Purpose: This worksheet is intended to help planners gain insight into identified high-priority needs. The goal is to fully understand the root causes (or contributing causes) of the needs. By clearly understanding the problem first can make problem solving much more effective. This step of the planning process should result in clear identification of major causes, but also important strengths currently exhibited related to needs.

Directions: Screen high-priority needs against the Guiding Questions. Guiding Questions are intended to provoke thought about the cause and effect relationship among the identified needs and the schooling or education factors affecting it. Following this process promotes thoughtful reflection. It also may result in even more questions. But by asking these thoughtful questions about each component of the system should ultimately lead to actions that will better align the total system to support improvement efforts. The questions should also bring insight into possible negative consequences or unproductive actions. They should help identify the possible implications of making changes in one component and the interactions and consequences of those changes on the other components of the system.

Generating more, specific questions related to each major cause areas is encouraged. This is the time to survey the current situation in the district and schools related to change and improvement. It is also the time to think about how best to ensure that actions included in improvement plans are designed to overcome current and past barriers and to better ensure the success of change initiatives.

If ___________________ is a high priority need, Then, the root and/or contributing causes that may underlie the situation could be related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and/or organizational processes.
**CURRICULUM**

**Curriculum** is the particular course or plan of study in a school. It consists of learning activities and assignments used to achieve course goals or standards. In short, curriculum is the knowledge, skills, understandings, dispositions, etc. students are to acquire through their instructional and extracurricular experiences. As one of the core issues of schooling, a school or district's curriculum poses numerous challenges to school leaders, from aligning the curriculum with standards to sequencing the curriculum across individual grade levels.

**Standards** refer to academic standards as a central focus of educational planning. Whether motivated by the national standards conversation, the reality of state-level accountability requirements, or a desire to more clearly identify what students should learn, school leaders and teachers in almost every school district across the country are grappling with the implications of adopting standards. Many schools and districts are undertaking a number of initiatives related to standards, from developing school- or district-level standards to implementing them in the classroom. But regardless of where they are in the process, school leaders are beginning to see that standards have widespread implications for their school systems.

**Guiding Questions**

- **What elements of CURRICULUM are currently productive in meeting the need?**
- **What elements of CURRICULUM are currently contributing to the need?**
- **OR What elements of CURRICULUM are obstacles to our meeting this need?**
- • What does our situation suggest in terms of the appropriateness of learning expectations?
  • • Are our learning expectations clear for all student groups?
  • • What does this situation suggest in terms of the meaningfulness and level of challenge of learning expectations for all student groups?
  • • Are students provided with adequate opportunity to learn by carefully paced curriculum expectations?
  • • Is the situation caused by the current curriculum being poorly integrated or not relevant to students’ needs?
- • Does the curriculum reflect rational, logical sequence from simple or basic to more complex?
  • • Is the curriculum organized to respect students’ developmental levels and prior knowledge and learning experiences?
  • • Is the curriculum scope well articulated to avoid redundancy and gaps in student learning?
  • • Does the curriculum content reflect appropriately integrated learning expectations coordinated across various disciplines?
  • • Do the curricular and extracurricular offerings offer all students multiple opportunities to acquire and demonstrate prioritized (or targeted) knowledge and skills?
- • Is the situation caused by the current curriculum being poorly aligned with assessments and instruction?
  • • Are students provided with adequate opportunity to learn higher-level thinking skills (or workplace skills, learning to learn skills, multicultural perspectives, or skills of productive citizenship, etc.)?
  • • Is the situation caused by in appropriate or inadequate curriculum materials and resources including technology?
  • • Are teachers supportive of the curriculum?
Related to our need and to CURRICULUM,
What are our major Strengths?

What are our major Challenges?
INSTRUCTION

**Instruction** involves teachers' decisions about what strategies to use when delivering the curriculum. In short, curriculum is the "what" and instruction is the "how." There is now a large body of research that demonstrates what parents and students have long known: Good teaching is essential to student achievement. Conversely, ineffective teaching can undo even the most thoughtfully planned curriculum.

Leaders of schools that have improved student achievement on standards-based assessments note that it is critical to focus on instruction. Even accomplished, veteran teachers can improve and expand their range of teaching techniques. Carefully examining the way curriculum is delivered in the classroom never fails to pay off. Thus, it is crucial for school leaders to work with teachers to examine the instructional strategies that teachers use in the classroom. There are many challenges related to adapting instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students.

**Guiding Questions**

What elements of **INSTRUCTION** are currently productive in meeting the need?

What elements of **INSTRUCTION** are currently contributing to the need?

OR What elements of **INSTRUCTION** are obstacles to our meeting this need?

• What are the implications of this situation for how students learn?

• What does this situation suggest about teachers' instructional methods?

• What does this situation suggest in terms of high-quality teachers who exhibit in-depth knowledge of content, pedagogy, and students?

• What does this situation suggest in terms of the consistency and quality of planning across subjects, grade levels, teachers, and student groups?
  • Are teachers committed to horizontal team planning participating and contributing willingly and eagerly?
  • Are teachers committed to vertical team planning participating and contributing willingly and eagerly?
  • Is the quality of team planning and decision-making consistently high across all grades and subjects?

• Is the situation caused by the lack of a common instructional design that is highly effective and can be adapted to meet the needs of individuals and groups?

• Do all student groups experience high-quality teaching strategies and learning opportunities?
  • Are students highly engaged in learning activities, making contributions, asking questions, participating in discussions, and using technology to learn?
  • Are teachers acting in ways to ensure student success by providing timely, substantive feedback, differentiated instruction, and persistently searching for approaches to meet student needs?
  • Is the quality of instruction consistent across subjects, grade levels, teachers, and student groups?

• Is the situation caused by teachers’ inability or unwillingness to incorporate research-based strategies shown to be highly effective with the students they teach?
- Are teachers supportive of advocated, research-based instructional practice?
- Are teachers engaged in and enthusiastic about sharing results of improved teaching techniques with colleagues?

- Is the situation caused by classroom environments that are not conducive to productive learning marked by excessive student disruptions?
  - Are teacher to student interactions respectful, appropriate, and reflect high expectations for learning?
  - Are classroom procedures, physical space, student behavior and contributions supportive of a challenging and dynamic environment?
  - Is the quality of classroom learning environments consistent across subjects, grade levels, teachers, and student groups?

- Are students provided with adequate opportunity to learn higher-level thinking skills (or workplace skills, or skills of productive citizenship, etc.)?

**Related to our need and INSTRUCTION,**

*What are our major Strengths?*

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*What are our major Challenges?*
ASSESSMENT

Assessment generally refers to the methods used to measure students' knowledge and skills. Assessment can take many forms, from traditional forced-choice or fill-in-the-blank assessments to essay questions, performance tasks, and portfolios. Assessment in all its forms provides critical feedback to teachers, students, and parents about students' individual and group academic progress. These results can then provide guidance for improving classroom instruction and for aligning standards, curriculum, and instruction.

As many expects point out, assessment drives instruction. Educators, in general, express the feeling that the assessments or "tests" are driving teaching and learning in the wrong direction. Research is suggesting that assessments become the models of what students should know and be able to do, then they would provide opportunities for students to become proficient in applying knowledge and higher level thinking to real-world examples.

Guiding Questions

What elements of ASSESSMENT are currently productive in meeting the need?

What elements of ASSESSMENT are currently contributing to the need?
OR What elements of ASSESSMENT are obstacles to our meeting this need?

• What are the implications of this situation for how student progress is assessed?
  • Are common assessments established and used at designated points to reliably determine student progress on curriculum learning expectations?
  • Are assessments aligned with curriculum, instruction practice and standardized assessments?

• Is the situation caused by the teachers' limited knowledge of assessment methodology?
  • Do teachers' classroom assessments help students prepare for statewide tests?
  • Are assessment types, conditions, and methodologies effective in promoting student performance on learning expectations for all student groups?
  • Do assessments range from traditional (requiring students to primarily recall information) to alternative (requiring the use of higher level thinking skills and application of knowledge)?
  • To what extent are teachers able to design effective classroom assessments?
  • Is the quality of assessment methodology consistent across subjects, grade levels, teachers, and student groups?

• What are the implications of this situation related to performance criteria?
  • Are performance criteria and standards clear, communicated to students, and appropriate for individual students and group needs?
  • Are assessments structured for student success by incorporating additional opportunities for students to improve results?

• Is the situation related to the interpretation of assessment results?
  • Are performances and products evaluated and interpreted consistently by teachers so that important conclusions may be drawn?
  • Are assessment results used in ways that help teachers change their instructional practice?
• Are assessment results communicated to students and parenting adults in understandable form?
  • Is our communication or conferences with parenting adults effective in promoting student progress?

• To what extent is the problem due to the quality of monitoring and feedback?
  • Is student progress monitored on a regular and consistent basis to provide substantive and varied feedback regarding needed improvements?
  • Are assessment results used to gear instruction to student needs and to provide timely remediation, enrichment, acceleration, tutoring, etc.?
  • Are assessment results reported in longitudinal records or portfolios that are accessible to teachers?

• Are students given opportunities to reflect on their learning progress and their abilities as learners through a range of formal and informal assessments?

• Are teachers supportive of advocated assessment practice?

Related to our need and ASSESSMENT,
What are our major Strengths?

What are our major Challenges?
ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES

Organizational processes include the people-related elements, or affective part, of a school and school system. Issues then relate to the attitudes, skills, and behaviors of the people in the system. Possible causes and actions relate to school and district leadership, professional development activities, communication, and the personal relationships among students, teachers, and administrators, as well as the culture these factors collectively create. The resources and structures of the system in which teaching and learning occur are included along with technology, and accountability requirements. Additional considerations relate to the system's external environment (e.g., changing demographics, state mandates) and stakeholders (e.g., parents, community members).

A school’s climate and culture affects the performance of students as well as the performance of educators and other adults. Climate is about the relationships, general attitudes, and perceptions within schools. A school's climate should be optimistic and nurturing, one where everyone believes that all students are capable of learning. The culture of a school can be viewed as its members' collective assumptions about who they are and how the shared work of education is accomplished. The culture of a school is apparent in all aspects of a school, including the principles that drive priorities, the goals that guide interaction, and the celebrations and rituals that mark important milestones.

School leaders greatly influence the climate and culture in a school, an influence that is reflected in the relationships between staff, between students and staff, and even between students. Through their actions and interactions they communicate what is valued and create shared meaning for the daily work within the school. According to Roland Barth, one of the most challenging and important jobs facing an instructional leader is probably that of changing the prevailing culture of a school.

Dr. Barth provides suggestions for the instructional leader as culture builder, they are: to become aware of what that culture is and means, to attend to those subjects that school staff members are afraid to discuss in the open, to have the courage and skill to address the harmful elements of a school's culture rather than become a victim of those harmful elements, to help faculty to constantly look afresh at habitual school practices, to find ways to separate learning and punishment, and to work at creating a healthy school culture that inspires lifelong learning among students and adults.

Guiding Questions
What elements of ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES are currently productive in meeting the need?

What elements of ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES are currently contributing to the need? OR What elements of ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES are obstacles to our meeting this need?

- Is our situation related to the extent to which our Beliefs and Mission are truly shared?
  - Do our Beliefs and Mission result in full commitment and productive day-to-day practices?
  - Do educators make decisions and act in ways consistent with the beliefs and mission?

- Are High Expectations evident in all our school and classes for all student groups?
  - Is the shared vision consistently supported and implemented across subjects, grade levels, teachers, and student groups?
• Are school improvement plans of high-quality, aligned with the vision, and implemented consistently across subjects, grade levels, teachers, and student groups?
• Are educators actively involved in developing school improvement priorities and are fully committed to achieving them?
• Does leadership provide appropriate guidance, adequate resources and support, and protection from distractions to achieve school improvement priorities?
• Do day-to-day practices consistently reflect high expectations?

• What aspects of the **Climate and Culture** promote academic excellence in all student groups?
  • Will current attitudes and skills of students, educators, and stakeholders contribute to successful change?
  • How can we create a school culture that supports continuous improvement?
  • How can school leadership help create a learning community?

• What implications does school and classroom **Learning Environments** have for our situation?
  • Is the learning environment a positive school culture with an academic focus that encourages student academic excellence?
  • Is the learning environment one that is orderly, safe, and secure?
  • Is the learning environment one that fosters a sense of belonging and an acceptance of diversity (of views, opinion, of races, nationalities, of groups)?

**Leadership**

**Effective leadership** is a key component of lasting reform efforts. It is important for educators to understand the concept of leadership and the characteristics of leadership that help create and sustain worthwhile improvement and reform. Experts who have studied leadership and change in business organizations, note that the leadership skills required to facilitate fundamental change (what they call discontinuous change) differ from those required to facilitate the kind of ongoing, step-by-step changes that are familiar to most executive leaders. In light of the systemic reform efforts that so many schools and districts are undertaking, this discussion must be expanded to encompass the role of leadership during periods of transformation.

• In what ways is our **Leadership & Supervision** supportive of successful change and improvement?
  • What leadership support exists to help us implement this initiative in all classrooms for all student groups?
  • Do educators experience collegial and professional relationships allowing them to spend more time and energy on doing what is best for our students rather than non-achievement issues?
  • Do educators feel reinforced and energized by the professional learning that results from the formal teacher evaluation process?
  • Is strong instructional leadership evident with school leaders frequently and regularly in classrooms gathering information and providing reinforcement, suggestions, and support?
  • Is shared responsibility encouraged through strategic organization of horizontal and vertical teaming?
Professional Development

All too often, professional development is conceived as "sit-and-get" training based on "this year's new thing." Information gets presented to teachers in hopes that they will become motivated to change their classroom practice. The National Staff Development Council notes that professional development should include ongoing learning experiences and other processes such as training, study groups, book talks, action research, collaborative planning, examination of student work, and peer coaching.

Time and money for quality professional development for all staff members are huge issues for school leaders nationwide. But the biggest challenge for school leaders may be to change perceptions about professional development and establish new structures and cultures in schools to use staff development time well. Another challenge is learning how to link staff development with student learning results.

Guiding Questions

• Is our Professional Development focused on appropriate priorities and designed to support long term improvements?
  • Have professional development opportunities for administrators, teachers, and educational assistants been designed as complimentary components of this initiative?
  • How can we create a school culture that supports more intensive professional development?
  • How can we more efficiently use student assessment data from both large-scale and classroom assessments to guide staff development?
  • Are teachers involved in designing and delivering meaningful and learning focused professional development activities?
  • Is the level of professional learning consistent and high across all grades, subjects, and teacher groups?
  • Are the opportunities for professional development equitable in terms of quality and intensity across all adult groups (teachers, support staff, administrators, etc.)?
  • Are educators building leadership capacity (i.e., hiring, training, and retaining high-quality educators) to ensure long term change?
  • Are novice teachers supported by an effective mentoring program, graduated induction priorities, and minimal negative circumstances while learning to teach?

• What implications does the way Time is allocated and used have for this situation?
  • Is instructional time (schoolwide and in classrooms) protected so that maximum time is available for instruction?
  • Is instructional time allocated effectively for appropriate instructional purposes for all student groups?
  • Is instructional time used effectively and appropriately for all student groups?

• Are Learning Supports in place to encourage increased learning for each student group?
  • Are we designing activities within and outside the school day that will bring students to grade level performance?
  • Have we thought about how, when, and how often remediation activities will be delivered?
  • Do we have adequate “safety nets” for all students in all groups?
  • Are educators provided with extra support necessary for high needs students to achieve school success?
• Are attitudes of teachers providing support and of students receiving support consistent with success expectations and beliefs that all students can learn?
• Are the support activities fully integrated with the regular curriculum and assessment programs so that learning expectations may be achieved?
• Are the support activities flexible in meeting student learning needs in timely and appropriate ways?
• Do parenting adults promote high expectations and support in-home learning opportunities?
• Is support for curricular programs exhibited equally by parenting adults of all student groups?
• Is flexibility and accommodation shown in decisions about staffing, space, resources, etc. regarding the learning needs of specific student groups?

Communication
Communication is internal and external. Open communication channels are essential when implementing any kind of change. A well-conceived, proactive communication plan that provides ample time for dialogue can put school leaders in a better position to make good decisions. Effective communication becomes even more important during a substantive change effort. During such efforts, most communications will be aimed at (1) mobilizing and focusing the time and energy of everyone within the school, and (2) developing and maintaining positive relationships and information flow to external stakeholders and resource providers. Communication involves more than distributing information. Equal attention should be given to receiving accurate information. The phrase "gathering intelligence" is a reminder that listening is an important part of intelligent decision making. An accurate reading of the situation is essential to selecting the most viable alternatives.

Guiding Questions
• How are current Internal Communication processes helping teachers learn from one another?
  • Are we effective in communicating progress to our educators and students?
  • Are internal communication processes helping us meet accountability demands?
  • Is two-way communication within the school and with parents and community evident and effective?
  • Are curriculum expectations appropriately communicated to students, parenting adults and community members?

• Related to Governance, how can we make decisions that will positively impact the learning of all student groups related to this initiative? Who should be involved? What processes will be used?
  • Are educator teams organized with clear roles and responsibilities to ensure productive team performance and support to guarantee that all members contribute equitably?
  • Do teams exhibit open communication, professional risk taking, collaborative decision making, and progress on improvement priorities?
  • Do school personnel work effectively as teams exhibiting supportive relationships and high quality outcomes?
  • Are decisions and solutions to problems developed collaboratively with input of appropriate personnel and stakeholders?
  • Do school personnel work effectively as teams exhibiting commitment to decisions and solutions generated?
Resources & Resource Allocation

The strategic use of resources is critical and often requires a systematic restructuring of virtually every aspect of school operations with an eye toward enhancing student learning and improving student achievement. After all existing resources have been identified, including local, state and federal funds; staff expertise; staffing patterns; time use and availability; school schedules; and technical assistance resources in the community and state. Keeping a clear focus on the district's beliefs and mission, educators should then allocate resources where they will have the greatest impact. This may require making difficult decisions, such as eliminating programs or practices that do not contribute to student learning.

Districts need to maximize their instructional resources through innovative scheduling, investments in ongoing professional development, and training for new teachers in order for school reform to be successful. They need to seek outside support, capitalize on increased flexibility in the use of federal and state grants, and cultivate support from the community in the form of dollars, expertise, and in-kind materials and services.

Guiding Questions

• What does this situation imply about adequate and appropriate Resources to ensure the success of change?
  • How can we better use resources to help us meet accountability requirements and be successful with this initiative?
  • Are appropriate and adequate curriculum materials (basic and supplemental, events, programs, and technology) available to address the learning priorities for all student groups?
  • Are financial resources adequate to achieve target priorities for all student groups?

• Related to Resource Allocation, to what extent does the way we allocate our most valuable resource, time, help us meet accountability demands and experience success with change and improvement?
  • Are available human resources allocated and used in the most effective ways to contribute to earning priorities for all student groups?
  • Do decisions about resources equitably support the learning of all student groups?
  • Are all resources coordinated to promote maximum progress on learning priorities?

• In regard to Facilities, what structure and size of classrooms in the school will best help us meet the needs of all students?
  • Is space allocated and used in the most effective ways to contribute to learning priorities for all student groups?

• What Technology is available and accessible to help us succeed with any initiative?
  • How can technology best be used to support instruction, curriculum, assessment, and organizational processes?

• How can Policies regarding attendance and tardiness, discipline, homework and grading encourage the success of all student groups?
  • Do policies and practices support academic learning and motivation and ensure a seamless and successful transition for students?
Partnerships

Schools need to establish and maintain productive partnerships with all stakeholder groups. A stakeholder is any individual or group that can affect or is affected by an organization's achievement of its purpose and goals. As such, stakeholders in school systems may include teachers, parents, students, school board members, and community members. All too often, stakeholders tend to resist change while demanding improvement. They can make it almost impossible for school reform to succeed unless leaders are aware of the many pressures at work. As Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) note resistance to change can also be a powerful source of learning. Educators need to know the perspective of the resisters and thus gain opportunities for learning. School and school system success is ultimately based on its ability to create common purpose and take focused, concentrated action with their partners.

Guiding Questions
• What are the implications of Partnerships (e.g., with parents, community members, community agencies and businesses as well as university personnel) with this situation?
  • How can we engage parents, community members, community agencies and businesses as well as university personnel to ensure the success or our initiative?
  • What is the level of understand about the importance of our change efforts?
  • Is the level of partnership activity adequate to result in benefits for student learning?
  • Do collaboratively developed partnerships with community members, agencies, businesses, and universities result in reciprocal opportunities, benefits, and learning?

Accountability

One of the most frequently used terms in education today is accountability. Today, accountability is placing demands on school leaders and holding them responsible to raise student achievement - usually as measured on statewide or district assessments. High-stakes testing and tough accountability measures have prompted concerns about narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and intensification of educators' workloads. It is worth noting that a common trait of nine high-poverty, high-performing schools studied by the Charles A. Dana Center (1999) is that they tend to operate under strong district accountability measures accompanied by district support and some degree of flexibility. In other words, well-conceived accountability systems can be a stimulus to change.

Guiding Questions
• How does our school and school system Accountability system provide teachers with adequate incentives to ensure success?
  • Are we effective in ensuring that accountability requirements do not have negative effects on school climate?
  • Is school leadership playing a positive role in responding to accountability requirements?
  • Are accountability and monitoring practices focused on advancing student learning and implemented consistently and fairly?
  • Are all educators and employees clear about their roles and responsibilities for promoting student learning?
  • Are evaluation activities designed to focus on student learning for all student groups, involve appropriate educators, and to adjust practices based on results?
Related to our need and ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES,
What are our major Strengths?

What are our major Challenges?