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## DIAGNOSTIC REVIEW AS A KEY ELEMENT OF SUCCESS:

# Enhancing Continuous Improvement and Improving Student Achievement

## An Overview for State and Federal Policymakers

To achieve and sustain the levels of performance expected today, schools and school systems are embracing a strategic focus on continuous improvement. A sometimes overlooked, but critical, component of continuous improvement is meaningful **diagnostic review**. Just as in medicine, diagnosis, or the practice of determining the nature or cause of a problem, is of vital importance to the health and well-being of schools and school systems. Without effective diagnostic review that includes a *root cause analysis*, the evaluation of school and system performance is likely to hinge only on performance data (“the numbers”) without fully addressing the myriad factors that may contribute to academic performance. Solutions that are being implemented based solely on “the numbers” have little chance of creating sustainable, continuous improvement in schools and school systems.

This document provides an overview of the reason for diagnostic reviews of school and school system performance and the process for conducting them.<sup>1</sup> It illustrates how this effort involves a comprehensive evaluation of factors, including, but not limited to, the numbers, that promote an accurate analysis of performance so as to guide decisions about the kinds of policy, practice and resource allocations necessary to continuously improve school and school system performance.

The diagnostic review process examines the extent to which an institution (school or school system) has enacted effective policies, practices, conditions and cultures that maximize learner success and support continuous improvement of student achievement. This process uses multiple, relevant sources of data and information to evaluate school and school system performance, improvement efforts and organizational effectiveness. The process generates evaluative feedback, including the identification of effective practices and improvement priorities that must inform existing school, school system and state department improvement planning processes, actions and decision-making.

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<sup>1</sup>This document amplifies the discussion of diagnostic review set forth in AdvancED’s recommendations on ESEA reauthorization: *ESEA Reauthorization Recommendations: Beyond the Numbers* (April 14, 2011).

### *Diagnostic reviews are intended to achieve the following goals:*

- Satisfy state departments of education requirements under approved ESEA waiver plans with regard to improvement efforts for low performing and high priority schools.<sup>2</sup>
- Provide a process that yields immediately actionable information to guide improvement activities and decision-making at the school, school system and state department levels.
- Build leadership capacity in schools and school systems through effective training and implementation of the diagnostic review process including internal and external review components.
- Align diagnostic review components with state requirements, regulations and strategic initiatives.

## The Elements of Effective Diagnostic Review

The diagnostic review process should be anchored in a set of standards for organizational quality and effectiveness. Just as strong educational systems have standards for student learning, they should also have research-based standards for effective operations of both LEAs and schools. Although some variation from state to state and system to system exists, these substantive standards generally include the following areas of focus:

- Purpose and Direction
- Governance and Leadership
- Teaching and Assessing for Learning
- Resources and Support Systems
- Using Results for Continuous Improvement<sup>3</sup>

### *An effective diagnostic review process should include the following elements:*

1. The development of profiles.
2. The execution of an annual review of performance, based on multiple sources of data.
3. Based on the annual review process, the determination of “root causes.”
4. Monitoring results, adjustment of improvement strategies and collection of data.



<sup>2</sup>Viable federal funding sources exist to support state and school district implementation of diagnostic reviews of low performing schools. Both ESEA Title 1, Part A and the School Improvement Program under Section 1003(a) have been identified as a potential funding source for diagnostic reviews.

<sup>3</sup>These areas of focus are taken from the *AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools* and the *AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems*.

### 1. The development of profiles.

A profile of the school system and schools is developed so that the school or school system has an accurate picture of its current reality. This includes assembling a host of data related to student and teacher demographics, student achievement, instructional and student support programs, stakeholder satisfaction, and more. The profiles are living documents, serving as the basis for the ongoing internal review described below.

### 2. The execution of an annual review of performance, based on multiple sources of data.

System and school leaders work together with staff, students, parents and the education community to conduct an annual internal review based on substantive standards like those outlined above. The system and school rate their performance on each standard using a set of established rubrics, based on a comprehensive collection, synthesis and analysis of multiple sources of data and best practices. They include the analysis of student performance on multiple assessments and other academic indicators over time; student demographic data; data and information on teacher and leader quality and effectiveness; programmatic data; parent, teacher and leader survey/perception data; and more.

From time to time, and with greater regularity for low-performers, institutions should enlist experts from outside of the system to perform a more rigorous and impartial assessment of performance. In addition to the data and evidence review described above, the external review includes school site-visits, classroom observations, and interviews with central office staff, school board members, parents, students and community and business leaders.

### 3. Based on the annual review process, the determination of “root causes.”

Using the results of the annual review process described above (whether an internal or external review, or some combination thereof) system and school leaders work together to discover patterns in their data, refute inaccurate assumptions, and move beyond the obvious to focus on the root causes associated with performance (at any level). After identifying the challenges facing the school or school system, the next step is to review all the available information and data through a root cause analysis process. Through this process, institutions gain a better understanding of the actual cause of the system’s challenge so they may confidently build research-based solutions that define targeted actions to be implemented for better results in the future. This approach offers a far greater likelihood of success than simply buying an “off the shelf” solution based upon a single assessment result.

### 4. Monitoring of results, adjustment of improvement strategies, and collection of data.

Throughout the year, system and school leaders regularly monitor implementation of their improvement strategies, discuss and analyze what is or is not working and make any necessary adjustments to the improvement plan. They also continuously collect data to inform the following year’s internal review.

The information revealed from the diagnostic review can and should feed seamlessly into existing frameworks of system and school improvement, thereby strengthening the impact, utility and efficiency of improvement efforts.

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