

# Teaming for Successful Root Cause Analyses

## *DCASD In Depth*

### Introduction: The Importance of Building a Team

When a local education agency (LEA), or school district, is identified with significant disproportionality, one requirement is that factors that have contributed to the LEA's specific area(s) of significant disproportionality be identified and addressed.<sup>1</sup>

#### For more information

See our companion resource, [\*DCASD In Brief: Root Cause Analysis Overview\*](#) for a full overview of root cause analysis for identifying contributing factors of significant disproportionality.

Implementing a high-integrity root cause analysis (RCA) is considered a best practice for identifying the contributing factors of significant disproportionality, and this approach should minimally include the

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

In this *DCASD In Depth*, the Data Center for Addressing Significant Disproportionality (DCASD) provides a more comprehensive look into the first component of a high-integrity RCA: the meaningful engagement of a team. Our intended audience is two-fold: state education agencies (SEAs) who might use this resource to provide guidance and support to LEAs, and the LEAs themselves, who might directly consult this resource when assembling teams to conduct a root cause analysis.

The remainder of this resource focuses on the following five areas related to teaming for RCA:

1. **Assembling the team**
2. **Establishing team roles, responsibilities, and processes**
3. **Resourcing the team**
4. **Supporting the team's understanding**
5. **Honoring team members' unique contributions**

---

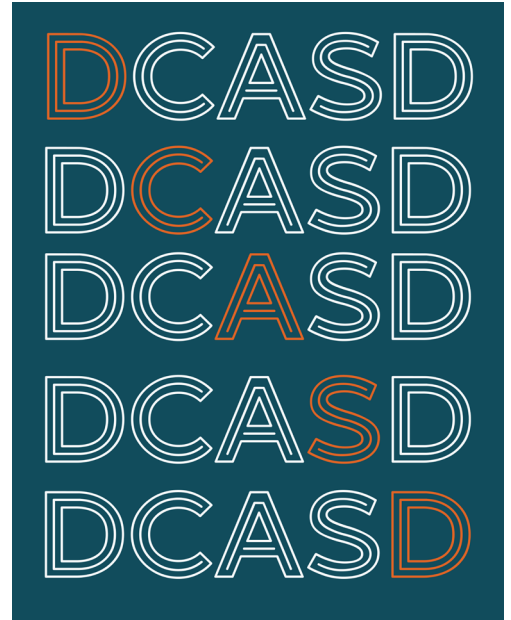
<sup>1</sup> See: 34 C.F.R. § 300.646(d)(1)(ii)

# Teaming for Successful Root Cause Analyses

## 1. Assembling the Team

Before beginning an RCA, it is important to assemble a team of interested partners who can help identify and understand local needs, who have varied areas of expertise and roles in the different levels of the local education system (e.g., leadership, general education, special education, parents, community partners), and who have knowledge of the student population.

These varied perspectives help form a full picture of the factors affecting the educational context of the significant disproportionality and may increase the likelihood of identifying true root causes in a way that a more narrow perspective may not.



### Questions to Consider When Assembling a Team

#### Role-based considerations

- *Is there adequate representation from district and building leaders who have sufficient decision-making authority to increase the chance of the RCA team's recommendations being adopted?*
- *Is there representation across departments, or is there representation from key personnel from various teams, committees, or departments?*
- *Are there both special and general education representatives from the district, building, and classroom levels?*
- *Are students and families sufficiently represented?*

#### Other considerations

- *How many other teams, committees, or work groups do team members participate in?*
- *Can potential team members commit to all learning or work sessions?*
- *Collectively, does the team understand local context and needs?*

# Teaming for Successful Root Cause Analyses

## Team Member Representation

The size of the team should strike a balance between ensuring a wide representation of knowledge, while not being so large that decision-making becomes difficult. The specific members of the team should therefore vary based on factors such as specific significant disproportionality identifications and size of the LEA. In general, teams should include a minimum of about five members. For further clarity regarding team member representation, consult figure 1, which provides an overview of some specific categories to consider.

**Figure 1. Example RCA team members, by role category**

<b>Student representation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ parents</li><li>✓ community group or local agency representing the identified student group</li><li>✓ students</li></ul>	<b>Building administration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ principals</li><li>✓ assistant principals</li><li>✓ deans</li></ul>	<b>District staff</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ school psychologists</li><li>✓ behavior specialists</li><li>✓ literacy specialists</li><li>✓ social workers</li><li>✓ data specialists</li></ul>	<b>Building staff</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ general education teachers</li><li>✓ special education teachers</li><li>✓ para-professionals</li><li>✓ school counselors</li></ul>	<b>District leadership</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ superintendent</li><li>✓ school board member(s)</li><li>✓ special education director</li><li>✓ curriculum and instruction supervisors</li></ul>
--	--	--	--	--

# Teaming for Successful Root Cause Analyses

## 2. Establishing Team Roles, Responsibilities, and Processes

Intentionally establishing team roles, responsibilities, and processes helps create a foundation for effective, purpose-driven RCA teaming. Furthermore, ensuring team resources and processes are co-constructed and facilitate active engagement from all participants helps create a space for authentic dialogue as well as the full consideration of the rich and varied perspectives at the table.

### Key Roles and Responsibilities for the Root Cause Analysis Teaming Process

- **Root cause analysis lead.** This role is responsible for ensuring the root cause analysis process and meetings are thoroughly planned and effectively carried out and that the team maintains ongoing two-way communication with leadership throughout the process. On larger teams, more than one person may co-serve in the RCA lead role.
- **Facilitators.** At each meeting or work session, the facilitator ensures meaningful participation of team members, and moves the team through the previously established agenda. Teams may choose one facilitator or rotate facilitators at every meeting.
- **Data specialists.** Prior to the meetings, data specialists collect and compile relevant data into user-friendly formats. During the meeting, they clearly explain the data to team members to provide a base of understanding. Data specialists also help ensure that the team uses data throughout the root cause analysis process, collecting and disseminating additional data as needed.
- **Team participants.** Participants are the heart of the team, and all members of the team are participants who may or may not have additional roles and responsibilities. All team members participate in discussion, establish communication processes, and develop recommendations.
- **Additional process roles and responsibilities.** Depending on the established team processes and its size, your team may choose to establish additional roles such as timekeeper, recorder, and process observer.

### Questions to Consider When Planning RCA Meetings

- *Are the agendas purpose-driven rather than exclusively time-driven?*
- *Are team processes built to ensure multiple modes of engagement and varied ways to contribute ideas?*
- *Are the team's working agreements co-constructed, and do they include communication, decision-making, and procedural functions?*
- *Are agendas and meeting materials sent out ahead of time to allow all members adequate processing time?*

# Teaming for Successful Root Cause Analyses

## 3. Resourcing the Team

Teams need adequate time and resources to meaningfully engage in root cause analyses. Without dedicated time and resources, there is added risk of rushing to identify contributing factors and the process being less intentional. Planning ahead can lead to a more dedicated team that feels valued and empowered to engage in the work necessary to identify the true root causes of the LEA's significant disproportionality. Consider the following questions when planning for an RCA team's resources:

- *Are staff provided sufficient time and space to engage in the root cause analysis?*
- *Are substitutes needed?*
- *Will family and community members receive stipends or reimbursements (if allowed per school/district policy)?*
- *Will staff members receive additional compensation (if allowed per school/district policy)?*
- *Is childcare needed?*
- *Are materials, agendas, and processes intentionally planned for ahead of meetings to ensure efficient and effective use of time?*

## 4. Supporting the Team's Understanding

Team members should have a foundational understanding of some key constructs relevant to the RCA process for significant disproportionality. Dedicating time to building the team's understanding may increase efficiency and effectiveness of the RCA, leading to the identification of true root causes within the locus of control of the district, and thus helping leadership identify and implement improvement strategies to address these root causes.

Therefore, it is important to ensure that team members receive support in developing their understanding of the following key aspects of significant disproportionality and the RCA process:

- Significant disproportionality regulatory requirements
- District-specific identified areas of significant disproportionality
- Which root cause analysis method the team will use
- The intent and requirements behind the data and PPPs the team will review

# Teaming for Successful Root Cause Analyses

## 5. Honoring Team Members' Unique Contributions

The reason for assembling a multidisciplinary team is to honor the varied lived experiences of those affected by significant disproportionality and to have representation of differing roles, identities, and areas of expertise present throughout the RCA process. These varied perspectives allow the team to look at the problem from multiple angles to understand the underlying causes of the district's significant disproportionality and find the most effective solutions. Creating a varied team and honoring each member's voice, however, requires intentionality and perhaps a shift in how the district usually approaches problem solving.

Ensuring all members of the team respect and value varied approaches is an important part of the RCA process and team members' contributions should be concretely visible in final decisions and products. Here are some questions to ask to check if team members' unique contributions are being honored:

- *Whose ideas are visible in our notes, decisions, and products?*
- *Are the times and locations of the meetings more or less advantageous for some participants?*

---

## Next Steps for the RCA Team

Once the team and its processes are in place, members can begin engaging in the analysis of root causes. This includes the careful analysis of data, including PPPs, used in the area(s) of the LEA's significant disproportionality as well as engagement in a clearly defined and evidence-supported RCA process.

As you work to assemble a team for successful root cause analyses and move through the RCA process, DCASD can help. [Visit our website](#) to check out additional root cause analysis resources or contact your state's DCASD TA provider for more personalized help and advice.

---

The Data Center for Addressing Significant Disproportionality (DCASD) created this publication under U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs grant #H373E230002. Juliette Gudknecht and Meredith Miceli serve as the project officers. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred. This product is in the public domain.

Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.



Published March 2025

