Comprehensive Needs Assessments

*Prepared by SwailLandis for the Virginia Department of Education — May 2023*

What is a Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA)?

A Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) is the initial component in Virginia's Continuous School Improvement Planning Process (VaCSIP). It is used to identify the needs and performance challenges in a school and/or district, determine root causes for these issues, and set priorities for future action (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.; Vermont Agency of Education, 2020). When complete, the school or district will have created specific priority areas to leverage change and improve teaching and learning. A needs assessment focuses on the ends rather than the means using available data to determine the priorities and criteria for potential solutions (Office of Migrant Education, 2001). Exhibit 1 below illustrates how the CNA fits in to the VaCSIP process. Exhibit 2 illustrates the five phases of the CNA process.

Exhibit 1. Virginia's Continuous School Improvement Planning (VaCSIP) (Office of School Quality, 2022).

Exhibit 2. The CNA Process (Office of School Quality, 2022).
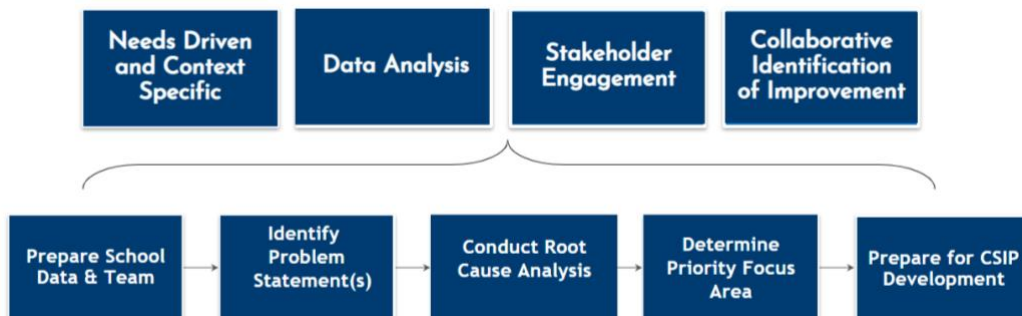
Why is a CNA Important?

The CNA helps foster a "deep and common understanding of the performance" of public education systems (Hawaii State Department of Education, 1999, p. 7). The CNA provides schools an objective, clear view of strengths, areas of development, challenges, and successes. For districts, it provides a clear picture of the quality of education in schools and identifies the needs and strategies required to improve student outcomes. For stakeholders, the CNA serves as a development tool for change in the continuous improvement process (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.-a).

The Comprehensive Needs Assessment provides a framework which:

- provides districts and schools with a clear view of their strengths, areas for improvement, challenges, and successes;
- enables a systematic review of practices, processes, and systems within a school district;
- assists district and school leadership in determining needs, examining their nature and causes, and setting priorities for future action;
- guides the development of a meaningful district or school plan and suggests benchmarks for evaluation; and
- is a cornerstone of continuous improvement, ensuring the best possible outcomes for all students. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.-a)

In addition, the Virginia State Code specifies the use of the CNA:

> *In accordance with the Standards of Quality at § 22.1-253.13:6 C of the Code of Virginia, all schools shall develop a comprehensive, unified, long-range plan. To develop such plans, schools shall conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, in collaboration with their school division staff, to identify needed actions to ensure continuous improvement for their students. Results of the comprehensive needs assessment shall be used to develop a multi-year improvement plan, which shall be a component of the school's comprehensive, unified, long-range plan. (Code of Virginia, 2018)*

Challenges, Barriers, and Successes for the CNA

The CNA can be a challenging exercise for schools and districts. While there are many guidebooks and directives to help work through a CNA, it is worth identifying some of the challenges, barriers, and ways to tackle these issues to create a seamless process. Bryk et al. (2015) identified six core principles of improvement that should be considered when conducting a needs assessment:

1. **Make the work problem-specific and user-centered.** It starts with a single question: "What specifically is the problem we are trying to solve?" It enlivens a co-development orientation: engage key participants early and often.
2. **Variation in performance is the core problem to address.** The critical issue is not what works, but rather what works, for whom and under what set of conditions. Aim to advance efficacy reliably at scale.

3. **See the system that produces the current outcomes.** It is hard to improve what you do not fully understand. Go and see how local conditions shape work processes. Make your hypotheses for change public and clear.

4. **We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure.** Embed measures of key outcomes and processes to track if change is an improvement. We intervene in complex organizations. Anticipate unintended consequences and measure these too.

5. **Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry.** Engage rapid cycles of Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) to *learn fast*, *fail fast*, and *improve quickly*. That failures may occur is not the problem; that we fail to learn from them is.

6. **Accelerate improvements through networked communities.** Embrace the wisdom of crowds. We can accomplish more together than even the best of us can accomplish alone. (Bryk et al., 2015)

Put differently, Bryk et al.'s (2015) challenges in conducting a needs assessment include vague and opaque problems/challenges; variation in performance; poor measurement and analysis; lack of systemic thinking; and weak learning networks. Some considerations to be considered by the CNA team to leverage success may include:

- Identification of "high-quality" people to serve on the CNA team, including consideration of professional, interpersonal skills, integrity, and knowledge;
- Adequate training for team members about the CNA;
- Procedures that take into consideration of feedback from all participants;
- Collection of useful and accurate evidence;
- Objective and impartial review and analysis;
- Clear and direct communication during the process and in reporting; and
- Confidentiality and sensitivity. (Adapted from (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

A major challenge for a successful CNA is the implementation of the plan's actions and strategies as required in the VaCSIP. School and district teams can conduct a successful CNA only to have challenges during the implementation phase. As Metz et al. (2020) note:

> *We can continue to research and develop evidence-informed practices, programs and policies, and implementation theories, frameworks, strategies and tools, but until we get better at applying them in practice, outcomes will not improve.*
> *(Metz et al., 2020, p. 3)*

Considerations for the CNA Team

The key stakeholders in the CNA process include principals, teachers, students, parents, and a review team (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018). The South Dakota Department of Education uses the following table to help identify key team stakeholders.

Exhibit 3. CNA Team Stakeholders (South Dakota Department of Education, 2022).

Team Role	Description	Name(s)
Team leader(s)	To be determined by principal and facilitator	
Data resource person(s)	Facilitator and designated staff with data expertise. Someone who is good with gathering, aggregating, and presenting data.	
Core content expert(s)	Suggested participants: Teacher, literacy or math coach, department chair	
Other area content experts	Suggested applicable participants: SPED, EL, family engagement, CTE, instructional coaches, social worker, district-level directors, etc.	

Why Bother with Stakeholders?

"We would never have known about ..." is a common response when education coordinators are asked what they learned from their stakeholders during planning. Regardless of how well educators think they know their audience, listening to stakeholders is an important task during the planning and needs assessment stage.

In one program, the overlooked stakeholder was the office director. That program ran into real problems when the office director revealed concerns over the focus of the program. In another example, the educator forgot to ask the teachers who the program had planned to train, how or if the topic might fit into the science standards of that grade level. Needless to say, teachers weren't as excited about the program as the planner thought they'd be!

And what are stakeholders asked? Some are asked questions as simple as, "What do you think about this idea?" For major projects, however, stakeholder input is much more vital and therefore more formalized. The bottom line is, as one educator put it, "We'd have made a lot more mistakes if we hadn't talked with the people who have a reason to care about the program." (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2009)

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2021) listed the following Code of Conduct for people serving on the CNA Team:

- Evaluate objectively and impartially;
- Report honestly, accurately, and fairly, ensuring that my evaluations and judgments accurately and reliably reflect the school's work;
- Work with integrity, treating everyone with courtesy and respect;
- Do all I can to minimize stress, not over-observe staff or demand unreasonable amounts of paperwork;

- Act with the best interests and well-being of students and staff;
- Communicate clearly, frankly, and sensitively in order to ensure understanding between the review team and the school and support the school to improve and develop practice;
- Listen respectfully to the evidence presented by the school and within the team;
- Respect the confidentiality of information;
- Work to deadlines and time scales;
- Undertake regular training and development as required;
- Accept and comply with the NCDPI's monitoring and quality assurance policy; and
- Uphold the professional standards and quality of the NCDPI. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021, p. 21)

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.

(Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018, p. 1)

Considerations for Data

Data is at the foundation of a successful needs assessment. However, the identification, collection, and analysis of data may be daunting for CNA team members and school/district staff. Some of the core pieces for consideration include:

- **Demographic data**, including enrollment rates, retention rates, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, income, graduation and dropout rates;
- **Student Outcomes data**, including results of state and local assessments, curriculum-based measures, demonstrations of proficiency, formative measures, behavior and social emotional health;
- **School Process data**, including measures of instructional practices, continuous improvement, curriculum alignment, professional learning, staff evaluation, resource availability, technology integration and program effectiveness; and
- **Perceptions data**, including climates surveys, communication data, parent and community involvement data and focus groups. *(Vermont Agency of Education, 2020, p. 4)*

Some of the challenges of the data piece includes using old/dated data or inaccurate data; lack of preparation of the data for analysis; and lack of alignment with the rubrics and other elements of the CNA (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). Exhibit 4 outlines potential data sources.

SOURCES FOR DATA IMPROVEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

Data Wise Improvement Process. An eight-step model created by Harvard Graduate School that guides teams of educators from schools or systems in working collaboratively to improve teaching and learning through evidence-based analysis. Courses are available for individuals and teams (free and cost).

A Practical Framework for Building a Data-Driven District or School. This White Paper describes a research-grounded model for data use based on three critical factors: data quality, data capacity, and data culture.

School Reform Initiative Data Protocols. This worksheet by LAUSD helps teams think through various aspects of strengths and problems of practice.

Exhibit 4. CNA Data sources by Component (South Dakota Department of Education, 2022)

Component	Existing Data Sources	Created Data Sources
Effective Leadership	☐ Walkthroughs and evaluations ☐ Leadership team meeting agendas and minutes ☐ Other agendas/minutes and documents ☐ Operational resources: budgets, staffing, time management ☐ Agendas of in-service/professional days ☐ Behavior/discipline procedure documents ☐ Supervision plans ☐ Safety/emergency plans	☐ Principal interview ☐ Teacher survey ☐ Non-certified staff survey ☐ Teacher focus group discussion ☐ Parent/family survey ☐ Student survey
Curriculum and Instruction	☐ Lesson plans ☐ PD plan/agendas/schedule ☐ Curriculum documents, pacing guides, curriculum review guides and other comparable documents	☐ Teacher survey ☐ Student survey ☐ Teacher observation
Talent Development	☐ Professional development plan ☐ Professional development plan meeting agendas	☐ Principal interview ☐ Teacher survey ☐ Non-certified staff survey
Family, School Culture, and Climate	☐ Family-friendly walkthrough results ☐ Family-friendly walkthrough implementation report ☐ School/family communications ☐ Community partnership data sources ☐ Professional development plan and schedule ☐ Professional development plan meeting agendas ☐ Behavior discipline data ☐ Behavior/discipline procedure documents ☐ Translated communications	☐ Teacher survey ☐ Non-certified staff survey ☐ Student survey ☐ Parent/family survey ☐ Student behaviors observation

SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING ON COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Comprehensive Needs Assessment Framework and Process. South Dakota's CNA handbook (2022). Provides excellent templates for use by CNA teams.

Needs Assessment Guidebook: Supporting the Development of District and School Needs Assessments (2018). This guidebook, produced by the State Support Network (American Institutes for Research (AIR)) under contract to the US Department of Education, provides a thorough review of the needs assessment process with guiding questions for each section.

NCDPI Comprehensive Needs Assessment: Notes of Guidance for the State, Districts, and Reviewers (2021). This guidebook provides an overview of the principles of the CNA, and information and forms to support school-level and district-level CNAs, including rubrics and other miscellaneous forms.

Comprehensive Needs Assessment Toolkit: A Resource for Vermont Schools and School Systems Engaged in the First Phase of Continuous Improvement Planning (2020). This comprehensive toolkit was assembled to support schools and school systems engaged in the comprehensive needs assessment process complete with worksheets and other useful exercises.

Migrant Education Program: Comprehensive Needs Assessment Toolkit (2018). This is one of the most comprehensive CNA packages available. Funded by the US Department of Education, this toolkit provides extremely detailed and userfriendly information complete with checklists and templates.

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