Identifying Priorities and Effective Strategies

In most schools, conducting a comprehensive needs assessment will result in the identification of a large number of issues that could be addressed to improve the achievement of students. However, no school should attempt to address every identified need in a single year. Most planning experts suggest that schools prioritize their major issues and address no more than three of the most important in the first year. When the needs assessment is complete, the planning team should work with the school staff to establish these priorities. A number of activities are available that help groups work through the priority-setting process.

Once priority needs have been identified, the planning team should describe them in detail and generate discussion among staff members and other stakeholders about strategies to address them. Becoming a schoolwide program means the school has accepted a collective responsibility for reaching and teaching all students. Therefore, in addition to being grounded in scientifically based research, the strategies developed must be comprehensive and span all grades and subjects.

The planning team might create a chart similar to the one below to organize their needs assessment findings and proposed solutions in each of the profile focus areas.

Profile Focus Area – Curriculum and Instruction	
Summary of problem: Low reading achievement in grades 1 through 5	
Problem/Need Reading curriculum is not coordinated across grade levels.	**Possible Actions** • Adopt a research-based program that supports consistency across grade levels. • Revise curriculum guidelines to increase program consistency. • Provide uniform professional development across grade levels. • Select and purchase new instructional materials that are based on scientifically based research and aligned with State standards and assessments.

Problem/Need	Possible Actions
There is a persistent achievement gap between the academic performance of minority and non-minority students in reading.	• Further disaggregate test data to determine specific skill deficits and re-teach those areas. • Examine instructional materials to determine if they are appropriate for the lowest-performing students. • Establish a performance plan that specifies skill mastery and timelines for completion. • Provide additional instructional assistance during the school day and after school as appropriate.
Assessment methods conflict or are not aligned with the academic content and achievement standards.	• Select or develop assessment tools that are aligned with the content standards. • Develop and implement a student portfolio system as one means to assess mastery of the achievement standards. • Expand the use of diagnostic assessment as one means to obtain student level information. • Assign cross-grade level teams to establish common assessment rubrics. • Improve the consistency of letter grade reporting across grade levels, and among teachers.
Reading curriculum is outdated and does not reflect the State's content and achievement standards.	• Request technical assistance from the State and other providers to revise and align the curriculum with the State's standards. • Ensure that a curriculum committee is in place to review and revise the curriculum as needed. • Review the content of textbooks and other instructional materials to ensure that they appropriately reflect the core curriculum as aligned to the State standards.
Reading skills are not reinforced with learning activities outside the school.	• Conduct workshops to provide parents with home activities that are consistent with grade-level content standards. • Implement reading workshops to increase the amount and quality of student reading time. • Use other subject areas to practice reading.

The planning team should remember that any strategies the school considers should be research-based and likely to produce the desired results. If they look outside the school for products and services to address identified needs (e.g., model developers, research organizations, or consultants) schoolwide planners should be careful consumers. They should scrutinize the proposals of these providers to ensure that all recommended activities are aligned with the State's academic content and achievement standards, and have been implemented successfully in similar school settings. In addition, schools considering outside services should--

- Closely examine what the program offers to determine how well it fits with identified needs;
- Insist on seeing solid, research-based evidence of a program's success; and
- Ask for references and contact schools where the program has been implemented.

Setting Measurable Goals

Once priority needs and potential solutions have been identified, it is time for the schoolwide planning team to draft goals that set the course for the schoolwide program.

The schoolwide plan should contain both student achievement goals (e.g., assessment targets) and goals that address how the school will operate (e.g., goals that address shared leadership or teacher collaboration). Because goal statements are broad indicators of intention, they must be connected to specific objectives, strategies, and action steps to become effective targets that truly guide schoolwide activities. A well-written schoolwide plan goal is specific, measurable, attainable, time-bound and, most importantly, focused on increasing achievement for all students in the school. Each effective goal also implicitly contains an evaluation question, indicating how the school will know if the goal has been achieved.

After it develops each broad goal statement, the planning team should refer to its list of research-based solutions to help create concrete strategies and action steps. Answering the following questions might also help the team to create the specific strategies that will help the school achieve its goals:

- What professional development is needed to achieve these goals?
- Which technical assistance providers will offer or support the professional development associated with meeting these goals?
- How can current resources (time, monetary, human) be reallocated to achieve these goals?
- What additional resources—human and fiscal—will be needed to achieve these goals (e.g., teaching specialists, textbooks, technology, planning time), and what funding is available to obtain them?

- What roles(s) will parents and the community play in achieving these goals?
- What are the barriers to achieving these goals, and how can they be addressed?
- What action steps will ensure the attainment of each goal?
- Who will be responsible for ensuring that the actions are taken?
- Within what timeframe will each action be taken?

Before a school finalizes its goals, the planning team should review the quality of each one, asking--

- Does this goal address a crucial identified need?
- Will achieving this goal positively affect all students in the school, especially those who are the beneficiaries of the individual programs included in the schoolwide program?
- Is the goal specific enough to be understood by all stakeholders?
- Does the goal include specific objectives, strategies, and action steps?
- Is the expected outcome measurable? Does it identify both short-term and long-term outcomes?
- Is the goal realistic and attainable?
- What is the timeline for achieving this goal?