

Program Evaluation

Know-How

Nancy Protheroe

Take a critical look at specific school programs and approaches by using these research-based strategies

In the assessment-driven environment of today's schools, questions about effectiveness and impact on student learning often focus on the school as a whole. For example, is our school successful in helping all our students meet high standards? Or the focus may be somewhat narrower—how are we doing with math instruction? An often-missed piece is taking a critical look at specific programs and approaches. Program evaluation is a tool that can help do this.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2006) explains that “In schools, program evaluation means examining initiatives the school has undertaken—whether the initiative is an approach to literacy instruction or a program to support struggling students—to answer the question, ‘Is what we are doing working?’” The important point is that principals should be constantly reviewing the ways in which resources—staff, time, and money—are used and should be asking: Is what we are doing having a positive impact on students? Is the effect a program is having worth the money or should we spend our resources another way?

Program evaluation can help to answer a range of common-sense—but critically important—questions. For example, Are we seeing the results we anticipated? or What changes should we make, if any, to increase the program's impact? (McREL, 2000).

Howard (2004) steps back from the idea of evaluating a specific program and puts the approach in a broader context: “School improvement and data-driven decision making are two terms that

all school leaders hear almost every day. Program evaluation brings together these two concepts by focusing data collection and analysis in an organized way in order to improve programs and, through improvement of these component programs, to improve schools.”

While you might agree in theory with the idea that data should be collected to assess how well programs are working, you might also be thinking that you don't have the time or skills needed for an evaluation. You are definitely not alone in that opinion. However, Herman and Winters (1992) suggest that educators' experience as “progress trackers” who almost continuously gather data to help assess what is going on in classrooms prepares them well for program evaluation. They continue: “Much of this progress tracking, whether at the classroom or program level, addresses two simple questions: How are we doing? How can we improve?”

McNamara (1998) agrees that educators have the skills and ability to conduct evaluations since they “do not have to be experts in these topics to carry out a useful program evaluation.” McNamara



goes on to say that “The ‘20-80’ rule applies here, that 20% of effort generates 80% of the needed results. It’s better to do what might turn out to be an average effort at evaluation than to do no evaluation at all.”

In addition, “many evaluation techniques are easy to execute; can make use of data that are already being gathered; and can be performed on a scale that is practical for teachers, principals, and other school leaders” (Center for Comprehensive School Reform, 2006).

The challenge, then, is to conduct an evaluation that yields useful data—while not diverting undue amounts of staff time from teaching and other important responsibilities. Distilling the evaluation process to three critical questions can help to organize the process:

- What are we looking for?
- How will we look for it?
- How will we use the data?

What to Look for

Words that are familiar to educators—formative and summative—from the perspective of assessing student learning are also relevant to program evaluation (Frechtling, 2002). A formative evaluation of a program might ask whether the program or approach is being done as it is intended to be. Howard (2004) calls this “taking stock,” with some questions that might be asked such as: Are there variations across classrooms? Do particular components seem to strengthen the overall program?

In contrast, a summative evaluation uses your school’s reasons for deciding to use the program—the objectives—as a measure against which its success is measured. For example, have students who participated in our after-school tutoring program made the desired progress?

Although many formal program evaluations might be summative in nature, formative evaluations are likely to be most helpful to your school’s improvement efforts. There is a common sense reason for this. Periodic reviews of how



things are going can help you ensure that programs, use of specific teaching strategies, etc., are headed in the right direction.

How to Look for It

The “how” should begin with developing a thorough plan of action. As part of the planning process, you will need to:

Establish due dates and timelines. Planning too tightly almost guarantees that there will be slippage, and the project overall may suffer.

Identify resources that will be needed. Staff time and expertise are two specific resources that should be discussed in detail.

Identify the components of the evaluation and assign responsibilities. The important concern at this stage is to think concretely—and in as detailed a manner as possible—about what will need to be done.

One important piece of advice: Keep the plan as simple as possible, especially for your first program evaluation. Remember that everyone working on the evaluation has other, more pressing responsibilities, and that the evaluation will need to mesh with the normal flow of school work.

How to Use the Data

Using the data is a must-do step of any evaluation. Otherwise, the resources used to support it would have been better spent elsewhere (Sanders & Sullins, 2006). Data use has two components: analyzing it in order to glean lessons from it—what Killion (2002) calls “meaning-making”—and then using these lessons to support

decision-making. McNamara (1998) suggests that this meaning-making is often easier if you go back to the goals of your evaluation: “This will help you organize your data and focus your analysis. For example, if you wanted to improve your program by identifying its strengths and weaknesses, you can organize data into program strengths, weaknesses and suggestions to improve the program.”

Here are additional tips that can help you and the other staff members analyze the data that have been collected:

- Ask: Do these results make sense? How can they help in decision-making about the program?
- Don’t assume the program is the only source of outcomes (positive or negative).
- Don’t rush this step of the evaluation process; the first fact discovered may not be the most important one (Cicchinelli & Barley, 1999; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998).

Once the three key questions have been identified, staff members working on the evaluation can focus on deciding which data will be needed to answer them. In Champion’s (2002) view, “No single data source can measure everything ... A good evaluation includes several kinds of data that measure the same thing from different angles.”

However, trying to draw from too many data sources may prove confusing. The goal is to develop an evaluation plan that balances the need for information with ease and cost of data collection. To do this, you should decide what information is critical to answering the question. You can also find that some of the relevant data might be difficult or costly (in terms of time and money) to collect. If so, circle back to your questions and ask whether different ones—those that could be addressed more economically—would still provide you with a productive evaluation.

Data such as test scores or attendance records will typically form part

of the evaluation's data base. However, descriptions of how the program functions or the feelings and attitudes of those involved with the program also can be useful data to collect. Data of this sort can provide context and might help to explain, for example, why the program isn't working as well as expected. Such qualitative information can be collected through surveys, interviews, or observations.

A primary use of program evaluation data should be to inform decision-making about school programs. Depending on the purpose of the evaluation, school staff need to consider the following. Does the program do what it is supposed to do? What program improvements do the findings suggest? For example, does it look as though the approach is not being implemented as designed? If you decide to keep the current program, perhaps with modifications, the findings might suggest some ways to improve the program's

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effectiveness. Finally, if the evaluation provides solid data that a program isn't working—and likely will not work—what does the evaluation tell us about what to look for in a replacement program or approach?

The Principal's Pivotal Role

In Howard's (2004) view, principals can be pivotal in creating “evaluation-friendly” environments in their schools by helping staff understand that the intent is to evaluate programs, not

people; integrating data collection into existing procedures as much as possible; and making it clear that some important questions can be addressed quite easily.

Finally, Champion (2004) stresses that it is important that your initial efforts to conduct more systematic reviews of your school's programs be of high quality—even if that means they are fairly limited in scope: “Think big, but take some small, carefully considered steps. Start with a conversation with your colleagues about what would be most useful to know with some certainty ... You don't need to do everything at once.” 

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WEB RESOURCES

Evaluating for Success was originally developed by McREL to help support schools' implementation of Comprehensive School Reform programs. However, its clear description of the evaluation process can be applied to any evaluation project.

www.mcrel.org/topics/products/76

The 2002 User-Friendly Handbook for Program Evaluation is posted on the Web site of the National Science Foundation. In one chapter, the authors briefly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of approaches to data collection such as surveys and focus groups.

www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/start.htm

The New York State Teacher Resource Centers host a Web site to assist educators to "plan, implement, and communicate evaluation activities." Included are tools such as an evaluation planner spreadsheet, designed to help support the development of an evaluation.

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