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Using Comprehensive Needs Assessment to Improve Student Achievement

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Abstract

This article focuses on the use of a comprehensive needs assessment to improve student achievement. Higher education institutions and P-12 schools should use a comprehensive needs assessment to aid them in improving their students' achievement in this era of redesign and reform. The authors use their experience as school administrators, college professors, and district assistant team members to explain the needs assessment process.

Comprehensive Needs Assessment Defined

The 1983 *Nation at Risk* report initiated a flurry of school reform that instigated a call for nationwide accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (United States Government, January 2001) mandates that public schools that receive federal funds achieve adequate yearly progress. Across the United States, school administrators, and faculty and staff have spent numerous hours on the issue of school reform since 1983 trying to improve student achievement. However, before student achievement can be improved, a comprehensive needs assessment must be conducted at the school level.

Post-secondary faculty can assist P-12 schools with improving student achievement so they can meet their assigned targets by including conducting comprehensive needs assessment in appropriate undergraduate and graduate courses and serving on district assistant teams. Conducting comprehensive needs assessment is not limited to P-12 schools. It is the same process that is used in post-secondary institutions when they seek accreditation from national accrediting agencies. However, the focus of this article will be using a comprehensive needs assessment in P-12 schools.

Rouda and Kusy (1995) defined needs assessment as a systematic exploration of the way things are and the way they should be. Teddlie and Stringfield (1993) remarked that too often there had been too much emphasis on the uniform practice of school effect models and too little attention given to the change process. Too often, educators hurry to complete the task and sacrifice the process as a result.

Schools should periodically survey teachers to identify their perceptions of the school climate in order to identify strengths as well as areas that need improvement

(Stockton & Cage, 2000). On February 3, 2000, the National Association of Secondary Principals issued a position statement on standards and assessments because of the increasing emphasis on accountability (NASSP Board of Directors Position Statement on Standards and Assessment, 2000).

The purpose of a needs assessment is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing programs, practices, procedures, and activities. There are many areas that data may be collected in order to get the big picture of the school. Data may come from students' norm reference, and criterion reference scores, archival data, school demographic data, surveys, and focus group interviews. The stakeholders must know where they are and where they want to be. They must identify any hurdles that they may encounter in order to achieve their goal.

Student Test Scores

Test data are collected from students' norm referenced and criterion referenced scores. Much controversy has arisen about the emphasis on testing. Walker (1997) cautions against the use of norm referenced test because they are designed to give information about groups rather than individuals. However, for the intent and purposes of needs assessment, norm reference test scores are quite suitable. Norm reference scores can give information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the school curriculum.

Norm reference tests are designed to be given in standardized testing conditions unless students qualify for accommodations according to IDEA guidelines. Mawhinney (1999) opined that with high stakes testing that educators must ensure that test-taking conditions are not just the same, but equitable. With regard to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, the intelligences that students use on these test are verbal linguistic and mathematical logical. Most of the tests occur in the morning. Many students in upper grades perform better later in the day. The test are timed and in multiple choice format. Educators must become test savvy to survive the high stakes testing era.

Criterion reference tests give administrators, faculty, and students specific information on what skills students have mastered according to Walker (1997). Many states issue teachers standards or targets at the beginning of the school year to teach that will be measured on criterion reference tests during the spring.

Kennedy, Teddlie, and Stringfield (1991) concluded that schools can make a difference in student achievement. The researchers have observed during visits to P-12 schools, presenting workshops, and teaching graduate classes that many practicing teachers lack skills to properly interpret norm reference test scores. Until faculty can interpret test scores, the test scores will remain of little value. These skills can be taught in about a forty-five minute interactive workshop.

The most effective strategy for a faculty to use to analyze test data is to meet and to divide into heterogeneous groups to identify curricula strengths and weaknesses. After identifying strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum, the faculty should develop an

action plan to target these areas. No more than three areas should be targeted during any one academic year. The action plan should be implemented at the beginning of an academic year.

Surveys

Surveys are used to measure stakeholders' perception of how well the school is performing. Students, parents, teachers, staff, and members of the school community are surveyed to measure their perception of the school's performance. Students should be given the opportunity to participate in the survey since they are stakeholders, too. Interestingly, students provide valuable perceptions about school climate and discipline practices. Student surveys should be completed in class so questions about survey items can be clarified. Although completed in class, monitors for the completion of the survey should be someone other than the classroom teacher. Faculty/staff surveys should be handed out in a meeting but they should be completed independently and returned in a sealed envelope. Parent/guardian surveys should be given out at a much publicized parent meeting. The second method of choice would be sending the surveys home by students. A 65% return rate should be set for parent surveys. Parents with multiple children in school should be sent only one survey. Business and cooperative sponsors should be mailed surveys. Representatives in the community where the school is located should be given the opportunity to complete surveys to get the community's perspective of the school.

Although there are commercial instruments available, each school's data collection needs are unique so it may be best, if each school develops the instruments that they will use. There are seven general categories that most schools are interested in collecting data. Survey items should be identified in these categories. These seven categories include:

- ⌚ School Climate,
- ⌚ School Culture,
- ⌚ School Administration,
- ⌚ Discipline,
- ⌚ Parental/Community Involvement,
- ⌚ Professional Development, and
- ⌚ Technology.

By aligning survey items to categories, it simplifies the process of emerging patterns. Survey items should be simply written and easily understood. The reader should not have to apply problem solving skills to complete the survey. The survey should not contain more than 20 items. It should not take the reader more than fifteen minutes to complete. Many researchers have not realized that they have low return rates on their surveys because they are difficult to read and they take too long to complete. Do not ask anyone to put their name on the surveys. Leave an area for write in comments.

Archival Data

Archival data are composed of report cards issued to schools by state departments of education, school improvement plans, suspension and drop out rates of students, and mission statements, school newsletters, school yearbooks, and any other materials that would provide any insight as to what events/persons direct the school to be as it is today. The more information collected, the more information that will be learned about the school.

Demographic Data

Demographic data include student population, number of students who qualify for free or reduced meals, racial composition of students, mobility of students, education and occupation of students' parents and guardians. The purpose of demographic data is to form a concept of the students' home environment. Educators should not have lower expectations for students from lower socioeconomic status environments. However, they may have to provide learning experiences that these students have not had due to lack of resources. For example, grants may need to be written or resources allocated so that students will have trade books in their homes during the summer.

Focus Groups

Focus groups should be created for (a) students, (b) faculty/staff, (c) parents/guardians, and (d) administrators. The focus groups should be facilitated by a neutral person not associated with the school on a daily basis perhaps a central office person or a university professor. Interview questions should be related to the seven categories used on the survey, but not the same items. Participants in the interview should be assured that their responses are confidential. Focus groups lend a strong qualitative touch to the needs assessment process. Each focus group should contain from seven to ten members (randomly selected). Focus groups are best conducted by evaluators external to the school.

The Process

Whereas, it is necessary to include all stakeholders in the needs assessment process. It is only good managerial practice to create a core committee to initialize, collect, manage, sort, and publish data. The core committee or steering committee should be composed of responsible individuals who will be key players in the needs assessment process. These individuals should serve as chairpersons of the committees that will create and collect surveys, archival and demographic data, conduct focus groups, and publish the results. They should take turns chairing the steering committee. Too often if there is a single chairperson, there is a tendency for a monopoly of power.

Summary

A needs assessment is a comprehensive evaluation plan of a school's strengths and weaknesses. The concept of needs assessment is to build on the school's strengths and improve areas of weakness. Educators are expected to use data from the needs assessment to write a school improvement plan that has specific targets and strategies designed by the school stakeholders to improve the school and student achievement. The process used is almost as important as the data that are collected.

Post-secondary faculty can assist P-12 schools by teaching how to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment in appropriate courses, volunteering to serve on school improvement teams, and serving on district assistance teams. The No Child Left Behind Act has identified high expectations for public schools. Public school educators will need support and assistance from higher education institutions if they are to meet their targets.

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