

Implementation Path Handout

A needs assessment is a *process* of examining data to determine priorities that will inform implementation. A needs assessment is made actionable through five distinct implementation phases of the needs assessment process. An implementation path is a visual representation of how a comprehensive needs assessment will unfold as a project. Generally speaking, it is a visual progression or timeline of events, albeit without times or dates attached.

This handout is based on materials developed for Scaling Needs Assessment Learning Cycle 3, where the community of practice for Scaling Needs Assessments discussed the purpose, desired outcomes, and an implementation pathway for comprehensive needs assessment with phases and milestones.

Needs Assessment as a Project

To define the progress of a needs assessment project and the types of activities to engage in as the project matures, we invoke terms from project management for work at the SEA level:

- **Initiate.** Define the project scope and purpose. Determine that a needs assessment will happen and the desired outcomes.
- **Plan.** Develop or formalize all the details necessary for the project to be a success. Develop tools, timelines, communications, and training for those who will carry out the project.
- **Execute.** Deliver on the project objectives. **NOTE:** This happens at the local level.
- **Control.** Monitor and support project implementation. Controlling should happen throughout the project and is the internal improvement effort of the project. For the needs assessment, this may mean piloting or lessons learned from one year of implementation to the other.
- **Close.** Complete the project. Although the needs assessment will be an annual project for more than one year, each year the project ends in order for the next year and next cycle to begin.

Phases of a Needs Assessment

The actual phases of a needs assessment take place at the local level (though there is overlap with SEA responsibilities). Those phases fall within the “**execute**” phase of project management at the SEA level. Each phase is based on research and Network experience working with states suggesting activities essential to a successful needs assessment.

- **Plan.** Articulate the purpose and intended outcomes. Determine central guiding questions that the needs assessment should address. Identify relevant stakeholders. Define your content, process, and presentation.
- **Collect and organize data.** Organize readily available data from existing sources. Determine and collect additional needed data. Decide on presentation of data.
- **Interpret information.** Uncover what individual data sources say about guiding questions. Crystalize themes. Investigate areas of stakeholder disagreement and causes of disagreement. Articulate findings for stakeholders without casting blame.

- **Determine priorities.** Conclude what findings and themes will have the greatest impact (if addressed). Contemplate if there are additional data that should be reviewed.
- **Connect to implementation.** Use results to create meaningful, long-term change. Collect additional information about identified priorities. Investigate root causes of priorities. Reflect on the progress of improvement efforts.

Needs Assessment as a Project

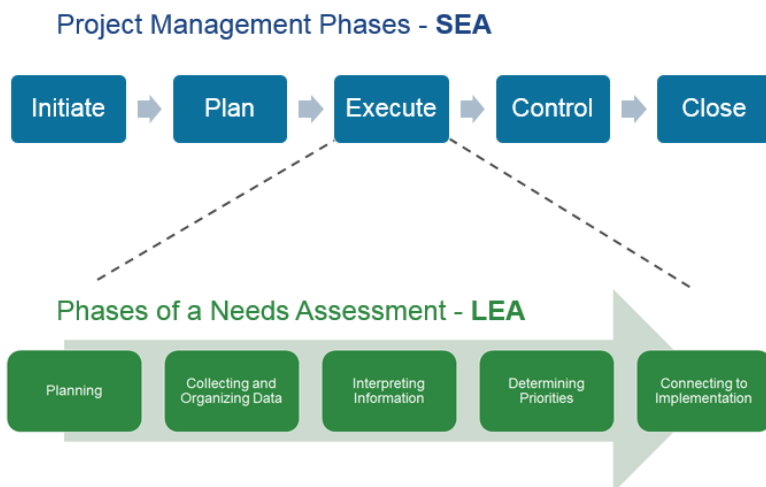


Figure 1. The phases in green are the sub-story that lies within – and forms the largest piece of – the larger statewide project represented in blue.

Sample Implementation Path

Figure 2 is a photo of an implementation path that was created by another state as they planned their needs assessment process. Using a wall chart with sticky notes, rather than an electronic means for brainstorming, allows a group of people to visualize and move ideas around in real time (in real life, this mural was about six or seven feet long). The sticky notes describing activities are placed above or below the implementation line in accordance with where the work is taking place: above the line if it is happening at the local level, and below the line if it is happening at the SEA level (similar to the green and blue distinctions above). The sticky notes form a wave shape: mostly below the line during the planning phase, when most of the work is at the SEA level, shifting to mostly above the line during the execution phase when the majority of the work is at the local level, and then breaking toward the end of the line, illustrating that the work moving forward (connecting to what comes next) happens at all levels.

