DOINGWHATWORKS

Key Considerations in Conducting Program Evaluations

Danette Parsley • September 2009

Topic: Increased Learning Time: Beyond the Regular School Day
Practice: Evaluate Program

Highlights

- Danette Parsley, the director of field services at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), lays out the key elements of effective evaluation.
- An evaluation plan rests on a logic model, or a theory of change, that looks at the resources available to the program and its desired impacts.
- It is helpful to engage multiple stakeholders to pin down program needs and to decide what kind of data would be relevant to collect.

About the Interviewee

Danette Parsley, M.A., is a senior director in McREL's Field Services division and leads McREL's field work in system improvement and out-of-school-time (OST). Ms. Parsley currently oversees several projects focused on OST programs, including a research project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences that will iteratively design and evaluate a summer science learning program for high school students, and a U.S. Department of Education–funded High-Quality

Supplemental Educational Services and After-School Partnerships Demonstration grant. She has extensive experience providing professional development and technical assistance at the local, state, and regional levels and developing products and tools to help schools and districts engage in continuous improvement. As senior director of field services, Ms. Parsley manages staff and resources for numerous large projects, including the delivery of an intervention for a multiyear, randomized controlled trial study conducted under McREL's Regional Educational Laboratory Central contract. She is currently pursuing an Ed.D. in organization change at Pepperdine University. She holds an M.A. in educational psychology, research and evaluation methodology, from the University of Colorado at Denver and a B.A. in psychology from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Before coming to McREL, Ms. Parsley was a classroom teacher and adolescent counselor.

Full Transcript

My name is Danette Parsley. I am a senior director for field services at McREL, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, in Denver, Colorado.

When it comes to evaluating programs effectively, there are a few key ideas to keep in mind. One is that they should be intentional and well planned. Another idea is that they should involve multiple stakeholders at the various phases of evaluation. And finally, evaluation should really be an integrated ongoing part of your program and not a stand-alone or one-time event.

When you begin planning your evaluation, it's important to involve multiple stakeholders in the process. You want to involve key people who really have a stake in the outcome of your program. So you want to involve parents, community members, teachers, principals, and also instructors and administrators for your actual program. You might also include people like partners or funders as well. It depends on the goals and the outcomes that you are trying to obtain for your program.

Now, one of the first things that you often want to do is lay out logically your program in sort of a snapshot by articulating a theory of change or a logic model. A logic model helps you articulate the key components or elements of your program and your rationale for your program. So it often contains elements such as your vision for your program, your context, so what are your driving forces for having your program, such as, we have a lot of kids who are not attending school regularly, we have an achievement gap between subgroups of our students, we have a high dropout rate perhaps—things like that. So a little bit of contextual information as far as the reason for your program existing.

The next thing you want to do is lay out your short- and long-term outcomes for your program. So what are the results that you want for your program? So what are you trying to accomplish by having this program exist?

Finally, you really want to lay out your strategies and activities that you are going to use to try to get those results. From there, your evaluation plan really falls into place. So once you have that snapshot of your

program and you really agree to what that is with the key stakeholders, then your evaluation plan falls naturally from there.

A sound evaluation plan has several characteristics. First, you want to articulate your purpose and the type of evaluation that you are going to conduct. And by type of evaluation, I mean formative or summative, and you may want to do both. So your formative evaluation would be more of a process evaluation, and that would be assessing implementation of your program and evaluating the progress toward meeting your outcomes. The summative evaluation would be about ultimate impacts or your outcomes; it is more of an outcome evaluation. The next thing that you would want to articulate, and this is closely aligned with your purpose and type of evaluation, would be your questions, your evaluation questions. So you may want to ask a question like "What is the impact of our program for our students?" Or you may say, "What is the impact of our program for particular subgroups of students?" You may want to ask a more formative question such as "Are we progressing toward our targets or our goals?" Or you may have a more descriptive question such as "What services are we providing?" or "Are we implementing our program as intended?" So those are different types of evaluation questions.

It's important to think about roles and responsibilities as far as data collection efforts, and that's often a shared responsibility between program staff and regular day school staff. So, for example, existing data, like achievement data on standardized tests or benchmark assessments or grades, that may be collected by a school staff member and provided to the program. Other data, such as stakeholder satisfaction data or program implementation data, that may be collected either as a joint effort between the program and the school or by the program itself.

Often schools have school improvement teams or leadership teams who are responsible for analyzing data to inform their school improvement plan, so they set goals and articulate strategies for making improvements. It's important for programs to work collaboratively with these teams, and they will help build the capacity of the providers in using data.