

Singular Statewide Needs Assessment Series Transcript

Part 6: District Lessons Learned

- Cary Cuiccio: Hello, and welcome back to our podcast series on developing a singular statewide needs assessment. This is Cary Cuiccio from the State Support Network. Yesterday, we talked with the Georgia and Arizona teams about the guidance and supports they provided to districts and schools to help them use their needs assessment results to drive meaningful, long-term change. Today, we are hearing from the Georgia and Arizona teams about how they engaged districts and schools in the development of their comprehensive needs assessments, as well as their thoughts on overall lessons learned about the process they've engaged in thus far. We'll begin our conversation with John Wight and Craig Geers from the Georgia Department of Education.
- Craig Geers: This is Craig Geers speaking, and I'm currently the Associate Superintendent for Federal Programs at [the Georgia Department of Education].
- John Wight: Yes, and this is John Wight. I'm the Director of Federal Programs here at [the Georgia Department of Education].
- Cary Cuiccio: My last question to you is really about how you supported the districts through this process in terms of the professional development you provided and the additional resources you provided to help folks understand what the shift in expectations meant, this whole idea of a consolidated needs assessment and your expectations for how they would go about it. You mentioned some webinars; can you tell us a little bit more about that?
- John Wight: Yeah. So, the [webinar series course](#) that we had was through the winter and spring of 2017. We did a large summer conference in June, where we pulled everybody together and we kind of brought to it a consistent format and consistent messaging. That was last summer; since then, we've [attended] various speaking opportunities at large conferences or at the regional meetings. It's not that we've had a specific outline of how we wanted to continue to message it, but when we have messaged it, it's been through the systems framework. So, we have been consistent in what we say.

Craig Geers: Yeah.

John Wight: We have more opportunities; we have another conference coming up in a couple of weeks. We'll do the same thing; we'll continue to bring the conversation up. I think that we've done a lot of branding of our framework.

Craig Geers: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John Wight: So that whenever they're communicated, we're communicating with our LEAs [local education agencies], or they're communicating with us, that [framework] is visually there; they are seeing this framework and then we're also talking through it.

Cary Cuiccio: Absolutely. So, I'm hearing that the most important thing is that this remains an ongoing part of your regular conversations with the districts; this wasn't ever treated as this one thing you have to do in this few-week period.

John Wight: Never.

Cary Cuiccio: And then you don't have to think about it again until next year. This is just now part of the way you work together.

Craig Geers: Yup, yup. It really is.

John White: We've morphed our process into this online platform. You know, Craig and I, we're a little bit older, so we're used to... We don't necessarily take advantage of the, of how the new technology of online working collaboration can really streamline work. We were really slow there.

Craig Gears: Yeah.

John Wight: Moving [our PDFs online](#) has really helped us see more and more ways that we can streamline to make it easy for us to do our coordination. And I encourage SEAs [state education agencies] to always think about streamlining the work and using technology to help it. Like, right now, Craig and I were talking today. We're having to use, because we're still developing our SLDS [statewide longitudinal data system], so we're having to do an offsite coordination tracking form that we know we're going to drop as soon as they build another module for us, but it's just an example of how we can always continue to use online resources, and, in the education world, we need to really see how we can use that to [our] benefit.

Craig Gears: All that to say, if the state is considering doing this, the first person they need to talk to is their IT program and see how they can help you. You

know, all you have to do is share with them what you're envisioning, and it's remarkable what they can tell you they can do.

John Wight: Exactly. I mean, Craig and I are still using voice-over PowerPoint; now those, they have their place, but that's old. Now, we use Google Docs and we think we're like in the 22nd century.

Craig Geers: Ha-ha.

John Wight: You know, we're not. So, yes, there's all sorts of things we don't know about that we're learning about that are going to help us.

Craig Geers: Right. And the best part is, when you collaborate with your districts and they have input into that as well, it really becomes a technology tool that they feel like they own and they enjoy using. I mean, we are not asking, we are not forcing our districts at all to use our online application. But we've got over half of our districts voluntarily using this, going through the needs assessment process and developing both the district- and school-level plan through our online tool. I would encourage states, yeah, talk to your IT folks and see how they can help you.

John Wight: And [stay] connected to your state longitudinal database, whatever you have.

Craig Geers: Yeah, because all the data right there, the systems already have access to them; it's a logical place for the systems to do their CNA [comprehensive needs assessment] work.

Cary Cuiccio: Excellent. I can't thank you two enough. This has really been terrific listening to you talk. I thought that I knew what was going on in Georgia fairly well, and I learned so much, and I know that our listeners are going to learn even more. Thanks for sharing.

Craig Geers: Sure, we... Yeah, it's our pleasure.

Cary Cuiccio: That was John Wight and Craig Geers of the Georgia Department of Education. To learn more about Georgia's work and to see examples of the processes they've used, please see the links embedded on the State Support Network website. Next, we'll hear from the Arizona Department of Education. Devon, can you introduce yourself please?

Devon Isherwood: This is Devon Isherwood, and I'm the Deputy Associate Superintendent for Support and Innovation, which is school improvement for the Arizona Department of Education.

Cary Cuiccio: I know that district engagement is really an important component of this process at all of [the] stages, and you talked about how you had the districts involved in the conversation right from the beginning when you were talking about, "What is the thing we're going to do? How are we going to structure it?" Are there any other thoughts you have about the district involvement in the work that feel important?

Devon
Isherwood: Keeping them informed of where we were and where we are going. Especially in Arizona; we have very small districts and we have large districts. By virtue of size, the large districts have more informal political power. We make sure that those key districts had as much information as we had. We were very, very transparent. When we took [our CNA] out to mega- and leading-change conferences, we asked them, "What should we cut?" They said, "It's too long, but don't cut anything. What you have is the important stuff."

Cary Cuiccio: That's a really important message to hear. I hear so often people saying, "We need to make this simpler for districts." Simpler seems to mean shorter, we want this to take them less time, but that's not what I'm hearing happened.

Devon
Isherwood: No. It was really interesting because the first time we took it out to the mega-conference, we anticipated this, "Oh my gosh, this is going to take us forever." Then, after three hours of working with it in a very structured process, their answer was, "Don't cut anything." Then, it was consistent from there. We don't hear complaints about the length of it anymore.

Cary Cuiccio: That's excellent. What you're learning is it's worth it to do the whole thing. It's worth it to do it right.

Devon
Isherwood: Yes.

Cary Cuiccio: I really appreciate your sharing your experience because I know that this has been a lot of hard work on your part and you were really blazing a trail with this. As you look back over your journey, is there any particular piece of advice you would have for a state that is just starting out on this process?

Devon
Isherwood: Yes, a couple of things. One, make a visual as soon as you can. As soon as you have the structure and the big picture overall, to communicate that vision in a visual [way], I think, is really important. We put it off and put it off and put it off, and I think it would've been helpful. The second thing is that we had two separate committees. We had the CNA IAP [Integrated Action Plan] work group and then we had a professional learning team that came to our CNA meetings, but their job was to plan the PD [professional

development]. I would make that one group, so that the PD follows the process that you're going through, so you take the people internally along the same journey that the committee is going on. So, at the end, they have a fuller understanding of what's going on; then, they can take it to the field.

Cary Cuiccio: So, Devon, what was the lift required to get this done?

Devon
Isherwood: I was working 80-hour weeks when we were working on this at the second half, literally because I had my other job. It became such a passion to me; it was going to be done right if my name's attached to it.

Cary Cuiccio: Because, it's sort of like I said in the beginning, this is really a systems alignment process that masquerades as a task about writing questions.

Devon
Isherwood: Like we tell the schools, it's the process that has the power.

Cary Cuiccio: If another state did that, they would absolutely gain the benefit of all of your hard work, but what would they miss out on?

Devon
Isherwood: They would miss out on the most important part of it.

Cary Cuiccio: The most important part being the process, the conversations you have about what are our exceptions, how do we convey these expectations, what process is important, how are we going to support people through this?

Devon
Isherwood: We gained such great knowledge about... We think we know what the other program managers are doing, but we don't. It un-siloed the agency to a degree. We hope to add program areas next year, more program areas next year. We were going to do it this year, but we decided to wait until the new tool was done.

Cary Cuiccio: Thank you to both Craig Geers and John Wight, from the Georgia Department of Education, and Devon Isherwood, from the Arizona Department of Education, for sharing their experiences. Today's conversation on the role of stakeholder engagement and discussion of lessons learned wraps up this series on the development of a singular comprehensive needs assessment process. If you have any questions about this series or are interested in more resources that can help guide development of an effective needs assessment, please contact the State Support Network directly on our website at statesupportnetwork.ed.gov. Thanks for joining us!