

Singular Statewide Needs Assessment Series Transcript

Part 1: What it Takes to Plan a Singular Statewide Needs Assessment

Cary Cuiccio: This is Cary Cuiccio from the State Support Network welcoming you from the opening podcast of our series on developing a singular statewide needs assessment. In this first installment, we will learn from the Arizona and Georgia Departments of Education about why and how they decided to create a single comprehensive needs assessment process to be rolled out statewide. Each state will address how they laid the groundwork for success within the agency, including how they ensured the collaboration and buy-in that were critical to the success of their efforts. We will begin today's conversation with Craig Geers and John Wight from the Georgia Department of Education.

Craig Geers: Good morning, Cary, and thank you for having us. This is Craig Geers speaking, and I'm currently the Associate Superintendent for Federal Programs at the department. I've been here since 2004. I began with Title I, Part C as a program manager, so I have a pretty broad knowledge of the context of federal programs here at the department for quite a long time.

John Wight: Yes, and this is John Wight. I'm the Director of Federal Programs here at the department and I've been here not as long as Craig, but about 10 years. I've worked in curriculum and on the RTI [response to intervention] guidance for the state, and I've been moving up into federal programs. So, I've been here about ten years, and that perspective really has helped; I think both Craig and I see the full capacity of the department. This process also kind of helped us move that along.

Cary Cuiccio: Excellent. So, tell us, why did you decide to do this? Why did Georgia decide to create a single, comprehensive needs assessment process? There are so many states that have been drawn to this approach, but it's really a considerable lift. So, what inspired you?

Craig Geers: Yeah, and I'll start by saying I think our LEAs [local education agencies] inspired us; it really was a message that was coming from the local systems. They were, I don't want to say, getting inundated with requests from us from the various federal programs all saying, "Hey, well you've got to conduct a needs assessment for migrant, or homeless, or this or that." So, our LEAs were really the driving force behind it, probably gosh, what John, three or four years ago?

John Wight: Yeah, right. And I think that they really helped us see that we were, you know we were very siloed in a lot of districts, or a lot of states are, they're very siloed in their work, and that this work helped us identify that we need to not be that way.

The needs assessment was the one little piece that helped us begin to see that quickly. Because we all were asking for a needs assessment, and, depending on the program, it could have been much more intense. Or another program might be very light on it, so the districts, if you're in a district and you're the one person working with 10 federal programs, you're seeing it clearly from the department how inconsistent we were. So, that really helped us see the need, the initial need to pull that together.

Craig Geers: Right, and, Cary, I will say that we were very good about probably doing what all states do and requiring a consolidated application from our districts.

John Wight: Right.

Craig Geers: So, that's been a process that we've had in place as long as it's been required of us. So, I think that single, comprehensive plan was always in place. But where we were, the struggle we were going through, and what we elaborated on, is that we weren't also having a single consolidated needs assessment. We were still saying to the district, "No, you can do the consolidated plan, but you've got to do individual needs assessments per program."

John Wight: Correct. And what's interesting about that is that the questions that were part of that consolidation really were needs assessment questions, so that was a very flat process, and it was a one and done. So, people were completing that, and then we were approving it, so we could roll money out. And then, as the other plans, the other programs, started to dig into the actual work, then they were saying, "Oh, we need to do another needs assessment." So, we were duplicating ourselves initially.

Craig Geers: Right. And I think we also realized when we were reading the responses in the plan that they were submitting to us, they were basically describing the needs assessment process. And so, we kind of came to the realization, why in the world are we reading a long narrative about the description of their needs assessment process? Wouldn't it be easier to have them not have to put it in a narrative, but just show us the needs assessment process? So, that's also, I think, a little bit of decision making that went into this.

John Wight: Right, and, Craig, remember, I'll be honest and say that as the programs were shifting to that, looking at the actual work, then looking at a narrative about the work, that's hard to do.

Craig Geers: It is.

John Wight: Because, when we're so used to seeing a district explain to us how they do it, that's what you, you read that and evaluate it one way. But then when you actually just see what they did, it's another set of skills. You'll be able to see that they hit everything you need, so that's an interesting note that will probably come up later.

Cary Cuiccio: That was John Wight and Craig Geers of the Georgia Department of Education. Next, we'll hear from the Arizona Department of Education. Devon, can you introduce yourself please?

- Devon Isherwood: This is Devon Isherwood, and I'm the Deputy Associate Superintendent for Support and Innovation, which is school improvement for the Arizona Department of Education.
- Cary Cuiccio: Tell us a little bit about why Arizona decided to create this singular statewide needs assessment process. So many states have been drawn to this approach, but it's really a considerable lift.
- Devon Isherwood: Prior to ESSA [Every Student Succeeds Act], we had a joint cross-division committee meeting look at what our expectations from LEAs were, and how we were duplicating and not quite duplicating. So, when ESSA was signed, we had what was called the colorful list. From school improvement we had the seven turnaround principles; from early childhood we had the ECQUIP [Early Childhood Quality Improvement Practices] rubric principles. Every program area had their own version and twist on those principles, and we were just in the process of narrowing those down. The confluence of needs assessment work flows straight from that. We were primed and ready for something like this and very fortunate that the groundwork had already been laid.
- Cary Cuiccio: So, how did you get everyone on board with the idea of doing something that was singular because inevitably this means that some agencies, or some departments, need to give up some little piece of what they used to do.
- Devon Isherwood: We had a lot of discussions in this prior committee, so what we did was we moved all those members into the confluence of [the] needs assessment work group, plus the deputy associates and directors of all program areas. We had a lot of discussions prior to starting the identification of indicators and elements around the why, and what we wanted out of one needs assessment and one integrated action plan based on that needs assessment. It was a group that was fairly open-minded. We had a couple of people that took longer for them to come on board, but as we went through the process they began to see the value in it; the give-and-take was not easy, but it wasn't really difficult because of the open, trusting communication style we had established early on in the process.
- Cary Cuiccio: You know, I like to say that developing a comprehensive needs assessment like this requires an evolution in systems thinking [in] that it masquerades as a brief task. Talk about how long it took you when you began having those discussions about why and what you wanted. Was that just a couple of weeks? Over what period of time did that take place?
- Devon Isherwood: We met weekly. The agency had an ESSA writing team that met weekly, and then my team met right after that. We met for two hours every Wednesday. We were having some of the discussion in the larger group, and then the CNA [comprehensive needs assessment] team stayed an extra two hours and worked together. I would say it probably took four, five meetings to really decide and agree that this was something that would benefit us as the agency and the different program areas working together and knowing what each other was doing at a deeper level, as well as the LEAs and charters out in the field not having to do 16 million needs assessments. I have a slide in my presentation that I've given that's full of the needs assessments we were asking LEAs and schools to do before we

went to this singular process. It was crazy. People couldn't ignore that that was crazy.

Cary Cuiccio: Oh absolutely! Absolutely. And I'm hearing that you spent a good month talking about how to do this well before you identified any indicators or put anything into the system.

Devon Isherwood: Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Cary Cuiccio: Having this introduction of the development of a singular comprehensive needs assessment process has provided some key background about the big picture rationale and what it takes to get the momentum going, a perspective that is so important for states or districts that might be considering taking a similar route. But this is only the beginning of the story of how Georgia and Arizona worked through this enormous undertaking. The next part of our series coming next week will focus on the elements of the planning process, including how the teams were structured, how they worked together, and some important takeaways about timelines. Our podcast series will continue over the next several weeks, including conversations with Arizona and Georgia about needs assessment data, about the process used at the local level for determining priorities and then connecting those priorities to implementation, and about the key role districts can play in the development process. If you have any questions or are interested in learning more, please contact the State Support Network directly on our website at statesupportnetwork.ed.gov. Thanks for joining us!