ENGAGING IN PROGRAM EVALUATION

Introduction

As conversations around academic recovery evolve and pandemic relief funds begin to expire, districts around the nation face a crucial question: Are their programs working for each student in the district and, if not, how they can improve?

In 2023, with the challenging work of academic recovery continuing and ESSER funding nearing an end, it's even more critical for schools and districts to understand which instructional policies, programs, and practices should continue and which ones to sunset.

This brief provides the audience with the purpose of program evaluation and best practices for conducting program evaluations in school districts.

What is Program Evaluation?

Program evaluation is the systematic assessment of the operation and outcomes of a program. Program evaluation helps district and school leaders identify factors that contribute to program success and determine how well the program is achieving its goals. These types of evaluations provide information that district and school leaders use to make decisions about the operation and/or expansion of their programs. As such, districts often incorporate program evaluations in their continuous improvement cycles—focusing on school improvement and student outcomes.

What is a Program?

For evaluation purposes, a "program" can represent any initiative, intervention, or strategy a district or school implements to improve outcomes.[1] Researchers broadly define a "program" as follows:

> " *A structured intervention to improve the well-being of people, groups, organizations, or communities. Programs vary in size, scope, duration, and clarity and specificity of goals.*
> -Weiss[2]

> *An organized, planned, and usually ongoing effort designed to improve a social problem or social conditions.*
> - Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman[3] "

Within these broad definitions, district can evaluate a variety of program types (see Figure 1), such as academic programs (e.g., a specific reading intervention or curriculum), departmental programs, district-wide initiatives (e.g., a 1:1 technology initiative), and staff programs (e.g., instructional coaching).

Figure 1: Categorization of Programs

BY TYPE	BY LEVEL
• Curriculum Initiatives • Instructional Strategies • Support for Teachers • Non-Academic Programs • Technology Programs	• Early Childhood • Elementary School • Middle School • High School • Adult Education

Source: Strategic Data Project, Harvard University[4]

Benefits of Evaluating District Programs

Program evaluation helps school and district leaders assess program effectiveness and determine how to improve program implementation. Quality program evaluations can improve educational practices[5] by enabling a district to:[6]

Assess program implementation	Assess program results	Highlight methods for program improvement

Effective evaluations help districts uncover barriers to program success and identify the factors that facilitate program success.[7] Districts also use evaluation results to make data-based decisions about whether to continue funding and implementing the program.[8] Many programs require a significant investment of financial and staff resources, so determining whether the program benefits students or staff is valuable. The findings from program evaluations can "result in better quality practices being delivered more effectively to enhance student learning."[9]

Types of Program Evaluations

Education program evaluations fall into two categories: *formative evaluations* of the program's processes or implementation and *summative evaluations* of the program's outcomes.[10] A process evaluation explores how a program operates, while an outcome evaluation assesses the extent to which a program has achieved its goals. Outcome evaluations can include impact analyses, which assess the "effects" of the program on the program's participants. Expanded definitions of each program evaluation type appear in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Types of Program Evaluation

PROCESS EVALUATION	OUTCOME EVALUATION
• Aims to inform changes or improvements in a program's implementation or operations. • Documents what the program does. • Captures the extent to which and how consistently the program has been implemented as intended. • Typically requires qualitative and quantitative data.	• Aims to identify a program's impact or effects. • Measures changes in program participants' and beneficiaries' knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and/or conditions that result from a program. • Typically requires quantitative data and advanced statistical methods (e.g., may include a comparison group).

Source: Corporation for National and Community Service[11]

Findings from process evaluations can help districts determine whether the program is functioning as intended and whether those implementing the program would benefit from additional professional development.[12] Findings from outcome evaluations can help districts make decisions about continuing, sunsetting, or expanding the program and about allocating program resources.[13]

What are the Phases of Program Evaluation?

Conducting a program evaluation requires identifying a program to evaluate, planning the evaluation, collecting and analyzing data, sharing the results, and changing or improving the program.

Identify a Program to Evaluate and Determine the Evaluation's Purpose

Program evaluation starts with the identification of the program that will be evaluated and the determination of the evaluation's purpose.[14] The evaluation's purpose provides context for planning, design, and analysis decisions.[15] When district leaders communicate the evaluation's purpose, they also provide transparency to members of the district community who may be invested in the program's future.[16]

Plan the Evaluation and Develop Evaluation Questions

In preparing to successfully evaluate a program, districts should establish an evaluation team, develop a logic model, and create evaluation questions.

ESTABLISH AN EVALUATION TEAM

At the outset of the evaluation, district leaders should establish a program evaluation team responsible for leading the evaluation. While the team's composition will depend on the program size, staff roles, and existing resources, the team should have a team leader who acts as the point person for all evaluation-related inquiries.[17] The evaluation team leader will need to make objective decisions about the program, even if they are a staff member responsible for the program's success.[18] Other team members will work together to support the team leader, provide feedback during the evaluation process, and oversee smaller components of the evaluation process. The evaluation team can also hire an external evaluator who works with district staff to evaluate the program.[19]

DEVELOP A LOGIC MODEL

Logic model development is a key step in starting the program evaluation process. A logic model is a "graphical representation of the relationships between the parts of a program and its expected outcomes." Using a logic model provides the evaluation team with a framework for describing how the program works and for identifying the components of the program that will be relevant to the evaluation.[20] Logic models describe the relationships between the program's inputs and outcomes and establish a shared language among members of the evaluation team.[21] Logic models further contribute to program evaluations by:[22]

- Making the intention behind the program clear
- Introducing common language and references for program collaborators
- Defining resources and outlining activities
- Describing quantitative outputs as well as short-, mid, or long-term goals
- Illustrating the program process
- Informing evaluation results and situating them in context

Logic models typically group program components into categories, including the program's resources (i.e., inputs), activities, and outcomes (see Figure 3 on the following page).[23]

Figure 3: Logic Model Components

RESOURCES	Resources (i.e., inputs) are the raw materials needed to create the program, implement its activities, and attain desired outcomes. Resources include material items (e.g., instructional materials, facilities, and funding) and nonmaterial items (e.g., time, community support, and specialized knowledge and skills).
ACTIVITIES	Activities are the processes, actions, and events through which the program resources achieve the intended outcomes; they are the steps in implementing a program.
SHORT-TERM AND MID-TERM OUTCOMES	Short- and mid-term outcomes are the changes in program participants' knowledge, beliefs, and behavior due to their involvement in the program. Short-term outcomes are observable almost immediately after participation; mid-term outcomes can take months or years to emerge and may build toward long-term outcomes.
LONG-TERM OUTCOMES	A program's lasting influences. Like short- and mid-term outcomes, long-term outcomes can be changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behavior.

Source: Regional Educational Laboratory Central, U.S. Department of Education[24]

CREATE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Next, the program evaluation team establishes evaluation questions that will guide the evaluation.[25] Evaluation questions should meet the criteria listed in Figure 4.[26]

Figure 4: Criteria for Evaluation Questions

Focused on a particular program or program component	Aligned with the program's logic model	Consistent with the program evaluation's purpose
Designed to address any formal requirements (e.g., state, federal)	Clear, specific, and well-defined	Measurable

Collect and Analyze Data

After planning the evaluation, evaluators will begin gathering and analyzing data to answer the evaluation questions. This phase of the evaluation process includes planning for data collection and analyzing and interpreting data.

To determine which data to collect, evaluators must first specify the indicators, for implementation or performance, that will help answer the evaluation questions. These indicators are the measurable pieces of the program evaluation and should be clear in what they intend to measure.[27] Effective indicators are:

Figure 5: Characteristics of Effective Indicators

SPECIFIC
- Clearly identify what is being measured.

MEASURABLE
- Quantify topics in numeric terms *or* describe an outcome qualitatively.

OBSERVABLE
- Able to be noticed or perceived.

NON-DIRECTIONAL
- Written in a neutral way, neither positive nor negative.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[28]

Evaluators must then identify the data sources and collection methods appropriate for each indicator. Districts can answer more evaluation questions and gain a fuller picture of the relationship between program activities and outcomes by using a combination of data sources and collection methods.[29]

**Figure 6: Data Collection Sources and Methods**

DATA SOURCES	DATA COLLECTION METHODS
• Documents/Existing Records (e.g., program records, lesson plans, student information systems, assessment data) • Individuals (e.g., self-reported attitudes, knowledge, perceptions, awareness, skills, and behaviors) • Observations (e.g., observations of individuals/groups, meetings, facilities, and environment)	• Surveys • Interviews • Focus groups • Observations • Document review • Quantitative assessments • Portfolios • Case studies

Source: U.S. Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[30]

ANALYZE AND INTERPRET DATA

Analyzing the collected data and interpreting the results enables the evaluation team to answer the evaluation questions.[31] Data analysis is "the process of organizing, classifying, tabulating, and examining the information you collected and presenting the results so they can be easily understood by your stakeholders."[32] The following figure displays the steps in the data analysis process.
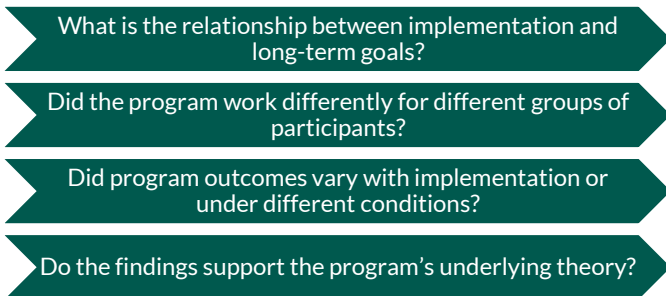
Figure 7: Process for Data Analysis

Develop a data analysis plan

Manage your data

Conduct data analysis
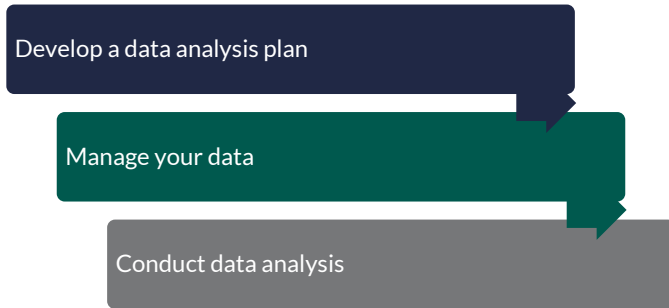
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[33]

Data analysis allows the evaluation team to understand the factors that hinder or facilitate the achievement of the program's goals and outcomes.[34] The following figure highlights four considerations for interpreting and drawing conclusions from the data.

Figure 8: Considerations for Analyzing Evaluating Data

What is the relationship between implementation and long-term goals?

Did the program work differently for different groups of participants?

Did program outcomes vary with implementation or under different conditions?

Do the findings support the program's underlying theory?

Source: U.S. Department of Education[35]

Share Results

Evaluation teams can then share the results of the analysis to enable district staff to use the findings to make data-informed decisions and engage in ongoing action planning.[36] Additional benefits of sharing evaluation results include publicizing outcomes, providing transparency, engaging the community and building relationships, and increasing knowledge sharing of effective programs.[37] When planning to disseminate evaluation findings, district leaders can consider key questions related to the audience, message, approach, timing, and responsible party, presented in Figure 9 opposite.

Figure 9: Key Questions for Dissemination Planning

AUDIENCE	Who needs the information?
MESSAGE	What does the audience need to know?
APPROACH	How can you best spread the message?
TIMING	When does the audience need to know?
RESPONSIBLE PARTY	Who will lead the dissemination efforts?

Source: Regional Educational Laboratory Central, U.S. Department of Education[38]

Effectively sharing evaluation results requires targeting communication efforts to different audiences.[39] Questions to consider when targeting dissemination methods to various audiences include:[40]

- What groups need to hear about your findings?
- Who has been involved in the evaluation?
- Who might have a stake in the findings?
- Who might be interested in the findings?
- What specific individuals or subgroups within these groups do you want to target?
- What is the purpose of the dissemination?
- Why do they need to hear about your findings?
- What do you hope to gain by sharing your results?
- How might the audience use the findings?

When determining which dissemination methods are most appropriate for which audience, district leaders can consider the following options:

Figure 10: Methods for Disseminating Findings

▪ Written Report	▪ Open Hours or Workshop
▪ Oral Presentation	▪ Handout or Fact Sheet
▪ Press Release	▪ Blog Post
▪ Newsletter	▪ Roundtable
▪ Meeting	▪ Coffee Chat
▪ Presentation	▪ Social Media

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Regional Educational Laboratory Central, U.S. Department of Education[41]

Engage in Action Planning

Evaluation results also enable district leaders and the community to engage in ongoing action planning about the program's future and stakeholders' experiences with the program.[42] The evaluation findings can inform recommendations for suggested programmatic changes and data-based decisions related to extending, adjusting, or terminating the program.[43] District leaders must

consider the impact of such program changes and they should consider the experiences of those who use or are impacted by the program.[44]

Action planning supports district staff acting upon evaluation results.[45] Overall, action plans should specify the following components:[46]

- **Goals** based on the decisions and recommendations from the evaluation;
- **Actions** to achieve these goals (can include changes to strategy, projects, activities, or other planning frameworks, for example);
- **Staff responsible** for the actions;
- A **timeframe** for completing each action; and
- **A budget (if applicable) for implementing the action steps.**

Engaging in the Program Evaluation Process

Based on a review of literature and best practices shared within the frameworks, Hanover recommends that districts use a mixed-methods approach to engage in program evaluation. During this process, district leaders must determine the type of evaluation that needs to be conducted, the availability of data, and their internal timelines and capacity for program evaluation efforts.

RESEARCH PROJECT	SAMPLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Logic Model and Evaluation Framework	1. What program inputs, activities, outputs, short-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes should be considered for the evaluation?
Program Evaluation Descriptive Data Analysis *Data Analysis*	1. What program inputs, activities, outputs, short-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes should be considered for the evaluation?
Program Evaluation Impact Data Analysis *Data Analysis*	1. What are the effects of the program on academic and/or behavioral outcomes? 2. Are there any associations between use of the program and student outcomes?
Fidelity of Implementation Survey *Survey*	1. What elements of program implementation are occurring with frequency? 2. What instructional practices are occurring in the classrooms? 3. What are the professional learning needs related to program implementation?
In-Depth Interviews *Qualitative Analysis*	1. How do staff perceive program implementation and effectiveness? 2. What are the perceived strengths of the program? 3. What are some barriers to effective implementation? 4. What additional professional learning needs exist
Capstone	1. What are key findings and recommendations based on the mixed-methods research studies related to the program evaluation?

As district leaders conduct the research and analyses outlined above, they should be engaging with their staff and stakeholders by communicating results regularly. District leaders should be able to use program evaluation results to engage in effective action planning related to specific priority areas in hopes of maximizing student learning and success.

Caveat

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