Identifying Root Cause

Identifying the root causes, or contributing factors, to an LEA's significant disproportionality is a critical step toward identifying CCEIS improvement strategies. LEAs identified with significant disproportionality must identify and address factors contributing to the significant disproportionality, which can be completed through a root cause analysis. Addressing true root causes has a higher likelihood of improving the systemic structures, policies, procedures, and practices that have led to the significant disproportionality, in turn improving the educational system to be more effective for all students.

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
Approach to Root Cause Analysis

There is no specific approach prescribed in the policy to Root Cause Analysis. High-integrity approaches include:

- Meaningful engagement of a varied and representative team
- The careful analysis of data, including policies, practices, and procedures used in the area(s) for which an LEA is identified with significant disproportionality
- Engaging in a clearly defined process that is supported by evidence and includes the examination of underlying beliefs
- Ensure findings of root cause are actionable items that an LEA can proceed with following through with the recommended changes

Examples include:

- Team approach.
    - Include a diverse stakeholder group with multiple perspectives, expertise, and at least one person with the authority to make a change
    - Providing the team with an overview of the root cause analysis process before you begin
    - Clearly defining the matter to address and preparing data before the meeting for informed decision-making
- Existing data and documenting review.
    - Observations – initial thoughts or reactions to the data.
    - Interpretations – meaning of data, whether the data confirms or disproves current thoughts or assumptions, and identifying what additional data needs
    - Implications – potential root causes of the problem, including less obvious or more hidden causes
    - Considering potential root causes associated with the student demographics, curriculum, instruction, system processes, and external factors (Preuss)
- Future documenting
    - decisions, next steps, action plans, and timelines for each action step to monitor the status of follow-up activities

Team Members and Team Process

Assemble a team(s) with diverse representation, including those who represent the student group(s) most affected. There should be an understanding of local context, needs, and inequitable outcomes with varied areas of expertise (e.g., general education and special education staff, behavior specialists, and school psychologists). Additionally, varied levels of the system and lived experiences.

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Roles

Leadership	Building Administration	District Staff	Building Staff	Student Representation
• Superintendent • School board Members • Special education director • Curriculum and instruction supervisors	• Principals • Assistant principals • Deans	• School • Psychologists • Behavior • specialists • Literacy • specialists • EL teachers • Social workers • Data specialists	• General education teachers • Special education teachers • Paraprofessionals • School counselors	• Parents • Community • group or local • agency • representing • identified • student group • Students

Examining a variety of quantitative and qualitative data, including the review of policies, procedures, and practices is important to developing a deeper understanding of the problem, which is foundational to identifying root causes.

Data and Documentation

Qualitative and quantitative data to be reviewed represent the local context and are specific to areas of identification. This creates a more holistic picture that is essential to provide a complete understanding of factors associated with Significant Disproportionality.

Examples of Additional Data Sources

- School-based data patterns
- Student, family, staff input
- Adult practice and fidelity data
- Referral and prevalence rates
- Family survey, interview, and focus group data
- Disciplinary actions (by whom, when, where, etc.)
- Absenteeism data
- Behavioral data
- Enrollment in advanced programs or classes
- School and district culture and climate survey data (staff, students, families)
- Student mobility data
- Resource inequity data

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Policies

Overarching principles, rules, or guidelines established by federal, state, or local educational agencies, or other governing bodies to ensure compliance with the requirements of a law. Broad objectives and standards that may include legal mandates, school board rules and policies, eligibility criteria, and rights and responsibilities of students, parents, and educational personnel relevant to special education

Procedures

Provide specific instructions on how to implement policy requirements in various situations. This may delineate the sequence of actions, roles, responsibilities, timelines, required documentation, and other operational aspects related to special education. Procedures help ensure compliance, consistency, and efficiency in the implementation of policies.

Practices

Evidence of the application, implementation or implementation fidelity, and execution of policies and procedures in educational settings. It encompasses the day-to-day activities, interactions, interventions, and strategies employed by educators, related service providers, administrators, and other stakeholders to meet the individualized needs of students with disabilities.

Guiding Questions

Steps	Guiding Questions
Define the Problem	• What is the nature of the problem? • What happened? (Example: The achievement gap between groups continues from year to year with little to no change in proficiencies among student groups.) • Where and when does it occur? • To whom does it happen? • How does it affect our goals?
Identify Possible Causes & Categories	• What factors are contributing to the problem? • What is causing a particular factor (e.g., people, time, resources)? • How can causes be grouped together in categories?

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Dig Deeper into "Why?"	• Why is it happening? • How come? • Why would that be? • What's the reason for that? • Why is that? • That's because … • I wonder if … If any response reveals a cause that is out of your control, keep asking questions. Stop when you have identified two to four potential root causes that are within your scope of influence to impact the school setting.
Select Root Cause(s) as the Focus for Your School Improvement Plan	If we address the root cause(s), can we significantly impact the problem statement? • Yes. The root cause(s) is worthy of focus in your School Improvement Plan. • No. The cause may not be a priority for our efforts, or it may not be a root cause

Team Discussion

- What qualitative and quantitative data would be valuable to bring together to align our areas of identification and local context?
- What policies, procedures, and practices should we examine to help get to the root causes of our significant racial disproportionality?
- In our local context, what is the best approach to examining beliefs that drive our policies, procedures, and practices?

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Regardless of the Specific Method Used, Remember the Critical Questions:

- 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?
- What is the belief about ability and opportunity behind any given policy, procedure, or practice, and how might that belief affect outcomes?
- What are the resources used or needed for any given policy, procedure, or practice?
- Are we missing any policies or articulated procedures?
- Is there a lack of clarity in any of our procedures?

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- Have our staff received adequate support to implement any policy or procedure (professional development, coaching, etc.)?
- Are there inconsistencies in how a policy or procedure is implemented?

Root Cause Analysis Methods

The Fishbone Method

Provide a description of SD listed at the head then brainstorm causes and list as branches, based on data and PPP review. Consensus of priority factors that, if changed, would reduce the likelihood of the problem.
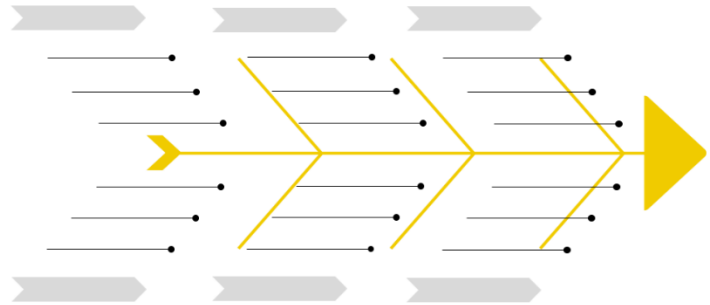
Tips for running a Fishbone Method:

Small groups organize causal factors into categories or themes of related factors using a fishbone diagram. The large group discusses all identified themes and combines or consolidates themes across groups to create a single set of causal factor themes.

1. There is no single "right way" to complete this step; here are some ideas on how to approach this activity:
   a. Read aloud. Distribute individual factors among all participants. Take turns reading aloud to the group, asking clarifying questions as needed. Group members discuss ideas about related factors and possible categories.
   b. Read silently. Distribute individual factors among all participants. Participants read their Post-its silently and individually share thoughts on emerging themes with group. Group members share and discuss ideas about possible categories.
   c. Group sort. This is often the choice for "standing groups." Participants organically read factors and collaboratively discuss possible categories. Participants ask clarifying questions as needed and move around Post-its as needed. Participants break into smaller groups to review the initial categories and reconvene as a large group to confirm that the initial categories work and exchange Post-its as necessary.
2. Large-group carousel to review all identified themes and causal factors informing these themes. Participants can contribute to other groups' work by adding:
   a. Questions for clarification
   b. Additional factors to support the theme

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   c. Possible areas of overlap to other themes
  3. Small groups revisit original poster and look for areas of needed consolidation across

Diagnostic Tree

The problem tree analysis template helps with: Understanding complex problems, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, aligning with other stakeholders, and providing a direction for problem-solving and decision-making. First, list the description of SD and the context, or known factors, surrounding the issue and the students affected. Use at least five decision steps, then formulate a hypothesis to prove or disprove.
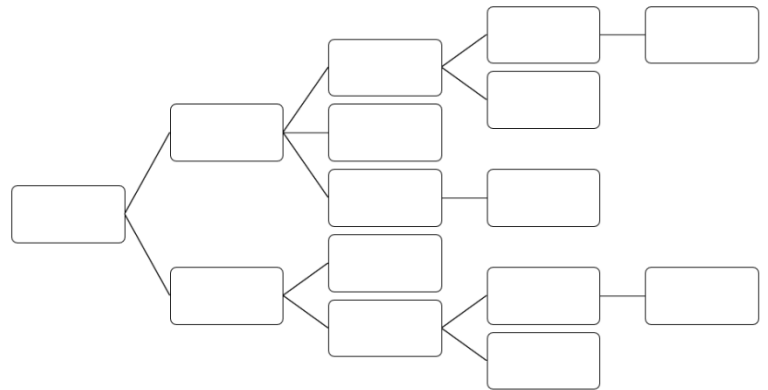
Tips for running a diagnostic tree analysis exercise:

Determine which underlying causes are root causes that must be addressed through implementation priorities and contributing causes that may inform necessary actions.

1. Facilitator introduces the decision tree flow chart and reviews the questioning process leading to a determination of root versus contributing cause.
2. Group examines each final statement using the decision tree questioning protocol.
3. Each underlying cause statement is assessed as either a root or a contributing cause and captured within the worksheet.
4. Participants complete the worksheet template by asking additional questions related to each cause.

The 5 Whys

Ask why SD is happening and continue asking why repeatedly to reveal underlying causes until you can identify a root cause. Consider the evidence for suspected root causes and repeat the process with alternate causes to verify conclusions.
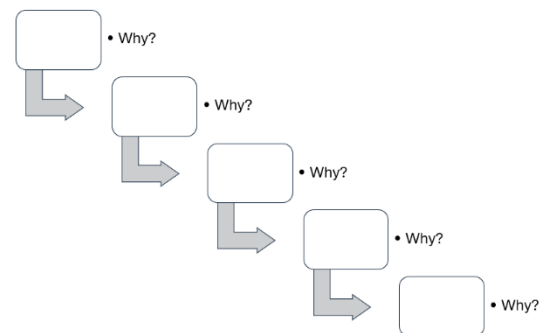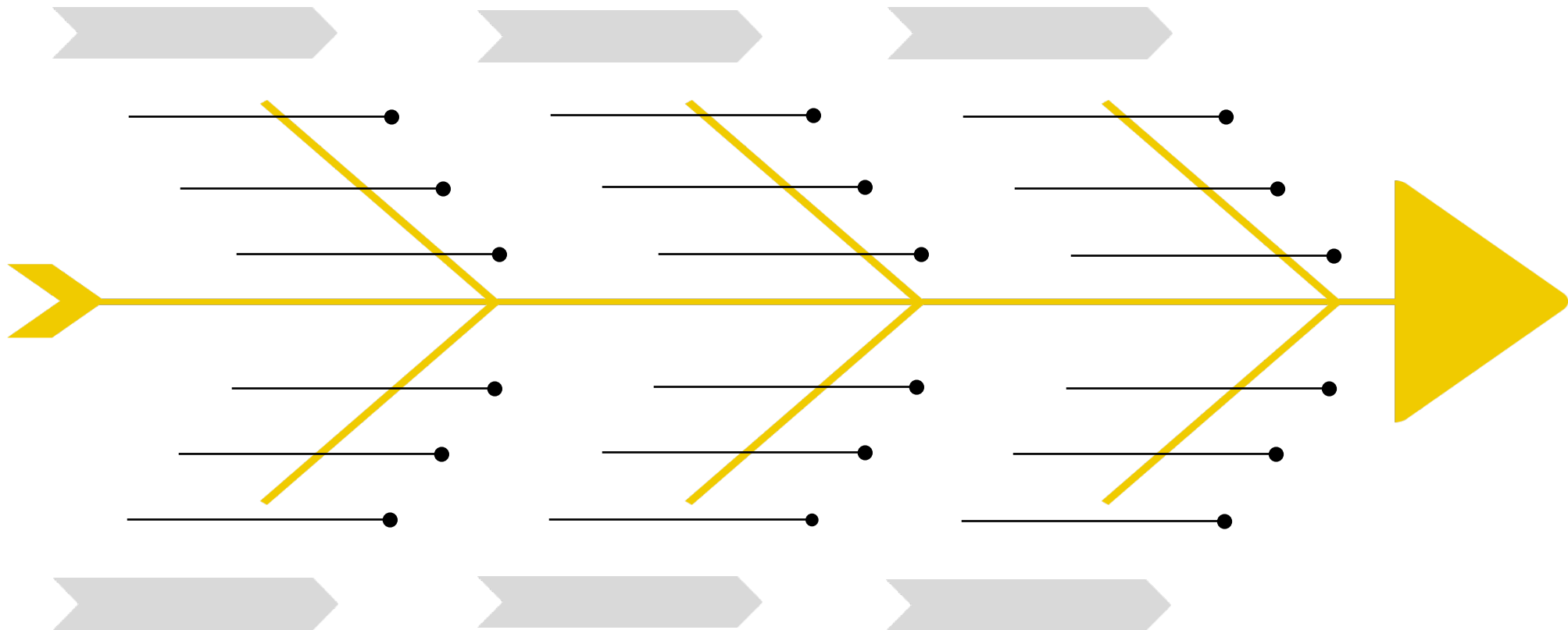
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Tips for running the 5 Whys

Explore potential causes for underlying cause(s) using the 5 Whys questioning protocol. Once the underlying cause of one potential cause has been determined, repeat the process with the next prioritized potential cause (causal factor statement).

1. Create new groups, assigning one group to ensure that participants are in new mixed groups so that each small group from Step 2 has been reconfigured and the new groups include representation from all (or most) of the previous groups to the extent possible. Determine group size and configuration based on the number of participants and number of potential causes to explore.
2. Facilitator uses the 5 Whys protocol with each potential cause, recording responses from participants. If more than one possible response is offered, come to agreement on the "most likely" response to continue to investigate, recording the additional responses in case they need to be revisited later.
3. At the end of the 5 Whys questioning for each potential cause, group arrives at a consensus on a final statement describing the underlying cause.

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Fishbone Diagram Template

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Diagnostic Tree Template

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The Five Whys Template

Analyze the causal factor statements to determine the underlying causes of the problem statement. Identifying the underlying causes ensures that issues have moved past surface "symptoms" to deeper "causes." This step is repeated for each (or as many as possible) of the causal factor statements. During this phase of the process, ask the question "why" until the underlying cause is reached.

- Why?
- Why?
- Why?
- Why?
- Why?