

Assessing Community Needs: Strategies for Charter Schools and Authorizers

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Introduction

What Is a Community Needs Assessment?

A community needs assessment is a systematic process for identifying the strengths and areas of need within a defined community. This assessment may be comprehensive or narrow in scope, addressing a wide range of issues or a particular area of need, such as education or health. Conducting needs assessments is a common practice in many fields, including education. At the school, district, state, and federal levels, educators conduct formal and informal needs assessments regularly when evaluating programs, determining budgets, and planning for improvement. Within the education sector, community needs assessments can be used to inform the development and design of school models, programs, and services. Beyond the education sector, community needs assessments are frequently implemented in the social services and health care industries, which have many parallels to education. Across all sectors, defining the community of interest may go beyond defining a geographic area.

Why Focus on the Charter Sector?

Many charter schools and charter authorizers have been holding public hearings and assessing community needs in some capacity for years. In fact, part of the original intent behind the creation of charter schools was that families should have choices among their schooling options and should be able to select a school that meets their needs. Community engagement is typically required by state charter statutes and by authorizers prior to a new charter school submitting an application. However, many of these community engagement requirements are minimal and do not necessitate a deep assessment of community needs.

Recently, there has been a greater focus within the charter sector on ensuring that charter schools meet the needs of the students and families they serve and on new charter schools engaging communities authentically and building on their assets. For example, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has an initiative focused on community-centered authorizing. Among NACSA's guiding principles for community-centered authorizing are the following: "1. Communities have great ideas about their kids' educational aspirations and needs," "2. All communities—including those that have been neglected for decades—have important untapped assets," and "3. Families know their children the best, including what learning environments will work for them."¹ This new approach to authorizing requires a more intensive community needs assessment and engagement process than has been typical in the past.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also motivated charter schools and authorizers to assess community needs more frequently and with more intensity. During the pandemic, it has been clear that students, particularly those in underresourced communities, have faced significant barriers to learning. Many schools and authorizers have realized that they need to assess and address the needs of students and families beyond education in order to remove barriers to learning.² Therefore, this brief provides guidance to both charter school operators and authorizers about promising practices for assessing community needs. The brief is part of a body of work that focuses on the role of community needs and interests in charter authorizing. A [related brief](#)³ supports charter school authorizers in making authorization decisions that incorporate the needs of local communities and includes an analysis of the impact of opening a new charter school on traditional public schools and the school district as a whole.

This brief begins by summarizing how other fields assess community needs, reviewing documentation and practices from the social services, health care, and education sectors. It then provides suggested steps for assessing community needs. Finally, to showcase what this work can look like on the ground, the brief provides examples of strategies that two charter schools and two charter authorizing organizations have used for assessing community needs.

Methods for Assessing Community Needs From Social Services, Health Care, and Education

What Is Known From Social Services and Health Care Programs?

Community needs assessments are frequently used within the social services and health care sectors in the United States and typically have common components. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides funds through its [Community Block Grant](#)⁴ to address the causes and conditions of poverty in communities and requires that a community needs assessment be conducted by organizations receiving funds. The National Association for State Community Services Programs provides guidance for conducting a community needs assessment for this program.⁵ Steps include defining the community and broad categories of need to assess; creating an assessment plan and designating a team to implement the plan; creating a data collection plan, including identifying data collection methods and sources; implementing the needs assessment; and analyzing and reporting the data.

Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a [community needs assessment workbook](#)⁶ that walks users through the process of planning a community needs assessment, reviewing data collected from the assessment, and developing a community action plan.⁷ The section on planning for a community needs assessment includes a significant focus on first defining what a community is, as a community is not always defined by geographical boundaries. In addition to focusing on defining the community, the workbook emphasizes the importance of assembling a diverse team to assess community needs, whose tasks include identifying the different sectors within the community and developing questions to ask members of each sector. Once a community needs assessment has been conducted and data have been reviewed and summarized, the CDC workbook recommends focusing on how to use the data to develop a community action plan that prioritizes needs and suggests strategies for improvement.

Many government and nonprofit organizations throughout the country conduct needs assessments focused on community health. For example, the county health departments in Boone County, Missouri, and Ottawa County, Kansas, conducted community needs assessments

to identify the highest-priority needs of their communities and to see how their services could be improved. Both departments established a clear process that began with surveying citizens of the counties in order to identify what services were of the highest need. They then analyzed the data and created improvement plans. In both counties, the needs assessments were used by the health departments to help them reflect on the progress they had made in reaching their internal goals and to prioritize listening to what citizens identified as their health care needs.

Although there is a great deal that can be learned from the social services and health care sectors about conducting community needs assessments, there are also many examples of these assessments being conducted within the education sector.

What Is Known From the Education Sector?

Engaging in a deep assessment of community needs is not a common practice in education, but assessing school and student needs is a common practice for informing the design of school improvement efforts and other programs and services. These types of schoolwide needs assessments can inform a community needs assessment, but they generally do not include an in-depth assessment of community needs.

Federal and state programs often require or encourage schools and districts to conduct needs assessments to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas of improvement. To identify areas of improvement, a needs assessment includes diving deeply into the school's practices, collecting a wide range of data, and conducting a root-cause analysis. The Center for School Turnaround & Improvement states that needs assessments in school improvement efforts provide a point-in-time snapshot that may address only a few aspects of the school's context and, therefore, should be revisited often to check for progress and reevaluate goals.⁸

Multiple federal education laws, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Head Start Act, require a needs assessment. These statutes require needs assessments for the programs they fund in order to confirm how the funds are used to address the specific needs of students. To fulfill such a requirement, recipients of these funds must develop assessment plans, take steps to identify the existing needs of students, implement the assessment plans, and have a system for evaluating the impact of the assessment.⁹

The level of specificity and the design and implementation requirements vary across laws and programs. For example, within the Head Start Act, a community needs assessment is required at least once during the 5-year grant period and must be based on consultation with parents about the benefits of parent involvement and the activities in which they want to be involved. The law also states that parent engagement must, to the extent possible, be in a form and language that the parents can understand.¹⁰ In other federal programs, such as those that identify schools in need of comprehensive support and improvement under ESSA, a school-level needs assessment

is required in order to “systematically examine performance gaps and identify, understand, and prioritize the needs that must be addressed to improve outcomes for all students.”¹¹

Within the charter sector, NACSA is an independent organization with a mission to advance and strengthen the ideas and practices of charter authorizing. Embedded in many of its recent authorizing documents is the idea of prioritizing community-based authorizing. In particular, NACSA encourages authorizers to focus on community needs when considering new charter schools. NACSA’s *Implications for Authorizing* webpage states, “Authorizers should identify community needs and actively cultivate a pipeline of potential schools that respond to those needs,” and adds, “[A]uthorizers must engage with their communities, especially parents and families. What do parents and other stakeholders value and need? What types of schools are they seeking? How does this align with other data and evidence?”¹²

Charter School Capital, an organization whose mission is to help charter school leaders better serve their students by providing critical resources, outlined three key steps that charters should consider when assessing the needs of their community: (1) identifying and engaging stakeholders, (2) determining what questions to ask, and (3) identifying internal and external supports and services that can help a school reach its goals.

These examples from social services, health care, and education include many common practices that can inform a process for conducting a rigorous and in-depth community needs assessment for both charter schools and authorizers to use.

How to Assess Community Needs

This section describes a suggested process, including specific steps, for assessing community needs (Figure 1). These steps are adapted from community needs assessment processes in education and other fields, as well as from interviews conducted with two charter school leaders and two charter authorizing organizations. School leaders and authorizers can draw from these steps to develop their own processes, adjusting them as needed for their own contexts. These steps include both formal and informal strategies for getting community input. Both types of strategies can be important parts of a community needs assessment process.

Figure 1: Steps to Assess Community Needs



STEP 1

Define the Community and Identify Stakeholders

School leaders and authorizers should first define the community they intend to serve and then identify the stakeholders within the community who should participate in a needs assessment. The definition of *community* can vary depending on the environment in which the school operates. A charter school may define the community it serves in terms of a specific geographic radius, target neighborhoods, or a particular student population, such as undercredited high school students or English Learners. Authorizers will likely have a broader definition of *community* than charter schools do, including a broader geographic area. In some cases, authorizers serve a particular district, whereas others may operate across a county or state.

For both charter schools and authorizers, stakeholders may include current and potential students and their families, members of the community, community-based organizations, school staff, school leadership, and board members. Schools and authorizers may also want to consider including political organizations, such as neighborhood councils and elected representatives. Authorizers will also want to get input from staff from all of the charter schools they oversee, as well as from any potential school developers looking to open a school in their community in the future. Both authorizers and schools should ensure that the stakeholders they identify represent their defined community, including any historically underrepresented groups.

Questions for Consideration

- What community do you serve or intend to serve?
- Is your community defined by geography? What additional factors define your community?
- Who are your primary stakeholders? Who are your secondary stakeholders?
- Do the stakeholders you identified include historically underrepresented voices?

STEP 2

Assemble the Team

Once you have defined your community and determined which stakeholders you will need to get input from, assemble a team to do the work. This team will include staff from your organization who will lead the work, as well as any partners or consultants whose support you need in order to implement the needs assessment. Choosing staff who have the relevant relationships and skills for focus groups, interviews, and other qualitative data collection methods is important.

These skills include being a clear communicator, being an active listener, and having the ability to remain impartial when asking questions. Building a team that is representative of the community you serve is also important. Staff, partners, and consultants should include people who share the backgrounds or experiences of community stakeholders in order to communicate with them effectively. Having both a facilitator and a notetaker for focus groups and meetings will be helpful.

Many schools and authorizers have limited capacity to plan and execute a large-scale needs assessment. Although the school or authorizer should develop the plan, it may make sense for the school or authorizer to join with a community partner, a parent organization, or multiple partners to conduct some of the needs assessment conversations or other activities. Schools or authorizers may also join an existing effort within the community to assess needs, or may decide to hire a consultant to collect the data.

Identifying the right partners can add to one's capacity to implement the community needs assessment activities. "The right partners" are organizations that have close relationships with community stakeholders and an in-depth understanding of their needs. For example, a community-based organization may already have strong relationships with the families in an authorizer's community and may be better able to facilitate an open dialogue with them about their needs and aspirations. Engaging a partner early in the planning process can support smooth implementation.

You may also consider creating an advisory committee that includes members of the stakeholder groups you will be getting input from. This committee can help schools and authorizers engage a diverse group of community members in developing the needs assessment plan, conducting outreach, and collecting data in a manner that is culturally appropriate and that ensures that all voices are heard. Committee members can also provide input and context for the data analysis.

Questions for Consideration

- What skills, capacities, and relationships do you need in order to implement the needs assessment?
- What skills, capacities, and relationships does your current staff have?
- Do you need to hire consultants or find other partners to fill gaps in skills and capacity?
- Do your staff share the backgrounds or experiences of your community? If not, how will you add to your team through consultants or partners?
- Which organizations might you partner with to reach particular stakeholder groups?



Define the Scope

The goal of a community needs assessment in the charter school context is to inform the development of school models, programs, and services that build on the assets of the community and address community aspirations. Defining the scope of the needs assessment and the categories to be assessed creates realistic parameters and helps ensure that the needs assessment will yield focused action areas. Both schools and authorizers will want to assess educational needs, values, and interests. They should then determine other key areas to focus on by identifying stakeholder priorities and barriers to student success.

Holding a targeted focus group can be a useful strategy for gaining an understanding of stakeholders' general priorities and values and for identifying issues for deeper exploration. For example, if focus group participants identify student social–emotional needs as a priority, a needs assessment survey can ask specific questions about that area of interest. Topics to explore may include health and wellness, food security, safety, gang activity, neighborhood parks, and community services already offered.

The education portion of the needs assessment should explore community members' educational values, needs, and interests. It should also explore perceptions of student achievement, including strengths and weaknesses. Finally, it should explore perceptions of existing educational programs and services and of gaps in programs and services. For example, authorizers may determine that families and community members are interested in more bilingual programs, career and technical education programs, or project-based learning. Or stakeholders may be particularly concerned about low literacy skills in elementary school or low graduation rates. Identifying community member priorities can inform authorizer priorities for a new school opening and school priorities for new programming, services, and partnerships.

Questions for Consideration

- What categories do you already know should be part of your scope?
- How will you determine what additional categories to add?
- How can you engage with your stakeholders to define your scope?

**4**
STEP

Define Data Collection Strategies

The needs assessment plan, developed in step 5, incorporates a variety of data collection methods and strategies to ensure that the voices of all relevant stakeholders are heard. In advance of developing a needs assessment plan, schools or authorizers will want to define data collection strategies that include a variety of approaches, such as conducting focus groups, attending community meetings, examining existing data, or knocking on doors.

To ensure that all participants feel comfortable and that all voices are heard, schools or authorizers will also need to determine who should collect the data. As mentioned earlier, schools or authorizers might consider working with partner organizations to co-facilitate focus groups or targeted conversations. Another option is to train community members to lead a data collection strategy.

Finally, pilot testing each of the data collection strategies with community members is a helpful way to ensure that you are collecting the data you intend to collect and that the questions are culturally appropriate and relevant.

Analysis of Existing Data

Both schools and authorizers should analyze existing academic data and other performance data as one source of information for identifying community needs. Authorizers typically have performance frameworks or systems of performance that incorporate a variety of data, including academic data, operational data, and financial data. These types of data provide a good starting point for understanding how well traditional public schools and charter schools are meeting student needs and where gaps in performance indicate unmet needs.

For authorizers, another important aspect of data analysis is analyzing existing school models and major programs in the community. What types of public school models are present in your community, including schools you authorize and other public schools? Are these types of school models providing high-quality options for students and families? These data can later inform an analysis of how existing schools align with community interests and needs.

Focus Groups

Conducting a series of focus groups is a good way to collect initial information on themes for further exploration. These themes can then inform the development of a survey or more-focused conversations with targeted groups. Holding focus groups at multiple times and locations that are convenient for participants, and potentially in multiple languages, is important to ensure that all voices are heard. Consider working with partner organizations that may have a better understanding of when and where these focus groups can be held, based on their

knowledge of the community. Focus groups can also be used after a survey to collect more in-depth information on survey responses or to gain insight in order to better understand survey responses.

Surveys

Conducting a survey is a helpful way to collect data and quantify the perceptions and opinions gleaned from the focus groups. It is also a helpful way to reach participants who may not be able to participate in conversations in person. Surveys can be disseminated through a school or authorizer's website, a newsletter or mailing list, or social media channels, or they can be sent to individual residences through the mail.

Targeted Conversations

Having targeted conversations with specific stakeholders is a useful way to collect data on a specific topic or from a specific stakeholder group. For schools, it may make sense to have a conversation just for families of students or for school staff. Authorizers may also want to have specific conversations with families of students, school leaders, and local political leaders or bodies.

Informal Check-Ins

Many schools and authorizers have ways to check in regularly with their stakeholders to keep a pulse on what is happening in the community. These check-ins could be weekly or monthly calls with school leaders, teachers, or other school staff. Such check-ins provide time for the people working directly with students to share what they are observing and experiencing, and may or may not have a set agenda.

Questions for Consideration

- What existing data are available for you to analyze?
- Which data collection strategies will you use?
- What vehicles, staff, and other facilitators will be used to collect each type of data?
- Are there staff, facilitators, or partners who represent the backgrounds of community members?
- If you implement surveys, what tools will be used for the surveys? Will you use only online surveys, or does your population need hard-copy surveys as well? If you will use a hard-copy survey, do you have staff who can input the data into a spreadsheet so that you can analyze it?
- How and where will you conduct focus groups and targeted conversations?



Develop and Implement a Needs Assessment Plan

It is important to note that if you have an advisory committee or other partners, they can help you develop an effective needs assessment plan, including developing key messages that will appeal to all stakeholder groups and an appropriate timeline.

Develop Resonant Messages for Stakeholders

A community needs assessment can be successful only if sufficient numbers of people from key stakeholder groups participate. Communication with stakeholders about the needs assessment should explain why it is important for a particular stakeholder group to participate and what they will gain from participating. Communication should be in the language (or languages) of the community to be reached and should be available in multiple formats.

Develop a Timeline

Developing a timeline for data collection activities is important for ensuring that sufficient time is allocated for each activity. The timeline should build backward from the date when results are needed, and should factor in the capacity of staff and the schedules of each stakeholder group, including holidays and large community events that may distract from participation. For example, school leaders will likely be unable to attend meetings at the beginning of the school year and during testing windows.

Collect the Data

Follow your timeline and plan for implementing each data collection activity. If needed, adjust your plan to ensure that the right stakeholders are participating and that you have collected enough data to for a meaningful analysis. In addition, consider whether you have funding available to compensate stakeholders or other partners for their time or to incentivize participation. For example, funding could support translation services, food, child care, or gift cards worth modest amounts.

Questions for Consideration

- Which stakeholders do you need to communicate to? What messages will appeal to each stakeholder group?
- How can you allocate funding to ensure that your stakeholders are able to participate in your activities?
- What factors and events will affect your timeline? Is there a particular deadline for reporting results that you should work back from?

STEP 6

Analyze the Data

Assess staff skills and capacity to analyze data from both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data should be descriptive, with averages or percentages as needed, and may be disaggregated by stakeholder groups in order to present a clear picture of the community. Qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups, require the ability to code the information and pull out relevant themes. Consider hiring a consultant to analyze some of the data if needed.

In addition, during the analysis phase of your plan, ensure that staff involved are being thoughtful regarding any power dynamics or systemic issues that may have impacted some of the information collected. Consider engaging staff, consultants, or partners who may have a better understanding of your community to help interpret data. Consider sharing some of the data with specific partners, community stakeholders, or an advisory committee in order to test the validity of the data interpretation and to ensure that the data analysis does not reflect biases.

Questions for Consideration

- What skills and capacity are needed in order to effectively analyze the data collected?
- Do your staff have the skills and capacity needed? If not, what partners or consultants could support this work?
- Are the data being analyzed with consideration for the cultural and historical context of the community?

STEP 7

Communicate and Use the Results

It is important to have ways to communicate the results to stakeholders after all the community assessment activities have been conducted. Communicating these results ensures that stakeholders feel heard, helps them understand how the results inform decision-making going forward, and increases the likelihood that they will participate in needs assessments in the future.

Schools and authorizers will likely need to use multiple communication vehicles in order to reach multiple audiences. Communication vehicles may include newsletters, meetings, emails, and information posted on websites. Both schools and authorizers should consider how to best

organize and present the information so that stakeholders can understand it. For example, a PowerPoint presentation or a short brief may be a better communication vehicle than a dense report. Key findings should be easy for stakeholders to access and understand.

Questions for Consideration

- Which stakeholders do you need to communicate to? What communications vehicles would work best for each type of stakeholder?
- Are there existing communications vehicles you can build on?



Engage in Continuous Feedback Loops

Assessing community needs is not a one-time process. Schools and communities are constantly changing and growing, as are their needs. Authorizers and schools should design a process that repeats assessment activities at regular intervals. The timing of these intervals will depend on how fast the school or community context is changing. One option is to have some type of low-burden activity each year, like an annual survey, and to conduct a more robust set of engagement activities every 3 to 5 years.

Questions for Consideration

- How frequently do you plan to conduct some type of community needs assessment? What activities will you use?
- How frequently do you plan to conduct a more comprehensive needs assessment?

Examples From the Field



KIPP DC

Background

KIPP DC is a local education agency and charter management organization in the District of Columbia. It serves approximately 7,000 students in grades preK3–12 across 20 schools at eight campuses. In terms of student demographics, 100 percent of the students it serves are students of color, 1 percent are English Learners, 18 percent receive special education services, and 57 percent are at risk.

Motivation for Assessing Community Needs

KIPP DC staff realized they needed a more robust community engagement effort when they had difficulty finding a neighborhood that was interested in a new KIPP high school, despite the fact that KIPP was one of the highest-performing charter networks in the District of Columbia. In addition, KIPP DC staff knew there was a need for an additional high school, because they knew that 75 percent of the students in one of KIPP's existing high schools (in Ward 5) were traveling across the city (from Wards 7 and 8) to go to school.

Although KIPP DC had implemented community engagement activities previously, the organization created a chief community engagement and growth officer position to lead a more robust and ongoing community engagement effort. On a personal level, KIPP DC's chief community engagement and growth officer, Jacque Patterson, had seen a disconnect between what community members in his neighborhood wanted and the schools that were approved to open. He observed that schools were not taking the time to make sure that the voices of community members were being heard.

Scope

KIPP DC staff defined their community as the neighborhood in which they wanted to locate the high school. They began by engaging with the most immediate Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC)—a local political organization representing the on-the-ground needs of people in the neighborhood—and worked outward from there.

The needs assessment focused primarily on determining where there was a need for a high school and on determining the educational programs and services that students and families wanted in a high school. Although educational programs were the focus of KIPP DC's needs assessment, KIPP DC staff also heard from families about needs for mental health supports and job training programs for parents. KIPP DC staff have been working with partner organizations to address some of these non-educational needs they identified.

Process and Strategies

KIPP DC's needs assessment process included having staff attend community meetings, convene their own meetings, go door to door to have individual conversations with people in the neighborhood, and talk with political leaders. They attended ANC meetings regularly to listen to conversations and learn about topics of concern in the neighborhood. They also did some political mapping to identify influential community members. Someone at KIPP DC would talk with someone in the community, and that person would recommend other influential people in the community to talk with. The staff talked with leaders of local charter schools to learn more about the needs they were identifying. They also held quarterly town hall meetings for the families of KIPP DC students.

KIPP DC has institutionalized an ongoing relationship with members of the community. In addition to creating the chief community engagement and growth officer position, KIPP DC has a department focused on interacting with community stakeholders, including families, staff, and political leaders.

Impact

KIPP DC was able to get approval for its high school from the DC Public Charter School Board in part because it was able to demonstrate support from the local community. KIPP DC staff also learned about the high school programming that students and the students' families were interested in. After finding out that students were interested in starting businesses, KIPP DC added entrepreneurship programming. Students were also interested in music production, so the organization added recording studios and programming. One of KIPP DC's proudest achievements related to community engagement was an increase in parent satisfaction. Last year, the organization had its highest level of parent satisfaction—a rate in the high 90s—to date.



DC Public Charter School Board

Background

The DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB) is the only charter school authorizer in the District of Columbia. DC PCSB is an independent government agency led by a volunteer seven-member board. It provides oversight to 133 public charter schools that served 43,857 students in the 2020/21 school year. Almost half of the public school students in the District of Columbia attend public charter schools.

Motivation for Assessing Community Needs

Relatively stagnant growth in charter school enrollment, along with a decline in traditional public school enrollment and the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompted DC PCSB to take a 1-year pause in new school authorization to conduct a citywide analysis and review of the application process. The District of Columbia had seen a decline in both traditional and charter public school enrollment overall since the 2019/20 school year (from 94,555 students in 2019/20 to 93,934 in 2021/22). Charter school enrollment declined in the 2019/20 school year but then increased slightly in subsequent years.

DC PCSB wanted to engage with families and stakeholders to determine how families were making education decisions and what educational options they were seeking. DC PCSB staff heard from school leaders that although they were struggling to recruit students, families were saying they did not have enough choices. What was the source of this disconnect?

Prior to the pandemic, DC PCSB recognized that there had been instances when a new school would open and, because the community did not have prior notice, there would be a backlash. DC PCSB wanted to work with schools to foster a better relationship between schools and community members.

Scope

DC PCSB defines its community as all of the District of Columbia because the agency is a districtwide authorizer. In its needs assessment work, the agency engages with families, community members, local political leaders, ANCs, and other community-based organizations.

DC PCSB staff conducted a listening tour from November 2019 to February 2020 as part of the process of preparing to hire a new executive director. The listening tour served as a preliminary needs assessment and informed DC PCSB's initial priorities, which were equity in education, accountability, and collaboration. DC PCSB has built on these priorities in developing the

agency's new [strategic roadmap](#).¹³ Agency staff are now conducting a more comprehensive needs assessment process to inform a revision of the charter application process for expansion and new school applications.

As described earlier, the goal of this needs assessment is to better understand what families want in their schools and what types of educational options they are interested in. Questions that DC PCSB staff are focusing on in their current needs assessment process include the following:

- What criteria do families use to consider school quality and school choice?
- What motivates the decisions families make about school choices?
- What school options do families wish they had?
- What motivates charters to expand and replicate?

Although DC PCSB staff are not focusing their needs assessment specifically on supports and services outside of education, they are learning about some of these needs and exploring how to partner with education-adjacent organizations to provide wraparound services to students and families.

Process and Strategies

DC PCSB staff's primary strategy for assessing community needs is to hold focus groups and meetings with particular stakeholder groups, both in person and virtually. They have partnered with various community partners to host meetings, including education organizations, ANCs, faith groups, civic associations, and ward education councils. DC PCSB staff would like to provide incentives for participation in some of these focus groups, such as gift cards to help with school supplies. They have also developed a survey they will issue to families, teachers, and charter operators, and they have analyzed census data to determine residential patterns.

Impact

DC PCSB staff are just beginning the process of assessing community needs in order to inform revisions to the agency's application process. They may also revise the community engagement requirements for new school applicants. Ultimately, the agency hopes the impacts of these efforts will be that DC PCSB will authorize new schools that residents want and that the new schools the agency authorizes "will have created a community and are a fabric of the community for years to come."¹⁴



Battle Born Academy

Background

Battle Born Academy is a new school in downtown Las Vegas that will open its doors in the 2022/23 school year. It will serve approximately 240 students in its first year of operation and will grow to serve 540 students in grades K–8 at full build-out. In terms of student demographics, Battle Born projects to serve a student population in which 95 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 42 percent are English Learners, and 11 percent receive special education services.

Motivation for Assessing Community Needs

Battle Born was founded by Kathy Rudd and Katie Krackhardt, both former teachers in the downtown Las Vegas area. They had the idea to start a school in downtown Las Vegas because they felt that this area of the city did not have many options for families. Before moving forward with their idea, however, they knew they wanted to see whether the community had a desire for a new school. This started their process for assessing community needs and led their team to talk to more than 450 families before they submitted their charter application. The team dedicated time to knocking on doors, sending out surveys, tabling at community events, and piloting their program in order to design a school that was truly meeting the needs they identified in the community.

Scope

The founders of Battle Born began by defining their community based on the zip code they intended to serve. However, after engaging with families and community partners, they quickly realized that families in neighboring zip codes also wanted to provide input. Other educators, nonprofit leaders, and community leaders were also part of whom Kathy and Katie defined as their community, whether or not those people currently offered programs or services in downtown Las Vegas. As Kathy stated, “Just because [certain community organizations] don’t currently work in this neighborhood doesn’t mean [they] won’t be a great option for our families.”¹⁵

They engaged families with straightforward questions related to their child’s education, focusing on what their child was passionate about, what they want out of school, and whether or not they felt their current school options were getting them there. Both founders used their personal school experiences to connect with these families—many of whom were living below the poverty line—through storytelling, building connections, and hearing families’ honest reflections on what resources were not there for them in their areas. In addition to engaging

with families, Kathy and Katie prioritized getting input from a design team of teachers; focused on making connections with key political players within the city of Las Vegas, such as their local council members; and had in-depth knowledge of what type of engagement their authorizer required in relation to the new charter application process.

Process and Strategies

Battle Born's process for assessing community needs consisted primarily of the team knocking on doors and tabling at community events; the team also implemented online surveys. They tried to gather as much information as possible regarding what families wanted out of a school.

Battle Born's team piloted the school's programming at a local elementary school during the school year, giving the team an opportunity to gather input from teachers who were delivering the programming and from participating families on whether the pilot was meeting the needs of the students and families involved.

Impact

Battle Born submitted its charter application to the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority in 2021 and was the only charter approved to open during its application window. The school has a plan for how it will meet the needs of the community, largely because the founders spent an enormous amount of time listening to community members about what those needs are. The school has committed to the content of what it will teach, the instructional model for delivering the content, and the idea that it will be a community hub, all based on what the founders learned during their community engagement process.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, gaining access to families was incredibly challenging throughout the entire community needs assessment process. Even so, Kathy and Katie were able to establish a core group of around 50 families who have been committed to the school from when it was just an idea to now, as the time approaches to open the school's doors. They have established trust in the community by being present, listening to the needs of the community, and following through.



Nevada State Public Charter School Authority

Background

The Nevada State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA) is the statewide charter authorizer in Nevada. Nevada law allows SPCSA and local school boards, colleges, or universities within the Nevada System of Higher Education to authorize charter schools across the state. Currently, SPCSA oversees the majority of charters in Nevada: 70 charter school campuses that serve approximately 55,000 students in the state.

Motivation for Assessing Community Needs

In 2019, the Nevada State Legislature passed legislation that required SPCSA to conduct a needs assessment, and to incorporate the findings into part of its approval process, when making decisions to authorize new schools. SPCSA embraced this new legislative requirement and saw it as an opportunity to set a north star for what it was looking for in new schools. It began to use this requirement not only to identify needs for high-quality schools across the state, but also to encourage new schools to work with community partners in order to better understand the needs of communities on a local level.

Scope

The language in the legislation was clear that SPCSA was to incorporate findings of an evaluation that included demographic information, the academic needs of students, and the needs of students at risk of dropping out into their chartering decisions. In order to translate this legislative mandate into action, SPCSA developed an academic and demographic needs assessment that focuses on three categories: demographics, academic needs in geographic areas with low-performing schools, and academic needs for students at risk of dropping out of school across the state of Nevada. This original assessment has been updated annually, using the most recent academic data.

The findings from this needs assessment are used as part of the charter application process, as potential applicants must meet one or more of the needs identified by SPCSA in order to be approved to open a new school in the state. In addition, the new school application includes detailed requirements for new applicants to engage with local communities in order to dig deeper into what parents and community members desire from a new school. As the statewide authorizer, SPCSA defines its community as the entire state, but it has engaged more deeply in areas of the state where the population is the highest, such as Clark County. Although its needs assessment is updated annually, the three focus categories have remained the same since 2019.

Process and Strategies

As the statewide authorizer, SPCSA has carefully thought through the organization's role in assessing community needs. Its process for assessing community needs begins by looking at educational needs at the state level and identifying areas where there are concentrations of low-performing schools. From there, SPCSA engages partners on a municipal level to understand the needs and priorities in a particular region. Then, when new school applicants come to SPCSA to open a school in this area, these applicants are required to engage with the community at a local level in order to be approved to open.

As an example of this process, SPCSA learned from the organization's needs assessment that the area of North Las Vegas had a concentration of low-performing schools. SPCSA then engaged with municipal partners to better understand their needs. This engagement uncovered a need for technical programs to better equip students for careers, as North Las Vegas was hit hard by the 2008 recession and has been focused on trying to bring business back into the community. The city had a desire to find ways to create a talent pool in its geographic area with the skills needed to fill new jobs and, at the same time, to have high-quality school options for workers' children. Using this information, SPCSA was able to use SPCSA's new charter application and rubric to both encourage and require new school applicants looking to open in this area to meet the needs of the community and to require that applicants dig deep in order to connect and hear from the local community.

A critical component of SPCSA's process for assessing community needs is engaging in partnerships throughout the process. SPCSA leverages the data and information that it has as a statewide authorizer to publish its needs assessment, and before it does so, it asks its community working group to vet this information to ensure that SPCSA's published priorities for new school applicants align with the needs of community organizations. This community working group consists of statewide and regional organizations that are able to provide insight about the needs of specific student groups or geographic regions. The group is used to vet ideas and brainstorm strategies for ensuring that the growth of the charter sector in Nevada is aligned with the needs of the communities it serves. Rebecca Feiden, executive director of SPCSA, stated, "Our orientation is to create transparency [regarding] what the needs are across the state, then to engage with community partners, and then, through the application and rubric, ask schools to demonstrate to us that the local communities' fingerprints are on their application."¹⁶

Impact

Since SPCSA has implemented its community needs assessment, almost every new school that has opened in the state has opened as a Title I school in a high-poverty community. SPCSA's new school application process previously had a community-demand section, but the shift to focus on assessing the needs of the local community and creating partnerships to meet those needs has resulted in applicants intentionally seeking out community partnerships and input. Rebecca

observed that “embracing the needs assessment has resulted in a noticeable shift in both the applications we’re receiving and those that are being approved.”¹⁷

In addition, assessing community needs has demonstrated to community stakeholders that the Nevada charter sector is committed to ensuring that schools are part of the communities they serve. This strengthening of the relationship between communities and the charter sector has opened doors of communication, so much so that Las Vegas has created a public–private partnership in order to open and support a new charter school within the city beginning in the 2022/23 school year.

Moving forward, SPCSA is looking at how it will continue to support schools opening in areas of need across the state. The charters that have been approved are operating in areas where students have many needs, and SPCSA is considering how it can offer technical assistance and support to ensure that these schools experience continued success within the community. In addition, SPCSA will continue to consider how, as a statewide authorizer, it fits into the conversation with local communities. As Rebecca said, “Our role is not to make promises about building schools in certain communities, but we have an opportunity to take our needs assessment and identify high-priority areas.”¹⁸ SPCSA will continue to use its needs assessment to identify high-priority areas across the state and then encourage applicants to identify the local needs of the community in which they are proposing to open.

Conclusion

As charter schools and authorizers develop community needs assessment and engagement practices that are more intensive and authentic, they will need to develop systems for ongoing engagement and feedback. For new schools, needs assessment activities are likely to shift to a focus on ongoing, embedded needs assessment conversations rather than on frequent assessment activities that are more formal. For example, schools may meet informally with families quarterly and conduct only one formal survey annually. Authorizers may also want to consider a system for ongoing engagement and informal needs assessment processes with a variety of stakeholder groups, conducting more formal needs assessments perhaps every 2 to 5 years. An annual survey may be a low-burden way for both schools and authorizers to track trends in stakeholders' perspectives over time and to determine when more intensive assessment activities are needed. As KIPP DC's chief community engagement and growth officer, Jacque Patterson, shared, "Community engagement is a practice; it's not a program."¹⁹

Endnotes

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- ¹⁵ K. Rudd (telephone conversations with Kathy Rudd, Principal and Co-Founder, Battle Born Academy, April 7, 2022).
- ¹⁶ R. Feiden (telephone conversation with Rebecca Feiden, Executive Director, Nevada State Public Charter School Authority, April 1, 2022).
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