Root Cause Analysis Overview

Introduction to Root Cause Analysis

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) requires state education agencies (SEAs) to collect and examine data from their local education agencies (LEAs) each year and to use that data to determine whether significant disproportionality is occurring within each LEA. If the state identifies an LEA as having significant disproportionality, that LEA must then take steps to focus on and improve the experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities by addressing and mitigating the cause(s) of significant disproportionality. Before any such steps can occur, however, the LEAs must identify the contributing causes of significant disproportionality. In this *DCASD In Brief*, the Data Center for Addressing Significant Disproportionality (DCASD) will provide an overview of one of the best practices LEAs can use in such cases: root cause analysis.

What Is Root Cause Analysis?

A root cause analysis (RCA) is a systemic investigation of the contributing, or root, causes of problems that organizations or institutions face. When it comes to addressing significant disproportionality, conducting an RCA can help LEAs unearth the true root causes and identify contributing factors of the significant disproportionality. LEAs can also create action plans based on RCA findings, which will have a higher likelihood of improving systemic structures, policies, practices, and procedures that led to the significant disproportionality. Alternatively, making assumptions or making decisions based on limited data can lead to costly changes that have little-to-no effect on the system or the students affected by the significant disproportionality.

Before We Begin

Though IDEA does not identify a specific method for identifying the root causes of significant disproportionality, following best practices, including conducting an RCA, are recommended and should include

- the meaningful engagement of a team;
- the careful analysis of data, including policies, procedures, and practices (PPPs) used in the areas for which an LEA is identified with significant disproportionality; and
- engaging in a clearly defined RCA process that is supported by evidence.

Did You Know?

IDEA regulations require the identification of contributing factors and the subsequent targeting of improvement strategies to address these factors through a comprehensive coordinated early intervening services (CCEIS) approach that uses 15% of an LEA's IDEA Part B (Sections 611 and 619) funds.[1] (34 C.F.R. § 300.646(d))

[1] For more information, see U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. (2017). *IDEA Part B regulations: Significant disproportionality (Equity in IDEA)*. Washington, D.C.: Author. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/significant-disproportionality-qa-03-08-17.pdf

Who Conducts an RCA?

One key to a successful root cause analysis for significant disproportionality is assembling a varied team to engage in the process. It is important to have a team of partners who can help identify and understand local context[2] and who have expertise and roles in various areas related to education, including students with disabilities (e.g., leadership, general education, special education, parents, community partners).

Why Are Data Important for RCA?

When considering contributing factors of significant disproportionality, it is important that the LEA team uses a variety of data to make informed decisions based on facts rather than assumptions. This wide range of data will provide a comprehensive approach to understanding root causes from a variety of sources.

We use data to…	
	❖ test our assumptions.
	❖ help direct our focus and know where to look deeper.
	❖ develop the whole picture that influences our outcomes.
	❖ make informed decisions.
	❖ help us understand the implementation of policies, practices, and procedures.

What Will Guide Inquiry for RCA?

To understand what types of data are relevant to the root cause analysis, leadership must ground the team in the *why*, or the reasons the SEA identified the LEA as having significant disproportionality—which may be due to identification, placement, and/or discipline (see: 34 C.F.R. § 300.646 (a) and (b)). Once they establish these reasons, the RCA team should consider developing a simple, yet focused problem statement connected to them. Throughout the RCA process, the problem statement will help keep the team's conversation grounded in a common understanding of the problem that will, in turn, guide the data analysis process. A basic problem statement guided by current data might look like this:

In our school district, students with disabilities who are Black are three times as likely to be suspended or expelled for more than 10 days as compared to all other students with disabilities in our district.

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[2] U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Non-regulatory guidance: Using evidence to strengthen education investments*. Washington, D.C.: Author. https://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/about/discretionary/2023-non-regulatory-guidance-evidence.pdf

What Types of Data Can Teams Use for RCA?

What Once they have developed a basic problem statement, the team should determine specific types of closely aligned data they can use to analyze it. This may include

- **Risk or alternate risk ratios**. These are the data that indicate disproportionality within an LEA. Team members can discuss what these data mean and go through their own risk ratio or alternate risk ratio[3] calculation process for the subgroup identified as experiencing significant disproportionality. This can be a powerful exercise to help all group members gain a deeper understanding of the district's specific areas of significant disproportionality.
- **Data from findings of a review of policies, procedures, and practices (PPPs).** Each LEA has a set of policies and procedures that guide their work and practices that demonstrate their implementation. The team should examine PPPs for *missing elements*, *compliance,[4] implementation fidelity*, and *resources* that the LEA already uses or needs to implement.

In addition, teams will want to consult a **variety of additional, relevant, contextual qualitative and quantitative data.** These data help teams to critically examine and gain a more holistic picture of the local context for the significant disproportionality. For each category of significant disproportionality in which the district is identified (i.e., identification, placement, discipline) the team should consider what data might provide them with a more complete understanding of what is influencing or contributing to the current disproportionality.

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[3] See: IDEA Data Center (2014). *Methods for assessing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: A technical assistance guide (revised)*. Rockville, MD: Westat. https://ideadata.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2017-09/idc_ta_guide_for_508-010716.pdf
[4] See: 34 C.F.R. § 300.646 (c)(1)

What Are the Types of RCA Processes?

As mentioned earlier, IDEA does not specify a particular process for identifying the root causes of significant disproportionality; *there is no one right way to conduct an RCA*. In fact, there are many best practices used as methods when conducting root cause analyses.

- **Fishbone Diagramming**, in which teams start by identifying broad categories of potential root causes and then use data to dive deeper into each category to determine subcategories that are more foundational causal or contributing factors. These steps help the team narrow down factors until they come to a consensus on root cause(s).
- **Diagnostic Trees**, where teams start at the top with a primary concern (i.e., the disproportionality) then outline the context or specific known factors around the disproportionality. The team follows a process of using data to develop and test hypotheses regarding contributing root causes.
- **The Five Whys**, a process where teams start with a hypothesized explanation for the significant disproportionality and then repeat one simple question—*why?*—to peel back the underlying causes of each answer until they identify a root cause. **Note:** With this process, teams will experience the best outcomes when they use data and accompany each answer with a thorough, evidence-based component rather than just making assumptions.

Keep in Mind

When selecting an RCA process, the team must understand what that process will look like in practice. To help with this, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) created a series of case studies which utilize some of these RCA strategies to help LEAs further understand the effect of choosing a strong, data-based RCA process.

How Can Teams Keep Students at the Center of the RCA Process?

Regardless of the RCA method, it is critical to keep the following questions at the heart of the RCA process:[5]

- What **evidence** do we have to support our statements about potential root causes?
- To what extent have we **implemented** any given policy, procedure, or practice with **fidelity**?

When a state identifies an LEA as having significant disproportionality, that LEA must take steps to focus on and improve the experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities by addressing and mitigating the cause(s) of the significant disproportionality. Root cause analysis is one way to begin uncovering those underlying causes. This *DCASD In Brief* highlights only the basics surrounding RCA. To learn more or request technical assistance, visit the DCASD website.

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[5] Ahram, R., Fergus, E., & Noguera, P. (2011). Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: Case studies of suburban school districts. *Teachers College Record*, *113*(10), 2233-2266

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