

Singular Statewide Needs Assessment Series Transcript

Part 4: The Interpretation of Needs Assessment Data

- Cary Cuiccio: Hello, and welcome back to our podcast series on developing a singular statewide needs assessment. This is Cary Cuiccio from the State Support Network. Today, we'll be talking with the Georgia and Arizona teams about the expectations and supports they provided to districts and schools related to the interpretation of needs assessment data at the local level. We'll begin our conversation with Craig Geers and John Wight from the Georgia Department of Education.
- Craig Geers: This is Craig Geers speaking, and I'm currently the Associate Superintendent for Federal Programs at [the Georgia Department of Education].
- John Wight: Yes, and this is John Wight. I'm the Director of Federal Programs here at [the Georgia Department of Education].
- Cary Cuiccio: So, we always say that an effective needs assessment is a process and not a piece of paper, but we know this can be a really difficult expectation to convey from the state level when the needs assessment is going to be carried out at the local level without your direct assistance. And, in some cases, [it] is going to be perceived as a compliance mandate rather than a prompt for some collective conversation or thoughtful action. So, what process did you ask participants to engage in at the local level for interpretation of the data, and how did you convey those expectations?
- Craig Geers: That is a great question and I think you'll see, when you look at our [framework](#), there's an outer green ring.
- John Wight: Yeah, so that is the problem-solving process.
- Craig Geers: Right.
- John Wight: And you'll recognize the data are pulled straight from the U.S. Department of Education guidance on identifying and selecting interventions. And that process is really what we use to talk about how we're going to do [it] and what we're going to do, and we encourage LEAs [local education agencies] to use that process because that process is real life; it's what classroom teachers do at a very quick level. It's what superintendents do at a slower rate because it's operating slowly on a bigger scale. So, really that outer

ring is the how we're going to do it, and the inside system is what we're going to address. It's a matter of what we we're putting a focus on; that's where there were some questions about how to do that, and our training has been to help them see that they're already doing that.

Craig Geers: Right.

John Wight: And this is a formalized way that you can coordinate together. So, that problem-solving process really is the glue that brings people together. Because that's how we do what we do.

Craig Geers: And, for us, it's just making sure that we are continuously messaging that framework and the improvement process that surrounds it.

John Wight: Right, so, for example, as teams come together to support a school system, you know Title III has someone who's in there, [Title] IV-A has someone that's in there, our regional educational agency has someone who's in there. What they're going to do, rather than having four different people hitting the principal, is those people are going to work together through the problem-solving process to identify how they can coordinate their support. That's our goal.

Craig Geers: Our ultimate goal, yeah.

John Wight: Yeah.

Cary Cuiccio: So, how did you ensure that this PDF that you sent out to everyone wasn't just completed by one person sitting alone at their computer?

Craig Geers: Ah, that's a great question. So, if you look at the [PDF](#), the very first piece that they had to fill out was identifying for us their team members. So, it was really asking the LEAs, this isn't a one-person task; this is a comprehensive needs assessment for your entire set of federal programs and your needs. We purposefully made them identify [their team members], and it was a required field. They had to identify folks who were going to be involved as the core team in this process. I mean, we received it; we saw who the team members were. It was a hard adjustment for our districts because several would reach out to us and say they wanted to break the PDF document apart because they needed to give it to somebody to work on that part. And, so, our message was always “No, no; it isn't that you take it apart and you give those pieces to the people who own that.”

John Wight: That you bring people together.

Craig Geers: You bring people together, and you talk about it as a team. And we were, at the DOE [Department of Education] level, we were trying to model that

continuously by showing that we aren't talking to you in silos anymore. Everything we're doing with you is about all of the programs coming together and looking at the work and collaborating in the work together.

John White: Yeah, yeah.

Craig Geers: We aren't quite there yet; it's a challenge in a state like Georgia that has so many rural districts. But you do, honest to God, you have one person in the district office who does it all.

John Wight: Does it all.

Cary Cuiccio: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Craig Geers: You know there are a couple, there were a couple of things that we did to help move that along. So, these fillable PDFs; you know we delivered them to the district. In the past, for federal programs, we would have gone to our federal programs people.

John Wight: Yeah.

Craig Geers: And we purposefully did not do that.

John Wight: Correct.

Craig Geers: We just sent everything to the superintendent. So, then they were charged with kind of looking at their district and they were to pull people together to work through it that way. So, it didn't look like this was a Title I thing, or Title II or Title III. So, that was a purposeful decision, and a byproduct of that was that it then would broadcast out to more people in the district who typically did not have a role in that annual LEA consolidated application, which just kind of resulted in more information going out and some questions coming back from people who really didn't know what this was about, but yet they had been pulled into the work.

John Wight: And, Cary, I mean we're super proud of our districts. We had an opportunity last spring as these PDFs were being rolled out. You know we asked our districts to invite us. Let us come see how you are doing this. So, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend a few of those, and, I mean, the things I witnessed were great. They were doing exactly what we were asking and hoping for with this needs assessment process. They got all those people together who were the team leads, and they were in a room together with all stakeholders having rotating group discussions about it.

Craig Geers: Rotating through the table; writing on the wall.

John Wight: I mean, so it does work if the mind shift can happen.

Craig Geers: Yeah.

John Wight: So, you said all stakeholders [were] in the room. Tell us who you saw. Who were the participants?

Craig Geers: Yeah—parents, principals, teachers, district-level folks, community supports; it was a great room full of all the people you needed to have, and, I mean, we helped facilitate that process by listing in the PDF document...

John Wight: Right, the names.

Craig Geers: The suggested folks that we thought would be appropriate. Now, it's going to depend on the context of the district.

John Wight: Right, and I will say that the districts over the years, they have done a good job in the silos for each of the programs of reaching out to the community agencies, DFCS [Division of Family and Children Services], or foster kids, whatever. All those were already there, but it was great to see them all together in one room, realizing that “Oh, we're connected to other programs.”

Cary Cuiccio: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, as you think back over this part of the work, you know, encouraging people to use this problem-solving process, to bring stakeholders to the table, to have these integrated conversations instead of dividing out sections and handing them off to individuals. What are you most proud of and what would you do differently if you had it to do over?

Craig Geers: I'll reiterate the what we would do differently, and that is ensuring you have LEAs with you through the journey. From the start of the discussions through the building of everything, I think that's what we would do differently.

John Wight: I would default to the fact that the systems framework has brought a common language to the department across programs. It has brought a common language to the LEAs when they're working with the district. With the SEA [state education agency] here, that we're all talking the same way. And, additionally, I think bringing that problem-solving cycle to the forefront as the way we do the work, is, I think, one of the most important things that we've been able to pull out. Helping people see that that is how they can coordinate. And how they can leverage their resources and do whatever they need to do, but through a framework rather than feeling like they're just hitting and missing in random meetings.

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: We always say an effective needs assessment is a process, and it's not a piece of paper that one person sitting alone in a room fills out and sends back. This can also be a difficult expectation to convey from the state level when the needs assessment is carried out at the local level without you there. It's really easy for some districts to interpret this as a compliance mandate, rather than a prompt for some really thoughtful action. How did you address that? What process did you ask participants to engage in? What do you think helped them be successful?

Devon Isherwood: We emphasized that it was a team effort and the discussion, the conversation, the arguments that might occur, that's where the power was. This was not about the end product. It was not about seeing your scores. It was not about getting it done so you get your money. We had to flip the mindset of: "We have this money. I'm going to figure out what I want to spend it on. Then, I'm going to make a plan that supports that. Oh yeah, by the way, there was a needs assessment that we kind of did over here."

We talked very honestly in trainings and at conferences about, as a Title I principal, I did a plan for compliance; I had my own plan that I followed, but that was just to get my money. That's not the way we wanted this to work anymore. We didn't want any more hoops. We wanted it to be real, authentic work that identified root causes that, if changed, would really push their schools forward. We're still sending that message. We're still working in schools in improvement. We did extensive hands-on training where they brought their CNAs [comprehensive needs assessments]; we walked through how they determined their scores, and 100 percent left to redo them because they then understood what they had was not valid information. Too few people had been involved, they hadn't looked at evidence, [and] they made pre-assumptions. For school improvement schools, we had a captive audience, requirements can be more stringent, and now we're moving that out into all the Title I schools [that are] doing more training.

Cary Cuiccio: What kind of expectations did you convey around stakeholder engagement?

Devon Isherwood: We conveyed that they were expected to have family and community, as well as all facets of the school. It didn't happen as often as we would have

liked in our new tool, not as stringent as Georgia's, but we have a dropdown of expectations. They have to put who and what their role was and who they represented, which will be new in the tool. We hope that with extra training and that requirement, we'll get more authentic stakeholder involvement. A lot of our schools had huge meetings; they had parent meetings. They're still learning how not to individually score and average, and *then* have the discussion, but have the discussion and then score with the evidence. That's a process for some.

Cary Cuiccio: Absolutely. I loved your story [in the previous podcast] about the ones that pushed back the hardest are the ones that love it the most because they were the ones that realized what they were missing doing it the old way.

Cary Cuiccio: Do you find that districts talk to each other about this?

Devon
Isherwood: Yes. It's that whole "100th monkey" thing. Once a big district said, "Wow, this is powerful." Then, the rural schools [did] too. You could see that snowball effect. Out of the blue, it's kind of fun because we have a new list of school improvement schools; they don't know what involvement was in it, so they'll be going on and on and on about how it's the best thing that they ever did. It's kind of fun to be listening to that and say, "Wow, we did do a good thing."

Cary Cuiccio: Today's conversation about data interpretation at the local level within a needs assessment process illustrated how this important step is what brings a needs assessment to life. At the local level, it is also the step that launches the conversation about how to move forward with determining priorities and connecting those priorities to appropriate interventions and implementation. Our next episode will focus on how Georgia and Arizona created a process that helped their schools and districts take their needs assessment findings and effectively connect those to an implementation plan. In the meantime, if you have any questions about this series or are interested in learning more, please contact the State Support Network directly on our website at <https://statesupportnetwork.ed.gov/>. Thanks for joining us!