Needs Assessment Toolkit

Why a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is a systematic process used to understand and create a profile of a community school's needs. Without a current and comprehensive needs assessment, a community school is less likely to provide offerings or foster partnerships that effectively address risks and promote opportunities for all of its students and families. The purpose of the needs assessment is NOT to rigorously or scientifically evaluate the impact of individual programs, strategies and curricula, but instead to gather a wide range of information that will inform and drive decisions about the community school's programming and operations.

How was the Needs Assessment Toolkit developed?

This Toolkit was developed by the Children's Aid Society National Center for Community Schools in partnership with the leadership and staff of the Chicago Public Schools Community School Initiative (CSI), an advisory group comprised of representatives from key CSI Lead Agencies and the New York-based research firm ActKnowledge. The Toolkit builds on the collective strengths and experiences of all of the aforementioned and includes adaptations of the Plus 50 Needs Assessment Toolkit developed by the American Association of Community Colleges.

What's included in the Toolkit?

The Toolkit was designed to be user-friendly and as brief as possible. It is organized around the key steps of the needs assessment process, which are listed below and best completed in sequence:

1. Getting Started
2. Archival Data Review
3. Initial Analysis
4. Surveys
5. Key Informant Interviews
6. Focus Groups
7. Final Analysis
8. Reporting

Depending on your community school's practice, you may already have some of the above steps in place, in which case it is entirely appropriate to include those existing resources into this process. Each step is described in the same format. You will see the following under each:

Tasks: Key activities or strategies that should be taken
Tips: Best practice suggestions to consider and pitfalls to avoid
Tools: Worksheets or sample instruments that can be used to support the process

The Needs Assessment Toolkit is available in electronic (.pdf) format. Additionally, all of the tools are available in editable electronic format (.docx) and can be easily adapted to meet your particular needs.

Step 1: Getting Started

Tasks	❑ Convene the Advisory Council ❑ Revisit the Advisory Council's mission/purpose and consider whether to add members ❑ Conduct a Readiness Self-Assessment
Tips	• You should not need to create a new team to take on the data gathering and analysis responsibilities. Conducting needs assessments should be one of the core functions of the community school's Advisory Council. The process described in this Toolkit may serve as an opportunity to reengage key stakeholders in your school and neighborhood and activate your Advisory Council. • Consider the existing diversity of experience, skills and perspectives of the Advisory Council to help you identify which potential new members you need. • One person should act as the project manager to keep track of the overall process and keep team members accountable.
Tools	• Building Your Team Worksheet • Readiness Self-Assessment Worksheet

Step 2: Archival Data Review

Tasks	• Gather and record key information from existing data sources (such as school suspension rates, after-school attendance, community health statistics, etc.) • Manipulate existing data sources to deepen your understanding (determining the chronic absence rates of English Language Learners, for example, will require some reworking of existing data sets) • Complete the Archival Data Collection Worksheet
Tips	• Make full use of the School Profile and Early Warning Indicator reports provided by Chicago Public Schools • As you collect and record each datum, new questions will likely come to mind, as might concerns about the accuracy of the data. Record those questions, concerns and other thoughts on the Worksheet. • Add Need Indicators to the worksheet as needed and appropriate. Blank rows have been inserted for this purpose.
Tools	• Archival Data Collection Worksheet

Step 3: Initial Analysis

Tasks	☐ Convene Advisory Council to review the Archival Data ☐ Identify the top five high priority needs that emerge from the review ☐ Brainstorm particular questions that should be considered for the survey, interview and focus group steps ☐ Identify the key informants to be interviewed in Step 5
Tips	• Remember that this is an *initial* analysis and that you are not expected to have findings at this point. The purpose, instead, is to collectively identify patterns, see connections between the need indicators and begin to narrow the focus of your needs assessment.
Tools	• Archival Data Collection Worksheet

Step 4: Surveys

Tasks	☐ Develop surveys for key constituent groups. Surveys of students, parents and teachers are required, but others may be added. ☐ Administer the surveys ☐ Compile survey results
Tips	• Questions should be mostly closed-ended (multiple choice, true/false, Likert Scales, etc.) and limited in number. • Paper vs. Online (using the method or combination of methods most likely to ensure a high response rate) • Use vocabulary and language that is appropriate for each audience. In all cases, avoid using technical language and terminology. • Particularly for youth surveys, you might consider offerings incentives. • Decide whether to use a paper-based or web-based survey (or both). Each has its advantages and disadvantages, but web-based surveys are especially convenient because they can tally up and graphically present responses automatically. There are free and low-cost solutions out there. When using paper, it may make sense to record the responses on an electronic spreadsheet . • Timing the administration of surveys to coincide with, for example, faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences, after-school special events may increase the yield of responses
Tools	• Archival Data Collection Worksheet (completed, from Step 3) • Sample Surveys

Step 5: Key Informant Interviews

Tasks	❑ Conduct Key Informant Interviews ❑ Summarize findings
Tips	• Keep interviews to 30-45 minutes long • Decide whether you want the same person conducting all of the interviews for the sake of consistency. • Do your best to frame questions in a way that elicits the key informants' interpretation of the data and perhaps some suggestions for addressing the needs • Avoid making the informant feel defensive; keep the conversation focused on the ways in which students may require supports and opportunities, and away from what they themselves have or have not done to address those needs
Tools	• Key informant interview Worksheet • Sample Interview Questions

Step 6: Focus Groups

Tasks	❑ Conduct Focus Groups. Groups including students, parents and teachers are required, but others may be added. ❑ Summarize findings
Tips	• Focus groups are generally most lively and effective when composed of 6 to 12 people • They should last between 45 to 60 minutes. Consider your audience when scheduling the focus groups (i.e., evenings or weekends for working parents, in-school hours for teachers if possible) • You will need a facilitator and a note taker. Do not combine these roles as it is exceedingly difficult to do both simultaneously. • Prepare a scripted introduction and 8 to 12 questions in advance (samples are provided for you). Unlike with the surveys, questions in focus groups should be open-ended and should encourage participants to elaborate. Ask participants to follow up on and react to each others' responses. Stay away from yes/no questions.
Tools	• Sample Focus Group scripts and questions

Step 7: Final Analysis

Tasks	❑ Convene Advisory Council to review summaries of surveys, interviews and focus groups ❑ Determine three priority need areas for the next 12 months ❑ Review and brainstorm additional recommendations for how to address the needs
Tips	• Advisory Council members should receive – in advance of the final analysis convening – summaries of the survey, interview and focus group results • Schedule enough time to have a thorough reflection and discussion. If needed, schedule a second session to ensure completion.
Tools	• Needs Assessment Analysis Worksheet

Step 8: Reporting

Tasks	❑ Write Need Assessment Report ❑ Disseminate Report
Tips	• Resist the urge to over think, over format or over produce this report. Bulleted lists are more readable – and therefore more actionable – than narrative descriptions • Include completed worksheets from the toolkit as supporting material in an appendix. The report itself should focus on your identified findings, priorities and recommendations.
Tools	• Needs Assessment Analysis Worksheet (completed, from Step 7) • Needs Assessment Report Outline