

Congregational Assessment Tools

Introduction

Many congregations participating in the Educate A Child Initiative will be those already engaged in a robust program of educational support. Other congregations have a growing sense of calling to child advocacy related to education but are not certain where to focus their efforts or which of many topics they might address. Still other congregations may find that two or more groups within the congregation are working on separate issues of educational advocacy but that the available resources are not adequate to sustain multiple efforts.

In any of these circumstances, congregations may find the assessment tools outlined below a way to:

- **Analyze** the current issues within their community;
- **Inventory** their own congregational capacities; and
- **Discover** the ways in which the gifts and graces of their congregation might be utilized most effectively to assist children or youth to better fulfill their educational goals.

Congregations that find themselves conflicted over priorities may find in the following assessment tools a means to achieve consensus and focus to their educational advocacy into a coherent expression of ministry and mission.

Organizing the Assessment

Most congregations will be best served by gathering or assigning a relatively **small, 6-8 person Assessment Committee**.

Those who serve as the Assessment or Planning Team should be asked to make a commitment of at least one month to study together in a prayerful and thoughtful process to discover the best possible use of the resources available in addressing the most critical needs most effectively.

Before You Begin...

- The Assessment Team will want to be certain of their relationship to the Session and/or other committees within the congregation are clearly understood and that some common agreement exists within the congregation that such an exploration is warranted and wanted.
- There should be an agreement about how, when, and where its findings will be shared. For example, it may be that they will present a report and recommendation to the Session or one of its committees at a future date, or it may be that they will make a report to a future meeting of all congregation members interested in the project. Knowing the context for its report will be important to the assessment task.

Three Assessment Tools

Three assessment options are described below. Some groups will select only one of these tools to undertake their work. Others will borrow elements from each of the three tools and will craft their own unique approach to assessment. Those entirely new to this field of ministry may find it most useful to utilize each of these tools in turn to formulate their report.

- ❖ ***Birdseye Assessment*** – Sometimes called “the view from 30,000 feet”, this assessment type tries to **gather and consider the state of children and education within the community**. To undertake this kind of approach, the Assessment Committee will want to ask about issues in their own community, such as:
 - Drop out rates
 - School rankings
 - Attendance statistics
 - Number of children receiving free meals
 - Remedial and special education services available
 - College and technical school enrollment rates

Conducting the study will rely not only on statistical information that should be readily available from local or state agencies but also on conversations with school officials, parent organizations, and social service agencies that serve school-age children or preschool populations.

Special attention should be given to the demographic characteristics within the school population:

- Are some children doing very well and others very poorly?
- Are the above groups distinct economically, racially, or ethnically?
- Are their specific advocacy groups or parents or others focused on particular issues within the school district?
- Have school budgets been defeated in local elections?
- Has there been a history of teacher strikes, layoffs or other disruptive patterns in school organizational life?

This kind of assessment will provide a broad orientation to the issues alive in your community. As you begin to understand issues of teacher shortage or school discipline, of bullying or poor performance on standardized tests, you will want to assign members of the Assessment Committee to pursue further conversation with school officials, parents, and others to understand who is addressing the issues you have identified and how they are doing so. In many communities, attendance at School Board meetings, PTA meetings, or other gatherings will provide a broader understanding of the issues. (For more information on the School Board and local advocacy for education, see “Parent and Community Power! School Board Advocacy 101” in this toolkit. -

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/child/school-board-advocacy-101/>)

A Birdseye Assessment often leads to a decision to bring a series of speakers on a variety of issues to speak at the congregation over a period of weeks or months in order to broaden the understanding of the range of issues to be considered.

❖ ***Internal Inventory***

Congregations generally have many more resources that can be utilized in educational ministries and advocacy than they are initially aware of as they plan ministry. A very important aspect of assessment is undertaking an inventory of what resources are available and in what measure. (For a detailed list of questions to ask in such an Assessment, see “Direct Action for Education: An Asset Identification Process” in this toolkit. -

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/child/direct-action-asset-identification/>) For example...

- **Financial resources** – How much money can be allocated in the budget or raised through special efforts?
- **Human resources** – How many people might be able to volunteer for a tutoring program or a summer feeding program?

Less obvious is the inventory of **special skills** that may be needed.

- Are there **contractors** who could retrofit a Sunday school room to meet the needs of a new child care center?
- Are there **those who could train volunteers** to serve as effective tutors?
- Are there people of substantial community influence who could help work for policy reform?
- Does the church have adequate room to house a new service delivery program for children or youth?
- Is there **adequate public transportation** or parking to facilitate transportation needs?
- Are there adequate recreational facilities or the possibility of developing them?
- Is the church **located in a neighborhood that will be welcoming and comfortable** to the population you hope to serve?
- Is the congregation better equipped to **provide direct service or to advocate for changes** in policies or procedures that impede children as they pursue educational opportunities?

These are questions that will require the congregation to take a candid and frank view of its possibilities and resources. Listing the resources available will be helpful in determining what issues and/or programs the congregation can undertake effectively. As an inventory is developed it will be important to test that list with others in the congregation and obtain some feedback about the accuracy of the calculation of resources available.

❖ *Issue Specific Analysis*

As assessment proceeds and individual issues are identified Assessment Teams will want to undertake detailed analysis of the issues and the ways in which the community is responding (or not responding) to the problems confronting children and youth.

Issue specific assessment includes the precise statement of:

- **What** the issue is
- **Who** and how many it is impacting
- **How** serious and crippling the issue is to children
- **Who** is working on the issue within the community
- **How** likely it is that additional support is wanted and needed and most especially
- **How** what is needed is aligned with inventory of the resources available to the congregation.

This last piece is perhaps most important, for it is by nature a strategic assessment of how the church might usefully invest itself in a specific issue via a specific program initiative.

Using the Results of the Assessment(s)

Whether your Assessment Team has used one or more of the assessment tools above or combined these methods in your own hybrid assessment, reporting the results will be an important step. In reporting the results three goals might guide your report.

A well-completed assessment should:

1. Broaden the knowledge base about the issues
2. Nurture an emerging consensus
3. Generate interest and enthusiasm for action steps

The Assessment Team will want to **develop tentative conclusions** based on its findings. It may, for example, tentatively conclude that what is most needed is a youth after school recreation and homework assistance program.

In its report the Assessment Team will wish to **test its recommendations** with a larger group, which may be a committee, the Session, or even a congregational gathering.

In order to **move from a knowledge base to an action plan**, the Assessment Team will want to underscore the way in which the proposed action plan makes the best use of the inventoried resources of the congregation.

The Assessment Team will want it its report to **identify companions for the journey**. This may include other churches or agencies in the local community that are working on the same or related issues. It may also include linking your church to another

Presbyterian congregation doing similar work. Some examples of congregations doing this of work can be found at <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/child/stories/>.

Finally, having completed its work, the Assessment Team will want to **relinquish its work to the on-going committee structure**. This is an important step of transition so that those who participate in the on-going committee perceive themselves as initiating a new work rather than as those joining a work designed by others. Assessment work is a servant ministry that finds its greatest satisfaction in enabling and equipping others in *their exercise of ministry*.