis was produced, including a description of how parents, families, and community members were engaged in such analysis; (C) an analysis of community assets and collaborative efforts (including programs already provided from Federal and non-Federal sources) within, or accessible to, the neighborhood, including, at a minimum, early learning opportunities, family and student supports, local businesses LEAs, and institutions of higher education; (D) the steps that the eligible entity is taking, at the time of the application, to address the needs identified in the needs analysis; and (E) any barriers the eligible entity, public agencies, and other community-based organizations have faced in meeting such needs."	ESEA Section 4624(a)(4)
Title IV, Part F **Full-Service Community Schools (Community Support for School Success)**	To apply for Community Support for School Success funding for full-service community schools, an eligible entity must submit as part of their application, a comprehensive plan that includes, among other things, a description of "[a] needs assessment that identifies the academic, physical, nonacademic, health, mental health, and other needs of students, families, and community residents."	ESEA Section 4625(a)(4)(B)
Title IX, Part B[2] of ESSA **Preschool Development Grants**	In addition to implementing evidence-based practices and other required activities, states that receive an ESSA Preschool Development Grant in support of the coordination and operation of early childhood care and education programs must conduct "a periodic statewide needs assessment of—(A) the availability and quality of existing programs in the state, including such programs serving the most vulnerable or underserved populations and children in rural areas; (B) to the extent practicable, the unduplicated number of children being served in existing programs; and (C) to the extent practicable, the unduplicated number of children awaiting service in such programs."	ESSA Section 9212(f)(1)

[2] Preschool Development Grants (PDGs) are authorized in ESEA, as amended by ESSA; however, this program is not the same as the PDG program first authorized in fiscal year 2014 under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014. It is included here to share the range of needs assessment requirements within ESSA. The secretary of health and human services, jointly with the secretary of education, will make awards under the ESSA PDG program.

Elements of a Successful Needs Assessment

A successful needs assessment leads to actionable priorities and meaningful, long-term change. Achieving these results requires more than just one or two people completing a form behind closed doors; it requires active and meaningful engagement of all concerned stakeholders in a process to examine, identify, and diagnose the challenges that need to be addressed for improvement to occur. The *Elements of a Successful Needs Assessment* framework presented in Figure 2 is informed by a review of the current research on needs assessment and the State Support Network's work with a number of states to examine and develop needs assessments. The framework illustrates key considerations for a robust and meaningful needs assessment process.

Figure 2. Four Elements Essential for Successful Needs Assessment

Needs-Driven and Context-Specific Approach

A successful needs assessment is both needs-driven and context-specific. To be needs-driven, the needs assessment design and scope should be built around an organizing framework that defines the problems, topics, and questions to be addressed. Educators may wish to adopt an existing research-based improvement framework (see the Resources section for examples) or develop a local version to ground their needs assessment process.

To be context-specific, the design and data inputs of the needs assessment must reflect the local context for the work. This is because specific interventions or practices may be key to driving school improvement in certain instances, but the same approaches quite often yield different results under different circumstances. A context-specific approach to needs assessment may include an examination of factors contributing to organizational health, implementation of initiatives, and local influences that can impact outcomes, as well as diverse stakeholder perspectives (e.g., students, parents, community members, teachers, and administrators). Stakeholder perspectives may be especially important because they may help leaders understand how the system's various components intersect and interact (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Identifying needs through a context-specific approach becomes especially important when interpreting the specific factors that may be causing those needs to exist, prioritizing those that are most important and selecting appropriate strategies that may be most likely to lead to improvements.

Rigorous Data Analysis

A successful needs assessment utilizes rigorous data analysis, including diverse and high-quality data sets. Diverse data sets include multiple data types, including both qualitative and quantitative data, reflecting multiple viewpoints. To be considered high-quality, data must be collected using valid and reliable methods and deemed clean and trustworthy (error-free). These diverse and high-quality data sources are then used in rigorous data analysis, in which findings from the data are aggregated or compared across data sources and types to develop and support a conclusion.

Ideally, the data included in a needs assessment should be balanced among input data, output data, and demographic or community context data.

- *Input data* describe resources intended to support achievement. This category might include information related to improvement plans, curriculum materials and supplies, training, resource allocation, and intervention programs.
- *Output data* refer to information that illustrates outcomes or results and could include student and teacher attendance, student achievement, program reviews, classroom observations, behavior referrals, and so forth.
- *Demographic* or *community context data* provide information regarding important contextual factors that the district or school likely does not have the power to change but that may affect implementation of interventions. Such information includes student subgroup populations and demographics, local economic trends, student mobility, and overall enrollment patterns.

Multiple data types mapped against specific issues or guiding questions from the framework allow for *triangulation*, a rigorous method of comparing multiple data sources to substantiate conclusions reached, resulting in greater confidence in identified successes to be leveraged and challenges to be addressed.

Stakeholder Engagement

A needs assessment is a process that should be undertaken with (or by) local stakeholders rather than completed entirely by a small group of leaders or an outside entity. Engaging school staff, parents, a diverse assortment of leaders and external support providers (even students, at the secondary level) during each phase of the needs assessment—not just in the delivery of results—ensures that the planning, data collection, identified needs, and consideration of underlying causes incorporate the input of a broad knowledge base, including diverse local perspectives.

The benefit of a needs assessment conducted with collaboratively engaged stakeholders is seen long after the needs assessment is complete. By developing trust in and through the process, participating stakeholders are more likely to be invested in the outcomes and actively engaged in the selection, development, and implementation of improvement plans and strategies that create lasting change. In addition, active participation increases the overall capacity of the group to sustain implementation and improvement efforts. Relational trust is a critical factor for implementing lasting changes in education settings, and active stakeholder engagement can help to build that trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Collaborative Identification of Improvement Needs

The primary outcome of the needs assessment process is a set of needs, or prioritized areas of focus, that will inform improvement efforts. Collaborative identification of those needs means that priorities are identified collaboratively with stakeholders (rather than being determined externally or in isolation). The local leaders, teachers, staff, and parents represented in the data collection, who also are responsible for carrying out the implementation strategies that are identified as a result of the needs assessment, have a stake in identifying and

prioritizing needs. When key indicators are determined at the local level, ownership and understanding increase. In short, local community members are more likely to embrace conclusions that they have drawn for themselves (Curtis & City, 2009).

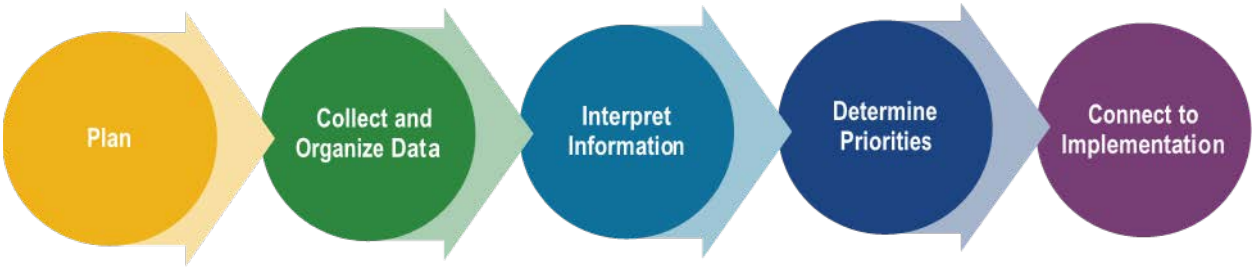
Collaborative identification of needs strengthens a needs assessment process in a few primary ways. Research suggests that genuine collaboration requires a shift from a cooperation mindset in which ideas and actions are "mutually agreeable" to ideas and actions that are "mutually beneficial" (Hord, 1981). By including stakeholders in the identification of improvement needs and a related examination of the underlying root causes, a broad cross-section of the school or district community knows what the results are and understands the importance of those results and how they will be used to impact implementation. This creates a team that is invested in moving forward together, a solid foundation for a successful improvement effort.

Phases of Needs Assessment Implementation

The four elements of a successful needs assessment describe the foundation of a needs assessment process or approach. The needs assessment process as it is enacted at the school or district level is implemented across five discrete phases: plan, collect and organize data, interpret information, determine priorities, and connect to implementation.

Figure 3 lays out the five phases of needs assessment implementation.

Figure 3. Phases of Needs Assessment Implementation



Each of these phases is described in more detail below, including critical activities to undertake during each phase, guiding questions, and key actions and considerations for incorporating each of the essential elements throughout the process.

Plan the Needs Assessment

The first step in a needs assessment involves defining desired outcomes and creating a plan to achieve them. The planning phase lays the groundwork for the rest of the process. During this phase, important activities include the following:

1. Define the purpose and intended outcomes of the needs assessment process within the local context.
2. Determine the guiding questions that the needs assessment should answer (if the needs assessment is not part of a larger project that has already identified central questions or concerns).
3. Establish actions, timelines, and responsibilities for all related activities.
4. Identify relevant stakeholders, plan for their involvement, and invite them to participate, beginning with the planning process.
5. Articulate the content (what the needs assessment will cover), the process (how the needs assessment will be accomplished), and the presentation (what the school or district will use and how the results will be conveyed).

Guiding Questions

- Why are we engaging in the needs assessment (beyond compliance)? What are we hoping the impact will be at the classroom, building, and system levels?
- What is the framework of the needs assessment—the core themes or topics the needs assessment will cover? What do we need to know or understand about each of these topics (e.g., instruction, assessment, achievement, climate, etc.)?
- Who are the key stakeholders who need to be engaged and at what points in the process?

Essential Elements: Key Considerations and Actions for the Plan Phase

Needs-Driven and Context-Specific Approach	• Use a framework to organize the needs assessment. (See the Resources section for examples.) – Develop guiding questions to focus data collection on the issues most critical to the needs assessment. – Ensure that multiple data sources align to each guiding question or framework element, allowing for triangulation of findings.
Rigorous Data Analysis	• Select and use readily available and relevant data sources. Determine additional data needed. Sources to consider include the following: – Assessment results, community demographics, student and teacher attendance, and behavior referrals – Data from classrooms, afterschool programs, and summer programs – Surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups to gather perceptions from diverse groups, such as parents, educators, students, and community members – Review of relevant district and school policies, plans, and allocation of resources • Include a mix of data that describe program inputs and results and demographic or contextual information. Disaggregate data where possible (without revealing individual identity). Include multiple years of data to better identify trends over time.
Stakeholder Engagement	• Involve stakeholders in identifying data sources. • Consider ways to gather input and promote ownership for groups of stakeholders and invite them to participate. Different stakeholders may be engaged at different levels during the process. • Communicate with stakeholders to build confidence and commitment. Be intentional and transparent regarding communication.
Collaborative Identification of Improvement Needs	• Develop a statement of purpose with input from stakeholders. The purpose statement will clarify the work as well as foster trust and ownership. • Explain the steps so that stakeholders know what to expect and how they can best participate. Use stakeholder feedback to improve implementation planning.

Collect and Organize Data

Data are a foundational component of any needs assessment process. However, data collected in their "raw" form are not always useful for making decisions; often, they need to be organized in a way that is readable and useful for the stakeholders who will be involved in interpreting the data to draw conclusions and identify improvement needs. During this phase of the needs assessment, data are collected in various forms (qualitative, quantitative, input, output, demographic) and organized and presented for interpretation.

Guiding Questions

- What data sources are aligned with the guiding questions and are readily available from existing sources (state databases, program reports, etc.)?
- What additional data are needed to fully explore the guiding questions, and what are the best ways to collect these data (survey, focus group, observation, etc.)?
- Which data will be provided to districts or schools, and which data must be added or collected at the local level?
- How can all data be presented in a way that is easily understood by stakeholders? Consider the need to avoid assumptions and preconceptions and to ensure opportunities for triangulation across data sets.

Essential Elements: Key Considerations and Actions for the Collect and Organize Data Phase

Needs-Driven and Context-Specific Approach	• Compare data sources to the guiding questions and overarching topic framework to ensure that all included data respond to the needs assessment purpose and can be triangulated with other data sources. • Include data that describe the climate and culture of the organization and community. • If looking at comparison data, consider other school districts and/or communities with similar demographics or organizational structures. • Identify and consider contextual information needed to understand the data or limitations in the data to avoid spurious or unrelated inferences about the data.
Rigorous Data Analysis	• Disaggregate data wherever possible to help identify areas of need that otherwise may not be apparent. Consider the following: – Demographics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) – Exceptional students (e.g., students with disabilities, gifted students, low-achieving students) – Students with additional needs (e.g., students in foster care; those who are homeless or migratory; and/or those whose families are highly mobile, such as military families) • Aggregate observation data by grade level or grade band and perception data by stakeholder group. • Include longitudinal data (when possible) to aid in identifying any trends over time. • Create visuals (charts, tables, graphs) to help the reader digest information presented. • Allow for reflection without assuming cause before data are triangulated across multiple sources.
Stakeholder Engagement	• Build stakeholders' capacity to make informed decisions by engaging them in data collection, defining unfamiliar terminology, avoiding jargon, and ensuring access to necessary background information. • Ensure that stakeholders understand data used in the needs assessment, and display data in formats that are easy to interpret and analyze. • Encourage authentic engagement by setting clear expectations for participation, facilitate dialogue rather than presenting information in a lecture-style format, and commit to finding answers collaboratively.
Collaborative Identification of Improvement Needs	• When preparing and organizing data to present, consider all stakeholders who will have a role in *Interpreting Information* and *Prioritizing Needs,* as well as the processes that will be used to complete these later steps. It is important to ensure that data presentation is clear and accessible for the intended audience.

Interpret Information

During this phase, educators examine relevant data to create meaningful information by collaborating with multiple stakeholders to ensure that the identified needs are interpreted within the local context. Collaborating with stakeholders who participated in data collection and are responsible for carrying out the next steps that result from the needs assessment further ensures that data are understood within what is realistic for the local implementation of future actions. To support this process, data should be organized and presented in digestible formats to facilitate examination of trends across time and data sources. The data presentation and interpretation process should also support triangulation of data points from different sources, voices, or forms of data. Triangulation produces more reliable outcomes and helps participants determine stronger themes within the data.

Guiding Questions

- What do the individual data sources say about the guiding questions that the needs assessment is trying to answer?
- What themes emerge when multiple sources are cross-referenced or triangulated across a given topic?
- Are there places in which the various stakeholder voices disagree with one another or present a different perspective than your own? How can the underlying causes of these differences be explored?
- How can we articulate what we have learned in language that is specific to our community yet does not cast blame?

Essential Elements: Key Considerations and Actions for the Interpret Information Phase

Needs-Driven and Context-Specific Approach	• Use the organizational components of the framework to look for trends within the data. • Once themes have been identified within the major components of the framework, conduct triangulation across the framework components to identify cross-cutting themes.
Rigorous Data Analysis	• Data sources are both *quantitative* and *qualitative*, include stakeholder perception, and can be triangulated across sources and methods of collection. • Diverse data highlight student outcomes as well as *contributing factors*: – Attendance, discipline, and graduation and dropout rates – Classroom observations, professional learning opportunities, and access to effective educators – Budget analysis and resource allocation, including funding sources
Stakeholder Engagement	• Include key internal *and* external stakeholders to represent diverse experiences and viewpoints. Consider the following: – **Educators** (teachers, school/district leaders, specialized instructional/support personnel, collective bargaining associations, two- and four-year colleges and universities, early learning providers) – **Parents, Families, and Students** (parent–teacher association/parent–teacher organization, secondary students, parent and family volunteers) – **Community, Business, and Economic Development Organizations** (school board members, health/social services agencies, faith-based institutions, youth recreational centers, workforce programs, mayors, legislators, libraries) – **Philanthropic Groups** (foundations and advocacy groups) • Consider individuals, groups, and organizations that have not been engaged in the past and/or those that could offer unique perspectives.
Collaborative Identification of Improvement Needs	• Select a skilled facilitator (external or internal) who has the knowledge, skills, and disposition to lead collaborative processes and is committed to meaningful results. • Given that facilitators can play a key role in implementing the needs assessment, consider the following: – Select protocols for efficient and effective use of time. – Promote equitable participation of stakeholders to ensure that all voices are heard. – Provide focus and direction while remaining flexible to the needs of the group. – Prompt deep thinking by challenging assumptions, discouraging groupthink, and asking probing questions. – Build consensus and resolve conflicts without marginalizing participants.

Determine Priorities

Achieving successful outcomes from an improvement process requires directing improvement efforts toward a manageable set of priorities. In the course of the needs assessment, it is likely that multiple needs or issues will emerge. However, it is important to narrow this list of needs to a key set of priorities for action. Further, stakeholders who will be responsible for carrying out the work resulting from the needs assessment must ensure that the priorities identified are authentic and specific to the needs assessment framework and local context.

Guiding Questions

- What findings or themes have emerged that, if addressed, will have the greatest potential for impact on student outcomes?
- How many priorities will a given school or district address simultaneously?
- Are there additional data that should be considered in order to make informed decisions about priorities and capacity for implementation?

Essential Elements: Key Considerations and Actions for the Determine Priorities Phase

Needs-Driven and Context-Specific Approach	• Ensure that priorities reflect areas that, if addressed, will have a measurable and lasting impact on implementation (system inputs) and outcomes. It can be tempting to focus on issues that contribute to system challenges but are outside of stakeholder control (including student demographics or local politics) rather than those elements that can be addressed to drive meaningful change. • In determining priorities, consider the following: – Can the school or district control this issue? – Are the voices responsible for carrying out the identified work involved in helping determine priorities? – Do the school/district and the voices represented have the capacity to realize the changes necessary to address this issue?
Rigorous Data Analysis	• Determine priorities that are supported by strong data (i.e., multiple data points derived from multiple data sources or voices), which is cross-referenced or triangulated to create a fuller picture of the issue. • Consider (rather than prioritize) findings or themes based on a single source or data point.
Stakeholder Engagement	• Gather input on determined priorities from stakeholders responsible for identifying needs and carrying out the work that results from the needs assessment.
Collaborative Identification of Improvement Needs	• Consider how identified needs impact one another, and determine which needs represent short-term goals and which are related to long-term goals. • Determine the effort that is required to address each need, and consider prioritizing those that are “low-hanging fruit” or that would represent a quick win to build momentum toward tackling the more challenging needs. • Use a voting process to prioritize identified needs for action; encourage conversation regarding the number of improvement priorities that any one plan can effectively tackle. • Identify any critical needs that are cross-cutting, or most closely related to the reason that the needs assessment was undertaken.

Connect With Implementation

The final phase of the needs assessment takes the results of the needs assessment and turns those results into something actionable. Educators dig deeper into the prioritized needs to understand root causes or further break down the priorities so they can be connected to relevant goals and incorporated into an improvement or action plan. Priorities established through the process of identifying needs and interpreting their causes drive the selection of appropriate strategies or interventions, how they will be implemented, and how improvement will be evaluated and measured along the way. Connecting with implementation is critical to realizing change as a result of the needs assessment process.

Guiding Questions

- How will the needs assessment results be used to create meaningful, long-term change?
- What are the potential underlying root causes of the needs or issues the team has prioritized?
- What additional information is needed about the needs assessment results or their potential underlying causes to create meaningful, long-term change?
- How will school or district teams connect needs assessment results to the selection of evidence-based practices for implementation?
- What processes will be created to ensure regular opportunities for utilizing data to reflect on the progress of improvement efforts?

Essential Elements: Key Considerations and Actions for the Connect With Implementation Phase

Needs-Driven and Context-Specific Approach	• Ensure that the implementation of improvement initiatives or interventions connects to existing work when appropriate, aligns with district priorities, and responds to the concerns of the larger community. Moving from needs assessment results to implementation requires many of the same contextual considerations as conducting the needs assessment, particularly related to organizational and system health, initiative implementation, and external conditions, including social context, local context, and best practices. • Focus the needs assessment on a core set of guiding questions or driving principles (a framework) that ties the needs assessment to overarching priorities and clearly defines the scope of what is considered as part of the process.
Rigorous Data Analysis	• Plan for further examination of data and research on the identified priorities, including the following: – Internal data on previous implementation of programs and initiatives related to action areas – Resource allocation considerations and trends (especially if these were not included as part of the input data collected for analysis) – Additional context or stakeholder information related to rollout and implementation of action areas – External research and data to support implementation of action areas
Stakeholder Engagement	• Engage stakeholders in identifying strategies, timelines, and available resources because those responsible for carrying out the work of improvement have a unique perspective on what has been—and what can be—successful. Communicate the results of the needs assessment and engage stakeholders in defining the next steps in response to those results. Engaging in two-way communication that is responsive to stakeholder needs creates buy-in and sets the stage for sustainability of improvement efforts.
Collaborative Identification of Improvement Needs	• Ensure that action plans informed by the needs assessment include strategies for progress monitoring. Identify opportunities for stakeholders—both those involved in implementation and those external to it—to engage in utilizing data to reflect on progress.

Opportunities for State and Local Agencies

State education systems are complex. Each state system is unique and includes multiple levels with relationships among all system levels; from the school building to the district, intermediate agencies, and the state agency. Needs assessments can occur at any level and can include elements of multiple levels within a single effort. The complexity and interrelatedness of the system levels (state, intermediate area, school district, and school—or even program within a school) can create highly interdependent relationships, and designing a needs assessment that takes advantage of those relationships can improve the inputs, procedures, and outcomes of the needs assessment process. This section explores two primary opportunities for engagement and collaboration: states and districts, and districts and schools.

States and Districts Working Together

It can be a challenge for states and districts to construct and implement a successful needs assessment process. States have the unique opportunity to reduce barriers and bolster efforts by providing guidance, resources, and direct assistance to their districts. States should consider technical support, assistance for implementation, developing tools and trainings, and filling capacity gaps as necessary, especially for small or rural districts (The Aspen Institute, 2015).

When states take the time to understand and consider the conditions for implementing a needs assessment and the varying degrees of leadership capacity that exist in schools and districts, they can create processes and tools that are accessible to and useful for practitioners implementing the needs assessment (Louis et al., 2010). States can provide guidance to influence decision-making routines at the district and school levels so that use of evidence becomes "embedded in the culture of the organization," with the needs assessment providing a starting leverage point for this culture change (Chiefs for Change, 2016).

States can create opportunities for collaboration and support for high-quality needs assessments at the district level.

Some examples of actions that states may take might include the following:

- Talk to districts from a variety of contexts (rural, urban, diverse student populations, etc.) to learn about their technical capacity, needs, and priorities to ensure that the needs assessment process can be implemented with flexibility.
- Develop a comprehensive needs assessment process or protocol for use by districts and schools statewide (to promote system coherence), which will satisfy the requirements of multiple Title programs and/or divisions within the SEA (to create efficiency).
- Conduct pilot programs with a small group of districts to test implementation of the needs assessment process and gather feedback for fine-tuning to create a process that serves both state and local needs.
- Develop guidance to support data collection and presentation, including methods for collecting and assembling qualitative and quantitative data.
- Provide assistance in gathering relevant data, including creating data tools that automate state-level data collection and/or provide graphs and charts for easy interpretation.
- Partner with state institutions of higher education to help prepare data templates and reports and/or to provide assistance with data collection.

- Recruit and train high-quality technical assistance providers to assist districts in facilitating the needs assessment process.
- Provide online resources for districts to access at their own pace, as necessary.
- Open up opportunities for feedback and genuine dialogue as part of the state's continuous improvement process.

Districts and Schools Working Together

Districts provide frontline support to schools identified as needing improvement. Improving student learning requires a collective effort at each level of the system in which educators continually support and collaborate with one another to accelerate student achievement.

Districts can create processes and systems to support schools, providing resources and guidance that help ensure that "everyone is rowing in the same direction." Making effective use of data is a key priority for districts as they partner with schools and requires efficient ways of accessing and displaying data as well as training staff at all levels on data use (Protheroe, 2008). By developing and adopting policies and a framework for improvement, districts can establish a structure to support school improvement.

Research has shown that strictly restricting principal autonomy can stifle innovative approaches to achievement (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). Needs assessment efforts can combat this issue by allowing enough flexibility for school-level differences in implementation, while still utilizing a common approach. When everyone is "rowing in the same direction," the color of the paddle that each rower is using will not impact the end result. In effective districts, the unique context of a school is recognized, and allowances for flexibility are granted at the school level (DuFour & Marzano, 2015). Principals who are given autonomy in the areas of human capital, scheduling, instructional programs, and fiscal responsibility, as well as the ability to use new resources or modify existing ones to adopt comprehensive school improvement design, are more likely to succeed (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). School leaders can increase effectiveness when they have the ability to reorganize resources to support improvement efforts.

Districts can create opportunities for collaboration and support for high-quality, school-level needs assessments.

Some examples of actions that districts may take might include the following:

- Set goals at the district level, and provide autonomy to schools to use the needs assessment process to develop strategies and actions to achieve the established goals.
- Work with schools to help ensure that their needs assessments are focused on the issues of greatest importance.
- Facilitate sharing and presentation of district-level data; develop data-reporting templates for common use.
- Support the inclusion of a variety of data sources; assist data collection efforts with district resources and connections.
- Bring schools together to focus on related concerns or priorities in order to pool expertise and resources.
- Identify resources and strategies that can work across schools to create efficiencies in implementing needs assessments across school buildings.

- Provide assistance with communications to stakeholders and community members regarding needs assessment activities. Provide professional learning and support on using data to inform the development of school improvement plans.
- Connect schools with available statewide systems of support, including external facilitators and high-quality professional development.
- Participate in and listen to the conversations related to individual building-level needs assessments to develop a more nuanced understanding of each school's results.
- Determine how school-level data may be aggregated at the district level to assist in ongoing data collection and tracking efforts.
- Create opportunities for networking and collaboration across schools that are engaging in concurrent needs assessments, in order to foster peer learning.
- Talk to schools about ways to reduce the potential burden of needs assessments, and model use of the needs assessment as a lever for change rather than an instrument of compliance.

Needs Assessment and the Continuous Improvement Cycle

The continuous improvement cycle is typically signified as the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle (Deming, 1986; Shewhart, 1931, in Metz, 2015). The four pieces of a continuous improvement cycle are:

1. Specify the plan that helps move service and interventions forward (including selecting evidence-based strategies and regular progress checks to assess implementation).
2. Focus on facilitating the implementation of the plan.
3. Engage in assessment processes to understand and evaluate how the plan is working (including evaluating fidelity of strategy implementation).
4. Make changes to the next iteration of the plan to improve implementation (Metz, 2015).

The findings from the needs assessments represent the foundation on which to build a sustainable continuous improvement cycle. A needs assessment, when conducted with the other steps of a continuous improvement process, can lead to improved outcomes for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Within the context of district and school improvement, this includes examination of root causes, selection and implementation of evidence-based strategies, and evaluation of the effectiveness of those strategies at producing desired improvement outcomes. Because effective improvement requires commitment to action, assessment, and ongoing adjustment, employing the elements of a successful needs assessment throughout implementation can support periodic data reviews to assess progress.

The science of continuous improvement is an emerging field that typically has been rooted in business and health care systems. In these sectors, continuous improvement has been used to achieve significant advances, ranging from improved technologies to reductions in patient mortality. Similarly, many schools and districts have achieved impressive results using continuous improvement processes.

The needs assessment findings can inform the continuous improvement cycle by reflecting the needs of individuals and the context of use, which are essential for innovative work in education (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010; von Hippel, 2005). Further, states and districts are more likely to implement strategies effectively when strategy selection is based on a data-based assessment of local capacity (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Guiding Questions

The task of integrating **continuous improvement and needs assessment** can be aided by discussing and answering the following questions:

- What sources of data will be used to guide and inform our continuous improvement cycle?
- What data sources utilized for the initial needs assessment are easily updated for use on a regular basis to track progress?
- What data collection systems and habits can be built into everyday practice (including routine school and district leadership team activities) to ensure that data collection evolves to reflect implementation?
- How can the state facilitate collaborative discussions among peer districts to support identification and implementation of evidence-based strategies as part of improvement planning?
- What learning is necessary to help school leaders and educators embrace continuous improvement?
- How is ongoing stakeholder engagement used to support and enhance the evaluation of progress and the continuous improvement process?

- What structures are in place to allow leaders and teachers the flexibility to take risks, test various possible solutions, and adjust programs?

Educators and leaders engage in needs assessment at the beginning of a much larger improvement process. As the first step of the improvement process, conducting a successful needs assessment plays an important role in establishing a strong foundation from which to build improvement efforts and rigorous implementation practices. Consistent and ongoing application of each step of continuous improvement is likely to strengthen implementation of improvement strategies, thereby improving the likelihood that those interventions will improve outcomes for students.

Resources

Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement
Center on School Turnaround
http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CST_Four-Domains-Framework-Final.pdf

The four domains provide an organizational structure to assist states, districts, and schools working toward rapid improvement efforts. The framework examines critical practices of successful school turnaround and describes them in practical language through four domains, supported by research and experience as central to rapid and significant improvement: turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift.

Let's Get This Conversation Started: Strategies, Tools, Examples, and Resources to Help States Engage With Stakeholders to Develop and Implement Their ESSA Plans
Council of Chief State School Officers
https://www.ccsso.org/resource-library/lets-get-conversation-started

This guide, developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers in consultation with 15 national advocacy and civil rights groups, offers SEAs strategies on how to engage and learn from stakeholders to achieve their vision of addressing the needs of all students through the implementation of the state's ESSA plan. The guide provides planning templates and tools, examples of effective strategies used in various states, and additional stakeholder engagement resources.

Using Needs Assessments for School and District Improvement: A Tactical Guide
Council of Chief State School Officers and Center on School Turnaround
http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/NeedsAssessment-Final.pdf

A tactical guide developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Center on School Turnaround, this resource provides SEAs and LEAs with specific planning guidance and questions to consider when developing either a comprehensive or segmented (i.e., focused) needs assessment and connect the needs assessment to a broader theory of action around improved outcomes for students.

Worksheets From Using Needs Assessments for School and District Improvement
Center on School Turnaround
http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/new-cst-publication-using-needs-assessments-for-school-and-district-improvement/
This tactical guide from the Center on School Turnaround is accompanied by a set of fillable planning worksheets.

Understanding Federally Required Education Policy Needs Assessments and Maximizing Their Impact
Council of Chief State School Officers
https://www.ccsso.org/resource-library/understanding-federally-required-education-policy-needs-assessments-and-maximizing

This resource, developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers, closely examines the various statutory requirements and available guidance for needs assessments under Titles I, II, III, and IV under ESSA. A summary table that highlights each requirement is included as well as links to additional examples and resources. An appendix provides additional context and background related to the ESSA regulations.

Framework for Great Schools
New York City Department of Education
http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/framework/default.htm

This graphic illustrates the New York City Department of Education's (DOE's) holistic, research-based approach to advancing student achievement. It interconnects the six elements of rigorous instruction,

collaborative teachers, supportive environment, effective school leadership, strong family–community ties, and trust to show the various layers of support that contribute to student growth. Research behind the creation of the framework and the connection to the DOE's accountability system also are provided as links.

A District Guide to ESSA and the Importance of Stakeholder Engagement
Partners for Each and Every Child
http://www.partnersforeachandeverychild.org/Publications/P4_District%20Guide_12.11.16.pdf

This guide was created by Partners for Each and Every Child to help LEAs understand what is happening at the state level during the development of state ESSA plans and to support districts in creating their own stakeholder engagement strategy. The guide outlines district responsibilities under ESSA, lists recommended stakeholders to engage, and provides additional resources on stakeholder engagement.

A Handbook for Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement: A Tool to Support State Education Agencies in Planning and Implementation of ESSA
Partners for Each and Every Child
http://partnersforeachandeverychild.org/P4_EngagementHandbook_ESSA_0616.pdf

This handbook was created by Partners for Each and Every Child to help SEAs design and carry out effective stakeholder engagement strategies throughout the transition to and implementation of new provisions in ESSA. It is meant to serve as a supplement to the *Let's Get This Conversation Started* guide published by the Council of Chief State School Officers. The handbook walks states through key decision points, constructing a framework for their stakeholder engagement strategy, understanding explicit requirements for stakeholder engagement, and utilizing tools, templates, and other resources as they build their engagement strategy.

The Every Student Succeeds Act Creates Opportunities to Improve Health and Education at Low-Performing Schools
The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
http://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/assets/2017/08/hip_the_every_student_succeeds_act_creates_opportunities_to_improve_health_and_education_at_low_performing_schools.pdf

Citing the connection between education level and health over a lifetime, as well as the impact community factors can have on student achievement, this resource highlights opportunities and innovations to assess needs and "root causes" of low student performance typically thought of as outside the LEA's purview. The team conducted a rapid health impact assessment to determine how needs assessments required under ESSA may be leveraged to engage family and community stakeholders for improved health and academic outcomes. The resource includes suggestions for SEAs, LEAs, schools, the U.S. Department of Education, and public health and health care professionals. Examples of innovative SEA needs assessment strategies and partnerships are shared.

Communications and Engagement Assessment Rubric
Reform Support Network
https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/communications-and-engagement-assessment-rubric.pdf

The Reform Support Network developed this communications rubric to help SEAs reflect on their current stakeholder communications and engagement efforts and take tangible steps forward to improve their work. The rubric is divided into five sections, with each section representing a strategic focus area surrounding communications and engagement, including a specific section on audience-specific messaging and engagement.

State Facilitator's Guide for the Reform Support Network Communications and Engagement Assessment Rubric
Reform Support Network

https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/state-facilitators-communications-engagement-assessment-rubric.pdf

This facilitator's guide is meant to serve as a companion to the Reform Support Network's *Communications and Engagement Assessment Rubric*. When used together, these two tools are intended to help SEA leaders conduct a structured self-assessment with SEA staff and key stakeholders of current communications and engagement methods related to a particular initiative or topic and to encourage discussion about new approaches and strategies that could be used to enhance the effectiveness of existing efforts.

Illinois 5Essentials Survey
University of Chicago
https://illinois.5-essentials.org/2016/

Developed by the University of Chicago, the 5Essentials Survey gathers input from teachers and students, Grades 4–12, around five factors considered key to school success: effective leadership, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment, and ambitious instruction. This website gathers submissions from schools throughout Illinois and makes available reports on a school's or district's strengths and weaknesses in the aforementioned categories.

Key Policy Letters Signed by the Education Secretary or Deputy Secretary: June 23, 2016
U.S. Department of Education
https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/160622.html

This letter highlights the utility and importance of stakeholder engagement in transitioning to and implementing ESSA. The letter recommends meaningful stakeholder engagement at the beginning of the process, when initial planning is getting started, rather than waiting until a plan is nearing completion. Stakeholder engagement describes multiple groups across the system, professionals, students, and families.

Non-Regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments
U.S. Department of Education
https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseseinvestment.pdf

Non-regulatory guidance developed and disseminated by the U.S. Department of Education in 2016 provides SEAs, LEAs, schools, educators, and partner organizations with information to assist them in selecting and using evidence-based activities, strategies, and interventions, as defined in Title VIII of (ESEA), as amended by ESSA. This guidance contains examples and links to resources, although the U.S. Department of Education does not mandate or prescribe specific practices, models, or activities included in this guidance.

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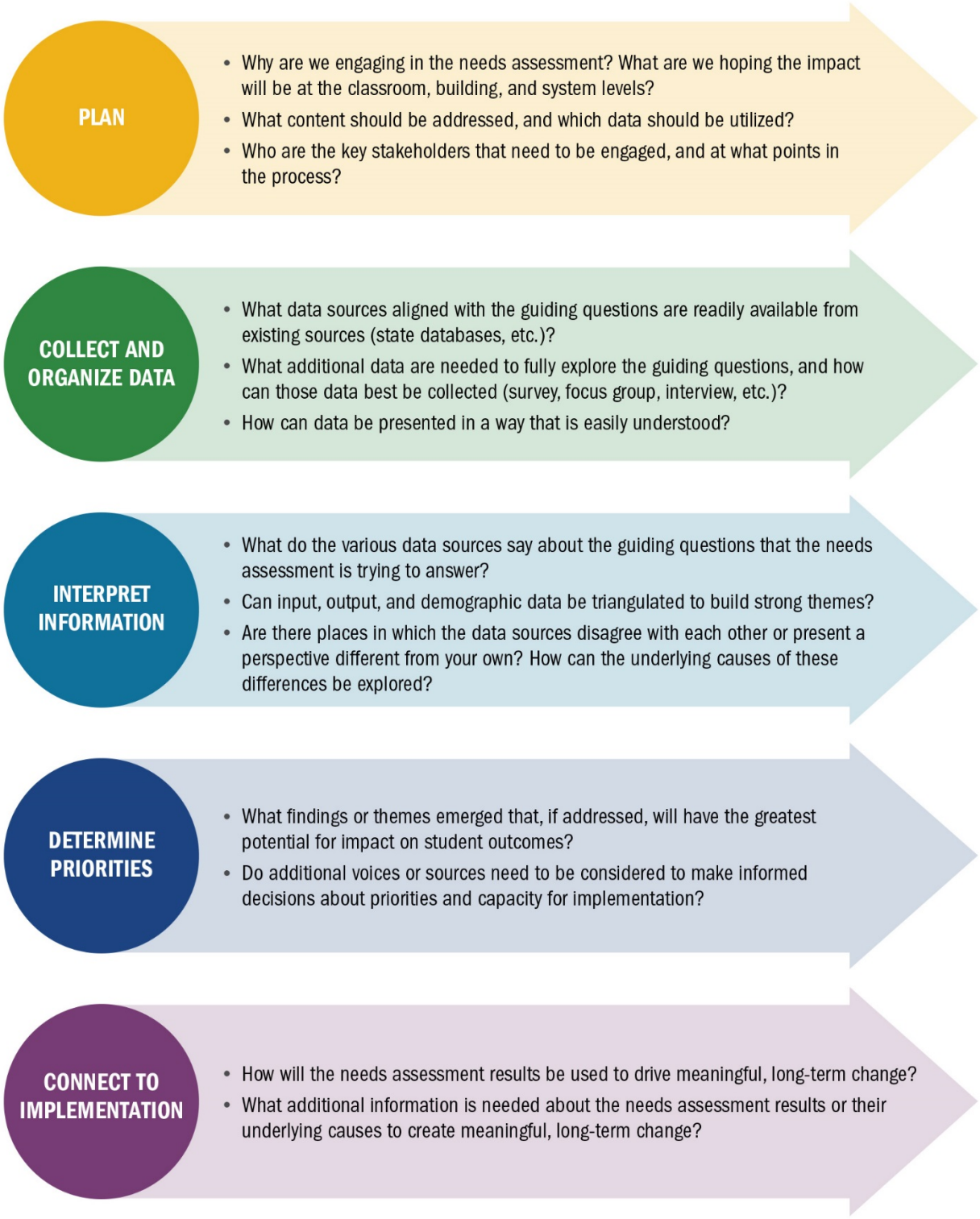
Appendix A. Conducting a Needs Assessment: Quick Reference Guide

Needs assessment is, first and foremost, a *process*—a process that can help education leaders successfully address education challenges. An effective needs assessment process helps local stakeholders and system leaders understand how the pieces of a complex educational system interact, uncovering strengths and challenges that will inform growth and improvement. This appendix provides a two-page *Quick Reference Guide* to summarize the main elements of the needs assessment framework presented in this guidebook.

Elements of a Successful Needs Assessment

The process of conducting a needs assessment can help articulate successes, challenges, and priorities for improvement, knowledge that supports the successful selection, and implementation of strategies that will help all students succeed. A successful needs assessment will accomplish three critical objectives: be reflective of research, meaningfully engage stakeholders, and emphasize the ***process*** as much as the end ***product***. The *Needs Assessment Guidebook* examines what research and State Support Network experience working with states suggest is essential to a successful needs assessment and organizes those core concepts into four elements:

Phases of Implementation

The elements of a successful needs assessment provide a structure for what a needs assessment should include. The theory presented in the elements is made actionable through five distinct implementation phases of the needs assessment process, as illustrated below.