

Singular Statewide Needs Assessment Series Transcript

Part 5: Priorities and Implementation

Cary Cuiccio: Hello. This is Cary Cuiccio from the State Support Network, welcoming you back to our podcast series on developing a singular statewide needs assessment. We know that in order for a needs assessment to drive change, schools and districts must identify a manageable set of priorities out of that process, and then connect those priorities to implementation. Today, we are talking with the Georgia and Arizona teams about the guidance and supports they provided to districts and schools to help them use their needs assessment results to drive meaningful, long-term change. We'll begin the conversation with John Wight and Craig Geers 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: We know that achieving some successful outcomes from an improvement process means that you have to direct your improvement efforts towards a manageable set of priorities. But, I know that, from having done some of these myself, that in the course of the needs assessment discussion, it's likely that unforeseen issues might emerge, but we know you can't focus on 15 things and be successful. You have to whittle those down to a key set of priorities for action. So, what guidance did you provide to the districts on how to do this, or is this something they worked out on their own?

John Wight: To a certain extent, it's something they worked out on their own.

Craig Geers: Right.

John Wight: Our process for the CNA [comprehensive needs assessment] of course had a prioritization. We didn't limit them on how they prioritized or how many they prioritized. They could [have] chosen quite a few things or they could have chosen just one or two things. I think the key element is the progress monitoring of whatever they're doing. And that's in the area where we're

continuing to always see the need to help us learn how to do that as well as districts. But they're [now] beginning to make sure they prioritize the right way, which was the whole data element piece.

Craig Geers: Right.

John Wight: Progress monitoring as a way to monitor the work going forward is really where we are right now; we're trying to figure the best way to continue to make sure that's really happening.

Craig Geers: Yeah, and I'll reemphasize the point that our [PDF](#) tool did guide them through the process for identifying the overarching needs, you know, going back to the root cause analysis. I think we gave them the right tools, so they didn't go too far. But, as John mentioned, we didn't limit the number of focus areas they could hone in on.

John Wight: Right, right. And I think that was just always [making] room for professional development on how to monitor that and progress monitoring.

Cary Cuiccio: Sure.

Craig Geers: We need something, you know, [for] our own professional learning here at the department. I think that this is something that we definitely recommend other states not overlook, making sure that your staff understood the continuous improvement process.

John Wight: Right. And really that difference between ongoing progress monitoring, which is in our framework, is we create the plan, and then we implement the plan, and then we examine the progress. Those are purposefully spread out because, a lot of times, people will unintentionally just wait until the end of something to look rather than seeing that as ongoing. So, that's why we like this problem-solving process because it breaks those out. Breaks those two out separately.

Cary Cuiccio: I want to go back and ask you another question about priorities. I know that within the PDF that you supplied to districts, that the data content was broken out into different categories, and, as you said, some districts wanted to break that apart, so they could hand different sections to different people. When they were going through the prioritization process, were they asked to prioritize by topic? Did you encourage them to cross-reference across issues? How did they go about this, and how did that work out?

Craig Geers: We didn't really provide any specific way that they were to do it. I think they did what met their needs.

John Wight: Right, and when they were identifying the root causes, we gave them specific examples to follow to identify the root cause. But when we did get to prioritization, it was really the group around the table looking at everything and looking at the data saying, “This is where we're going first.”

Craig Geers: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yup.

Cary Cuiccio: Yup. So, how could you tell, when you were looking at the plans that came back to the department, how could you tell if what they selected was in fact the most pressing or meaningful thing for them to be focused on?

Craig Geers: Yeah, good question. Because we did. We saw the CNA [comprehensive needs assessment] PDF, they submitted that right along with their plans, and our teams here intentionally spent time reviewing the results of the CNA, looking over the CNA, the data, what they were determining as priorities, and then looking at the plan. So, you know, occasionally we would see disconnects. We're like, wow, okay, the things that you ultimately came up with weren't necessarily the things we saw reflected in your needs assessment. But, you know, I think we realized early on that's not our place. They were the ones who know their situations the best. I think we wanted to provide recommendations and feedback to them, but we were in no position nor should we be dictating to them, you know, what they determine to be their priorities. So, we provided feedback when we saw those types of things come up.

John Wight: Right, but there wasn't a requirement to change it.

Craig Geers: Right.

John Wight: [We] also pointed the finger back to the SEA [state education agency] that our PD [professional development] and our training of that, you know, we need to see how we're doing that. Because if there's something that we can provide support for, they can do a better job of it.

Cary Cuiccio: So, it really speaks to the interconnection of everyone's efforts here. So, with that in mind, I was thinking about your comments about progress monitoring. What processes did you create or do you envision to ensure some regular opportunities for folks at the district level to reflect on the progress of their improvement efforts? Like, how do you ensure that this isn't one and done?

Craig Geers: Yeah; that's a great question, and, I'll be honest, we don't have a consistent way to do that.

John Wight: I agree. We have different things that we've shared about how, best practices.

- Craig Geers: Right.
- John Wight: Or to take a look at something every couple of weeks, but that is, again, an area that the department can begin to develop more resources for our LEAs [local education agencies] on that because, like Craig's saying, we don't have a formalized process for that.
- Craig Geers: Right. And even from our level, our hopes would be that our teams who are reviewing the plans and the needs assessments could get into the districts and help with progress monitoring and check and see, you know, how are things going? It's been a struggle to build that level of support coming out of the DOE [Department of Education], but we're still working on it and devising our support structure so that we can help districts with the progress monitoring.
- John Wight: Right. You know, we go in to monitor just like all of the other states do. We monitor programs; we're on a four-year cycle for federal programs only. So, we go and we look at it, so we can see how they're taking a look at things. We have a self-monitoring process they can use, but it does need to be coordinated in a better way.
- Cary Cuiccio: So, you mentioned earlier that rather than have folks from different federal programs going in and asking the principal or asking the district folks for something separately, thereby illustrating that the folks at the SEA level weren't talking to each other, are you now working to coordinate progress monitoring in any way, across the different title programs?
- Craig Geers: Yeah, we are, and we don't have it all figured out yet. But we definitely realize what we need to do. And we are trying to put together our support structures. A set of procedures, really.
- John Wight: Right, and it will include these teams that we're referencing; these teams will be part of it; it will be connected to our tiered supports for comprehensive and targeted schools when they're identified. So, we're going to try to align all that together. But Craig brings up the point of the procedures because that is the important thing. Because we can lay it out, how it's going to look, and of course they will all follow the problem-solving process, but there still need to be procedures so people know what that's going to look like. But we don't have that yet.
- Cary Cuiccio: Yeah.
- Craig Geers: Yeah. I think we've been here a long time, John and I, and we realize how important procedures are.
- John Wight: Right.

Craig Geers: Nothing is going to be implemented very well if there aren't clear procedures that everyone is supposed to be following. Written procedures.

John Wight: Right. And shared.

Craig Geers: And shared.

John Wight: [And] provided professional development on because working together is hard work. It's easier to silo, just being honest.

Craig Geers: Yeah, it sure is.

John Wight: But working together is hard work; it's more meaningful. Sometimes, people will, in groups, get together and go through the stages of forming together. They can be a little unintentionally chaotic as they're trying to figure out what they're supposed to do if we don't clearly say, "This is what you're supposed to do."

Craig Geers: And, Cary, I would say one area where we probably made the most progress is for the review teams. For the district plans, we have a pretty standard set of procedures now about who those teams are, and how they operate, and how they interact with the districts in the review of the CNA and the plan. I think that's one area where we have made progress. It's what happens after the plan is approved where we're still developing the procedures.

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: You talked earlier about root cause analysis, and how that was a piece of the expectation, the piece of the process in the new version when you have everything online and the web portal; you're actually going to have the [root-cause analysis fishbone that folks fill out](#). Can you talk about how you set that up as a way that folks connect their priorities then to implementation?

Devon Isherwood: As a result of the CNA, they go through each principle. Principle 1, at the end; they look for trends and things that have popped up, and then they identify primary possible needs. On the summary page, they have all six principles with their possible primary needs. They're required to do three or four of those. The root cause, of course, would then come next in results,

and a needs statement and a desired outcome. It's primary need, root cause, needs statement, desired outcome, and, then, if a SMART goal is appropriate, then the SMART goal would also be there.

Our school improvement schools still need more practice and assistance. [There] will be an emphasis on Title I training as well. It's surprising to me, the number of good administrators that have never seen a [fishbone diagram](#), that have never done a true root cause [analysis]. That's pretty rampant in our state, so that's going to be our focus for this next year prior to transitioning to the new tool.

Cary Cuiccio: How are you going to go about that? I know this is a problem that other states have run into as well, saying, "We've put some instructions out there, but the uptake just wasn't what we expected." How are you addressing that?

Devon
Isherwood: Face-to-face training. We're putting together a webinar, but we don't anticipate that having a major effect. We did face-to-face training with our schools [identified in need of improvement]; we will do it again. Then, we will do regional training open to Title I. For school improvement schools, it was required. For Title I, it won't be required, but it will be highly recommended. The first step in that is going to be to train our specialists in what a root cause analysis is really about. That's a big lift for the rest of the program areas in our agency. That has to happen, and will happen, in the next couple of months. Going into the fall, as we train for the new tool, the root cause will be an integral part of that. Bring your CNA; what's one of your needs? And, with a team of people, walk through the root cause analysis.

Cary Cuiccio: Right; that'll be really helpful.

Cary Cuiccio: You mentioned earlier that you asked them to identify three to four priorities. How could you tell, in the end, that the priorities they selected were, in fact, the ones that seemed most pressing or meaningful? I know that's something other states worry about.

Devon
Isherwood: It's time consuming, and, again, my primary lens is school improvement, so we have a much smaller "n" than Title I. If their needs statement was, "We need a counselor," it's pretty clear that they did a root cause [analysis] to get what they thought they needed. Then, we would back up; we would look at the CNA, talk to them, so it's a lot of conversation. The ones that blatantly didn't do it, you can see pretty easily when you're looking at their integrated action plan, which is derived from the CNA. Then, we, depending on the skill of the specialist, depending on the unit, [determine] how they back up from there, which goes to my training issue that I spoke of that we need to shore up internally.

Cary Cuiccio: Right. The folks who are looking at the integrated action plans need to understand what should have gone into creating one if they were following the process.

Devon
Isherwood: Yes. During this whole process, we had a reorganization at the top, and now we're still filling in at the specialist level. New people added; [a] new person started yesterday. It's all part of our process, our own continuous improvement process.

Cary Cuiccio: So, speaking of continuous improvement process, what processes did you create or do you envision to ensure regular opportunities for these schools to use data to reflect on the progress of their improvement efforts? How do you make sure that this isn't the "one-and-done" kind of thing? Not "I did my plan, it goes on the shelf, I'm done."

Devon
Isherwood: Principals in improvement we quarterly review on our visits; the integrated action plan is the core of what we're looking at to see progress, to see what they might want to abandon, or something that they might want to add, something that they need to tweak. For Title I, Title II, and Title III, they're on cycles. Each cycle looks to makes sure [each process] is moving forward, and, in cycle 4, they look at the whole process. We are looking at that protocol to see how [to] better work with those schools that need more help on a more frequent basis than the cycle now allows.

Cary Cuiccio: What I'm hearing is that it really is an ongoing conversation between you and the schools, between you and the district.

Devon
Isherwood: Absolutely. And every chance we get to make that integrated action plan real, live, in the moment using every minute, we do. We saw in our site visits before, five years ago, that the [district] staff wouldn't even know what the improvement plan was. They now know because they've helped write it. They can speak to it very clearly, and that's a huge shift.

Cary Cuiccio: Today's conversation about using needs assessment results to drive change at the local level provided some key insights into the importance of connecting emergent priorities to improvement plans through root cause analysis – and the importance of connecting plan implementation to a continuous improvement cycle. Our next and final episode in this series will focus on Georgia and Arizona's approach to including district stakeholder input in the development process, and some overall key lessons learned as they reflect upon their progress. We hope you'll tune in to hear more! 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!