RIVERSIDE COUNTY
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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# Differentiated Assistance:
## Perspectives and Feedback From District Leaders in Riverside County

*Prepared by the Riverside County Office of Education*

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# Introduction

Riverside County covers over 7,300 square miles with a county population of nearly 2.5 million serving a student population of over 430,000.  Riverside County students are served by 23 school districts along with numerous charter schools and through direct services provided by the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE).  In addition to direct student services, the RCOE provides specific educational, financial, legislative, and leadership services and support to all TK-12 school districts and charter schools as well as early childhood education programs in Riverside County.  As an organization, it is comprised of the elected Riverside County Superintendent of Schools and the array of individuals employed by the County Superintendent to help fulfill their statutory duties and responsibilities.  The RCOE Pledge states that, "***Every student in Riverside County will graduate from high school academically and socially prepared for college, the workforce, and civic responsibility***."  The Pledge serves to define student success in relevant, measurable, and achievable terms and is the foundation for the work of the RCOE.

The **California System of Support** is designed as a tiered model which affords services to CA districts and schools based upon identified needs in order to support continuous improvement efforts.  The first tier, Level 1 or **General Assistance**, consists of resources and assistance made available to all local educational agencies (LEAs).  Level 2 or **Differentiated Assistance** (DA) is the second tier of assistance required by Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) statute provided to LEAs that meet eligibility criteria[1] based on CA School Dashboard[2] data.  County superintendents, charter authorizers, the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) provide DA for eligible LEAs in the form of individually designed assistance to address identified performance issues, including significant disparities in performance among student groups. (Source: California Department of Education[3])

In Riverside County, DA consists of several common processes that are differentiated for each eligible district.  As required per CA Education Code 52071[4], RCOE supports districts with identifying strengths and weaknesses through a root cause analysis process.  This is coupled with working collaboratively with the school district to secure assistance from academic, programmatic, or fiscal expert(s) to identify and implement effective programs and practices that are designed to improve performance in any areas of need identified by the school district.  During the 2021-2022 school year, DA was augmented based upon new requirements set forth by CA Assembly Bill 130, Section 122[5] which included supporting LEAs with analyzing a specific set of local metrics due to the absence of statewide data due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Differentiated Assistance takes place throughout the school year.  After the annual publication of the CA School Dashboard in December, representatives from RCOE communicate with representatives in each district that meets eligibility criteria[1] for DA.  This is followed by an initial meeting between a team from RCOE and a team from each district to review data and discuss strengths and challenges.  A plan is established for conducting a Root Cause Analysis (RCA) in any areas of focus stemming from CA School Dashboard outcomes.  After completing the RCA and determining specific actions, additional supports and services are offered.  If the district is in need of the offered services, RCOE and the district team collaboratively plan for implementation of identified services.  Every effort is made to align the DA process with the timeline for each district's development of their Local Control and Accountability Plan[6] (LCAP) to ensure that any areas of identified need are communicated to educational partners and inform actions and services within the LCAP.  As additional needs arise, districts coordinate with a liaison from RCOE to determine how to address needs.

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[1] LEA Criteria for Differentiated Assistance  www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/leaproposedcrit.asp
[2] CA School Dashboard  www.caschooldashboard.org/#/home
[3] CA Department of Education: California's System of Support  www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp
[4] CA Education Code Section 52071  leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=52071.&lawCode=EDC
[5] CA Assembly Bill 130  leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB130
[6] Local Control and Accountability Plan  www.cde.ca.gov/re/lc/

# Self-Study Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this self-study conducted by members of the RCOE team was to determine successes and challenges of Level 2 Differentiated Assistance (DA) as perceived and reported by school district leaders in Riverside County with a focus on how DA support **impacted student outcomes**. In the spirit of **continuous improvement**, results of the study will **inform future DA services** to expand upon successes and identify actions to overcome challenges.

This study used **multiple methods** to seek input from school district leaders. School district leaders from districts eligible for DA were invited to participate in a **digital survey**. A smaller sample of district leaders was also asked to participate in **empathy interviews** using a semi-structured interview protocol. District participants were selected to participate in the survey and interview if they served in a leadership position in any district that was identified as eligible for DA in 2017-2022[7], and continue to serve in the same district.

**Quantitative data** was also reviewed from the CA School Dashboard in 2017, 2018, and 2019 along with additional metrics reported via DataQuest in 2020 and 2021 and compiled by district and student group. Data was examined to determine areas of student growth. Based on quantitative data review, interview questions were created specific to each districts' Dashboard data to ascertain district leaders' perceptions of attribution for improved student group outcomes.

In constructing the survey and semi-structured interview protocol, additional DA resources and records were reviewed from DA sessions in 2017-2018 through 2021-2022. This included survey responses from district evaluations of root cause analysis sessions facilitated by RCOE in prior years, notes from RCOE DA meetings with district teams, and photographic artifacts from meetings and support sessions.

Survey responses were collected and reviewed. Interview responses were qualitatively coded for trends and themes related to successes and challenges of DA support. Trends and themes were compiled and summarized in this report.

| | |
|---|---|
| Number of Districts in Riverside County Eligible for DA in 2017-18 | 10 |
| Number of Districts in Riverside County Eligible for DA in 2018-19 | 15 |
| Number of Districts in Riverside County Eligible for DA in 2019-20 | 12 |
| Number of Districts* in Riverside County Participating in Reflection Surveys During DA sessions | 15 |
| Number of Districts* in Riverside County Receiving DA Feedback Survey | 12 |
| Number of Districts* in Riverside County Participating in an Empathy Interview | 12 |

*See Appendix B for list of participating districts.*

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[7] As a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, school districts identified as eligible for DA in 2019 retained DA eligibility in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. This is due to the suspension of the CA School Dashboard publication as a result of CA Senate Bill 98 and Assembly Bill 130 in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 respectively.

# Key Findings

In reviewing various data sources including survey results, meeting notes, and interview transcripts, there were several common findings evident in districts' responses about Differentiated Assistance (DA).

- In several instances, there appeared to be some **misunderstandings** about **DA requirements** and **criteria** for eligibility.  Based on analysis of this finding, it was evident that perceptions often stemmed from leaders new to their leadership role or new to a district that was eligible for DA.  A few survey and/or interview responses also indicated a perception that DA is perceived as a punitive process.  Respondents who indicated a perception about DA being "punitive" expressed that their perception about DA improved over time after working with county partners.  Building a common understanding about DA is an opportunity for growth.

- Interview responses and meeting notes indicated that district leaders would prefer to include more **educational partners** in the DA process including site staff, board members, and community partners.  District leaders were able to invite a team to DA sessions (initial meeting, root cause analysis sessions, follow-up support) but in some cases, district teams were very small.  During the DA process, leaders recognized the value of bringing educational partners through every stage of support to build awareness, gain perspective from multiple partners, and empower team members to take action.

- Efforts are still needed in **making connections** across elements of CA's Accountability and Continuous Improvement System.  For example, the connection between the CA School Dashboard and eligibility for DA is fairly clear, however the ways in which DA efforts impact LCAP development can be strengthened.  In addition, how DA and LCAP connect to Special Education Compliance and Improvement Monitoring (CIM) can be streamlined.  There can also be better efforts to connect district-level accountability with school-level accountability and support through Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI), and School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) development.

- District leaders shared that they value **flexibility** in the county office's approach to providing DA to each district.  It is well known that districts across the CA differ drastically in needs.  Participants in the research study appreciated that the county team and district team were able to co-design the support services based on local contexts. However, there were also several comments about clarifying **expectations**.  Since there are not specific timelines associated with support services, questions were asked about monitoring and accountability.  Several also inquired about whether districts should expect additional oversight in the future.

- Districts shared that DA eligibility supported their **focused efforts** aimed at priority areas or student groups.  DA created additional urgency, confirmed areas of need, and enabled reassessment of actions being targeted to serve specific students in order to initiate, adjust, or improve services.  In addition, districts were able to enhance how data is used to assess needs, monitor progress, and support students based on their area of focus.

- A common theme expressed by districts was that new state and federal programs and one-time funding provided to accelerate learning recovery during the pandemic created **competing priorities** that negatively impacted differentiated assistance efforts.  While the additional funding was beneficial and the programs are well-intended, a categorical approach to funding is not always aligned to the needs of specific districts, and the amount of time required to develop plans stretches the capacity of district staff and dilutes their focus on longer-term improvement efforts.

- Many interview and survey responses indicated a preference for **in-person sessions** when digging deeply into data and analyzing root causes for specific student outcomes.  Although some respondents appreciated the flexibility that virtual meetings afford, the feedback suggested that in-person sessions are more meaningful.

- Respondents also indicated a preference for **individualized support**.  Several acknowledged that they may have similar Dashboard outcomes as other districts or they may have a similar demographic composition, however improvement work is personal and contextual.  Districts felt that it was beneficial to work with county partners on a more individualized basis, as opposed to being grouped with other districts in larger settings.

# Summary of Student Success: Dashboard Outcomes

Prior to conducting the self-study, RCOE staff reviewed quantitative data to determine areas of challenge and areas of success reflected on the CA School Dashboard and other quantitative sources. Of the **ten districts eligible for DA in 2017-2018**, eight met DA eligibility criteria based on outcomes for Students with Disabilities (SWD) while far fewer met criteria based on outcomes for Foster Youth (FY) (two districts), African American (AA) students (two districts), English Learners (EL) (one district), and American Indian (AI) students (one district). Three of ten districts met eligibility criteria for more than one student group. Eligibility primarily resulted from red performance levels on the CA School Dashboard in the academic indicator and suspension rate indicator, with a few student groups meeting DA eligibility criteria in graduation rate.

Of the **fifteen districts eligible for DA in 2018-2019**, many were identified as a result of the Chronic Absenteeism and College and Career indicator results being published for the first time. Eleven districts met DA eligibility criteria based on outcomes for SWD, eight met criteria for FY, seven for Homeless Youth (HY) and fewer met criteria based on outcomes for AA students (five districts), EL students (two districts), AI students (two districts), White (W) students (one district), socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students (one district), Hispanic (H) students (one district), and students of two or more races (one district).

However, even with the increase in the number of districts meeting eligibility criteria from 2017 to 2018, several districts demonstrated progress. **Three districts that were eligible for DA in 2017 as a result of outcomes for Students with Disabilities no longer met eligibility criteria for DA in 2018** based on SWD outcomes. Similarly, **three districts that were eligible for DA in 2017 as a result of outcomes for Foster Youth no longer met eligibility criteria for DA in 2018** based on FY outcomes. **One district that was eligible for DA in 2017 as a result of outcomes for American Indian students no longer met eligibility criteria for DA in 2018** based on AI outcomes.

**Twelve districts met DA eligibility criteria in 2019-2020** based on 2019 CA School Dashboard outcomes; a decrease of three districts from 2018. Nine met DA eligibility criteria based on outcomes for Students with Disabilities. This included three districts meeting eligibility criteria for the first time in 2019 plus six continuing to be eligible based on SWD outcomes since 2018. **Six districts no longer met eligibility criteria in 2019 based on outcomes for SWD** demonstrating improved outcomes in Academics, Chronic Absenteeism, Graduation Rate, Suspension Rate, and the College/Career Indicator.
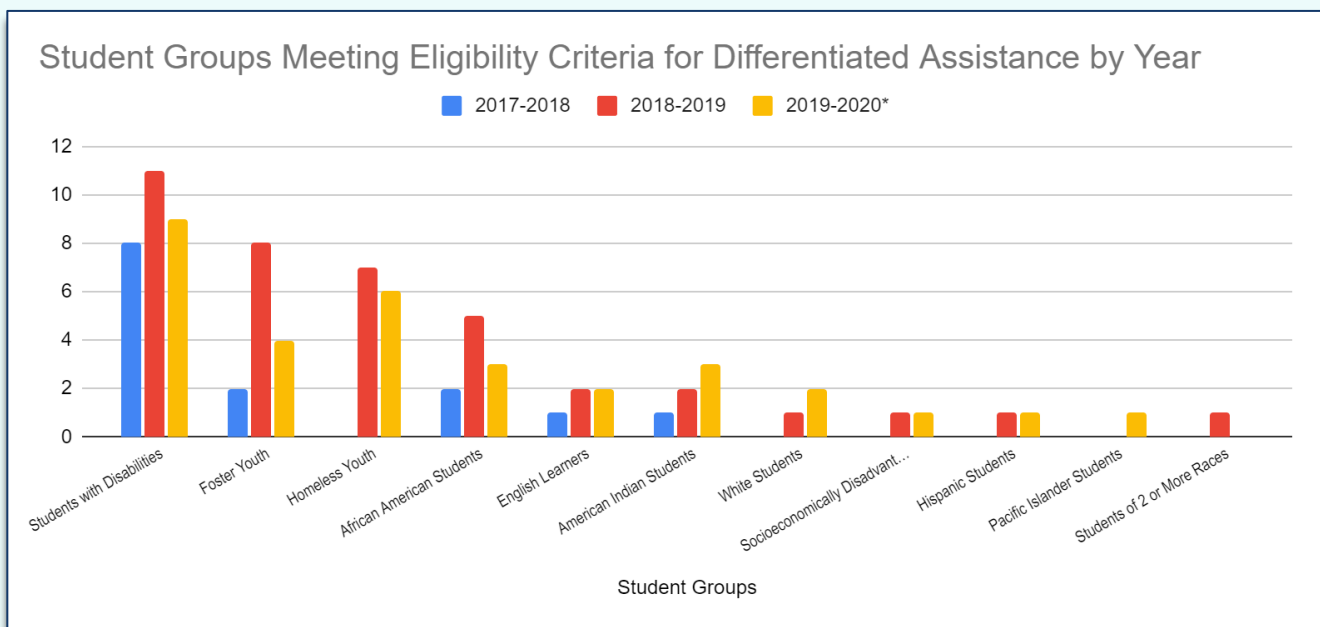


*Due to the suspension of the CA School Dashboard during pandemic, districts eligible for DA in 2019-2020 retained eligibility in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.*

Four districts met DA eligibility criteria based on outcomes for Foster Youth (three newly identified; one continuing to be eligible since 2018). However **seven districts no longer met DA eligibility criteria based on FY outcomes**, primarily based upon improvements in Chronic Absenteeism and Suspension rates.

Six districts met DA eligibility criteria based on outcomes for Homeless Youth (two newly identified; four continuing to be eligible since 2018). However **three districts no longer met DA eligibility criteria based on HY outcomes**, primarily based upon improvements in Chronic Absenteeism and the College Career Indicator.

Additionally, districts also demonstrated successes in outcomes for other student groups including **four districts no longer meeting DA eligibility criteria based on outcomes for African American students** with improvements in Academics, Chronic Absenteeism, and Suspension Rates.

# Summary of Student Success: Interviews with District Leaders

In order to gain perspective from districts regarding their successes with various student groups, district representatives were asked district-specific questions during empathy interviews. For example, one district was asked:

> *Anonymous District was eligible for DA in 2018-2019 based on 2018 Dashboard outcomes for Students with Disabilities, Foster Youth, African American students, and American Indian students. In 2019-2020, Anonymous District was no longer eligible for DA, with ELA/Literacy and Graduation Rate proving consistent success points in improving outcomes on the 2019 Dashboard. To what does the district attribute growth in student outcomes?*

Each district received a question with details specific to their districts' Dashboard data and DA eligibility. District responses to DA eligibility questions regarding student success included a variety of themes. Some districts indicated that they were able to gain a better understanding of student needs through an **in-depth root cause analysis** as a result of DA eligibility. Other districts attributed success to **engaging additional partners** in the improvement work such as site level teams, school board members, community members, and union leaders. One of the most common themes centered around **improving data systems and data accuracy** by analyzing local results, verifying accuracy of results, developing additional data collection tools (screeners, surveys), and establishing analysis processes.

This connected to another theme related to refining **monitoring processes** to frequently monitor progress of student groups and/or improvement actions. A few respondents indicated that they had to address "adult mindsets" to improve relationships with students and increase expectations of students.

Districts also attributed success to **focusing on the needs of specific student groups**. Survey responses, interview responses, and a review of DA meeting notes indicated that for many districts, DA eligibility confirmed what the district was already aware of in that they had specific student groups with needs not being addressed. DA eligibility for student groups **reinforced their intentional focus on specific needs** and it also enabled **unified efforts** towards common goals. Another district expressed that the Dashboard and subsequent DA eligibility set a "**clear expectation** to focus on the most vulnerable students" while another shared that the Dashboard highlighted that there were **needs beyond academic issues**.

Specific student group success was attributed to a variety of actions and services, including but not limited to:

| Students with Disabilities | Foster Youth |
|---|---|
| • Focusing on inclusion and inclusive practices.<br>• Improving Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).<br>• Ensuring consistency in implementation of foundational systems such as Student Study Teams and the Special Education identification process.<br>• Training for various groups of educators including teachers, paraprofessionals, instructional coaches, and administrators. Training in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was mentioned frequently in addition to co-teaching strategies, intervention strategies, and early literacy strategies.<br>• Aligning Special Education Plan (SEP) and LCAP actions to focus efforts and investments across plans, coordinate support, and eliminate redundancies or competing priorities.<br>• Developing internal monitoring tools for attendance, graduation "on-track" status, and academic progress.<br>• Transcript analysis of SWD to address access to and success in courses. | • Raising awareness at sites about Foster Youth (identification, services, and available supports).<br>• Connecting with RCOE Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) to find support with wrap-around services.<br>• Requesting training from RCOE for centralized registration staff to develop a process for registering Foster Youth to ensure smooth transition to school site.<br>• Hiring a social worker to focus on the needs of foster youth and expanding services with Social Work interns from local universities.<br>• Monitoring Foster Youth progress through data systems and site visits focused on Foster Youth.<br>• Refining the Alternative to Suspension process and implementing consistently across sites.<br>• Creating a Foster Youth LCAP Advisory group.<br>• Building relationships between Foster Youth, guardians, and educators. |
| **African American Students** | **Homeless Youth** |
| • Gaining perspectives about students' experiences through empathy interviews and determining where the system was not meeting their needs.<br>• Setting clear expectations to focus on students' needs and build relationships with students and families.<br>• Process-mapping of suspensions using scenarios of student infractions through consequence in order to determine inconsistencies across sites and develop a more standardized process. Alternatives to suspension, positive behavior interventions and supports, reentry meetings after suspension, and restorative practices were identified as effective approaches.<br>• Developing, implementing, refining, and expanding African American Parent Advisory Councils at sites and districtwide.<br>• Implementing an African American Achievement Initiative (AAAI) locally based on RCOE's countywide AAAI including equity training, equity walks, and equity coaching. Equity efforts led to addressing inequities with several other student groups including Students with Disabilities and English learners. | • Conducting empathy interviews with students to learn more about life challenges that impact attendance.<br>• Raising awareness at sites about Homeless Youth (identification, services, and available supports).<br>• Connecting with RCOE to find support with wrap-around services.<br>• Meeting with RCOE to probe deeper into data pertaining to homeless students.<br>• Developing attendance initiatives focused on needs of homeless youth.<br><br> |

# Detailed Findings: Survey and Interview Responses

## District Perceptions About Differentiated Assistance

During interviews, participants were first asked, "*What do you think when you hear the phrase 'Differentiated Assistance?'*" Several respondents indicated that the phrase DA brought to mind "**compliance**." This included comments such as a "state mandate to improve" or "additional work on top of the work we're already doing." A few others shared that DA provided "**accountability**." For some, the accountability was perceived to be beneficial in that it supported districts in **focusing attention on specific student groups**. For others, accountability was described as "another hoop to jump through."

Many respondents indicated that their initial perception about DA was negative with phrases such as "an ugly check mark," or "we are on 'the list'," but most shared that their **impression of DA changed over time**. Districts came to recognize that DA eligibility reinforced the **current reality** in the district. Student needs were illuminated or amplified by the Dashboard, then DA provided "a label for something we already know and are addressing." One respondent shared that DA created a "**sense of urgency** to really understand what is happening with our kids." Another district leader shared that the DA eligibility initiated a **deeper level of data analysis**. Many also shared that after their initial negative perceptions about DA, the relationship with RCOE made the process feel **supportive**.

Some participants questioned the **accuracy of DA identification** based upon the **variation** in student group composition over time as well as the combination of state priority indicators resulting in identification. For example, if a district improved student outcomes in one area, but then struggled in another area, they may continue to be eligible for DA in the subsequent year, even though improvements were made for the student group and indicator of focus. Another mentioned that District of Special Education Accountability[8] rules impact their ability to address needs if they are not serving specific students yet are held accountable for results of those students.

The interviews also brought to light some continuing **misperceptions** about DA. This included one comment about DA being "just a new label for Program Improvement (PI)." Another district, however, shared, "DA is nothing like PI" since PI was very specific in the required corrective actions. Another misperception was demonstrated in a participant's response about "DA schools" and "DA funding," conflating district-level DA eligibility with school-level Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) eligibility.

## District Perceptions About Initial DA Meetings Between RCOE Team and District Team

District participants were asked to provide their perspective related to the initial DA meetings between RCOE and the district teams. At the initial DA meetings, a team from RCOE visits the school district team at a location of choice (district office, school site) to review DA eligibility and requirements, analyze Dashboard and other data, discuss the district's perceived strengths and areas of opportunity for growth, and plan next steps in partnership between the district and county teams. Survey data showed that the initial DA meetings were perceived as **positive** with 80% of respondents rating the meetings as "good" or "excellent" and open-ended comments such as, "**Communication** was very clear and **alignment efforts** were very good," and, "we appreciate RCOE's assistance with data during the process."

Upon conducting interviews with districts, several other themes emerged within this response. **Data resources** and the opportunity to **review district data** was generally perceived as a positive. This related to the COE team being familiar with data in advance and providing additional data resources during the meetings. Some districts felt the meeting would have a "better value with more recent data" besides Dashboard results. While data discussions were generally perceived as positive, a few districts did mention that the data overview was "not impactful" because they "already analyze data on their own" or "we live in our own data."

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[8] For most student groups, the LEA in which a student resides will be the same LEA in which the student is receiving the majority of their instruction. However, students with disabilities (SWDs) often receive services outside their district of special education accountability (DSEA). The DSEA, which in most cases is also the district of geographic residence, may be unable to provide the full range of special education services that the student requires and will often enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with another LEA or county office of education to provide these services. (**Source**: Update to the District of Special Education Accountability for Students with Disabilities www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/documents/districtresidencerule.pdf).

Some respondents also mentioned the need to increase **expectations for action** during initial DA meetings. A suggestion was that perhaps the county and district teams might designate some **benchmark timelines**. For example, one district suggested that they should be asked, "What should the community see in three months or in six months, etc.?" in response to identified areas of need.

A frequent theme among participants was the need to include other partners in the initial DA and subsequent DA meetings. Districts want "more people in the room" and "all hands on deck" when data is being analyzed. They appreciate RCOE being "thought partners with us" and would like the ability to **invite more educational partners** to the meetings to become part of the process.

Many districts had a positive perspective on the initial DA meetings. Some district participants saw the initial DA meetings as a **positive experience** with the county team "laying out a positive path forward." They appreciated that the county team came out to the district and set aside time to **meet individually** with the district. They thought it was impactful to understand why they were eligible for DA and to hear about what supports were available. Districts were appreciative of the county's positive and helpful attitude and one even labeled the initial DA meetings as "fantastic" since they were able to connect with the county team and learn more about available supports.

Some of the districts believed that the **initial meetings provide an opportunity for growth for RCOE**. These districts believed that the initial meetings were "clinical" or a "check the box" task for RCOE. The meeting could also feel like a "punch in the gut" for district team members who were not already aware of the district's DA eligibility. There were also districts that **had changes in leadership** who did not participate in initial DA meetings and were unable to provide feedback or perspectives.



## District Perceptions About Root Cause Analysis Sessions Facilitated by the RCOE Team

RCOE also sought input, feedback, and district perceptions regarding Root Cause Analysis (RCA) sessions facilitated by RCOE, a common process that takes place during Differentiated Assistance when analyzing strengths and area of opportunity for growth (EC52071(c)(1))[9]. RCOE facilitated several RCA sessions with districts eligible for DA since year one of the differentiated assistance process in 2017-2018. Most sessions were held in large groups with teams from multiple districts over several days with action periods in between. Sessions are sequential beginning with Day 1 when district teams are led through a process to develop a root cause inquiry plan centering on their identified problem of practice stemming from Dashboard outcomes. Teams are trained in various qualitative investigation processes (e.g., empathy interviews, process mapping) as well as quantitative visualization and analysis. On Day 2, after a one-month to six-week action period, results of the inquiry investigation are analyzed though various processes (e.g., coding, affinity grouping, fishbone diagramming) to determine potential root causes. This leads to the development of a theory of action (e.g., driver diagram) including an aim statement, system drivers, and potential "change ideas" to implement and monitor related to the problem of practice to address the root causes of Dashboard outcomes.

Surveys conducted after RCA sessions in 2018-2020 resulted in open-ended feedback responses including but not limited to:
- *This process prompted **deeper conversations** yet we needed more time. Celebration of our team gaining traction to further our collaboration and deeper thinking.*
- *Great way to **identify the problems**. Use of guiding tools have been helpful, eye-opening to see the results of the **empathy interviews**.*
- *It assisted the team in **delving deeper into the causes** instead of jumping to solutions.*
- *We loved the **team time** today so we could develop a plan and next steps.*
- *It was a very informative process to analyze a problem and identify solutions but it was very fast-paced.*
- *The structure helped support us through the process and gave us time to get **input from all team members** in order to have a **better understanding** of the big picture.*

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[9] CA Education Code 52071 leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=52071.&lawCode=EDC

As part of the DA feedback and input survey in 2022, results showed that 50% of respondents felt that RCA sessions were either "excellent" or "good" while the other 50% felt that they were "fair." While conducting interviews, some district leaders shared that they were already participating in RCA sessions or similar inquiry sessions with outside agencies contracted by the district, so their perspective was that some of the processes facilitated by RCOE were **redundant** of work they had already started or was **too accelerated** based on their contemporaneous RCA processes, but they felt it was "required" based on RCOE's role to provide DA. Others indicated that they rated the session as "fair" because they **prefer more individualized support** instead of cohort or large group sessions.

Although survey responses seemed split, a large majority of the districts spoke to the use of the RCA tools[10] in their districts after the facilitated sessions. They believed the sessions provided their districts with **focus** and **tools** to begin the "conversation about the data." They believe that the **empathy interviews** were "valuable to get insight" into what was going on in the district from the perspectives of students, teachers, and other educational partners. They were able to go back to their schools and create some "**process maps**" to determine variability in practices in an effort to improve opportunities and outcomes for students. The tool used most predominately for in-district inquiry was a "**fishbone diagram**."



Continuous Improvement Tools Replicated for In-District Inquiry
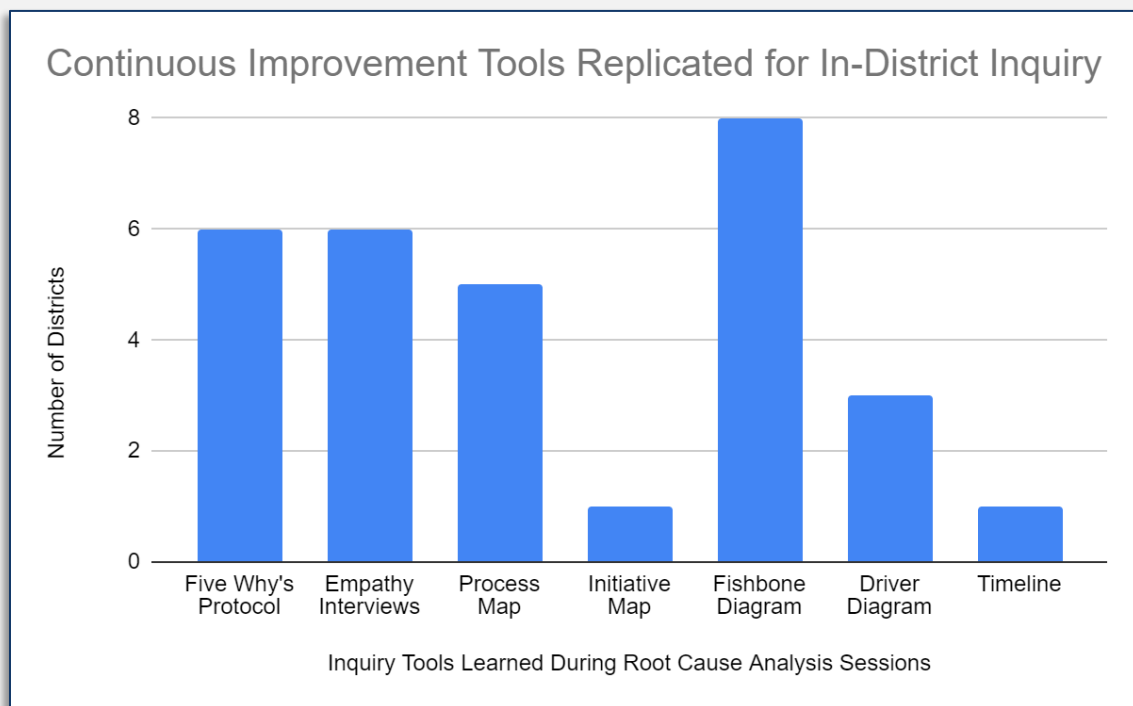
Feedback about the format of the root cause analysis sessions also emerged through interviews. Prior to COVID, root cause analysis sessions were held in-person in large groups with all districts who were eligible for DA attending sessions at the same time. Districts believe that the **return to in-person sessions** will be "easier to accomplish" and "more impactful." They also believe that the "**big group was very distracting**" and preferred a smaller group setting. There was also a call to have the meetings done in districts (as opposed to a conference center) as it was "**hard to facilitate off campus**" for some districts or difficult to get a larger team to participate if they had to travel to a conference center.

While meeting location and facilitation were important to districts, another important theme that emerged related to who attended the meetings. Districts had a desire to "**bring in other educational partners**." There was a call for larger teams including the "union president, board members", or "social workers and counselors," and to have "other people in the room." One district stated specifically that "all groups participating comes down to one thing, **relationships**."

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[10] Differentiated Assistance Protocols for Local Educational Agencies Facilitation Guide – 2nd edition (**Source**: CA County Superintendent's Educational Services Association ccsesa.org/?wpfb_dl=6538 )
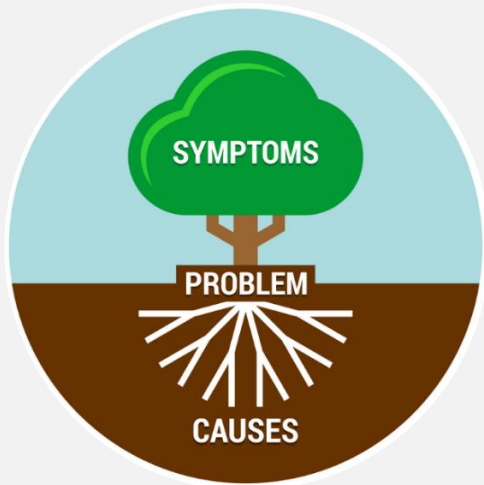
While feedback for root cause analysis sessions was generally positive, there were also some areas of growth for RCOE. One participant's feedback was that "**too many tools can be overwhelming**" and that the process should begin with just one or two tools to launch inquiry investigations. There was also a comment regarding the difficulty of RCOE being both an evaluator and a coach. This participant believed that the person who is an evaluator cannot also be an improvement coach because the districts will treat it as a directive instead of a learning opportunity.

Overall the root cause analysis sessions were perceived as valuable by most districts. They appreciated the tools and thought the trainings were "comprehensive." One district even said, "If there is anything I've ever done professionally, that initial [root cause analysis] training was number one." The respondent continued to share how his team was able to take many of the **inquiry tools** and strategies back to site teams, they took **ownership** of the process, and they **improved services for students**.

### District Perceptions About Follow-Up Support Provided by RCOE

Many districts were provided follow-up support based on the needs of the district highlighted by the dashboard and the root cause analysis sessions. Those who did not receive support directly from RCOE were partnering with other agencies. District participants were asked their perception regarding follow-up support, which varied by district. Some comments regarding follow-up support focused on specific people or outside consultant groups that provided positive support. These included Riverside County SELPA, CORE, and WestEd.

Districts reflected upon RCOE support favorably with statements such as "we always appreciate RCOE support" and shared that they greatly benefited from follow-up support by specific employees. RCOE staff have provided **customized support** to districts regarding student with disabilities such as attending meetings pertaining to students with disabilities, training teachers of SWD on how to **analyze transcripts**, and working with other programs in the district to improve graduation rates of students with disabilities. Customized support also included **attendance and data-tracking** as well as improvements to **screening processes** to better support homeless and foster youth.

**Strategic Plan Alignment** (SPA) support was a service provided to districts during the COVID-19 pandemic since it was a process that could be completed remotely. SPA was a chance for districts to work in conjunction with RCOE and Riverside County SELPA in a concerted effort to **align plans across the district**. Plans reviewed as part of the SPA process included the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), the Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA), and the Special Education Plan (SEP). Districts believed plan alignment was "extremely helpful" with one district calling it "a dream to try and get to one plan."

Districts felt that RCOE was **flexible** during the process in listening to what they needed and an outside view "helped us to see where gaps or duplication exist." While some felt that the outcome of plan alignment was "not what they expected," they believe that plan alignment had **unintended benefits** such as **modified data conversations** or realizing that they needed to **spend more time with site teams** to understand alignment. One theme that resulted from plan alignment was the need to **involve the community**. A few districts mentioned the fact that the "DO (district office) may see a through-line between plans, but the community may not." Other districts also felt that community should be involved in follow-up support for DA including board members, so they have a true understanding of the needs and available supports.

Some districts did not have specific comments about follow-up support since they did not opt to receive follow-up support. One district mentioned that **communication** between RCOE and one district was seen as an **opportunity for growth**. Survey results revealed that 30% of respondents **did not know about consultation services** and **professional learning sessions** available as follow-up support. 50% of respondents were not aware of strategic plan alignment support. Generally speaking, follow-up support for districts was seen as "helpful" but communication about available services can be improved.

## District Perceptions About How RCOE Can Improve Differentiated Assistance

District participants were asked to provide recommendations to RCOE regarding **how to improve** Differentiated Assistance. Many districts spoke to the fact that they look to RCOE as experts in the field that they can turn to for assistance. Districts wanted RCOE to provide more of an "**active role in technical assistance**" by **providing feedback** on the work that is being done in the districts and some even suggested having more **concrete timelines** to improve outcomes. Districts also wanted "**confirmation** that we are moving in the right direction" and for RCOE to provide support with **problem-solving** and **evidence-based practices**.

While many districts asked for support from RCOE, there was also a recurring theme of **district mindset** being a barrier to the work. A few districts mentioned that district mindset or attitude about the DA process "puts the COE at a disadvantage." Districts felt like **DA was "one more thing"** on top of an already impacted workload. Although some districts might have had a negative perception towards DA, they generally believe that "the process works" and was effective for them. As one district said, "Is it a perfect model? No. But it's a very good model that worked for us."

Another emerging theme for improvement was "**monitoring**." Participants believed that DA should be a "**reflective process**" with "candid conversations about the journey" and some believed that there should be **more oversight or involvement from the county office**. Suggestions included **site visits**, **specific expectations**, **concrete timelines**, and identifying **roles and responsibilities** of all involved. One district suggested that DA should be a bit more specific with what is trying to be accomplished paired with differentiation and flexibility based on local context. Survey participants also suggested that districts should be able to choose what will work best for them based on their needs and be **equal partners** in designing support services, but districts should also have an **understanding of consequences** down the line if targets are not met or if student outcomes do not improve.

District participants gave suggestions for ways that RCOE could improve supports for Differentiated Assistance. Some districts suggested that **aligning DA support**, such as strategic plan alignment, with other initiatives so it would not be "one more thing" would be helpful. It would also alleviate some of the stress on the districts. They **appreciated that there was not a separate "DA plan"** but agreed that there might need to be **more support with how needs are addressed in the LCAP** to further align the goals of the district.

Another point of feedback was that DA support should be more **individualized**. They felt like their district "got lost in a big group" when RCA sessions were conducted in a large setting. They shared that "more focused groups" would help. Some districts again mentioned bringing in "**change partners**" such as their board members. Specific feedback to improve outcomes was given by some districts which included providing **starter sentences for data analysis** and **creating consortiums of work groups** around specific student groups. Most districts had similar advice for RCOE which included "keep supporting," "be available and encouraging," and "make yourselves available and help us to keep this at the forefront with reminders."



## District Feedback to Policymakers About the California Accountability and Continuous Improvement System

District participants were asked if they had any feedback for California policymakers about the Accountability and Continuous Improvement System. The Accountability and Continuous Improvement System includes the LCAP, the Dashboard, and tiered supports such as DA. One clear call to action was to "unify systems more clearly." The districts felt a strong sense of duplication recently with, as one district says, "**One thing after another**; LCAP, SEP, DA, then all these other plans. There is no cycle of improvement because **we can barely implement before we are asked to write another plan**." The amount of plans required by the recent budget and legislative cycles was overwhelming for the districts and they often felt like a "Jack of all trades, master of none." Participants expressed a desire for a **more streamlined and less duplicative accountability system**.

The majority of district participants believe a shift in focus towards a more "categorical program" approach from state policymakers risks undermining local control. **Categorical restrictions are a "frustration" and a "contradiction"** because districts find it difficult to focus on the specific needs of their students "if every new bill and funding stream has its own requirements."

District participants also believe that **one-time financial support is not often the solution to recurring issues**. Districts believe that "money doesn't solve problems" and "mandates don't solve problems" - great teaching, evidence-based practices, and invested leaders help to improve schools. A specific example a district provided was the influx of Expanded Learning Opportunity Program (ELO-P) Funds. While the district was appreciative of the support for its students' before- and after-school programs, they also had needs during the school day that were not feasible with the ELO-P. Nor did their team have sufficient capacity to develop a comprehensive ELO Program while also developing a Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) Program, an A-G Completion Improvement Grant plan, an Educator Effectiveness Funds plan, all while implementing their Local Control and Accountability Plan, their Special Education Plan, and numerous safety protocols and requirements.





Another common challenge expressed by districts was the **recruitment and retention of qualified employees**. The influx of state and federal funds provided financial resources to be able to hire new staff, but the available workforce is limited. There is no one available to hire or qualified to support identified needs so there is **a disconnect between the needs and the attainable practices** that could improve outcomes.

Districts expressed an interest in having **policymakers come and visit the school sites to see the needs before implementing policy**. They would like to be able to share their stories as well as other types of assessment data with policy makers so decisions can be made based on the needs of the students. As one district participant said, "If we want to improve the education system**, solutionitis[11] needs to stop at all levels of the system**." The ability of policy makers to come to the school sites and listen to the needs of the students and staff would help to initiate a move towards **student-centered policy**.

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[11] Solutionitis: The tendency to jump quickly on a solution before fully understanding the actual problem to be solved. This behavior results in incomplete analysis of the problem to be addressed and fuller consideration of potential problem-solving alternatives. It is siloed reasoning--seeing complex matters through a narrow-angle lens--that can lure leaders into unproductive strategies. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching  https://carnegienetworks.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/115001233068-Solutionitis

# Recommendations

**Recommendations for School Districts**

- Include **team members** representing a **variety of perspectives** throughout the Differentiated Assistance (DA) process. If it is challenging to convene a large team across multiple inquiry and improvement planning sessions, use existing meeting structures to include DA discussions and planning (e.g., LCAP Advisory meetings, Parent Advisory meetings, Principals' meetings, Board meetings, etc.). If existing meetings are not available, schedule opportunities to keep educational partners updated and involved throughout the process.
- Continue to **improve and refine data and monitoring systems**. Many districts attributed growth in student outcomes to improvements in data quality and availability of data paired with structured processes for monitoring student progress. Frequent opportunities to **formatively assess progress** enable districts to determine if new actions are achieving desired outcomes.
- **Make connections** between differentiated assistance and other System of Support processes such as LCAP development and Special Education Compliance and Improvement Monitoring (CIM). This could include **ensuring that all departments are represented in the various improvement and planning sessions** to avoid duplication of efforts and competing priorities.
- **Protect time for improvement work**. As one participant stated in an interview, "improvement is messy but necessary work." This means it takes time to truly understand which elements of a school and district system are producing current student outcomes. Another respondent shared, "In education we know there is no such thing as a silver bullet." This emphasizes the notion that improvement takes dedicated time and effort since a simple or single solution is unlikely to achieve equitable access and improved outcomes for students.

**Recommendations for County Offices of Education**

- To address district perceptions about Differentiated Assistance, continue to **enhance messaging** to district teams about the CA Accountability and Continuous Improvement System. Clarify the DA purpose and processes, and create communication tools that districts can use with their internal teams to build awareness and understanding. **Bolster communication** about services and supports available as part of DA eligibility.
- Support districts with improving and refining **data and monitoring systems** to enhance opportunities for districts to determine if improvement actions are resulting in improved student outcomes.
- Make every effort to **individualize support** for each district. Team meetings, inquiry and analysis sessions, and follow-up support may be focused on similar needs and may be structured similarly between districts, however customizing based on each districts' context aligns with the intention of differentiation. It also creates an environment for reflection and self-examination if conversations can be open and honest.
- Support district teams with **making connections** between elements of the CA Accountability and Continuous Improvement system. For example, COEs can work with Special Education partners such as Special Education Local Planning Areas (SELPAs) to connect inquiry and analysis support for DA and Compliance and Improvement Monitoring (CIM) and resultant actions that appear in the LCAP and CIM plans.

**Recommendations for State Policymakers**

- District teams repeatedly mentioned the disconnect and disjointedness between various elements of the CA Accountability and Continuous Improvement system. There was a resounding plea to **align various elements and requirements** in the system to unify efforts and eliminate duplication and competing priorities.
- A similar recommendation from districts is to return to the original intent of the local control funding formula (LCFF) and **avoid the continuing shift towards a "categorical program" approach**.
- Districts also requested that state policymakers **visit schools to adequately assess needs** before initiating new programs with new requirements.

# Appendix A

## Data Collection Tools

1. Sample DA Root Cause Analysis Reflection Survey from RCA Sessions (Spring 2018 and 2019)
   https://forms.gle/t5syZtBjU8nUohKD8

2. Sample DA Feedback Survey and Self-study Questions (Summer 2022)
   https://forms.gle/GHu1K8vzBMX6ip8T7
   https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MrTiWEgtcBaTfNmdwLmW9MIaRZNhunxfLLFg8SZ1xRo/edit?usp=sharing

3. Sample Semi-structured Interview Protocol
   https://docs.google.com/document/d/1t8Kpr_gB501N-0PfkBtauLx5eMv3adWNush3aNlbiC8/edit?usp=sharing

*Copy and paste links into browser if links do not function by clicking.*



### Root Cause Analysis Reflection

Each district team can select one representative to record and submit information resulting from the Root Cause analysis sessions and final reflection conversation.

What "Problem Statement" did your team identify for your root cause investigation? *

Your answer

What is the "Aim Statement" that your team will be striving to attain? *

Your answer

What are some of the "Drivers" in your system that you plan to impact? *

Your answer

What "Change Idea(s)" do you plan to test to positively impact the "Drivers" in your system? *

Your answer

What support might you need from academic, programmatic, or fiscal expert(s)? *

Your answer

Sample Root Cause Analysis Reflection Survey (Google Form)



### Differentiated Assistance Survey

We appreciate your participation in this brief survey as we work to improve our Differentiated Assistance (DA) support services and to determine possible impacts of DA on student outcomes. This survey is part of a self-study about Differentiated Assistance in Riverside County. The purpose of the study is to determine successes and challenges of DA support from the perspective of school district leaders. Results will inform future DA support including expanding upon successes and identifying actions to overcome challenges.

Differentiated Assistance is part of the CA System of Support and is described in Education Code 52071.
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=52071.&lawCode=EDC

1. Please select the size of your district. *

○ Small (Enrollment less than 10,000)

○ Small/Medium (Enrollment between 10,001 and 15,000)

○ Medium/Large (Enrollment between 15,001 and 20,000)

○ Large (Enrollment over 20,001)

2. What was your frequency of involvement with Differentiated Assistance services facilitated by RCOE? Response should reflect the year(s) that your LEA was eligible for DA. *

○ Frequent (Participated in most or all DA meetings/activities).

○ Moderate (Participated in several DA meetings/activities).

○ Minimal (Participated in one or two DA meetings/activities).

○ None (Did not participate in any DA meetings/activities).

Sample Differentiated Assistance Survey (Google Form)

# Appendix B

# List of Participating Districts

| Districts Participating in Root Cause Analysis Reflection Survey (2019) | Districts Receiving Link to Participate in Differentiated Assistance Feedback Survey (2022) | Districts Participating in Differentiated Assistance Empathy Interviews (2022) |
|---|---|---|
| Alvord Unified | Banning Unified | Banning Unified |
| Banning Unified | Beaumont Unified | Beaumont Unified |
| Desert Sands Unified | Coachella Valley Unified | Hemet Unified |
| Hemet Unified | Desert Sands Unified | Jurupa Unified |
| Jurupa Unified | Hemet Unified | Lake Elsinore Unified |
| Moreno Valley Unified | Jurupa Unified | Moreno Valley Unified |
| Murrieta Valley Unified | Lake Elsinore Unified | Nuview Union |
| Palm Springs Unified | Moreno Valley Unified | Palm Springs Unified |
| Perris Elementary | Nuview Union | Perris Elementary |
| Perris Union High | Perris Elementary | Perris Union High |
| Palo Verde Unified | Perris Union High | Palo Verde Unified |
| Riverside Unified | San Jacinto Unified | San Jacinto Unified |
| San Jacinto Unified | *Not all districts eligible for DA between 2017-2018 through 2021-2022 received the link to participate in DA Feedback Survey due to changes in district leadership over time and limited experience with DA in current district leadership role.* | *Not all districts eligible for DA in 2021-2022 were available to participate in empathy interviews. Several districts eligible for DA in prior years (2017-2018 or 2018-2019) were interviewed to determine perspectives from prior years.* |
| Temecula Valley Unified | | |
| Val Verde Unified | | |