



## Differentiated Assistance Leadership Perspectives on State Accountability



# CONTENTS

---

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Key Findings</b> .....	<b>7</b>
SDCOE’s Beliefs Regarding Differentiated Assistance .....	<b>7</b>
Coherence .....	<b>8</b>
Root Cause .....	<b>9</b>
Using Data Formatively in the Differentiated Assistance Process .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>13</b>



Differentiated assistance is therefore intended not only to help the LEA address the underlying causes that led to its eligibility for assistance, but also to strengthen the LEA's overall ability to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and programs and make adjustments as appropriate.

California Department of Education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) developed the DA Survey to share SDCOE leaders' perceptions of the Differentiated Assistance (DA) process in an effort better understand the challenges and barriers to getting the process to work optimally. The primary purpose of this internal survey is to improve the DA process by carefully examining reasons why DA efforts may not be achieving broader goals of reducing performance gaps between student groups. The following are the key findings from the 2020 survey.

Many bright spots emerged from the 2020 COE DA Survey. First and foremost, the vast majority of SDCOE leaders involved in the DA process feel valued and understand their respective roles. It is clear that leaders are not confused on what to do or how the process works. Years of capacity building in Improvement Science have developed a strong foundation on which DA rests. It is also clear that most leaders understand how to use summative data in the DA process to help their respective LEAs, and they feel equipped and supported by experts in the organization to use data strategically.

Overall SDCOE perceptions of the DA process are extremely positive. As with any process, however, some areas of challenge emerged in the survey. One of the biggest challenges involves the transition from efficiency to effectiveness. While many SDCOE leaders understand their DA roles, some also recognize they are being asked to get things done versus focusing on efficacy. More than half the leaders surveyed perceive the DA process as just that—a series of tasks and activities that get accomplished. The purpose of DA (i.e., reducing performance gaps between student groups) becomes minimized amidst the complexities of implementing DA tasks and activities. DA is a relatively long process with many moving parts that must be coordinated well. As SDCOE works to align these moving parts, every DA member must continuously navigate between the broader purpose of the DA process as well as the tasks and activities that must get completed to ensure the purpose of eliminating equity gaps in schools occurs.

Another related challenge of the DA process is the tension between a prescriptive versus explorative DA process. Many SDCOE leaders feel “locked in” to a DA structure, and as such, are less able to provide the customized support they believe would best assist the districts they serve. Motivational issues arise for COE team members when they question the meaningfulness of an overly prescriptive DA process. It is critical that DA leadership and SDCOE DA leads negotiate a more effective loose-tight DA structure that works for all parties involved, where everyone is clear about the right things to do and each member has a level of autonomy and creativity to make those things happen. A transformative, cultural approach requires both time and a degree of flexibility to succeed, and SDCOE leaders must have these elements if the process is going to be impactful and coherent.

A final challenge raised by the survey involves the use of process-oriented, formative data. While many leaders are adept at using summative data, formative data present a significantly greater test for them. Most leaders do not use process-oriented data (such as plan-do-study-act cycles, or PDSA data) within the DA process consistently. It is these types of data that drive the improvement process. SDCOE leaders need more internal support to use formative data. As capacity improves, leaders will be better positioned to support LEAs in understanding the learning that occurs from using process data; that is to say, understanding the relationship between delivering an action or service and the outcome(s) that results from it.

## KEY FINDINGS

### SDCOEs Beliefs Regarding Differentiated Assistance (DA)

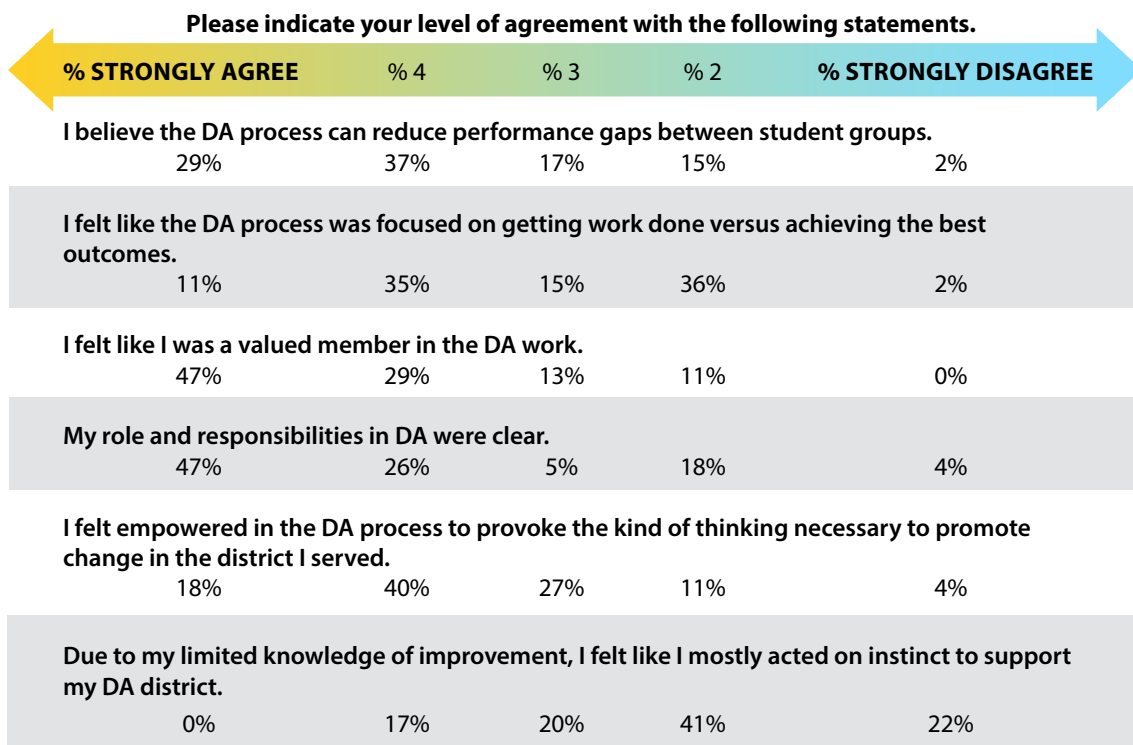
Ensuring consistent beliefs in a county office of education regarding the Differentiated Assistance process is essential to propagating the accountability behaviors in local educational agencies (LEAs).

More than two-thirds of the San Diego County Office of Education leaders trust the DA process as a mechanism for achieving better outcomes for students. However, nearly one in five SDCOE leaders lacked confidence in the process as a means of reducing performance gaps between student groups. One potential reason for this difference in beliefs may involve how leaders in the organization perceived the outcomes of DA. Nearly half the leaders (46%) strongly agreed or agreed that the DA process was focused on getting work done versus reducing performance gaps.

SDCOE leaders were confident in their understanding of their roles in the DA process as well as in their perceived value as team members. Approximately 76% and 73%, respectively, strongly agreed or agreed they felt like a valued member in the process and understood their responsibilities. However, more than one-fifth of leaders surveyed lacked clarity in these responsibilities.

Finally, six in 10 leaders felt empowered to provoke the kind of thinking necessary to promote change in the district they served, while 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed they were empowered to lead provocative conversations. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of leaders were confident in their knowledge of the improvement process, leaving approximately one in five leaders who acted on instinct to support their respective districts.

### SDCOE Beliefs in the DA Process



## Coherence

Coherence is a critical component of any change process in schools. The ways in which SDCOE’s improvement services align with an LEA’s system is crucial to ensuring the outcomes of DA.

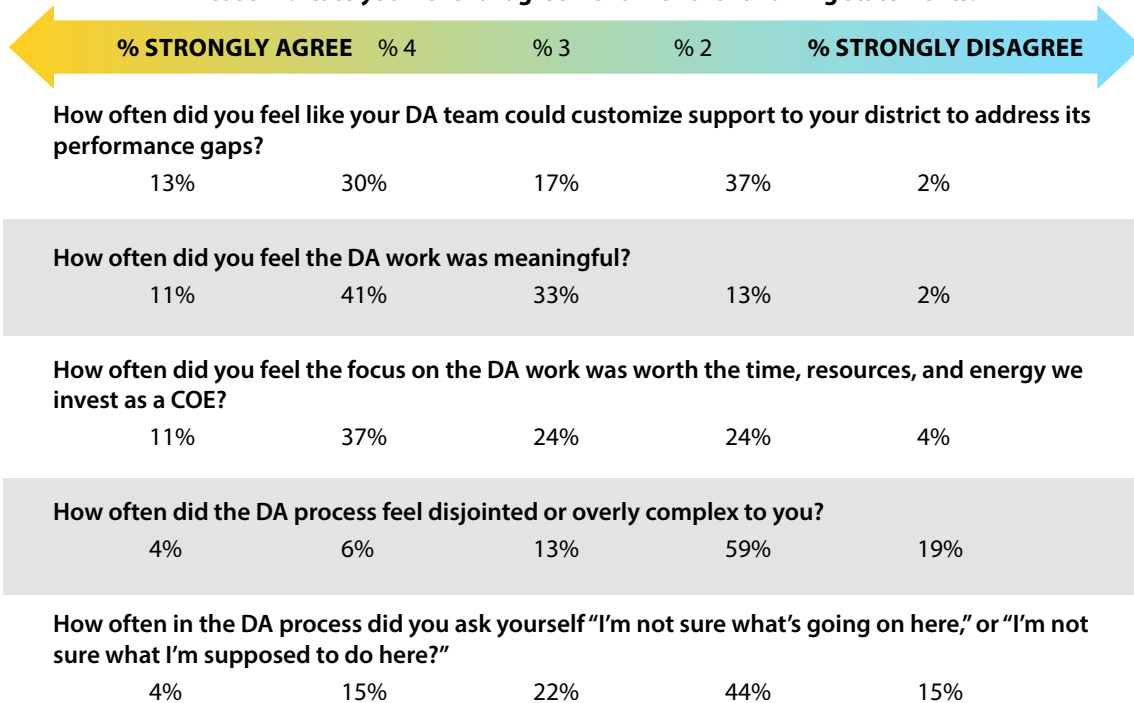
Almost 40% of SDCOE leaders felt locked into a DA process and therefore were more likely to comply with the explicit facilitation of DA versus customizing their support for the districts they served. Maintaining this one-size-fits-all approach may be counterintuitive to the concept of Differentiated Assistance.

Additionally, slightly more than half the leaders (52%) strongly agreed or agreed that the DA work was a meaningful use of time. Only 48% agreed they felt the DA process was worth the time and energy SDCOE invested in it. SDCOE’s limited belief in the meaningfulness of the DA process as an accountability mechanism can introduce coherence issues with other drivers in the LEA’s system.

On another note, refinements to the DA process over the past two years have apparently translated into greater simplicity. Nearly 78% of leaders agreed the process was not overly complex and less than one in five were confused about what they were supposed to do in the DA process.

### The DA Process and Coherence

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

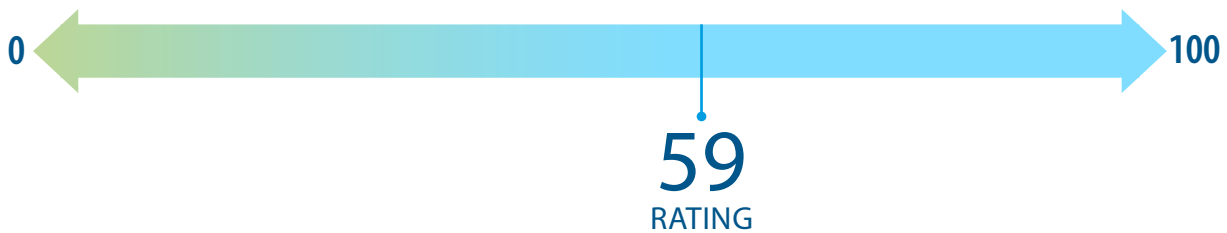




## Root Cause

The purpose and design of the DA process is to uncover root cause(s) of systemic issues. Too often improvement processes focus on the symptoms of problems and mitigating these symptoms versus addressing the root of the problem. Based on the question, "On a scale of 0-100, how confident are you that the DA process got to the root cause of the systems issue in the district you served?"

The average rating across all SDCOE leaders was 59. Given that a score of 100 indicated total confidence, a score of 59 suggests that leaders were neutral in their assessment of whether the DA process addresses the root cause of a systems weaknesses.



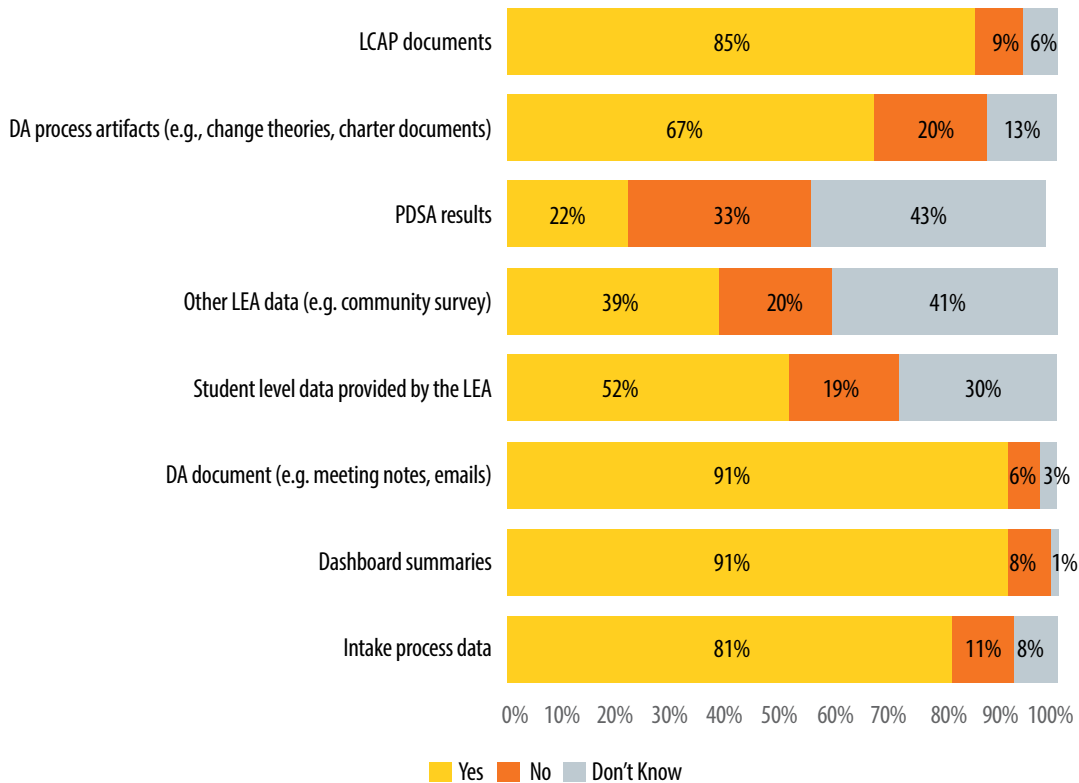
## Using Data Formatively In The Differentiated Assistance Process

The final set of survey questions focused on the formative use of data in the DA process. Using data formatively is an essential part of the DA improvement process. LEAs and COEs need efficient access to data, the right data to guide the DA process, and to feel empowered and supported to use the data.

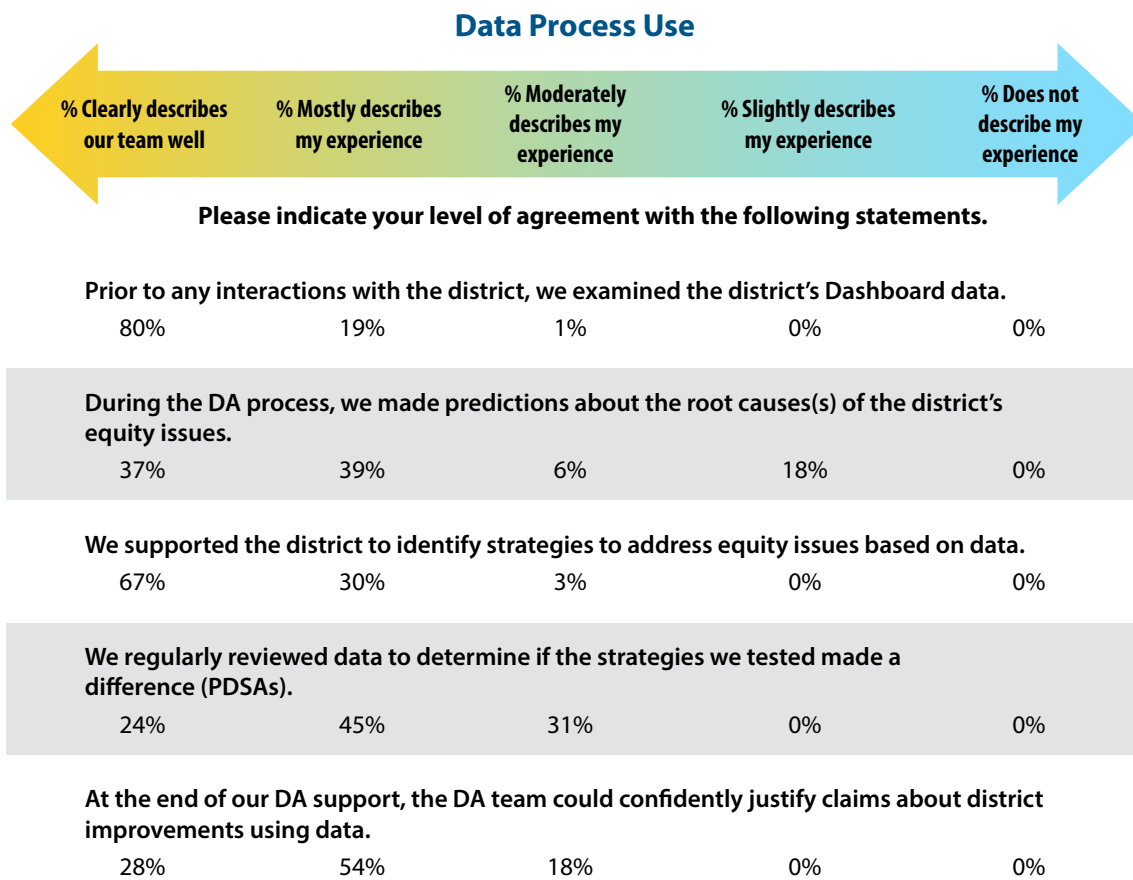
In terms of access to DA data, the vast majority of SDCOE leaders indicated they used data from the intake process (81%), California School Dashboard (91%), DA documents (91%), and Local Control and Accountability Plans (85%) to support districts throughout the DA process. Results from change idea tests or PDSAs were less frequently used (22%), as were other forms of data such as community surveys (39%) or other student level data from the school district’s information systems (52%). These additional data sources are often rich repositories of information for understanding root causes or making targeted improvements.

### Access to DA Documents

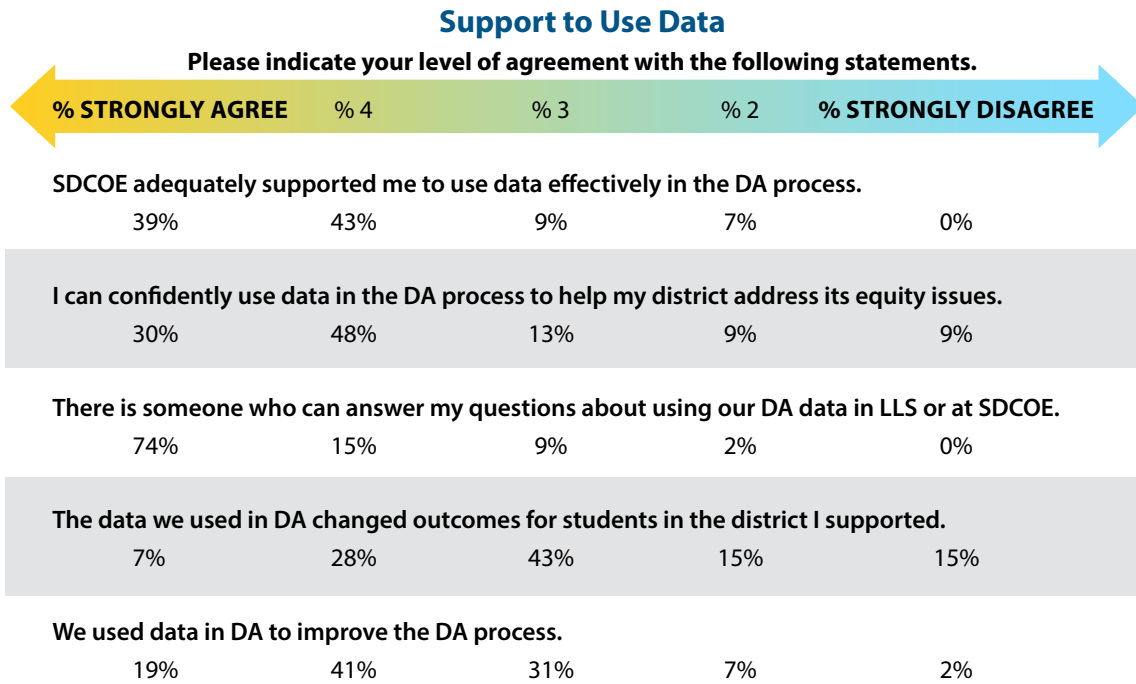
As part of the DA process did you have access to the following data sources?



In terms of the process by which SDCOE leaders used data, 80% of leaders indicated that accessing publicly available state accountability data clearly described their team’s experience. A large percentage also reported using data to identify strategies to address systemic weaknesses (67%) while about one-third used data to make predictions about root causes (37%). About one-fourth of leaders indicated that using PDSA data regularly (24%) and justifying system improvements (28%) clearly described their team’s data-use experience.



Most SDCOE leaders reported feeling supported to use data effectively during the DA process (81% strongly agreed or agreed), with nine out of 10 leaders reporting having someone at SDCOE who could answer their questions about DA data. About 60% of leaders strongly agreed or agreed they could use data to address performance gaps between student groups.



## CONCLUSION

As SDCOE gears up for another year of DA work, it is clear that SDCOE leaders recognized these services are intended to support struggling LEAs improve outcomes for all students. SDCOE leaders involved in the DA process feel valued and understand their respective roles. It is clear that leaders are not confused on what to do or how the process works. Years of capacity building in Improvement Science have developed a strong foundation on which DA rests. It is also clear that most leaders understand how to use summative data in the DA process to help their respective LEAs, and they feel equipped and supported by experts in the organization to use data strategically.

While perceptions of the DA process are relatively high overall, one major challenge involves the transition from efficiency to effectiveness. While many SDCOE leaders understand their DA roles, some also recognize they are being asked to get things done versus focusing on efficacy. More than half the leaders surveyed perceive the DA process as just that—a series of tasks and activities that get accomplished. The purpose of DA (i.e., reducing performance gaps between student groups) becomes minimized amidst the complexities of implementing DA tasks and activities. DA is a relatively long process with many moving parts that must be coordinated well. As SDCOE works to align these moving parts, every DA member must continuously navigate between the broader purpose of the DA process as well as the tasks and activities that must get completed to ensure the purpose of eliminating equity gaps in schools occurs.

Another related challenge of the DA process is the tension between a prescriptive versus explorative DA process. Many SDCOE leaders feel “locked in” to a DA structure, and as such, are less able to provide the customized support they believe would best assist the districts they serve. Motivational issues arise for COE team members when they question the meaningfulness of an overly prescriptive DA process. It is critical that DA leadership and SDCOE DA leads negotiate a more effective loose-tight DA structure that works for all parties involved, where everyone is clear about the right things to do and each member has a level of autonomy and creativity to make those things happen. A transformative, cultural approach requires both time and a degree of flexibility to succeed, and SDCOE leaders must have these elements if the process is going to be impactful and coherent.

A final challenge raised by the survey involves the use of process-oriented, formative data. While many leaders are adept at using summative data, formative data present a significantly greater test for them. Most leaders do not use process-oriented data (such as plan-do-study-act cycles, or PDSA data) within the DA process consistently. It is these types of data that drive the improvement process. SDCOE leaders need more internal support to use formative data. As capacity improves, leaders will be better positioned to support LEAs in understanding the learning that occurs from using process data; that is to say, understanding the relationship between delivering an action or service and the outcome(s) that results from it.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing sense of optimism in county offices that the DA process — a continuous improvement process — can become institutionalized (Hough, et al., 2017). DA remains a genuine attempt by our state to address equity-related issues in our schools and ensure all students have access and opportunity to a quality educational experience. As COEs and LEAs make progress toward these important goals, the DA process will increase its footprint as a mechanism for schools to evaluate the effectiveness of its strategies and programs and make adjustments as appropriate.

**Bibliography**

Hough, H., Willis, J., Grunow, A., Krausen, K., Kwon, S., Mulfinger, L., & Park, S. (2017). *Continuous Improvement in Practice*. Stanford: Policy Analysis for California Education.

---

**For more information contact:**

**Shannon E. Coulter, Ph.D.**

Director, Research and Evaluation  
San Diego County Office of Education  
6401 Linda Vista Drive  
San Diego, CA 92111  
**scoulter@sdcoe.net**  
**858-292-3593**



**[www.sdcoe.net](http://www.sdcoe.net)**

San Diego County Office of Education  
6401 Linda Vista Drive  
San Diego, CA 92111