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Why Evaluate Your School Programs?

This is a legitimate question. After all, aren't teachers and other school staff busy enough trying to educate students? Aren't there enough distractions already: dealing with parents, addressing disciplinary issues, attending endless professional development sessions, and so on, and so on? Besides, with federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind, there's already more than enough evaluation going on! There's no time left behind to even consider additional tasks!

DEFINITION OF EVALUATION

The reality is that successful program development—whether the program involves a new science curriculum, a parent-teacher organization, or a character development program—cannot occur without evaluation. Program evaluation is the process of systematically determining the quality of a program and how it can be improved.

The evaluation principles included in this guide provide a means for improvement and a way of documenting results so that others can learn from one's successes and failures. This way, precious time and resources can be delegated effectively. Indeed, any evaluation that is worth doing must ultimately *save* a school's time and resources and produce better results.

USES OF EVALUATION

Evaluation gives direction to everything that we do when changing and improving school programs. It is the process used to identify student needs. It is the process used to set priorities among needs and to translate needs into program objectives or modifications of existing objectives. It is the process used to identify and to select among different program approaches, organizations, staff assignments, materials and equipment, facilities, schedules, and other structuring choices in order to build a program that has a high likelihood of success. It is the process used to monitor and adjust programs as they are implemented. It is the process used to determine whether a program is resulting in desired outcomes and why the outcomes are as they are. It is the process used by outsiders to determine whether a program should be supported, changed, or terminated. It is the process used to judge requests for resources to support the program. In short, evaluation is an essential part of the improvement of school programs. It should underlie all changes and reforms. Without evaluation, change is blind and must be taken on faith.

BENEFITS OF EVALUATION

The payoffs of program evaluation are benefits to school staff and the children they serve. For example, as a result of sound program evaluation, benefits that can accrue to students might include improvement of educational practices and procedures or development of support materials to eliminate curricular weaknesses. Benefits to teachers might include recognition and support for teachers associated with a good program or help in choosing the best curriculum materials. Benefits to principals might include direction in setting priorities for school improvement or the identification and justification of needs for new programs.

FORMAL VERSUS INFORMAL EVALUATION

The process of evaluation involves two basic acts: (1) gathering information so that decisions will be informed and supportable and (2) applying criteria to the available information to arrive at justifiable decisions. The process is done systematically and openly so that others can follow along and all can learn. It is recorded in reports or other documents so that the steps in a decision process about a program can be traced, and, when necessary, the results can be reviewed and communicated clearly and accurately. Evaluation findings are reported in writing so that learning can be shared and made available for future use by others.

The evaluation process differs in important ways from the day-to-day personal decisions you make. When you evaluate items on a lunch menu,

you do not systematically conduct an analytical study; you do not carefully collect data, analyze it, and report it; you do not explicitly describe the criteria that you are using to make a selection. You just do it. It is highly subjective and not open to public review and debate. One set of values applies. The results are not written up for future use or for sharing with others.

The evaluation of school programs frequently involves a much more rigorous process, because the decisions being made can affect many others—perhaps even the well-being of the next generation. Many perspectives need to be considered, and standards must be met. Formal reports are prepared and made public. This is what we mean by formal evaluation.

The Hammer of NCLB

When school staff think of evaluation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) often pops into mind—often with an accompanying sense of anxiety and/or resentment. NCLB is neither the magic bullet hailed by its proponents nor the "Weapon of Mass Destruction" cursed by its detractors (Bracey, 2004). Arguably, NCLB isn't a weapon but a tool: a tool that, like a hammer, can be used to build or destroy.

However, we've all heard the expression "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Unfortunately, many educators feel they have been "nailed" by NCLB, without the benefit of other, perhaps more appropriate, forms of evaluation. With a greater variety of tools in one's evaluation toolbox, including those required by NCLB, a school can be assessed more accurately and eventually built stronger and more effective.[1]

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY (PART 1)

Before moving on, let's look at an illustrative case application of the material that we have covered. Although fictitious, this case is like many faced by building teachers and principals. Its purpose is to show how the evaluation steps could work in a real school setting. First, a scenario is presented, and then we will apply what has been discussed so far to the scenario. This illustrative case will be continued through the remainder of this guide. As each step in the program evaluation process is discussed, we will return to this case to examine how the discussion could be applied.

Setting of the Case Study

Lakeview City has a population of just over 50,000 people and is located midway between two major metropolitan areas, each about 200 miles away. Lakeview City is the county seat and the largest town within 100 miles. It has diversified industry, including a major chemical plant and the farm machinery

division of a large national manufacturing company. The town is primarily blue-collar workers; however, unemployment has recently doubled, as the local chemical plant has dramatically downsized. There are about 8,000 students in Grades K–12. The school district has six elementary schools (Grades K–5), three middle schools (Grades 6–8), and two high schools (Grades 9–12). About 30% of the high school graduates go on to higher education, with the remainder taking jobs or going into the military. Approximately 10% of entering high school freshmen fail to finish high school.

The Purpose

In response to a new federal mandate, the state has recently begun statewide testing in science in Grades 4, 8, and 11. Last year Lakeview students at all three levels scored poorly on the science tests that were given; this meant that they failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as a district. While science test scores were below par in general, scores for low-income students were significantly lower than those for other students. Lakeview Elementary School had particularly poor scores on their fourth-grade science tests; while their test scores in reading and math had made some progress, the science scores had actually decreased. This puzzled the staff, because all of the school's curricula, including the science curriculum, had recently been updated to be in line with the new state standards. Furthermore, there seemed to be fewer complaints from or about the science department than other departments.

The principal, Ms. Goss, and the teachers were painfully aware of the consequences of not meeting AYP. At this point, it required developing a School Improvement Plan that targeted the school's weak areas. If the school continued to fail in meeting AYP, ultimately Ms. Goss could lose her job and the school could be restructured or even closed down and reopened as a charter school. Ms. Goss presented the results of the tests to a schoolwide team meeting of teachers, with predictable reactions.

Ms. Lee, a fourth-grade teacher protested, "Our low-income students, with all their socioeconomic limitations, can't possibly live up to such high standards!"

"Economics are no excuse," retorted Ms. Garcia, a third-grade teacher. "It's their parents, who just don't value education or discipline. If they can't parent, we can't teach!"

"It's just a few bad apples, really," explained another teacher. "Too bad we can't just make sure they're all absent the day of the tests."

Ms. Garcia chortled, "Hey, it's easy enough to rile them all up into a fist-fight with each other. Then we can expel them all. Problem solved!" Devious snickers ensued.

"The so-called bad apples alone couldn't have created overall science tests scores that were *this* low," Ms. Goss countered. "Besides, reading and math scores actually increased. We've got to focus on improving our science program, not blaming our kids."

"The sad part is," sighed Ms. Cooper, a fourth-grade teacher, "I was really looking forward to continuing that environmental science curriculum. Even the difficult kids seemed engaged with it. I hope we aren't forced to scrap it and teach to the test instead."

Ms. Lee rolled her eyes and hissed, "That NCLB is a bunch of B.S. Its one-size-fits-all approach is a totally inappropriate way to evaluate *our* unique school!"

> Ms. Goss interrupted the gripe session. "I agree there are plenty of limita-tions to these tests, but they did point out that our science program isn't up to par. With all our attention on the reading program and the new discipline com-mittee, we'd lost sight of that. That's what NCLB expects of us: to establish a School Improvement Plan to improve our weaknesses. And conducting our own internal evaluation—one that looks beyond narrow NCLB criteria—is the first step of that improvement plan. Otherwise, we're shooting in the dark."

What should be evaluated in schools? Chapter 2 presents an initial inventory of things that deserve evaluation. It also provides a process for identifying what to look at when evaluating a school program.

Internal Evaluation in Charter Schools: Key to Successful Schools and School Reform

Charter school advocates emphasize reduced bureaucracy, increased flexibility, opportunities to innovate, and accountability for student per-formance as essential to school reform (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Although charter schools are encouraged to demonstrate their achievements through unique methods as well as mandated traditional achievement tests, they rarely take advantage of the former. Various charter school studies have found that self-evaluation in charter schools is lacking, and that even their self-stated goals are often vague and immeasurable (Crew & Anderson, 2003; Legislative Office of Education Oversight, 2003; Sullins & Miron, 2005). Often schools simply lack the ability and resources to develop measurable goals and sound evaluation plans, but with assistance they can demonstrate their achievements through a variety of venues (Miron & Horn, 2002; Sullins & Miron, 2005).

Charter schools may be under even more pressure than traditional public schools to demonstrate good performance and family satisfac-tion, as they could lose their charter and cease to exist if they don't live up to the expectations set up in their charter. Although theoretically a charter school could lose its charter solely on the basis of not meeting its NCLB standards, this has been quite rare thus far. Charter school failures and closures have usually been the result of fiscal misman-agement, poor organization, and/or low enrollment: factors that can be proactively avoided by conducting continuous internal evaluation. Internal evaluation not only can prevent disastrous blunders, but it can assess progress on unique goals and objectives in addition to externally mandated ones. A school that fails to meet NCLB standards shows a greater chance of retaining its charter if it can demonstrate that it met its other unique goals and objectives. Fortunately, the smaller size, reduced bureaucracy, unifying mission, and familylike climate reduce the political gridlock that often occurs in larger school districts. These factors all facilitate internal evaluation.

Ideally, all schools—charter, traditional public, or private—must explore reasons for success or failure in meeting the goals and develop plans for continuing their successes and correcting their shortcomings. This is what helps schools become "learning organizations" that continually evaluate themselves and strive toward improvement (Awsumb-Nelson, 2001; Davidson, 2001). Such self-evaluation is especially important in schools that pilot unique educational innovations. Charter schools in particular are seen as research and development "laboratories" for testing innovations in education, innovations that, if proven successful, can be adopted by other schools. Without evidence that these educational innovations can produce the intended results, the charter school movement's potential as a mechanism for overall school reform is greatly diminished.

An excellent resource specific to internal evaluation of charter schools is C. Awsumb-Nelson's (2001) *Strengthening Your School's Accountability Plan: A Technical Assistance Manual for Cleveland Community Schools,* available at http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter/cleveland/accountability_manual.pdf.

NOTE

1. For more information on NCLB, please see http://www.ed.gov.