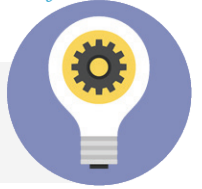




An Introduction to the District Capacity Assessment (DCA): Supports for Schools and Teachers

Caryn Ward, Dean Fixsen, & Dale Cusumano

Based on the work of the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of the District Capacity Assessment and provide resources for additional information and learning.

Introduction

School districts (local education agencies) in the United States are charged with many responsibilities, by law and by custom. The most important is responsibility for assuring schools and teachers have the support they need to provide consistent, high quality, and effective education to promote student learning for all students every year. Measures of student outcomes are now commonplace in education. Those measures, while important, have not led to improved student outcomes (Manna, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Recognizing the key role of teachers, what is missing is a measure of district supports for schools and teachers. The District Capacity Assessment was developed to fill this gap.

The [District Capacity Assessment](#) (DCA; Ward et al., 2015) is grounded in implementation science and the Active Implementation Frameworks (Metz & Bartley, 2012). Implementation science is the study of factors that influence the full and effective use of innovations in practice. The leadership, competency development, and organizational support factors identified in implementation science have been built into the 26 items that comprise the DCA. These factors are used by district staff to support schools and teachers' use of evidence-based interventions and strategies that lead to positive student outcomes.

A DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION TEAM (DIT) IS COMPRISED OF KEY LEADERS (E.G. DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT), LEAD TEACHERS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND LEAD DISTRICT AND BUILDING ADMINISTRATORS.

The DCA is completed by district leadership and members of the District Implementation Team (DIT). The District Implementation Team uses the results of the DCA (scores, notes from discussion) to guide action planning. Action planning is focused on the development of infrastructure and capacity to support effective education practices across schools. Although the primary purpose of the DCA is to assist school districts in using evidence-based interventions and strategies, the DCA also fills a void by providing an avenue for collecting data to guide and monitor the development of infrastructure to support the use of evidence-based interventions and strategies.

Items on the DCA assess the development of capacity in terms of the Active Implementation Frameworks (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). The "capacity" of a district to

facilitate building-level use of evidence-based interventions and strategies refers to systems, activities, and resources that are necessary for schools to adopt and sustain effective innovations (Ward et al., 2015). Key systems, activities, and resources required for strong implementation and sustainability of efforts are identified across items that are comprised within three Implementation Drivers Subscale Scores: Leadership, Competency, and Organization (see Table 1).

The DCA is an action assessment. That is, data from the DCA are used to guide action planning and next steps in an effort to close discrepancies between the capacity needed to adopt and sustain use of evidence-based interventions and strategies with fidelity and the current capacity detected by the DCA. As a result, the DCA is not considered to be completed until an implementation capacity action plan has been developed and reviewed.

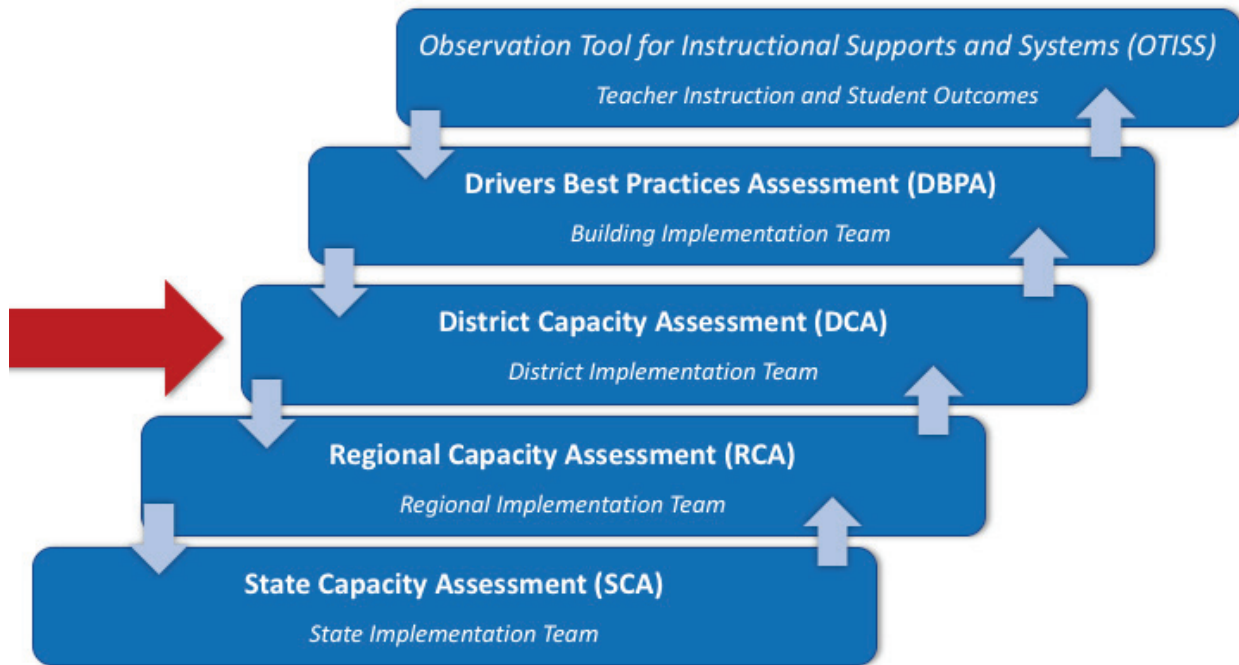
Table 1. District Capacity Assessment (DCA) and Subscales

DCA Scores
<u>Subscales</u>
Leadership - Active involvement in facilitating and sustaining systems change to support implementation of the effective innovation through strategic communication, decisions, guidance, and resource allocation.
<p><u>Leadership</u> – District Implementation Team (DIT) exists with leadership and funds to support implementation</p> <p><u>Planning</u> – Plans exist and are monitored to guide implementation</p>
Competency - Strategies to develop, improve, and sustain educators’ abilities to use evidence-based interventions and strategies as intended in order to achieve desired outcomes.
<p><u>Performance Assessment</u> – A fidelity measure is supported to guide on-going staff feedback</p> <p><u>Selection</u> – A process for selecting staff is used</p> <p><u>Training</u> – DIT secures and evaluates training</p> <p><u>Coaching</u> – A coaching service delivery plan is used and coaching effectiveness is evaluated</p>
Organization – Strategies for analyzing, communicating, and responding to data in ways that result in continuous improvement of systems and supports for educators to use evidence-based interventions and strategies with good outcomes
<p><u>Decision Support Data System</u> – DIT has access to data for the innovation that supports decision making at the district and building levels</p> <p><u>Facilitative Administration</u> – DIT has formal processes for meeting, communicating, linking innovations to efforts, and addressing internal barriers</p> <p><u>Systems Intervention</u> – DIT uses a process to report policy relevant information to outside entities</p>

A Cascading System of Implementation Supports

As shown in the graphic below, a cascading system of supports consists of linked Implementation Teams that align, integrate, and leverage existing resources in a state education system. Implementation teams at all levels are charged with developing the infrastructure to support work at school and classroom levels so that high quality education practices can be delivered as intended. If barriers arise that are beyond a district’s capacity to address, the work of the District Implementation Team is to lift those issues up to regional and state levels. Systemic resolutions to

THE ESSENTIAL PURPOSE OF A DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION TEAM IS TO DEVELOP, IMPROVE, AND SUSTAIN EFFECTIVE SUPPORTS AT THE BUILDING LEVEL SO THAT BUILDING IMPLEMENTATION TEAMS CAN SUPPORT TEACHERS WHO ARE DELIVERING INNOVATIONS OR PRACTICES IN A SCHOOL.



district and school issues result in improved supports for existing teachers. For example, a review of DCA data might highlight gaps in Facilitative Administration and Systems Intervention. Given that these items tap into a district’s power to address barriers that impede effective use of an innovation, planning that identifies actions at both the district and regional levels should follow. In this scenario, district planning may address barriers in the flow of useful information by aggregating teachers’ concerns at the building and district levels. Simultaneous action planning at the regional level may revisit the flow of information between the district and regional team. As such, DCA data serve to inform current status, facilitate action planning, and monitor systems, actions, and resources that support implementation capacity over time.

Technical Information

Development of the DCA was informed by an extensive review of the literature. Its psychometric properties have been examined with respect to usability, feasibility, construct validity, and reliability (Russell et al., 2016). The DCA Total Score has strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .91. The three subscales also have adequate internal consistency: Leadership ($\alpha = .79$), Staff Competency ($\alpha = .79$), and Organizational Systems ($\alpha = .81$). The assessment has been found to be sensitive to growth or decline in implementation capacity (Russell et al., 2016). Additional efforts are underway to assess the consequential validity of the DCA: that is, how the instrument is used in practice and the relationship between DCA scores and indicators of school and teacher performance.

Administration

The DCA takes one to two hours to complete. It is led by a [trained Administrator](#) who meets with a team comprised of district leadership and other staff intentionally selected for their roles in supporting use of the innovation (e.g., District Implementation Team). The Administrator guides the group through discussion and scoring of items and later action planning. Additional roles include a Facilitator and a Note Taker. The Facilitator is very familiar with the district and contextualizes items during scoring and discussion. The Note Taker records scores and discussion that arises during the scoring process. Using a standardized voting process, items are scored along a three-point scale as fully in place (a score of 2), partially in place (a score of 1), or not in place (a score of 0). A scoring rubric provides key indicators for assigning scores to items.

DCA Use as Intended

The DCA is administered twice a year, in October/November (set action agendas for the year) and again in February/March (a strategic time for district budgeting and planning). Two administrations per year help district leaders and others monitor progress and engage in continued action planning to improve district and regional infrastructures for supporting implementation of effective innovations.

Figure 1 depicts DCA data collected over time in one district. The DCA scores from the October administration indicate baseline district capacity in the 20% range. With the support of a Regional Implementation Team, this district engaged in purposeful action planning and attention to development of systems, activities, and resources related to Leadership, Competency, and Organization supports for schools and teachers in the district. By the end of the academic year, DCA scores had improved to the 60% range. The district used the second

set of scores to begin action planning for the fall with a third administration of the DCA scheduled to monitor progress.

Figure 1. DCA Over Time

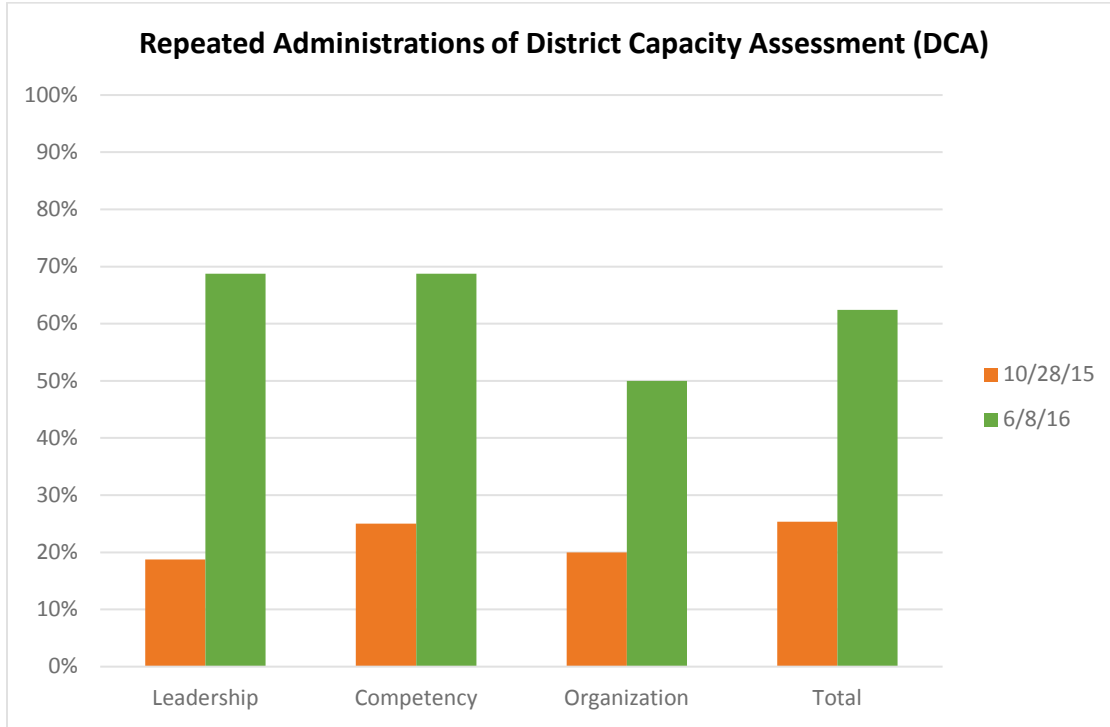
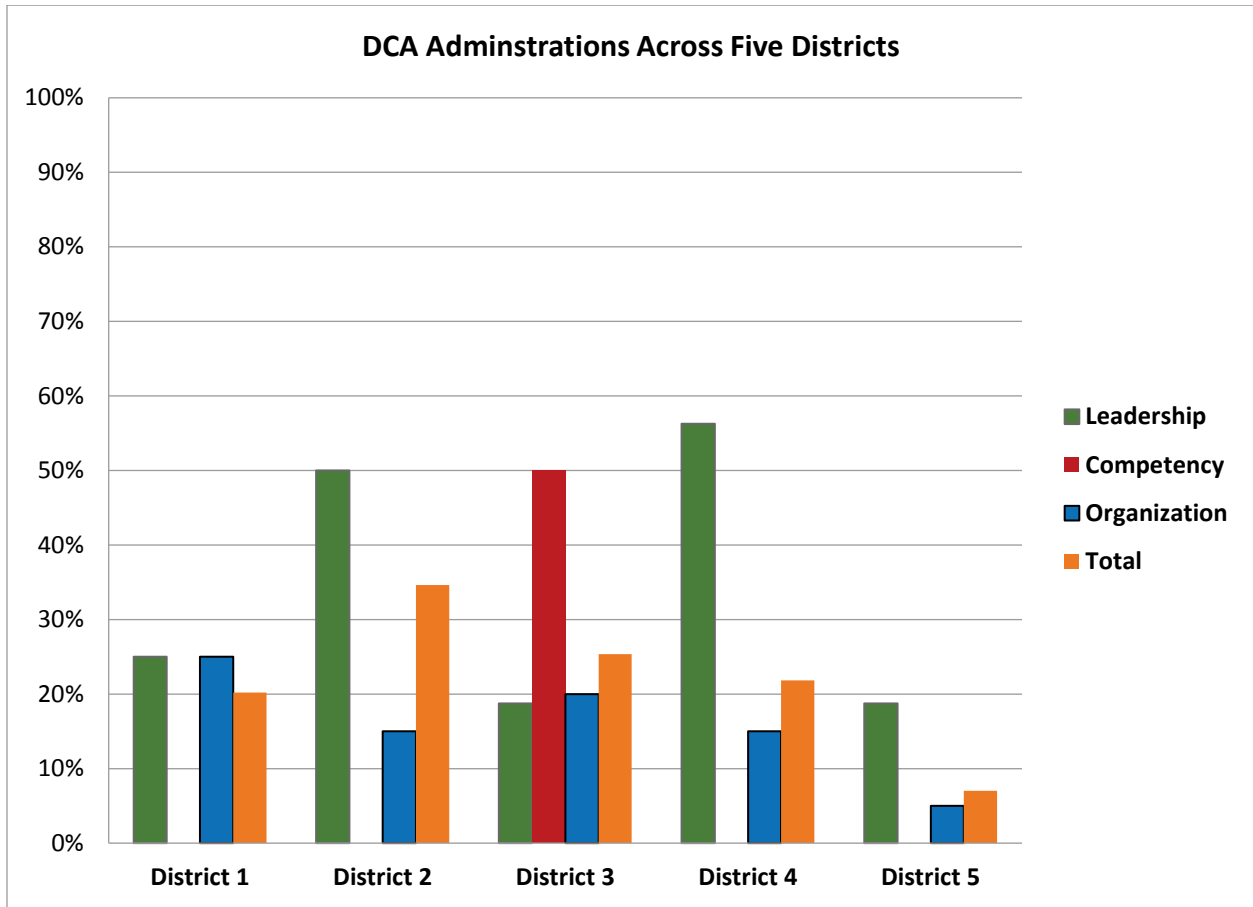


Figure 2 provides a broader picture of data collected across five districts served by one regional education agency (REA). These data provide a snapshot of the impact of REA support on the development of infrastructure and capacity to use innovations in the region. The baseline Total Score for each district is in the 20-40% range that is typical across hundreds of districts. Low Competency development scores (a score of 0 for 4 of the 5 districts) also are common across districts. The pattern of baseline scores is different for each district and the Regional Implementation Team uses these data to support the development of a District Implementation Team in each district. With this support it is likely that DCA scores will be in the 80-100% range within two years. The DCA informs action plans at the district level and at the regional level so each team can identify needs and allocate resources and supports in service of building sustainable use of evidence-based practices in their schools. For example, a local district used DCA scores in conjunction with fidelity scores to advocate for the school board to allocate funding for coaching of their identified innovation. With funding secured, the district was able to action plan and create a system to support effective coaching.

Figure 2. DCA Data Across Five Districts



Summary

Data from the DCA serve a critical role in informing and developing support within a Cascading System of Implementation Supports. The DCA administration process allows both district and regional implementation teams to reflect on their current processes and practices in supporting instructional staff in their use of evidence-based interventions and strategies. Importantly, these results assist district and regional implementation teams in creating implementation capacity action plans that target needed infrastructure and supports to implement innovations with fidelity and produce intended outcomes. This task would be difficult, and perhaps impossible, without capacity assessment tools such as the DCA.

References

- Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, National Implementation Research Network.
- Manna, P. (2008). Federal aid to elementary and secondary education: Premises, effects, and major lessons learned. Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary, Department of Government and the Thomas Jefferson Program in Public Policy.
- Metz, A., & Bartley, L. (2012). Active Implementation Frameworks for Program Success. *Zero to Three*, 32(4), 11-18.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). The Nations Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012. Retrieved from Washington, D.C.: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/main2012/pdf/2013456.pdf>
- Russell, C., Ward, C., Harms, A., St. Martin, K., Cusumano, D., Fixsen, D., . . . LeVesseur, C. (2016). District Capacity Assessment Technical Manual. Retrieved from National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Ward, C., St. Martin, K., Horner, R., Duda, M., Ingram-West, K., Tedesco, M., . . . Chaparro, E. (2015). District Capacity Assessment. Retrieved from National Implementation Research Network: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Learn More

- [The District Capacity Assessment](#)
- [NIRN Implementation Measures](#)
- [The Active Implementation Hub](#)
- [The National Implementation Research Network](#)

This document is based on the work of the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN).

© 2017 Dean Fixsen, Caryn Ward and Allison Metz



This content is licensed under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs . You are free to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions: Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work); Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes; No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder, nirn@unc.edu.