 

# Improving Professional Development Offerings: Conducting a Needs Assessment

Professional development (PD) is a systematic process used to strengthen the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a particular workforce. The goal of PD, in the context of CDC DASH priorities, is to help improve health, education, and well-being of youth. It is a critical strategy for changing practice in the school setting to reach the desired outcomes for Program 1807 for sexual health education, sexual health services, and safe and supportive environments. For PD to be most effective and successful, it should be designed and delivered in a manner that addresses the needs of participants.

## What is a Needs Assessment?

A professional development needs assessment is a formal process to gather data to identify the professional development needs of the primary target audience. This information will optimize a professional development program and ensure that professional development is aligned with the needs of the primary target audience as well as the overall goal and mission of an organization. A needs assessment can provide information to help:

* Identify areas that need improvement and clarify issues,
* Identify discrepancies between what is in place and what needs to be in place,
* Determine attitudes and beliefs,
* Determine knowledge level, and
* Determine skill level.

## Conducting a Needs Assessment

A needs assessment should be a thoughtful and purposeful process. Overall, there are four general steps involved in conducting a needs assessment:

1. Plan,
2. Develop Questions,
3. Select Data Collection Method, and
4. Analyze and Prioritize Data for Action.

***Instructions: Use this document as an inventory of key elements to consider,***

***and to document your evidence, as you prepare to conduct your needs assessment.***

### Step 1: Plan

Before a needs assessment is developed and conducted, there are several questions to consider. The answers to these guiding questions will inform decisions about what is asked, how it is asked, and how the information is utilized.

| PLAN |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Guiding Questions to Consider: | √ | Evidence / Notes |
| * What is the primary purpose of the assessment? (What do you need to know?)
 | □ |  |
| * What existing data do you have? What do you already know?

(Review existing and relevant data to determine what you already know, i.e. previous needs assessments, student surveys, observations.) | □ |  |
| * Whose needs are being assessed? Who needs to participate so the results of the assessment are representative?
 | □ |  |
| * What do you have the ability to change?
 | □ |  |
| * How will you use the information you plan to gather?
 | □ |  |
| * What resources are available to conduct a needs assessment (e.g., budget, people, and time)?
 | □ |  |

### Step 2: Develop Questions

The usefulness of a needs assessment is only as good as its questions. Think about the following guiding questions as you develop your needs assessment to ensure you are drafting questions to achieve your intended outcome.

| DEVELOP QUESTIONS |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Guiding Questions to Consider: | √ | Evidence/Notes: |
| * + What should be assessed (e.g., knowledge, attitudes/beliefs, skills, technology needs, leadership ability)?
 | □ |  |
| * + Will the questions yield useful information? (Use simple language to make the question clear.)
 | □ |  |

| DEVELOP QUESTIONS |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Guiding Questions to Consider: | √ | Evidence/Notes: |
| * + Will the respondent be able to answer the questions?
 | □ |  |
| * Is the question *necessary*? (Consider if the answer will provide information you need?)
 | □ |  |
| * What question format is best for gathering information (e.g., multiple choice, open ended, checklist, etc.)?
 | □ |  |

Remember, more questions are not always better. Limit the number of questions to only those that are necessary given the purpose of the needs assessment. It is also important to pilot your questions to verify that the questions are clear and easy to understand and that respondents interpret them in a consistent way.

### Step 3: Select Data Collection Method

A needs assessment may take many different formats. The most common formats include surveys, interviews, focus groups, or key informant interviews. A needs assessment might use one or more data collection formats. The following table shows the pros and cons for these data collection formats.

| DATA COLLECTION  | METHOD |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Data Collection Formats | Pros | Cons |
| **Survey or Questionnaire** | * Easy to administer
* Inexpensive
* Less time consuming
* Reaches large number or respondents
 | * + Doesn’t allow for clarification of questions
* Provides limited answer choices
 |
| **Interview** | * Allows personal interaction
* Obtains in-depth information
* Can be conducted in person or on the phone
 | * Small number of respondents
* Time-consuming
* Can be difficult to analyze
 |
| **Focus Group** | * Allows personal interaction
* Obtains in-depth information
* Generates a group dynamic where interaction can yield richer conversations
* Provides ability to observe nonverbal cues
 | * Can be expensive
* Less able to generalize
* Time-consuming
* Needs experienced moderator
* Generates a group dynamic where participants may be less likely to speak in front of others
 |
| **Key Informant Interview** | * Obtains key insights/knowledge from informants
* Better ensures that minority or less visible audiences are included
* Can help establish rapport
 | * May overlook other perspectives
* Requires interviewers to know who would make good informants
* Not representative
* Gives more room for biased data
 |

| DATA COLLECTION  | METHOD |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Guiding Questions to Consider: | √ | Evidence/Notes: |
| * What format(s) will you utilize for this data collection (check all that apply)?
 | * Survey or Questionnaire
* Interview
* Focus Group
 |  |

### Step 4: Analyze and Prioritize Data for Action

Once you have planned, developed, and conducted a needs assessment, you will need to analyze it and summarize it for this information to be useful and meaningful.

Tips for analyzing data include:

* Look for themes in responses,
* Aggregate data to explore differences in responses (e.g., teachers compared to administrators), and
* Synthesize your data. Think about the connections and meaning from different sources of information.

The data from a needs assessment is most beneficial if it is shared and used to guide decisions and focus future work. After the results are analyzed, identify your professional development priorities keeping in mind the following questions:

| ANALYZE & PRIORITZE DATA |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Guiding Questions to Consider: | √ | Evidence/Notes: |
| * What areas of need are worth addressing?
 | □ |  |
| * Who thinks it is important?
 | □ |  |
| * What is the extent of the need (how many people does it impact)?
 | □ |  |

| ANALYZE & PRIORITZE DATA |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Guiding Questions to Consider: | √ | Evidence/Notes: |
| * Is there urgency related to particular needs?
 | □ |  |
| * Can you effectively address identified needs?
 | □ |  |
| * Do you need additional information to clarify needs?
 | □ |  |

### Next Steps: Identify Solutions and Opportunities for Action

Lastly, given the results of the needs assessment and the prioritization of professional development needs, the next step is to identify solutions and opportunities for action to address the professional development needs of the target audience.

Information from a needs assessment can be used as the foundation and guide for determining such things as:

1. Professional development goals and objectives,
2. The design and content of professional development offerings,
3. Strategies for follow-up support and technical assistance, and
4. Evaluation activities.

Email dash-pd@cdc.gov to request assistance with these steps and additional resources for developing a needs assessment.

Sources:

* Davis, M. & Harmacek, M. (1997). *School health needs assessment: A starter kit*. Denver, CO: University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.
* Romney, V.A. (1996). *Strategic planning and needs assessment.* Fairfax, VA: Decker and Associates.
* Rouda, R.H. & Kusy, M.E. (1995). *Needs assessment: The first step.* Retrieved online on 1/25/2006 at
* [http://alumnus.caltech.edu/~rouda/T2\_NA.html.](http://alumnus.caltech.edu/~rouda/T2_NA.html)
* Tobey, D. (2005). *Needs assessment basics.* Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development.
* Wolf Schwartz, M. (2001, October). Needs assessment pointers. *Latitudes, 10 (5)*.
* Cuiccio, C & Husby-Slater, M. (2018) Needs Assessment Guidebook: Supporting the Development of District and School Needs Assessments. Retrieved online 7/10/2019. <https://statesupportnetwork.ed.gov/resources/needs-assessment-guidebook>
* Killion, Joellen Needs Assessments for Professional Learning. National Staff Development Council. nsdc.org
* Killion, Joellen & Kennedy J. (2012) The Sweet Spot in Professional Learning: When student learning goals and educator performance standards align, everything is possible. Retrieved online 7/10/2019. <https://learningforward.org/journal/october-2012-issue/sweet-spot-professional-learning/>

Modified by the ICF-CDC DASH Professional Learning Collaborative (PLC), 2019. Adapted from Conducting a Needs Assessment | ETR-CDC DASH Professional Learning Collaborative (PLC), 2014. Original version created by RMC Health-CDC DASH Professional Development Partnership (PDP), 2009.