Colorado Board of Education Needs Assessment:

Key Findings and Recommendations

Executive Summary



The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) conducted a statewide needs assessment to better understand the support, resources, and professional learning opportunities that would most benefit locally elected boards of education while meeting the statutory requirements of HB18-1355 and HB25-1278.

Participants consistently expressed interest in resources that strengthen their ability to provide oversight while maintaining appropriate boundaries between governance and administration. Rather than requesting additional information concerning compliance requirements, respondents overwhelmingly favored practical guidance, governance-focused learning, and examples that could be applied directly within their own districts.

Five findings emerged consistently across the assessment. First, boards are seeking greater clarity regarding governance roles and responsibilities. Second, there are opportunities to strengthen board understanding of accountability systems, Unified Improvement Planning, and governance-level data use. Third, participants strongly preferred concise, practical tools and resources over lengthy guidance documents. Fourth, flexible professional learning opportunities delivered through multiple formats are preferred. Finally, boards consistently emphasized the value of collaboration, peer learning, and partnerships among organizations.

Introduction

As expectations for local board governance continue to evolve, board members are increasingly asked to understand complex accountability frameworks, interpret performance data, oversee improvement planning, and maintain effective governance relationships with district leadership. These responsibilities require a clear understanding of governance principles and access to practical resources that support informed decision making related to accreditation and improvement planning. Per Colorado Statute, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has been tasked with making available resources to local boards that help accomplish this work. To better understand specific needs, CDE conducted a statewide needs assessment to identify the support most valued by boards of education and education leaders. This was intended to inform future work of CDE including resource development, professional learning opportunities, and learning partnerships.

Methodology

The needs assessment combined quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. A statewide survey gathered responses from 105 participants representing superintendents, board members, board presidents, charter leaders, authorizers, and other education stakeholders. Respondents averaged approximately seven years of experience in their current roles, providing perspectives from both experienced and less experienced educational leaders.

To complement the survey findings, CDE partnered with the Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) to conduct focus groups with locally elected board members. These conversations explored governance responsibilities, accountability systems, improvement planning, board-superintendent relationships, data literacy, and professional learning preferences. Because the focus groups consisted exclusively of board members, they provided valuable insight into governance challenges from the perspective of elected officials responsible for district oversight.

Participation	Summary
Survey	105 statewide respondents representing superintendents, board members, board presidents, charter leaders, authorizers, and other stakeholders.
Focus Groups	Board member focus groups (conducted with CASB board members) exploring governance, accountability, data literacy, improvement planning, and professional learning.

Key Finding 1: Boards Seek Greater Clarity Regarding Governance Roles and Responsibilities

Across both the survey and focus groups, the strongest and most consistent finding was the need for greater clarity regarding the governance role of local boards of education. Participants frequently discussed uncertainty surrounding the distinction between governance responsibilities and operational management. While board members recognized their responsibility for setting direction, monitoring progress, and holding the superintendent accountable, many indicated that applying these principles in practice can be challenging.

This uncertainty was especially evident when discussing accountability and improvement planning. Participants described questions regarding the board's role in reviewing Unified Improvement Plans, monitoring implementation, interpreting performance information, and engaging in discussions about school improvement. Focus group participants noted that boards occasionally struggle to determine where governance oversight appropriately ends and administrative responsibility begins.

Survey responses reinforced these observations, with more than half of respondents identifying clarification of board and superintendent responsibilities as one of the highest priorities for future support. Participants consistently emphasized that clearer guidance would help boards improve meeting effectiveness, strengthen superintendent relationships, promote community confidence, and maintain appropriate governance boundaries.

These findings suggest that governance role clarification represents the foundation upon which many other board support efforts should be built. Without a shared understanding of governance responsibilities, even high-quality accountability resources or professional learning opportunities may have limited impact.

Finding 2: Boards Need Greater Understanding of Accountability Systems, Data, and Improvement Planning

While participants demonstrated a strong commitment to improving student outcomes, the assessment revealed substantial variation in board members' understanding of Colorado's accountability framework. Survey responses indicated that many boards possess only a basic awareness of District and School Performance Frameworks and Unified Improvement Planning. Similarly, respondents described limited confidence in interpreting student performance and growth data from a governance perspective.

Focus group discussions provided important context for these findings. Board members explained that they often receive extensive reports containing detailed data but lack guidance regarding which information should inform governance decisions. Participants expressed interest in learning how to recognize meaningful trends, ask strategic questions, and monitor district progress without becoming involved in operational decision making.

Rather than requesting additional technical information, participants consistently emphasized the need for accountability concepts to be translated into governance language. Boards wanted practical examples illustrating how performance data, accreditation information, and Unified Improvement Plans should influence governance discussions throughout the year. These findings suggest that future professional learning should emphasize governance-level interpretation and application rather than technical compliance requirements.

Finding 3: Boards Prefer Practical, Action-Oriented Resources

Across every respondent group, participants consistently expressed a preference for concise resources that could be immediately applied during board meetings and planning sessions. Short guidance documents, sample monitoring tools, governance checklists, case studies, discussion protocols, and brief video modules were viewed as significantly more valuable than lengthy manuals or policy documents.

Focus group participants repeatedly noted that effective governance resources should simplify complex information without oversimplifying important concepts. Resources that translate accountability requirements into practical governance actions were viewed as particularly valuable. Participants also emphasized that resources should remain flexible enough to accommodate districts of varying sizes, governance structures, and community contexts.

These findings indicate that future resource development should prioritize usability. Practical tools that support board discussions and strategic oversight are likely to have greater impact than extensive reference materials that are consulted infrequently.

Key Finding 4: Professional Learning Must be Flexible and Accessible

Participants expressed strong support for a blended approach to professional learning. Live virtual sessions, regional workshops, conference presentations, and on-demand learning modules were all viewed as valuable components of a comprehensive support system. Rather than relying on a single delivery method,

respondents preferred opportunities that allow board members to participate according to their schedules, travel limitations, and local needs.

Board members from smaller and rural districts noted that travel requirements can limit participation in statewide events. As a result, respondents emphasized the importance of expanding regional learning opportunities while continuing to provide high-quality virtual programming. Participants also highlighted the value of short learning modules that could be accessed as needed by both new and experienced board members.

Collectively, these findings suggest that accessibility should be considered alongside content when designing future governance supports.

Key Finding 5: Effective Governance is Strengthened Through Collaboration

One of the strongest themes emerging from the focus groups was the value board members place on learning from one another. Participants consistently described governance as a discipline that is strengthened through shared experiences, discussion of real-world challenges, and opportunities to observe successful practices from other districts.

Respondents also emphasized the importance of continued collaboration among CDE, CASB, CASE, District Accountability Committees, charter organizations, and other education partners. Participants viewed coordinated messaging and jointly developed resources as important strategies for reducing confusion while promoting consistent governance practices across the state.

These findings reinforce the importance of viewing governance support as an ongoing partnership rather than a series of isolated training events. Creating opportunities for peer learning and collaborative problem solving may strengthen both individual board capacity and statewide governance practice.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Although each finding identified distinct governance needs, several themes emerged consistently across both the survey and focus groups. First, participants emphasized that effective governance begins with a clear understanding of board roles and responsibilities. Role clarity serves as the foundation for effective governance and ability to take meaningful actions related to statutory responsibilities.

Second, respondents consistently favored practical resources that translate complex accountability concepts into governance-level actions. Participants sought guidance that helps boards ask better questions and make informed decisions rather than simply understand technical requirements.

Third, accessibility emerged as an important consideration for future support efforts. Participants preferred learning opportunities that accommodate diverse schedules, geographic locations, and experience levels through a combination of virtual, regional, conference, and on-demand formats.

Finally, participants consistently described governance as a collaborative endeavor. Learning from peers, sharing successful practices, and strengthening partnerships among governance organizations were viewed as essential components of long-term board development.

Strategic Recommendations

Strategic Priority	Description
Develop a Comprehensive Governance Resource Library	Create a coordinated series of concise governance publications, infographics, templates, FAQs, and visual resources that clarify board responsibilities and provide practical examples of effective governance.
Develop Practical Governance Toolkits	Create governance-oriented toolkits that include monitoring templates, sample board questions, discussion protocols, dashboards, and case studies supporting board oversight of accountability and improvement planning.
Expand Professional Learning	Provide a blended system of professional learning including webinars, regional workshops, conference sessions, learning cohorts, and asynchronous modules that accommodate diverse board needs.
Strengthen Statewide Partnerships	Continue collaboration with governance organizations including CASB, CASE, District Accountability Committees, charter organizations, and other partners to develop coordinated resources and consistent messaging.
Support New Board Member Development	Develop a structured onboarding pathway introducing governance fundamentals, accountability systems, data literacy, board-superintendent relationships, and effective governance practices.

Conclusion

The findings from this needs assessment demonstrate a strong statewide commitment to strengthening board governance in support of improved student outcomes. Participants consistently recognized that effective governance requires more than knowledge of statutes or accountability systems; it requires practical skills, shared understanding of governance responsibilities, access to meaningful data, and opportunities for continual learning.

The assessment also demonstrates that Colorado's boards of education are eager to engage in professional learning that is relevant, accessible, and immediately applicable. Rather than requesting additional compliance guidance, respondents emphasized resources that help boards carry out their governance responsibilities with greater confidence and effectiveness.

These findings provide a strong foundation for future governance support efforts within the Colorado Department of Education. By emphasizing governance role clarity, practical resources, flexible professional learning, and collaborative partnerships, CDE can continue building the capacity of local boards to provide strategic leadership that ultimately supports improved outcomes for Colorado students.

Appendix A: Selected Survey Highlights

Survey Finding	Result
Respondents	105 statewide participants
Preferred Resource	Short on-demand videos
Preferred Guidance	One-page governance resources
Most Desired Training	Live virtual and regional workshops
Primary Governance Need	Clarification of board and superintendent roles
Common Learning Need	Understanding accountability systems, data, and UIP oversight
Preferred Support Style	Practical, governance-focused resources
Important Delivery Feature	Flexible, accessible learning opportunities
Valued Approach	Peer learning and collaboration

Background Information related to CDE Board Supports:

CDE support, grounded in C.R.S. 22-11-208, is non-directive and non-partisan, focusing on best practices and resources. CDE does not prescribe governance approaches; these decisions remain with local boards. Boards should consult legal counsel for specific guidance. Related resources are available at: https://ed.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/board-of-education-supports

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