



*Using ESSA to Redesign
High Schools to
Support Their
Communities in the
21st Century*

What Do Needs Assessments Need to Do to Support the Redesign of Low Performing High Schools?



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Setting the Stage- Redesign and the Low Performing High School Environment



High Schools are Different

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- A typical high school has 1,000 students and 80-110 adults, but they can range from 1/5 smaller in size and up to 5 times larger
- That is a lot of adults and students to organize, motivate, and educate
- There are few comparable institutions of this size in other sectors
- It is equal to organizing a regiment in the military. They are led by a colonel with 22 years experience in all aspects of the work
- Manufacturing plants that employ 1,000 or more people are uncommon



High Schools are Different in High-Poverty Environments

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- Majority of students enter with below grade level skills
- Chronic absenteeism can be 50% (or higher)
- More students can be suspended than graduate in a year
- Teacher absenteeism and turnover can be high
- Principal turnover is high
- School reform fatigue can be high. Sense that many/most/all reforms have not worked
- Feelings of stress and scarcity are high; trust can be low
- In short, it is often the case that some to many students and adults do not want to be there or believe that things can really get better



The Logic of School Improvement

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- School improvement is typically based on a premise that there are critical components of an effective school
- The road to improvement is based on identifying which of these elements are not present in a school in need of improvement
- Then, developing an implementation plan which builds them in a strategic manner (while bringing in or building the leadership and teacher skill and capacity to do so)
- School improvement needs assessments follow a similar logic
- Typically, they seek to establish a school's current state on dimensions critical to school improvement, including effective leadership, skilled teachers, instructional coherence, using data to drive both instruction and students supports, use of progress monitoring, and productive school climates which including family and community involvement.



Redesign is Different from School Improvement

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- Redesign argues that more fundamental changes are needed in the basic architecture of the school's design, to meet the needs of its student and community in the 21st century.
- To build and implement redesign, it is necessary to have a deep understanding of the challenges the school, its students, and its community face, as well as their strengths and resources. Then create a shared vision of what the community, students, and staff want from their high school.



ESSA Needs Assessments in Low-Performing High Schools Need to be Different

- The fundamentals of school improvement are essential. No school will get better without them.
- Thus, existing needs assessment instruments that establish where schools are on the pathway to effective leadership, skilled teachers, instructional coherence, data driven instruction and student supports, the use of progress monitoring, and productive school climates have an important role to play.
- Many of the remaining low-performing high schools will score low on these dimensions.
- Needs assessments rooted in school improvement, however, are not sufficient. Additional elements which focus on the “what”, “why” and “how” or redesign, given existing conditions, are needed.

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What is the Goal of Needs Assessment in Support of Redesign

- Redesign will require that adults, students, and the community to shift some views and change some standard practice(s).
- This is best done when they, themselves, conclude through investigation and data analysis that this is a good course of action.

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Some Critical Guidance from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching- Core Principles of Improvement on How to do This Work

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- **Make the work problem-specific and user-centered-** “What specifically is the problem we are trying to solve”
- **Variation in performance is the core problem to address-**“The critical issue is not what works, but rather what works, for whom and under what set of conditions.”
- **See the system that produces the current outcomes-**“Its hard to improve what you do not fully understand. How do local conditions shape work processes? Make your hypothesis for change public and clear.”



Some Additional Needs Assessment Elements to Support Redesign

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- Reform history of the school, both perception and reality matter
- Deep understanding of the scale and magnitude of the educational challenge which walks in the door in ninth grade (e.g. prior history with chronic absenteeism, school suspension, course failure, involvement with public agencies, academic and social-emotional skill levels etc.)
- Passions and concerns of the adults and students in the school
- Community input—how is the school viewed, what does the community want/need the high school to do



Some Additional Needs Assessment Elements to Support Redesign cont.

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- Deep analysis of the school schedule—who and what is currently supported, who and what is currently minimized.
- Shadow sample of students through the school day-how consistent is their experience classroom to classroom?
- Distribution of fiscal and human capital—what is invested in, what is not.
- Compare student self-report on their needs and challenges in and out of school to faculty perception of them.



Needs Assessment is just the beginning of as School's Redesign Plan

Once a low performing high school knows where it stands on the continuum of school improvement, and the “what”, “why” and “how” of its redesign efforts:

- It must identify appropriate existing evidence based strategies where they exist and then establish areas where innovation will be required
- It also needs a strategic sequence of actions, timeline, and continuous improvement processes to support implementation
- All of this together becomes the school's redesign plan
- Many, most of the remaining low-performing high schools will need technical assistance and network supports in conducting needs assessments and developing school redesign plans

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