

How to Use Root Cause Analysis with the EWS Indicators to Develop Appropriate Interventions

Definition

- **What:** Root cause analysis identifies the underlying cause(s) of student indicators in the ABCs (attendance, behavior, course performance). It goes beyond superficial assumptions (e.g., “These kids just don’t care”) to seek reasons behind surface symptoms. The Clark County (NV) school system defines a root cause as “the deepest underlying cause, or causes, of positive or negative symptoms within any process that, if dissolved, would result in elimination, or substantial reduction, of the symptom.”
- **Why:** Understanding why an event occurred is the key to developing effective recommendations. If we do not understand why a student (or group of students) has an indicator, we will not know how to address it effectively and may use time and resources in interventions that are not effective.
- **How:** In an EWI system, root cause analysis must be used in conjunction with consideration of the most strategic action level(s)—e.g., individual, group, or school-, district-, or state-wide, as well as evaluation of existing capacities and resources — to identify appropriate immediate and long-term action(s).
 - Use multiple data sets to examine the problem.
 - Focus on “actionable” factors that you can address and which, if resolved, will eliminate or mitigate the problem.
 - Focus on changing adults and systems, not students.
 - When an explanation is offered, ask “Why?” Keep asking “Why?” until there is no further explanation behind the explanation.
 - Make sure the data offers evidence for the proposed explanation, and that the data confirms its connection to the problem.
 - Consider alternative explanations and contributing factors. If the deepest underlying explanation seems to be something that you have no control over, are there other ways you can break the chain of causality?
 - For deeper systemic problems, consider both short-term and long-term solutions. If addressing the deepest level of causality requires a long-term systemic reform, is there a short-term “fix” you can implement to help student who are affected by the problem right now?

Training Materials:

- **School Improvement Planning Basics: Root Cause Analysis**
Clark County School District, Nevada. 2012. A very helpful manual dealing with the topic in depth at multiple levels.
<http://ccsd.net/resources/aarsi-school-improvement/pdf/planning/school-improvement-planning-basics-root-cause-analysis.pdf>

- **Root Cause Analysis Toolkit**
Colorado Department of Education. 2012. A useful tool primarily for school- or district-wide analyses.
https://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/documents/uip/downloads/rootcauseanalysis_trainingmaterials/rca2.0combinedpacket.pdf
- **Conducting a Root-Cause Analysis with Stakeholders**
Ohio Department of Education. 2017. Two- page brief on root cause analysis with multiple stakeholders to address educational equity gaps.
<https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Teaching/Educator-Equity/Educator-Equity-in-Ohio/Local-Equity-Plan-1/Conducting-a-Root-Cause-Analysis-with-Stakeholders.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>

Exemplar in Practice:

- **A Case Study in Smarter School Spending**
Government Finance Officers Association. 2015. Helpful example of ways Beaverton School District in Portland, Oregon, used root cause analysis to find the most effective and cost-efficient ways to improve unsatisfactory graduation rates and special education students' poor performance on achievement measures.
<https://www.gfoa.org/sites/default/files/Beaverton%20School%20District%20Case%20Study%20Root%20Cause%20Analysis%20FINAL.pdf>