Needs Assessment Overview Planning Tool

What Is a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is a collaborative process that identifies and prioritizes the strengths and unmet behavioral health needs of students, families, and the overall system at a school or district level. Once the school team identifies the most significant unmet needs, they can develop an action plan to address the highest priority areas impacting school and student performance. Schools and districts should incorporate needs assessments into their ongoing performance management cycle (Center for Healthy Schools and Communities, 2015).

What Are the Goals of the Needs Assessment?

Every school in Texas is unique; therefore, a school's plan for supporting students' academic success and wellness must be tailored to meet the unique needs of its community. The goal of the behavioral health needs assessment is to understand the needs and strengths of students and the adults who support their development. Another goal of conducting a needs assessment is strengthening the collaboration amongst various stakeholders within the school community. A comprehensive assessment not only gathers information to identify needed services or programs, but also identifies the infrastructure needed to implement new programs and build sustainability.

Conducting a behavioral health needs assessment can also initiate dialogue with key stakeholders and build support for the strategies that will arise from it. The assessment process brings in the critical voices of students, family members, educators, school staff, and community members. Engaging stakeholders from the very beginning helps to create a sense of partnership, shared vision, and collective commitment toward system improvements. Developing a strong school behavioral health system requires the buy-in and commitment of school leaders, educators, staff, students, their families, and community partners. Each of these stakeholder groups must be a part of identifying the assets and needs in the school and informing the priorities for improvement.

Completing the behavioral health needs assessment and developing a plan for strengthening the campus behavioral health system is just the beginning of the assessment process. The needs assessment will also serve to identify areas that can be measured and tracked to determine if unmet needs are being addressed, that programs and services are high quality, and that students are experiencing increased academic, social, and behavioral success. With each update to prior needs assessments, the team will document progress on the improvement plan and adjust goals and action planning toward current areas of improvement.

Needs Assessment Overview

As the team shifts from planning to implementing the needs assessment tools, use the following questions as a guiding framework (Kroos & Crain, 2019):

- Which student needs does our school (or district) address well?
- Who/what contributes to the observed areas of strength?
- What are the current gaps in meeting student behavioral health needs?

- What are the root causes of the gaps?
- What progress has been made since the previous needs assessment (if applicable)?

Which Student Needs Should Be Considered?

Since a student's readiness to learn is impacted by challenges they face both in and out of school, the school mental health team should evaluate the collected data to assess whether students' needs are being met in each of the following areas (Lever et al., 2014):

- Academic needs
- Behavioral health needs
- Esteem
- Intellectual needs
- Basic human needs
- Physical needs
- Love and relationships
- Meaningful life activities

Data Collection and Analysis Tips

A significant portion of time should be spent collecting, organizing, and analyzing data during a needs assessment. Ideally, the team should collect multiple types of data, including *input data* (information related to resources supporting student achievement), *output data* (results-oriented information such as attendance, achievement scores, behavioral referrals, etc.), *demographic data*, and *community context data* (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018). As mentioned previously, a mix of quantitative and qualitative data is optimal. The results of a needs assessment depend heavily upon the quality of data collected and the reliability and validity of data collection and analysis methods used.

The team may decide to analyze existing data collected during the planning phase to develop a basic sense of current student needs before making final decisions about which new data could be collected to enhance understanding of the most pressing behavioral health needs.

At each stage of assessing needs, use the data to inform conclusions and decisions. As trends and patterns emerge, create easy-to-read graphs and charts to include in final reports. Develop one list of the areas where the school is most effectively meeting student needs, and another *prioritized* list of unmet student needs with hypothesized root causes for the gaps. Lastly, share findings of needs assessments with stakeholders in as many ways possible.

Analyzing and Prioritizing Needs

Following the collection of existing and new data, the school mental health team will analyze the data to understand the strengths and unmet needs within the school system. Potential approaches to the analysis include the following:

- Identifying potential student strengths and assets that are not fully realized, such as support from caring adults; involvement in sports, clubs, or organizations; or active parent involvement in student's success at school;
- Identifying the most prevalent student behavioral health and related needs, based on surveys from different respondents;
- Identifying common themes or messages that arise in interviews of different people, such as "there are no referrals for children with eating disorders";

- Identifying needs that are most significantly impacting academic success of students, such as absenteeism or out-of-school suspensions; and
- Identifying the most significant barriers to having an effective comprehensive school mental health system, such as ineffective Tier I supports or challenges to collecting and using data to monitor the impact of supports.

After the initial identification of potential needs, the school mental health team should consider further exploration of the root causes of the prioritized needs in order to identify potential solutions. Many times, an identified problem or need may reflect the surface, or highest level of the problem, and additional exploration is needed to understand the one, or more, core causes for the problem. Therefore, additional data collection may be needed to understand the root causes. For example, if absenteeism is identified as a critical need to be addressed, a root cause analysis would examine the many potential factors that are contributing to absenteeism in order to select interventions that most closely match the underlying causes.

Texas School Mental Health Needs Assessment Planning Tool

District_____   School_____

Potential Sources of Existing Data	Source	Person(s) Responsible	Due Date
Community & Campus Demographics (staff & student)			
Office Referrals			
In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions			
Expulsions			
Attendance and Truancy			
Nursing Logs			
Professional School Counselor Logs			
Crisis Referrals			
Psychiatric Hospitalizations and/or Emergency Room Visits			
Time Away from Instruction (out of the classroom)			

Potential Sources of Existing Data	Source	Person(s) Responsible	Due Date
Mental Health Screening Data			
School Climate Survey			

Possible Additional Data	Source	Person(s) Responsible	Due Date
Mental Health Needs Survey			
Youth Strengths Survey (e.g., social skills, school connectedness, personal responsibility, decision making)			
Student Focus Groups or Interviews			
Family Focus Groups or Interviews			
Teachers/Staff Focus Groups or Interviews			
Community Forums			
Other			
Other			