



Five-Minute Read

Prepared by the Research Office

What Exactly is a Program Evaluation?

Sometimes we are asked to do a program evaluation of a new project or intervention by people who are not quite sure of what a program evaluation is or the kind of information they will get from it. Oftentimes, they are responding to advice from a colleague suggesting they evaluate the program, or they are required by grant funders to include one. This short read explains what a program evaluation is and describes some of the information gained from doing one.

What exactly is a program evaluation?

A quick Google search results in many definitions for *Program Evaluation*. While they vary a bit depending on the discipline from which the definition originates, they all have the following components in common:

- They all include a process of gathering or accessing relevant data
- They all specify an analysis and interpretation of the data
- They all indicate that the resulting findings be used to make a determination about the efficiency or impact of the program being evaluated

Program evaluations in education tend to have two main purposes. One is to evaluate the implementation of a program or project, such as a new curriculum or intervention. Often implementation program evaluations measure whether a program is being implemented with fidelity, or how closely the actual implementation matches the recommendations and requirements for an effective program. For example, imagine that a computer intervention for literacy requires that students use the program for three 45-minute sessions per week to see growth in reading. Schools that meet that requirement have implemented the intervention with fidelity, at least with regard to usage time. Schools that schedule students to use the computer intervention less than that (either with fewer minutes or fewer sessions) are said to not be implementing the program with fidelity.

The second reason education program evaluations are typically done is to determine whether a program has an impact on student outcomes. Student outcomes may be academic, such as achievement test scores or measures of academic growth, or they could be behavioral such as attendance or suspensions. The goal of these program evaluations is to determine whether implementing a certain program will lead to changes in student outcomes. For example, a once-a-week mentoring program may be designed to reduce disruptive student behaviors in school. A program evaluation might examine if the program reduces conduct-related office referrals for participants compared to non-participating students.

Sometimes, a program evaluation examines both implementation and impact. Using the above examples, a program evaluation may examine both whether students are using the literacy intervention three times per week for 45 minutes and changes in their reading scores. In the second example, an evaluation may determine whether students participated in mentoring sessions that occurred weekly, and then whether there was a reduction in conduct-related office referrals.

What can I gain from program evaluations?

Reading program evaluations can provide information on what to expect before deciding whether to implement a certain program in your district, school, or classroom. Implementation program evaluations would highlight aspects of the program that are potentially difficult to implement. Additionally, they could provide information on aspects of the program that might allow flexibility in



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implementation. Let's return to the above example of a computer intervention to support literacy. The model specifies that students use the intervention for three 45-minute sessions per week. However, depending on the time required for regular classroom instruction, support classes, lunch, recess, and other scheduled activities, there may not be time in the weekly schedule to allot three 45-minute sessions to the computer intervention. A program evaluation might help determine whether the computer intervention is still useful if implemented at a lower level, for example 30-minute sessions instead of 45 minutes. In general, information from implementation program evaluations can help determine the usefulness of a program given different scenarios.

Program evaluations can also provide information on the different kinds of outcomes you might expect to see for students who participate in the program. A mentoring program that aims to reduce conduct-related office referrals may have different outcomes for varying contexts. Perhaps the program is found to be helpful for students who are chronically tardy but not effective at reducing bullying. Or maybe the mentoring program is effective with middle school students, but not high school students.

Once you've decided to implement a program, if at all possible, it is a good idea to plan for it to be evaluated. As noted above, an evaluation can inform where adjustments are needed to improve the program. Analyzing program impact on student outcomes can also provide important information to others interested in program effectiveness, such as district leaders and program funders.

Program evaluations may capture more information than originally expected, providing the opportunity to think more broadly about a program. For example, teachers of students in the mentoring program may report that program participants are more interested in class compared to non-participating peers. This could be helpful information, especially if the program is not reducing conduct-related office referrals as much as desired. You may think of ways to tweak the program to support both academic interest and positive behaviors in students.

One final point to consider, especially for programs that provide some kind of intervention, is if there are other factors that might be influencing the program outcomes. Well-designed program evaluations can help tease out the impact of the program and the impact of other factors on the outcomes being studied (such as, how much of students' improved literacy skills is due to the computer intervention versus other literacy instruction and activities in which students are engaged). However, it is best to include the evaluators in the beginning so they are fully aware of the program to be evaluated and have the chance to consider how best to design the evaluation.

For further reading:

https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/3988_Chapter_1_overview.pdf

<https://www.eval.org/p/bl/et/blogid=2&blogaid=4>

<https://mainweb-v.musc.edu/vawprevention/research/programeval.shtml>

<https://www.learningtogive.org/resources/program-evaluation>

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/evaluate/evaluation/framework-for-evaluation/main>

<https://www.cdc.gov/eval/guide/introduction/index.htm>