



University Council
for Educational
Administration

Utilizing District Needs Assessments to Drive Curriculum and Evaluation for Principal Preparation Programs: A How To Guide



2017

Table of Contents

Introduction: What is a District Needs Assessment?	2
About this “How To” Document	2
What is a District Needs Assessment for a Principal Preparation Program?	3
Why Conduct a District Needs Assessment? Purposes and Methods?	4
Conducting a Needs Assessment	5
Getting Started on Your Needs Assessment	5
Establish Methodology and Research Design	5
Data Sources	6
Methods of Data Collection	6
Identify Respondents and Respondent Selection Process	7
Determine methodology to be employed	8
Identify the Research Team	8
Submit the Research Plan for IRB Approval	9
Creating Your Needs Assessment	9
Identify and review previous needs assessments	9
Deploy Survey/Questionnaires	10
Analyzing, Completing, and Releasing Report	10
Analyzing Data	10
Writing Report	11
Putting it All Together and Finalizing the Report	12
Suggested Uses for Needs Assessment	13
Developing Curriculum	13
Developing Professional Development Plans	14
Developing/Revising Succession Planning Models	14
Augmenting/Supplementing a Comprehensive Program Evaluation	15
Potential Barriers to Consider	15
Conclusions	15
References	16

Introduction: What is a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is the process of systematically studying a group of individuals to identify the knowledge, skills, behaviors, interests, attitudes, perceptions and/or abilities relevant to a single or multiple issues, organizational goal(s), or objective(s). Needs assessments can employ a multitude of different methods for collecting data and rely on information gathered from not only the group of individuals under study, but also from groups of individuals with relationships to the individuals under study.

Needs assessments have been used for decades and are currently used in a variety of fields, although outside of education such efforts are often called market research. Typically, market research is conducted to determine if the product or services provided by a company is actually desired by consumers. This is often accomplished through focus groups of potential consumers in which the attractiveness and desirability of a product is assessed.

The utilization of needs assessments are becoming increasingly more frequent as organizations attempt to better meet the needs of their constituents and/or match their training with the specific needs of individuals in the field. This trend is no different for educational organizations, with districts, schools, and preparation programs conducting needs assessments in efforts to meet the needs of the individuals and organizations served by these institutions.

About This “How To” Document

Currently, there are few examples of needs assessments to guide those embarking on their first needs assessment. As programs begin to complete these assessments, specific examples will become available to help guide others in completing their own needs assessments. Before such examples become available, examining needs assessments from other fields may prove fruitful in providing additional guidance about how to proceed in conducting a high-quality needs assessment.

Because there is a paucity of such examples, this document was created with the purpose of providing a basic “How To Guide” that would assist principal preparation program team members in completing a needs assessment cycle. Thus, this guide provides a general overview of what are needs assessments, the purposes of needs assessments, why principal preparation programs should conduct needs assessments, and brief descriptions of the steps need to complete an entire needs assessment cycle for a principal preparation program. This guide, however, does not provide specific examples of how to complete each step of the needs assessment cycle. Because each needs assessment will be unique to the context of the preparation program and the districts served by the preparation, providing specific examples that would address all the different possibilities that may arise during a needs assessment is simply impossible.

After completing this document, principal preparation program team members should be able to do the following:

1. Understand the basic components of a needs assessment;
2. Identify the purposes of their own needs assessment;
3. Plan a full needs assessment;
4. Identify the data that would be useful in conducting a needs assessment; and,
5. Determine how a needs assessment could be utilized to improve practice.

Simply reading this document will not provide a reader with the knowledge and skills to actually conduct a needs assessment. Well-qualified researchers that have the knowledge and skills to conduct quantitative and qualitative researcher as well as have knowledge of principal preparation programs are a necessary requirement for completing a quality needs assessment.

This document was developed as part of The University of Texas Collaborative Urban Leadership Project (UTCULP)-an extension of the University of Texas at Austin Principalship preparation program's effort to increase academic achievement by collaboratively preparing 120 effective leaders for urban secondary schools. Through partnerships with three high-needs local education agencies, Dallas Independent School District, Houston Independent School District, and Harlandale Independent School District, the project will prepare leaders for three districts that serve 14% of all Texas students living in poverty. The UTCULP will:

1. Identify the unique needs of each district partner;
2. Recruit, identify, select, financially support and prepare at least 120 candidates who have the potential to become effective principals of secondary urban schools;
3. Provide ongoing evaluation to ensure candidate growth and program effectiveness;
4. Recruit, select, and train a District Site Coordinator and five District Mentors in each partner district; and
5. Develop and implement district level strategies to support and retain current effective leaders who can provide follow on and support to future aspiring leaders in the district.

This document is the result of the first goal of the grant to conduct needs assessment in each of the partner districts and outlines the process developed for Dallas and Houston ISD.

What is a District Needs Assessment for a Principal Preparation Program?

A district needs assessment is a systematic study of principals currently employed in partner districts to identify the knowledge, skills, behaviors, interests, attitudes, perceptions and/or abilities relevant to a single or multiple issues, organizational goal(s), or objective(s) that are collaboratively determined by the preparation program and partner districts. While the issues, goals, and objectives should be decided collaboratively by the preparation program and partner districts and could address a variety of topics, the preparation programs most certainly should be interested in collecting data from graduates about their perceptions of the efficacy of the preparation program in preparing them to be successful in their first years as a school leader. For example, the UTCULP needs assessment asked current principals about the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to be an effective first-year principal in their local setting. Further, the assessment delved even deeper by asking respondents to rate how effective their preparation programs were in providing them the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be successful school leaders.

A needs assessment is only one component of an overall preparation program evaluation plan. For a more complete overview of how to conduct a program evaluation for a principal preparation program, please see *Developing evaluation evidence: A formative and summative evaluation planner for educational leadership* by Orr, Young, & Rorrer (2010).

Why Conduct a District Needs Assessment?

The contemporary needs of a principal must be considered when planning any principal preparation program. As universities continue to adapt to the changing roles of the principalship in an effort to adequately prepare individuals for the daunting task of leading schools in the 21st century, it is increasingly important to collaborate with school districts to determine the specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed by individuals to be successful within specific work contexts. In short, preparation programs need to collaborate with schools districts to create and deploy needs assessments in order to better prepare graduates for successful employment as school leaders.

More specifically, preparation programs and partner districts need to employ needs assessments to answer some basic, yet often over-looked, questions regarding the preparation of principals:

1. Is there a gap between the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors of effective principals and the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of individuals completing a preparation program? In other words, is there a deficiency in the preparation of principals that become employed in the partner districts?
2. Is there a gap between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of those currently preparing principals and the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to prepare principals who are effective school leaders in the partner school districts? This question may sometimes be translated into who currently prepares principals and who should be involved in preparing principals?
3. Is there a gap between the manner in which principals are currently prepared and how they might be more effectively and/or efficiently be prepared to be effective school leaders? In other words, is the current manner of preparation deficient in any way that leads to less effective preparation of principals?

Purposes

The purposes of the needs assessment process, then, are to answer one or more of the above questions. Sometimes only one question may need to be answered while other situations may call for answering all three questions. In our own experience in conducting needs assessments, we have actually answered all three questions during the same needs assessment process. From analyzing the data, we learned that current principals identified a gap between what they would like to know about hiring and removing teachers and the knowledge and skills they had learned about these issues while in their preparation programs. Similarly, from our interviews with program staff, we ascertained that no one involved in the preparation of principals had extensive knowledge or experience in hiring or removing teachers to the level desired by students. Finally, our interviews with current principals suggested that learning more about how to hire and remove staff should come from the internship experience rather than from a classroom setting.

Methods

Needs assessments can take many different forms and can rely on varied modes of data collection. Needs assessments may employ reviews of existing data sources, document review, surveys, focus groups, interviews, and other modes of collecting both quantitative and qualitative information. Indeed, the most effective needs assessments typically employ a wide variety of data collection methods and target not only the primary subjects of the needs

assessments (e.g., graduates of a preparation program), but others who work closely with the primary subjects (e.g., teachers, principal supervisors, students, parents, etc.).

Conducting a Needs Assessment

The remainder of this document will describe how to embark on conducting a district needs assessment, creating such an assessment, analyzing the results of the assessment, creating reports, and employing the results collaboratively with partners to improve practice of both district and preparation program leaders as well as the practice of school leaders.

Getting Started on Your Needs Assessment

Establish Relationship with Partner District(s). The first, and perhaps the most important, step in embarking on a district needs assessment cycle is to establish a relationship with partner districts. These relationships are necessary for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to ensure placement of graduates and access to data collection. Not only is establishing University-District partnerships necessary for placement of students and data collection, but university-district partnerships help to ensure that school leadership preparation is a sustained effort that creates a pipeline of effective school leaders (Young, 2010). As an added benefit, research by Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, and Orr (2007) has found partnerships to be an essential factor in establishing effective leadership preparation programs. One of the factors that distinguished these effective programs from less effective programs was a commitment of key stakeholders from both the university and the district to create policies that helped delineate clear expectations, thus facilitating effective collaboration.

This commitment went beyond mere words to include district provided subsidies for credits, streamlined hiring, and, in some cases, collaboration in the development of university-based curriculum. In return, universities provided tuition waivers, mentors, and coaches for prospective principals, as well as faculty to support district-based professional development. Darling-Hammond et al assert that such strong partnerships have the potential to prepare principals for specific district and regional contexts and can develop a stronger and more committed pool of leaders.

The partnership begins when university officials establish a rapport with the partnering school district. Prior to initiating the needs assessment process, it is important to establish a working and friendly rapport that recognizes the value each partner brings to the working relationship.

At this point in the relationship the preparation program and school district should start to formalize a memorandum of understanding (MOU) so roles, responsibilities, and expectations are clearly defined. Further, the MOU can provide an initial framework of the parameters of the needs assessment so that both organizations can start to plan for the allocation of resources to execute the plan.

Establish Methodology and Research Design

After establishing a rapport with the school district, establishing a research design is the next step in the needs assessment cycle. Most importantly, the research design establishes the critical areas to be examined and the specific research questions that will drive the needs assessment to ensure the critical areas are addressed. In addition, this process includes determining sources of data, how the data will be obtained, who will collect or provide

the data, when the data will be collected or provided, how the data will be analyzed, and who will conduct the data analysis.

Data Sources

There are generally two types of data sources: (1) existing data sources already available from the state or district; and (2) data sources that need to be created and/or collected in some manner.

The university and district representatives should collaboratively decide on the data sources to be used. In making the decision, individuals should consider cost of procuring the data, degree of difficulty in procuring the data, degree of difficulty in using the data, accuracy of the data, and usefulness of the data. In short, the two organizations must establish and agree upon a clear understanding of the purposes of the needs assessment and determine and agree upon a clear scope of what data is to be used, who will collect or provide the data, when the data will be collected or provided, and who will pay for the data if there is a cost associated with procurement or collection.

Some of the more important data that should be collected include the following:

- Retention in the profession;
- Retention at a school;
- Teacher retention in the school;
- Student outcomes (achievement, drop out/completion rates, college-ready, college enrollment, attendance, etc);
- Teacher working conditions;
- Principal working conditions;
- Changes in teachers' instructional behaviors;
- Principal perceptions of preparation about various aspects of the work lives of principals (human resources, instructional leadership, ISLLC Standards, etc).
- Principal perceptions of central office support; and,
- Principal perceptions of central office politics.

Methods of Data Collection

The most common methods of data collection are surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Surveys—either electronic or on paper—are typically used to collect data from principals, teachers, and or parents. While electronic surveys are more cost efficient and easier to distribute, paper surveys typically have a greater response rate. Regardless of survey form, ensuring the district works towards a 100% response rate is critical. Low response rates—even those in the typical acceptable range of 75%--can yield inaccurate results and lead to erroneous policy changes at both the district and program levels. The primary purpose of a survey is to determine the overall needs of principals. Open-ended questions should be included in the survey in order to allow respondents to explain their answers and provide depth of responses not garnered through likert scale or short answer items.

Focus groups are typically employed to collect much richer contextual data than can be gathered through surveys—even open-ended questions on surveys. Focus groups can be used with principals, principal supervisors, teachers, parents, or students. Focus groups should include a group of 6 to 12 individuals who are guided through a facilitated

discussion on a predetermined topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The purpose is to gather information about the opinions of principals related to principal preparation programs content, coursework, internship experiences, etc. The smaller group size is to ensure that all participants remain actively involved in the group discussion throughout the data collection phase. Also, it is extremely difficult to manage or accurately transcribe a group discussion of more than six participants.

In our experience, we have used focus groups exclusively with principals. Focus groups allowed us to begin to understand the thoughts principals have related to the work they do in specific contexts. Focus groups should be conducted at the district central office or somewhere convenient for principals to meet. One important consideration for determining the meeting location is the maintenance of participant confidentiality and the associated freedom to speak candidly. Participants must feel as if their confidentiality will be maintained so that they may speak candidly about both their preparation experiences and the context of their local school district if accurate information is to be gathered from the participants.

Interviews are one-on-one conversations intended to gather the same type of rich, contextual data as through focus groups. However, the one-on-one nature provides the opportunity for even deeper, more candid conversations. Interviews are typically used with principals and the supervisors of principals. There is little utility in conducting interviews with individual teachers, parents, or students since the numbers of individuals in each of these three groups is typically quite large and interviews would not provide representative information of all individuals in the groups.

Identify Respondents and Respondent Selection Process

Obviously, the natural pool of respondents for needs assessments focused on principal principals is current principals. Graduates who are not employed as principals are also likely candidates for participation in needs assessments. Other respondents that could be included in needs assessments are principal supervisors, assistant principals, teachers, parents, and students.

The researchers must then work collaboratively with district personnel to determine which groups of individuals should be included in the needs assessments and whether all individuals in a group should be asked to participate or a random or other type of sample should be employed with a group of individuals.

Typically, all principals should be included in the needs assessment. While samples of principals may suffice, less than a 100% response increases the possibility of response bias and the odds that the results, conclusions, and policy implications are inaccurate.

One lesson learned from our experience conducting needs assessments included receiving a low survey response rate from school principals. In retrospect, it was abundantly clear that there was no clear understanding or agreement about who would be responsible for disseminating the survey, providing an incentive for principals to respond to the survey, or following up with principals to ensure an acceptable level of response. In a subsequent needs assessment survey with a different district, we ensured there was clear communication and agreement about the roles and responsibilities of district personnel and us as the researchers regarding the dissemination of the survey and ensuring a high response rate. Consequently, the response rate was more than triple the response rate for the first district.

Determine methodology to be employed

Based on the data available and sample size, the researchers must determine, in collaboration with other members of the team, the various methodologies that need to be employed in conducting the analyses. These methodologies will clearly include a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Certainly, descriptive statistics should be employed in analyzing the data and the data should be disaggregated by personal student/principal characteristics and school characteristics if the sample sizes are large enough. Generally, at least 10 cases should be in each group when disaggregating the data. Even with 10 cases, the results would have to be interpreted with caution since one outlier could substantially alter the mean. Thus, medians should also be used when comparing smaller sample sizes.

Inferential statistics such as independent sample t-tests or Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) can be employed if the data can be disaggregated into two groups with at least 30 cases in each group or there is 30 people in one group the comparison examines the same cohort across two points in time such as with a pre- and post-test.

More sophisticated analyses may be employed with larger sample sizes. For example, logistic regression analyses could be used to determine the factors associated with any binary outcome such as feeling prepared (1) or unprepared (0) or remaining in the principalship (1) or not remaining in the principalship (0).

A relatively recent technique called propensity score matching should also be investigated as a way to match graduates to comparison graduates or schools to comparison schools. Once these comparison individuals or schools are identified, then the above statistical techniques could be employed.

Finally, because the analysis is a needs assessment rather than a traditional research report, ranking of items will be incredibly useful in identifying the needs of graduates, current principals, districts, or any other unit of analysis. For example, in the UTCULP needs assessment, we asked respondents to rank 30 items related to principal knowledge and skills in importance related to being an effective school leader. Further, the respondents had to identify a single item as most important, a single item as second most important, through a fifth most important item. Ranking the items is less than straight forward since, by design, not all respondents provided a response for each question. Thus, simply weighting the responses and taking the mean (5 for most important through 1 for fifth most important) does not provide information on the number of respondents ranking the item. An item ranked most important by one respondent could be identified as very important if the number of respondents is not taken into consideration. To rectify this situation, we multiplied the weighted ranking by the number of respondents with that ranking. In this way, an item with 20 respondents ranking an item as third most important would be ranked above an item with one respondent ranking an item as most important.

Identify the Research Team.

Based on the data available and methodologies chosen, the appropriate researchers then need to be identified. The researchers could be based at the University, school district, or an outside consultant. In selecting a researcher, the program should obviously consider the researcher background and qualifications. Ideally, the researchers should be knowledgeable of both the fields of principal preparation and research methodology. Hiring researchers who do not adequately understand both fields could compromise the quality of the needs assessment. Further, researchers

should have previous experience in conducting needs assessments or similar research involving principals or, at the very least, other types of educators.

Revise MOU if needed

If significant changes in the planning of the needs assessment have been made, the MOU may need to be altered. This is especially true if changes have been made to research questions, data collection methods, data collected, and participants. Without changes to the MOU, there may be some misunderstandings about who will be available for data collection, the process by which data is collected, what data is collected, and when data is collected. Revising the MOU should clarify these issues and prevent any confusion that could impede the completion of the needs assessment.

Submit the Research Design for Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

An institutional review board (IRB) is a committee that has been formally designated to approve, monitor, and review research involving humans with the aim to protect the rights and welfare of the research subjects. The key to determining if IRB approval is necessary is understanding how the needs assessment will be used and its intended purpose.

Generally, if the information being gathered for a needs assessment is not going to be published and will only be used to improve the services or programs of a school district, then you do not need IRB approval. However, if the investigation is designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge, and which involves living humans, it may qualify as human subjects research, thereby requiring IRB approval. Thus, it is imperative that decisions about the scope, purpose, and usage of the needs assessment are made before data collection is undertaken.

For more information regarding the IRB process, the following websites have helpful guidelines:

- <http://www.irbforum.org/>
- <http://www.utexas.edu/research/rsc/humansubjects/faqs/>

Creating Your Needs Assessment

Identify and review previous needs assessments

The first step in developing the needs assessment is to identify any previous needs assessments or similar needs assessments that can provide guidance into the development of your needs assessment.

Create survey instrument content. At this point the researcher or a team of researchers and practitioners should create the various components of the needs assessments. This will include surveys, focus group questions, and interview questions. Some areas of content to be included in such a survey would be:

- Time Management;
- Facility and Resources Procurement and Management;
- Instructional Leadership;
- Teacher Working Conditions;

- Human Resource Management;
- Communications;
- Overall Leadership Skills;
- Central Office Support; and,
- Principal Working Conditions.

Of course, the survey may include other areas related to school leadership. After the areas are agreed upon, a team of people should develop individual questions or statements associated with each area. A team approach is important since no one person will know everything necessary to write appropriate, relevant, and clear questions or statements.

After the individual questions and/or statements, the researchers should employ cognitive pre-testing to identify problems with the survey. Cognitive pre-testing involves asking volunteers who are representative of the target population to complete the survey while the researcher watches and listens to the volunteer respondent. The job of the respondent is to communicate to the researcher what s/he thinks the question is asking, whether responses make sense, whether responses are missing, and any other problems that make the question confusing or difficult to answer. The purpose is to ensure each question is well-written so that respondents understand the question and provide appropriate responses.

Based on the results of the cognitive pre-testing, the researchers should then revise the survey/questionnaires and pilot the survey/questionnaires with a larger group of volunteers to identify further areas of weakness. The results of the pilot administration should then lead to a final revision of the survey or focus group/interview questions.

Deploy Survey/Questionnaires

After finalizing the survey, focus group questions, and interview questions, the three components should be deployed. Researchers should consider the time of the year and the length of time when determining the best time to conduct each of the three components. For example, asking principals to complete a needs assessment during state testing or at the end of the year will likely result in very low response rates and more negative results than if administered at other times of the year. Asking school leaders to respond to a survey during the first week of school also will often result in low response rates. An appropriate window of time should be determined with input from respondents. Once the time period is determined, the same time period should be employed over time unless new factors make the time period untenable.

Analyzing, Completing, and Releasing Report

Analyzing Data

Data should be analyzed using appropriate methods and adhere to analytic standards. The different potential methodologies are described above. Every needs assessment should report basic counts, percentages, and response rates. Every quantitative analysis begins with these basic statistics and needs assessments are no different. Further, most readers of the needs assessments results will not understand any methodologies more sophisticated than basic descriptive statistics and perhaps simple inferential statistics such as independent t-tests and ANOVA.

Importantly, results should be disaggregated if at all possible. Disaggregation categories might include personal, school, and/or district characteristics. Possible personal characteristics would be:

- Age;
- Race/ethnicity;
- Gender;
- Year preparation program was completed;
- Preparation program attended;
- Participation in a field experience;
- Years of experience as an educator;
- Years of experience as an assistant principal; and,
- Years of experience as a principal.

Possible school and district characteristics would include the following:

- School level of district type;
- Student enrollment;
- Accountability rating/student achievement; and,
- Student demographics;

Disaggregation is important because it can often help identify needs for particular types of principals or principals in particular types of schools. For example, for one of our needs assessments, we asked current principals to identify knowledge and skills that were critically important to being an effective school leader. One statement included was “Developing a sense of trust and respect among the staff.” Overall, 69% of respondents agreed that this was critically important to being an effective principal. Yet, only 50% of relatively inexperienced principals believed it was critically important while 74% of experienced principals agreed it was critically important. Thus, as compared to more experienced principals, less experienced principals did not understand the importance of creating a sense of trust and respect in retaining teachers and improving teacher quality (See, for example, Ladd (2002) and Berry & Fuller, 2000, 2001). Disaggregating the data by experience as a principal might lead to a preparation program including studies and explorations of trust and respect when the non-disaggregated findings would not suggest the area was near the top needs to be addressed.

Writing Report

Writing the report may be the most important and most difficult component of the entire needs assessment cycle. A well-written report will convey the important findings of the needs assessment in a manner that is easily understood by the intended audience. Thus, knowing who the intended audience is one important piece of writing the needs assessment report.

Putting it All Together and Finalizing the Report

While every step in this process is important, this step is the meat of the process. A thoughtful analysis employing the appropriate methodologies that is well-written and succinctly conveys the information pertinent to stakeholders is critical in completing a useful needs assessment. Because of the wide array of data that might be collected, varying sample size, and differing purposes, the sections below provide only brief guidelines for analyzing the data and writing the report. The specific details for each needs assessment will be determined by the size of the program, response rates, time for analyses, ability of the researchers, and the purposes of the assessment itself.

Conduct preliminary analyses. Any preliminary quantitative analysis should include an exploration of response rates, missing data, and outliers for all questions and statements. Each of these can present problems in conducting the analysis and must be dealt with before the data is actually analyzed. Subsequently, basic descriptive statistics such as counts, percentages, means, medians, and rankings should be completed. After the data is checked, corrected, and analyzed using basic descriptive statistics, disaggregation and more sophisticated analyses can commence. The disaggregation and more sophisticated analyses employed will largely be determined by the sample sizes within groups of respondents and other characteristics of the data.

With respect to qualitative data, the analysis should identify important themes and constructs arising from review of any open-ended questions from the survey as well as data from any interviews and focus groups conducted.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings should be examined together to see how they reinforce or contradict each other. The analysis should intersperse the quantitative and qualitative findings rather than presenting them separately.

Employ member checks and peer reviews of analyses. After analyzing the data, researchers should write a data and methodology section as well as a preliminary findings section that includes both the quantitative and qualitative results. The sections should then be provided to the interview and focus-group participants to ensure the qualitative section captures the intended meanings of the participants. The participants should also review the quantitative data and communicate whether the findings reflect their own experiences as principals in schools within the partner districts.

Write initial draft. The initial draft should include a description of the project, data and methodology, findings, and implications sections as well as a review of any pertinent literature. The findings section should reflect any changes proposed by participants through the member checks conducted in step two above.

Have draft and findings reviewed by district partners. The initial draft should then be reviewed by district partners and feedback solicited from the partners. While many researchers overlook the importance of this step, the researchers simply cannot fully understand the context of the district unless the researcher works in the district as well. Even then, the researcher would have a very different perspective on the district context than principals or supervisors of principals.

Revise report based on feedback from peers and partners. The feedback from the district partners should be incorporated into this version of the report. This does not necessarily mean that all comments or suggestions made

by the district partners should be included in the report, but that all comments and suggestions should be seriously considered by the researchers.

Employ a final peer review and revise if necessary. After incorporating the feedback provided by the district partners, the researchers should seek informal peer reviews of the report. This will ensure a high level of quality in both methodology and interpretations of the data analyses.

Releasing Report. The following two considerations should be kept in mind when releasing the report.

1. Consider multiple formats—written, web, webinar, etc.

If the intended audience consists only of preparation program and district partner personnel, then a paper version of the report will likely suffice. However, if the intended audience is wider than preparation program and district partner personnel, then multiple formats for releasing the report should be considered. In particular, placing a PDF version of the paper on a website and submitting the paper to ERIC should be strongly considered. Further, presentations at regional and national conferences would also serve to widen the distribution of the report.

2. Gather feedback after release

To improve the report process, feedback should be solicited from all consumers of the report. If the report is posted on the web, readers of the report should have the ability to electronically comment on the report and make suggestions for improving the report.

Suggested Uses for Needs Assessment

The major findings of the needs assessment set the framework for discussion amongst the collaborators about the most important aspects of a principal preparation program for the district-specific context. The report should be disseminated to district officials to peruse prior to a formal meeting. This allows for participants to digest the results from the needs assessment prior to discussing the findings.

As mentioned above, there are many ways to use a needs assessment. Three examples will be discussed in this guide. One example of a suggested use for the needs assessment that will be explored is the development of curriculum for a principal preparation program. A second example of a suggested use is the creation of responsive professional development based on findings from the needs assessment. A third suggested use is the development and/or revision of succession planning models.

Developing Curriculum

After disseminating the report of findings from the needs assessment, the preparation program personnel should plan to meet with the partner district personnel to discuss findings. Using the report, both groups of stakeholders should collaboratively determine the most important aspects of the preparation program needed to prepare effective school

leaders in the context of the partner districts. After consensus is reached about the central learning components of the preparation program, the curriculum writing process should commence.

One possible outcome of a needs assessment is the creation or revision of curriculum related to a principal preparation program. The process of developing a curriculum responsive to the results of the needs assessment allows the university and district officials to collaboratively synthesize findings into practical learning opportunities.

The district needs assessment can inform curricular design for context-specific educational settings (i.e., urban secondary schools). The curriculum writing sessions are designed to gain consensus among the district and university collaborators in order to establish a common vision around shared beliefs about a context-specific principal preparation program. The success of the curriculum writing phase in many ways is contingent on the congruency of beliefs about essential components of the principal preparation program.

At the curriculum meeting, district and university personnel gather to discuss the findings from the needs assessment report. District personnel may include principals, middle range central office personnel, and upper level administrators. University personnel may include staff from the needs assessment team, faculty from the principalship program, other university professors, and graduate students. The discussion group needs to represent a balance of university members and district officials. The purpose of the break-out groups is to create powerful learning experiences within the curricular course schedule.

The findings from the needs assessment are powerful tools that serve to guide the process in filling in existing gaps in preparation programs. The co-developed learning objectives, taken directly from the discussion of the findings from the needs assessment, will have a direct influence on the curriculum. One way to address key learning objectives in a principal preparation program is through the development of powerful learning experiences (Orr, 2011; O'Doherty & Generett, 2011). Powerful learning experiences include carefully thought out learning outcomes reflective of the key findings from the needs assessment. Powerful learning experiences consist of theories of action statements, learning outcomes, a connection to state or national standards, and a link to the course scope and sequence for the principal preparation program. For more information about how to create powerful learning experiences, see O'Doherty & Generett, 2011 – in press).

Developing Professional Development Plans

Another suggested use for the needs assessment is the creation of responsive professional development opportunities for current principals in the district. The results of the needs assessments are often used to develop professional development or training modules. Indeed, while the preparation program can use the results to alter the components of the program offered to students, the district and/or the university can develop professional development and training units that address the needs or deficiencies identified by the needs assessments designed for current practicing principals and assistant principals, as well as other school and/or district personnel.

Developing/Revising Succession Planning Models

Finally, the results of the needs assessments can be used to develop or revise succession plans. If districts do have succession plans—and often they do not—they can use the results of the needs assessments to ensure that aspiring principals are provided the opportunity to obtain the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to be an effective

principal in the district through professional development and training opportunities as well as through mentoring and coaching opportunities with principals who possess strengths in the areas off weaknesses found in the needs assessments.

Finally, the results of the needs assessments can be used to develop or revise succession plans. If districts do have succession plans—and often they do not—they can use the results of the needs assessments to ensure that aspiring principals are provided the opportunity to obtain the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to be an effective principal in the district through professional development and training opportunities as well as through mentoring and coaching opportunities with principals who possess strengths in the areas off weaknesses found in the needs assessments.

Augmenting/Supplementing a Comprehensive Program Evaluation

Needs assessments can and should be one component of a comprehensive program evaluation plan (Orr, Young, & Rorrer, 2010). Indeed, the needs assessment should only be the first step in an ongoing cycle of assessment and evaluation. Once the needs assessment is completed, further evaluation is needed on the efficacy of the curriculum, instruction, field experiences, and mentoring in preparing students to be effective school leaders. Further, data should be collected on certification test scores, placement rates, characteristics of schools and districts employing graduates, tenure rates, mobility rates and patterns, attrition rates, and student outcomes. All of this information should be considered concomitantly in making efforts to improve practice.

Potential Barriers to Consider

It cannot be overstated the importance of understanding of the relationships within the district and how to navigate them. Differences in status between researchers and practitioners can lead to conflict (Bickel & Hattrup, 1995; Freedman & Salmon, 2001; Goodlad & Sirotnik, 1988). Unclear roles and relationships on both sides can create uncertainty and misunderstanding (Freedman & Salmon, 2001; Goldring & Sims, 2005). Coburn, Soung and Turner (2008) suggest that the development of clear authority relations actually enables productive working relationships. Shared understanding of appropriate roles and relationships provides guidance for interaction and decision making.

Conclusions

The purpose of this “How To” guide is to provide a basic framework for completing a needs assessment cycle. If preparation programs are to continually improve practice, programs must establish strong relationships with partner districts and implement needs assessments. Only through the identification of strengths and weaknesses of the program and the needs of those actually in the field will changes made to programs align directly with the needs of school leaders.

Unfortunately, there are few models to follow in this area, hence the creation of the document. Together with the literature cited in this area and thoughtful interaction with experts in the field, leaders in partner districts, and school leaders in partner districts, we are confident that any program can create and implement a useful needs assessment. The first attempt may not be perfect—ours certainly was not—but the process can be quickly improved and become a regular and sustained component of regular program improvement efforts.

References

- Coburn, C.E., Soung, B., & Turner, E.O. (2008). Authority, status and the dynamics of insider outsider partnerships at the district level. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 83, 364 – 399. doi:10.1080/01619560802222350
- Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., & Orr, M.T. (2007). *Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs*. Retrieved online at <http://www.sde.idaho.gov>
- Fry, B., O'Neill, K., & Bottoms, G. (2006). Schools can't wait: Accelerating the redesign of university preparation programs (Vol. 04). Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.
- Herman, J.L., Morris, L.L., & Fitz-Gibbons, C.T. (1987). *Evaluator's handbook*. Sage Publications: Newbury Park, California.
- Kaufman, R.A. & English, F.W. (1979). Needs assessment: Concept and application. Educational Technology Publications, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Retrieved online at <http://books.google.com/ebooks>
- Krueger, R.A. & Casey, M. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McCawley, P.F. (2009). *Methods for conducting an educational needs assessment*. Retrieved online at <http://www.cals.uidaho.edu/edcomm/pdf/BUL/BUL0870.pdf>
- Orr, M. T., Young, M. D., & Rorrer, A. K. (2010). Developing evaluation evidence: A formative and summative evaluation planner for educational leadership *The National Center for the Evaluation of Educational Leadership Preparation and Practice*, . University of Utah: Utah Educational Policy Center and University Council of Educational Administration.
- Young, M., Peterson, G., & Short, P. (2002). The complexity of substantive reform: A call for interdependence among key stakeholders. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 38(2), 137-175.

Authors

Edward J. Fuller, Ann O'Doherty and Michelle D. Young

UCEA

The University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) is an international consortium of universities that offer doctoral programs in educational leadership and administration and are marked by a distinguishing commitment and capacity to lead the field of educational leadership and administration. UCEA has a single standard of excellence for membership: Superior institutional commitment and capacity to provide leadership for the advancement of educational leadership preparation, scholarship, and practice consistent with UCEA's established mission. UCEA's mission is to advance the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of all children and schools. UCEA fulfills this purpose collaboratively by 1) promoting, sponsoring, and disseminating research on the essential problems of practice, 2) improving the preparation and professional development of school leaders and professors, and 3) influencing policy and practice through establishing and fostering collaborative networks.

UCEA encourages membership among universities with the capacity and commitment to participate in research, development, and dissemination activities toward the ends of improving preparatory programs and solving substantial problems in educational leadership and administrative practice. Approximately 1,300 professors in 96 member institutions and over 1,000 additional faculty affiliates are involved in various aspect of the UCEA program.

UCEA headquarters are currently located in the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. The mailing address is UCEA, UVA Curry School of Education, 405 Emmet Street South, Charlottesville, VA, 22904. The phone number is (434) 243-1041. For more information visit the UCEA web page at www.ucea.org.