

Walking YZ Educational Consulting



Dear Fellow Educator,

Let me introduce myself-my name is Jack O'Connor, owner of Walking YZ Educational Consulting. I have spent over 33 years as a teacher, principal, and Federal Grants director across several Montana school districts and the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI). Over my educational career I have taught grades 5, 6, combo 5/6, served as a K-8 principal, been the OPI school improvement director, assistant Title I director, Title I director, and finally Federal Programs Unit Manager overseeing Title I, Parts A, C, and D; Title II, Part A; Title III, Part A; Title VB; and Title IX (McKinney-Vento Homeless Education). During this time, I also served as president of the National Association of ESEA State Program Administrators (NAESPA), one of the most prestigious educational advocacy groups in the country.

Over the past eighteen years at the OPI, I have had the honor and privilege of working with many of you to support federal program and grant management in your districts and schools. My goal in starting Walking YZ Educational Consulting is to continue to provide outstanding service in the development, implementation, and evaluation of high-quality educational programs, federal grant management, working to move targeted assistance Title I programs to schoolwide Title I programs, developing and implementing comprehensive needs assessments, and assisting districts in completing state-level federal programs monitoring.

I will be working through the Western Montana Professional Learning Collaborative (WMPLC) to assist interested districts. The complete description of what I provide through Walking YZ Educational Consulting, fee structures, and the link to register for services can be found here: <https://www.wmplc.org/walking-yz-educational-consulting-services.html>.

As an introductory service, I am providing districts and schools with the following overview of developing and completing Comprehensive Needs Assessments (CNAs). There are also two sample needs assessments that I encourage you to use as the foundation for developing your own CNAs. If you have any questions, please contact me at walkingzyeducation@gmail.com. I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Overview of a Comprehensive Needs Assessment

The Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) is designed to assist districts and schools in identifying both strengths and weaknesses in their academic program and to determine what steps need to be taken to improve overall performance. CNAs are usually associated with school improvement efforts, and in many cases, are seen as ways to point out "failures" within a system. When I have discussed CNAs with schools over the years, I have seen many roll their eyes, and in some cases, I have seen looks of terror. In one situation, a teacher said to me, "Oh great! Just another way to tell us how bad we suck!" However, this is not the goal of the CNA.

All systems, whether they are businesses, schools, or even service organizations, need to develop CNAs to determine a path for continual improvement and growth. To begin, let's discuss the role of growth. *Everything grows...*

Seeds grow into plants, babies grow into adults, and so does our knowledge in science. This is a normal part of life. In our natural world, when growth ends, so does life. In the business world companies grow, and when one can grow no more, stagnation occurs, and eventually it closes. Schools must also grow. Not in a physical sense, of course, but growth

for improved instruction, increased student outcomes, and in preparing students for an ever-changing economy. We can use a CNA to show us where we can grow. *People want to improve...*

In the business world, people want to improve production to increase profits. Athletes want to become bigger and stronger to defeat the competition. Doctors want to increase their skills to save lives. Schools must also improve. This is normal. Maintaining the status quo has never worked, and yet we as educators try so hard to hold on to it. If it doesn't work in any other system, why would we think it could in the most important one that we have? As educators we must improve our knowledge of instruction, assessment, and evaluation to increase student achievement.

Before beginning the CNA process, a change in mind-set must occur. In the opening paragraph, one teacher's view of the needs assessment was that it was just another way to show failure. As this is a common belief, we need to change it. Let's start it with the question, "What are we doing right?" When districts and schools look at the results of a CNA, we first want to use it to see what we are doing well. Even schools that are in comprehensive and targeted improvement under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 are doing many things effectively. If we begin here, we can look at the CNA, find our successes, examine why they are that way, and use those strategies to improve our areas of weakness.

One of the next concepts surrounding the use of a CNA that must change is the belief that a CNA must be long. Why? Districts aren't performing a scientific analysis of the data. It's not a research paper for a doctoral dissertation. It doesn't need to be valid and reliable. It just needs to be reliable! Does a survey really need ten questions looking for a single data point, all phrased slightly different from each other? For example, let's take the question, "Do you like the color maroon?" Later, do we also need to ask, "Is maroon a favorite color of yours?", and "Would you buy a maroon car?" and finally, "Is maroon a pleasing color to you?" Seriously, who has time for this? If we take the original question, put out a survey to a hundred people, and 65 say, "Yes;" I am sure that we can extrapolate that people like the color maroon!

Our next idea that must change is that needs assessments should have complex language. NO! Like newspaper articles, CNAs should be written at a six to eighth grade reading level. As educators, we have a terrible habit of using acronyms, flowery language, and jargon related to our field, and no one outside of our group knows what we are talking about. Here are some common educational buzzwords and acronyms: agency, robust, rigor, asynchronous learning, fidelity, IDEA, MTSS, PBIS-the list goes on and on. A recent question that I saw in a section of a CNA for parents was, "Do you believe that the teachers in your school teach with fidelity?" In another survey I read, "Do you believe that the PBIS program has been implemented effectively in your school?" How would any parent respond to those two questions? The answer, and we all know it, is that they can't. Yet we see them all the time.

When we begin to think about a district/school Comprehensive Needs Assessment, there are three main areas that need to be addressed. These data points are district/school climate, academic/instructional program, and use of fiscal resources to support the mission of the district/school. In the next couple of paragraphs, we will discuss all three.

School Climate Survey

This type of survey refers to the qualities of the school environment that are experienced by district and school staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders. It is qualitative in nature. It is the impressions of the stakeholders of the teaching and learning environment of the school. How stakeholders *feel* about their school plays an important role in family engagement, and family engagement plays an important role in student success.

Academic/Instructional Program

This portion of the CNA deals with the actual instructional component, and how it affects student growth. It is more quantitative in nature. In this portion of the CNA, districts and schools look at testing data to inform instruction. It is imperative that the data used is not from a one-and-done testing source, and that it compares the same testing group, for example, the 4th grade class of 2021, which would be the 5th grade class of 2022, and then finally the 6th grade class of 2023. Districts/schools need to look at their own benchmark assessments to be able to measure growth of a specific group or grade level over time. Not only can this data be used to track student group performance, but it will also show strengths and weakness in grade spans.

Fiscal Resources

The goal of school is to graduate students to either go to work, higher education, or the military with the proper skills to be successful. Before the advent of federal funding in education, state and local funds were used to run districts and schools. These dollars paid for all aspects of the educational program, including any district-led special initiatives. Even now, this is the basis for all funding for a school program.

When federal funds were added to the mix, it was under the condition that these dollars were supplemental in nature, and they were to be used to run additional programs to assist certain student groups. Title I, Part A was the first. Over the years, Title I, Parts C and D were added, along with Title II, Part A; Title III, Part A; Title IV A & B; and Title V, A & B, to name a few. By law, a district must be able to open its doors, run a high-quality educational program, and pay all its obligations without federal funding. After this, federal funds can be used to run additional programs under the parameters of the grant for specific purposes or student groups. While performing a CNA, a district must look at these federal funds and track the success of the program to ensure that they are being used to run a program, and they are not just being used as a funding source.

Title I, Part A, is the largest federal educational grant program. These funds are to be used to add additional educational support programs to students who are slightly behind their peers academically. Students are identified through various testing means, and then they are to be given academic assistance to aid in closing the achievement gaps they have with their classmates. During the needs assessment process, the district/school should be reviewing the data looking at the number of identified Title I students, how long that child was receiving Title I services, how the child was exited from services, and whether the student returned to Title I services in the area originally identified, or if it was in another area. Furthermore, this same process should also be done in examining how state and local funds are being used to improve student outcomes.

Comprehensive Needs Assessment Process

After we have considered all the previous information, districts/schools can start the process of developing the actual assessment tool. This team should consist of district/school administration, teacher leaders, parents (not parents who are also teachers in the system), and if applicable, students. First, we start with what information we want to learn, then we determine our audience, and finally we put the assessment together. The last step is figuring out a time to complete the assessment. For students, this can be done in class. Information needed from the staff can be collected during a PIR day. Data from parents can be obtained during an open house, parent-teacher conference, or family engagement night.

Next, we need to look at the number of questions needed. We need a balance of the number of questions to get the information needed, and the number of questions that won't try the patience of the person taking the survey. A recent Comprehensive Needs Assessment that I saw contained the following number of questions per group:

School Board Member: 59 questions
District Administrator/Principal: 157 questions
Certified Staff/Teacher: 139 questions
Non-Certified Staff/Support Staff: 75 questions
Parent/Guardian: 55 questions
Student Grades 9-12: 20 questions
Student Grades 5-8: 15 questions
Business Partner: 22 questions

As you can plainly see, the number of questions is well beyond what anyone taking the CNA would tolerate. Would a parent really want to respond to over 50 questions? How about an instructor who not only has to teach six classes, but who is also the sophomore class advisor and the JV basketball coach? Maybe your principal has the time for 150+? None of these scenarios are likely. What is a reasonable number? Each district/school is different, and that must be the first consideration. Here are some more appropriate numbers that would give the same information, and not annoy the stakeholders who are vital to the success of the improvement plans that districts are trying to put into place. Do note, however, that I believe these are the maximum number. Districts/schools should feel free to use the number of questions that the system needs to gather the data required.

School Board Member: 20 questions
District Administrator/Principal: 25 questions
Certified Staff/Teacher: 20 questions
Non-Certified Staff/Support Staff: 10 questions
Parent/Guardian: 10 questions
Student Grades 9-12: 10 questions
Student Grades 5-8: 5 questions
Business Partner: 10 questions

Districts/schools also know their clientele. When designing the CNA, the age, educational levels, career options, cultural norms, etc., must also be taken into consideration. The types and numbers of questions needed will differ between Missoula and Browning, Browning and Fairfield, Fairfield and Box Elder, and Box Elder and Woodman. Comprehensive Needs Assessments should also contain a mixture of Yes or No (T/F) responses along with some that are open-ended and require a short answer. For example, "I feel welcome in my child's school." Then give the option of letting the parent/guardian tell you why or why not. Below are the response choices for the aforementioned excessive CNA:

Scoring each statement:

Each question will be rated from 1-4, please see the description for each number below.

- 1 = I don't know or not being implemented
- 2 = Basic Implementation
- 3 = Proficient Implementation
- 4 = Effective or Sustained Practice

Earlier, we discussed educational terms and jargon. What do these statements mean? What does implement imply? In a more urban setting, implement might mean "to put into action." In the small, rural community where I grew up,

“implement” is something that you buy at the local John Deere dealership. How about basic or proficient? Effective and sustained? Are these terms the public would understand? Would a teacher? Probably not!

As a fellow educator, I know that you are busy. In this post COVID world where things are upside down, our workloads have increased, and the stress has become unimaginable, districts/schools are looking for solutions that are simple or canned. While a prewritten CNA would be optimal, when looking at all the factors stated earlier (education level of the stakeholders, type of CNA needed, length of the survey, etc.), this may not be completely feasible. However, I have developed a quick open response assessment below that districts/schools may find useful as a starting point, or one that may be used as it gathers much of the data needed to begin improvement planning.

District Administration/Principals

1. When considering your school’s student achievement results, what is working? (List assessments used.)
2. I feel that the district/school has the needed testing data to make the proper decisions regarding teaching and learning.
3. In my opinion, what needs to be improved to increase student achievement across the school?
4. As you think about student achievement in your school, what new school-wide planning or research-based strategies for supporting higher student achievement do you want to implement?
5. Identify the three most important research-based instructional strategies and the three most important instructional interventions to increase student achievement.

Instructional strategies	Instructional interventions
a.	a.
b.	b.
c.	c.
6. What professional development strategies will promote better results?
7. In my opinion, the district/school is using state, local, and federal funds to increase student learning in an effective manner.

Classroom Teacher

1. When considering your students and student achievement results across your school, what works?
 2. In my opinion, what needs to be improved to increase student achievement in your classroom and the school?
 3. As you think about student achievement in your grade level team, what long term planning or ideas do you have for supporting higher student achievement?
 4. What instructional intervention is most successful in your classroom?
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5. What is your greatest professional development need?
6. I feel that my concerns are being addressed.
7. In my opinion, the district/school is using state, local, and federal funds to increase student learning in an effective manner.

Parent/Community/School Board

1. When considering students and student achievement results across your school or in the district, what works?
2. In my opinion, what needs to be improved to increase student achievement across the schools and the district?
3. As you think about student achievement across the district, what long term planning or ideas do you have for supporting higher student achievement in the schools?
4. I feel welcome at my child's school.
5. I believe that my child's classroom teacher(s) have high expectations.
6. In my opinion, the district/school is using state, local, and federal funds to increase student learning in an effective manner.

Student

1. Do you feel safe at school?
2. Are your teachers giving you the tools to be successful?
3. What changes do you feel need to be made for all students to learn?

Title II, Part A Needs Assessment

As many of you know, the OPI has begun requiring districts to upload a needs assessment in Egrants when using Title II, Part A funds for professional development. It is important to remember that federal law under the ESEA/ESSA Act of 2015 requires districts to do this yearly. This needs assessment must be able to show that the district has looked at its data to determine which type(s) of professional development are needed to improve student outcomes. Just like the CNAs we have discussed earlier; this one does not have to be complex. The needs assessment for Title II, Part A should look at three main areas: district-level needs, school-level needs, and individual teacher needs. We will discuss each below.

District-level needs:

Districts have strengths and weaknesses. Some things are done well, and some things need improvement. Districts should look at data to determine what they are. An example could be looking at attendance data. If the district notices that students are not attending regularly, then efforts could be made to find out why and remedy the situation.

School-level needs:

Individual schools also have strengths and weaknesses, even within a district. A district with multiple elementary schools will see a variety of different needs. One school may have strong math scores yet be lower in reading. A school ten blocks away may see just the opposite. Districts would use testing data (from multiple sources) to determine a course of action for professional development.

Teacher growth plans:

Teachers need to improve, it's part of the job. While most teachers do an exceptional job of educating students, areas for growth are always there. Part of the annual evaluation process for district/school staff should include looking at testing or other data to determine areas where a teacher needs professional development. This could be based upon learning more content, improving teaching methodologies, or even improvement in classroom management.

Title II, Part A Professional Development Sample Needs Assessment

Data Source(s):

- 1. _____
- 2. _____

District/School/Teacher Identified Needs:

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

- 1) How will this activity/project Improve and increase teachers' knowledge of the subjects they teach?

- 2) Explain how this activity/project is of high quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom focused.

- 3) Explain how this activity/project is ongoing and not just a one-time workshop or conference.

- 4) How does this activity/project advance teacher understanding of effective instructional strategies that improve teacher practice?

In closing, I believe that educators have amazing ideas that should be shared. Therefore, share! No educator works in a vacuum. When you meet, tell each other your ideas! Bring your CNA, and then give it to your colleagues. By working together, we can develop CNAs that are effective in improving student achievement across our great state.
