

Needs Assessment and Root Cause Analysis FAQs

The following is from the California Department of Education (CDE) to introduce local educational agencies (LEAs) a collection of commonly asked questions regarding needs assessments and root cause analysis.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/narcafaq.asp#accordionfaq>

Needs Assessment

1. [What is a needs assessment?](#)

A needs assessment is a tool used to identify a school's and/or LEA's strengths, weaknesses, and the areas in which improvement is needed. A needs assessment is sometimes called:

- o Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA)
- o Segmented Needs Assessment (SNA)
- o Consolidated Needs Assessment
- o Equity audit
- o School Quality Review (SQR)
- o Diagnostic assessment
- o Diagnostic review
- o Diagnostic inquiry

2. [What is a needs assessment for improvement?](#)

A needs assessment for improvement is a systemic process that is used to:

- o Determine strengths and weaknesses of a school and/or LEA
- o Understand the context and constraints of the school and/or LEA
- o Perform a root-cause analysis
- o Develop an improvement plan outlining changes considered most likely to bolster or build on strengths and to remediate weaknesses

A needs assessment should:

- o Be part of an ongoing continuous improvement cycle that includes both long-range performance goals and short-cycle implementation targets, and
- o Include questions at the county office of education level, even if the focus is the LEA level

3. [Why is a needs assessment important?](#)

The needs assessment goes beyond student data to include data on the prevalence of effective (and ineffective) practices. Identifying areas of weakness is an essential first step toward identifying and then addressing root causes of poor performance. Root cause analysis addresses the problem rather than the symptom, eliminates wasted effort, conserves resources, and informs strategy selection.

4. [How do you know what kind of needs assessment to use?](#)

A needs assessment is a point-in-time snapshot. Examples include:

- o Comprehensive Needs Assessment—assessing all aspects of the district and its context (including its county office of education), and/or
- o Segmented Needs Assessment—assessing only one or a few aspects of the district and its context.

Root Analysis

1. [Why is root cause analysis important?](#)

Root cause analysis addresses the **problem**, rather than the **symptom**, eliminates wasted effort, conserves resources, and informs strategy selection.

- o The California School Dashboard identifies **symptoms** of the problem. The **problem** causing those symptoms is revealed through root cause analysis.

2. [What is root cause analysis?](#)

Root cause analysis is part of the needs assessment process. It is a strategy to thoroughly examine practices, processes, and routines to determine their impact on outcomes. It answers the “Why?” behind each identified area of improvement.

- o Root cause is defined as “the deepest underlying cause or causes of positive or negative symptoms within any process that, if dissolved, would result in elimination or substantial reduction of the symptom” (Preuss, 2003, p. 3).

3. [Where does root cause analysis fit into the Continuous Improvement process?](#)

Root cause analysis occurs:

- o *After* gathering and analyzing data
- o *Before* determining findings and creating action plans

4. [Where does root cause analysis fit into the Local Control and Accountability Plan \(LCAP\) process?](#)

Root cause analysis occurs:

- o *After* gathering and analyzing data through the needs assessment process
- o *Before* determining Actions and Services for the LCAP

5. [Who participates in root cause analysis?](#)

Representatives from all stakeholder groups can participate in root cause analysis and may include:

- o California Department of Education personnel
- o County offices of education personnel
- o District personnel
- o Local boards of education
- o Families and community members
- o School personnel
- o Students
- o District-hired external partners
- o Others

6. [What tools are available for root cause analysis?](#)

Examples of some promising [root cause analysis tools](#) include:

- o Fishbone Diagram (using the 5 Whys)
- o Interrelationship Digraph
- o Expert Convening

- o Empathy Interviews
- o Digging Into Data
- o Process Mapping
- o Driver Diagram