DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 106 365 TM 004 483

AUTHOR Kean, Michael H.
TITLE Approaching Title One Program Evaluation with Creative Pessimism.
PUB DATE [Apr 75]
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, D.C., March 30-April 3, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Data Collection; Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Educational Planning; Educational Problems; *Educational Research; Evaluation; Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Needs; *Federal Programs; Information Dissemination; Information Utilization; Organization; Personnel; Problem Solving; *Program Evaluation; *Research Problems; *Role Conflict; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *ESEA Title I Programs; Implementation

ABSTRACT

Throwing the proverbial monkey wrench into the machinery "on paper" before a system begins functioning seems to be essential to program evaluation. This activity should be performed by the "resident skeptic" who is familiar with past resistance to change and who, being familiar with a program, is able to foresee theoretical and practical problems. Such creative pessimism should be applied to the evaluation of Title One Programs in a large urban district. It may prove useful to categorize anticipated concerns and potential problems under six general headings: (1) Planning: includes providing useful data within a mandated time frame and specification by the Federal Government of minimum evaluation requirements, (2) Organization: includes setting up an organizational linkage between the evaluation and instructional arms of a school system, (3) Implementation: includes considering evaluation results in program and management decisions and combating outside criticism that research and evaluation activities constitute a frill, (4) Dissemination: includes avoiding gross oversimplification of research results, (5) Personnel: includes convincing personnel that program evaluation should not be equated with personnel appraisal and (6) Miscellaneous: includes addressing demands for non-existent information, adjusting to the Buckley amendment and contracting with outside firms for evaluation services. (Author/BJG)

APPROACHING TITLE ONE PROGRAM EVALUATION WITH CREATIVE PESSIMISM

By

Michael H. Kean
Executive Director
Office of Research and Evaluation
The School District of Philadelphia

Presented at the Annual Conference of
The American Educational Research Association
Washington, D.C.

March 30 - April 3, 1975

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Whoever Murphy was, he could not have envisioned that the humorous law which bears his name would be so appropos during this age of technology and complex organizations. Murphy's law, of course, states that in every given situation, anything that possibly can go wrong, will. The education of disadvantaged children is far too important to leave to chance, however. So, armed with the wisdom of Murphy's law, it is incumbent upon us to prepare for potential problems, not wait to be battered by them.

It is my hypothesis that an approach which I shall call "creative pessimism" may serve as a vehicle to identify such areas of concern. Creative pessimism is the process of deliberately establishing a series of potential obstacles of sufficient magnitude, so that if not removed they would prevent anticipated events from occurring. More simply stated, creative pessimism is the act of purposely throwing the proverbial monkey wrench into the machinery, but "on paper;" not once the system is already functioning.

In practicing the act of creative pessimism, one might function in the role of "resident skeptic." Such an individual serves the purpose of communicating the fruits of creative pessimism to those empowered to take action. The resident skeptic must be sufficiently familiar with a project or program to identify problems of the highest order -- both theoretical and practical. He should not, however, be convinced of its

merit, but instead should stand on the negative side of the neutral line. Another way to view the resident skeptic, particularly when dealing with Title One Programs, is as a modified ombudsman -- a person who points out any and all potential problems, no matter what or whom they might impact upon, and irregardless of which group or individual would assume responsibility for remedying them.

A prudent manager, charged with the responsibility of implementing a new program, particularly if it is innovative in nature, should review thoroughly the literature and research dealing with resistance to change, so that he will be in a position to minimize its deleterious effects. This exemplifies the proactive decision mode as opposed to the reactive mode, and carries with it all of the advantages which does planning versus non-planning. Creative pessimism provides another way of approaching resistance to change, as long as it is practiced by design, with the necessary linkages having been attended to in advance. Spontaneous, uncontrolled pessimism can quickly destroy an innovative program.

That which follows is an attempt to apply the notion of creative pessimism to the problems associated with the evaluation of Title One Programs in a large urban school district. In raising them, the author will be briefly serving as a resident skeptic.

Although all of the problems examined may not be present in all large cities, they are by no means rare occurrences. Conversations with the individuals charged with the management of research and evaluation activities in large city school systems provides testament to this contention.

Difficulties are arising elsewhere as well. In the September 1974 issue of Educational Researcher, John W. Evans of the U.S. Office of Education, wrote an article entitled "Evaluating Education Programs -- Are We Getting Anywhere?" in which he points up some of the newer problems faced by educational evaluators. Though Evans was writing from the perspective of top-down, Federally sponsored research and evaluation activities, the concerns with which he deals more often than not, come home to roost in public school systems, for school systems are, after all, the sites of implementation of most such studies. Evans was particularly concerned with the following areas:

1. As educational research and evaluation have proliferated, the people and institutions who are the objects of these studies have come under an increasing data collection burden - and are increasingly expressing their resistance to it.
2. Evaluation studies that involve collecting data on adults are encountering increasing resistance at the interviewee level, particularly among minorities and the poor where it is now not uncommon for respondents to insist that they be paid for their time.
3. The increased sensitivity to evaluation studies - both what they seek to find out and the amount of data they propose to collect - is resulting in a strangling growth of reviews, clearances, and advisory bodies.
4. As protests over evaluations arise, ostensibly over the type and amount of data to be collected, there is likely to be an increased politicization of these weapons in broader disputes.

5. Evaluation has the unfortunate effect on some program officers and school administrators of increasing their unwillingness to participate in such studies for fear of what will happen to their programs if the evaluation produces negative findings.

6. Evaluators are increasingly encountering unrealistic expectations on the part of policy-makers with respect to both the speed with which evaluations should be mounted and completed, and the simplicity of the answers which are desired.

7. There is a great deal more public debate over the validity of evaluation methods and results. An increasingly important and time consuming task for evaluators will be defending the evaluations they carry out and their suitability as a basis for policy decisions. An unfortunate by-product of such debates is the impression created among both policy-makers and the public that the mere fact such a debate is occurring means the evaluation must ipso facto be faulty and therefore should be put aside.

Rather than merely present a lengthy list of anticipated concerns and potential problems related to the evaluation of Title One Programs in a large urban school system, an attempt has been made to categorize each item under one of six rough headings -- planning, organization, implementation, dissemination, personnel, and miscellaneous. The line between planning and implementations is often difficult to construct, especially since such concerns often must be dealt with during both phases of an evaluation. Nevertheless, the following problems seemed to

be both initially and most closely related to planning.

.The failure of the Federal Government to be more specific in mandating minimum evaluation requirements. This is not all bad, for it allows the local educational agency to better tailor the evaluation to their particular information needs. However, it does create problems if the State agency serving as a conduit for Title One funds is given a free reign in establishing their interpretation of how the evaluation should be conducted

.The difficulty of producing useful data within a mandated timeframe. End-of-year evaluation reports are often required before funding for the following year is approved. When this is the case, it becomes necessary to use data for the final report which were collected many months prior to the end of the school year, thus creating an incomplete picture of the results.

.The difficulty of nailing-down decision points and dates within the school system, so that data might be provided in time to impact upon decisions. Evaluation results may be required by half a dozen different decision-makers at different points in time. Without advance knowledge of this, the evaluators cannot provide useful information to their clients, and often end up producing inconclusive data instead.

.Lack of support for the process of developing and implementing research and evaluation activities by instructional personnel. Because the office responsible for evaluation is usually separate from that charged with implementing the program, close coordination is essential, particularly in planning for the evaluation. Without it, the utility of the end product may be highly questionable.

Closely related to problems associated with planning are those which impact upon system organization.

.The dichotomy of responsibilities between high level decision-makers. The gray area between instructional planning and operations can result in key staff members utilizing only those evaluation results which will enlarge their personal domains of responsibility.

.The lack of a formalized organizational linkage between the evaluation and instruction arm of the school system. This is particularly critical in terms of the feedback and utilization of meaningful information.

.Difficulties in accessing data collected in individual schools and by other divisions within the school system. Without a mandated process to control the types of data and ways in which it is collected by divisions not charged with that responsibility, conflicting or invalid results may be reported, evaluation over-kill may occur, and the reliability of all results may be jeopardized.

.Tremendous numbers of requests for permission to conduct research within the school system. Government agencies, labs and centers, universities, and graduate students may account for over 500 requests for access and/or cooperation each year. If even a majority of the better proposals were approved, the school system would quickly resemble an enormous fish tank, with school children playing the role of the fish.

.Sharing data processing facilities with the rest of the school system. When computer facilities are shared, business activities tend to receive first priority. Advance planning and scheduling may reduce

some of the deleterious effects of this upon the research and evaluation unit, but in emergencies, the payroll must always be run first, even though the funds used to pay for thousands of positions may depend upon the outcome of an evaluation.

.The lack of an office responsible for policy development. This leaves the school system without a formally constituted body to provide top level management with indications as to the complete ramifications which might be expected as a result of the implementation of new programs. A unit help key staff translate evaluation findings into operational programs would enable middle and long range planning to be effecitvely carried out.

It is not surprising that the greatest number of concerns fall under the category of implementation.

.Evaluation results not being considered at all in making program or management decisions.

.The informal approach to management -- anyone can do it, and gut level is the best way. This very often goes hand-in-hand with the above concern. The propensity of certain managers to categorically ignore information from sources other than from their own staffs is perhaps the single most difficult problem with which evaluators must deal. A sub-set of this is:

.The inability of reticence of decision-makers to create new programs, or alter old ones, based upon evaluative data. In other words, "don't confuse me with the facts."

.Evaluation data being ignored if it adversely affects patronage possibilities. Since many Title One Programs are personnel intensive, evaluation results which indicate that the way in which certain personnel are utilized make little difference in meeting the program's objectives could result in the loss of jobs. If such jobs help establish a power base, there will likely be tremendous resistance to doing away with them.

.Resistance to data by supervisory personnel, including principals. Sometimes, such individuals may view the outcome of a program as totally their responsibility. Though identifying with the program is important, no Title One Program is evaluated on the basis of a single objective relating to the effectiveness of the program's support and leadership personnel.

.The hands of decision-makers often being tied when they attempt to utilize evaluation results. This is sometimes due in part to the unwillingness of certain Board members to deal with results which might have political repercussions.

.The volunteering of the research unit by others to conduct surveys and provide data without first checking with them as to the feasibility of doing so and the resources available. Lack of control of resources, particularly time, can easily destroy the effectiveness of any organization. School-based research and evaluation units are sometimes viewed as being similar to university researchers, and thus it is assumed that their staffs are sitting around, thinking, and waiting to be given something to do. In actuality, however, Title One

Program evaluations generally meet more rigid time tables than the programs themselves.

.Criticism by city government that research and evaluation activities are an unnecessary part of the School District budget -- a frill. In actuality the budget makes up only a fraction of 1% of the total school district's operating budget. All of the Title One Evaluation activities are mandated and paid for by federal categorical monies.

The way in wich information is disseminated is a key element to any evaluation system. Because of its pivotal position, however, problems associated with dissemination often become even more serious.

.The philosopher stone syndrome -- the demand for gross over-simplification of results. The great majority of clients served by research and evaluation units, including the key decision-makers who use the data which they provide, would like researchers to tell them exactly what does and does not work. This is, of course, not possible without the specification of conditions and the identification of and controlling for the myriad variables associated with children and the environment in which they function.

.The demand that the evaluator provide an instructional prescription. This is closely related to the above concern. Though not an unreasonable demand, instructional decisions are usually closely guarded by project personnel as being their sole responsibility.

.The development of technical information in a form that will communicate to decision makers who are afraid of figures. Though evaluation reports must communicate in as simple and non-technical a form as possible it is not always feasible nor

advisable to completely eliminate all statistical information.

.The media's propensity to over simplify and often alter information. In an effort to simplify often complicated results, the "fourth estate" quite regularly places emphasis upon less significant, though more sensational findings. Gross misrepresentation of data is not uncommon as the result of the editor's scissors.

.The expectation that "emergency information" will always bail out the requester. The "quick, give me some data so I can quiet my critics" approach to evaluation is just as likely to have the opposite effect.

.The lack of understanding of the expectation and role of evaluation by federal funding sources. ESEA guidelines, for example, are interpreted by many people as requiring pure research studies to be conducted on all funded projects, which is, nor should it be, the case.

Unless problems associated with personnel can be solved, the evaluation of Title One Programs cannot function properly. Examples of such concerns follow:

.The fear of those in some way responsible for Title One Programs that an evaluation of said programs will discredit them. Evaluation results may be viewed as threatening by management personnel at a number of levels. Persons responsible for securing Federal dollars may be concerned that they will be viewed as having "backed the wrong horse." Program directors, particularly those in charge of non-basic skills areas such as social studies, art, and music, may fear that their programs will be de-emphasized. Project managers

may associate a less than glowing project evaluation with certain discontinuation of funding.

.Confusion between program evaluation and personnel appraisal. This failure to differentiate between the evaluation of programs and the rating of people causes a tremendous amoun iculty in securing the cooperation vital to carrying out on-site evaluation activities.

.The pervasive fear of the notion of accountability. Where systems of accountability are being implemented, they are not tied to evaluations geared toward other sets of objectives. Nevertheless, teachers' unions and administrators' associations have often erroneously related the function of a program evaluation to that of the office of personnel.

.The threat of unionization of research and evaluation personnel into the same bargaining unit as teachers. This could conceivably abrogate the ability of evaluators to observe and report findings, without being subject to undue pressures.

.The lack of trained educational researchers and evaluators. This creates staffing difficulties in all general program evaluation areas. The most problematic situation, however, is in identifying, recruiting, and hiring minority research and evaluation personnel.

.Pressure to hire certain personnel and retain certain consultants. If the research and evaluation unit is used as a dumping ground, the quality of its products will reflect the quality of the persons developing them.

Before concluding this series of potential problems, a number of miscellaneous concerns should also be raised.

.Demands for non-existent information. Groups such as WRO and Parents' Union have on occasion demanded access to data which has never been collected.

.Confidentiality and control of data. The impact of the Buckley amendment upon the ability of Title One research and evaluation units to cooperate in meaningful research projects may be cataclysmic.

.Contracting with outside firm to provide evaluation services. Generally speaking, Title One Program evaluation services, if conducted by an autonomous in-house unit, can be provided better and more efficiently than contracting with an outside firm.

What has preceded has been a deliberate attempt at pessimism. Hopefully, it has been sufficiently creative to prove useful. However, the true test of its utility will rest with its ability to force those responsible for the creation and implementation of Title One Program evaluation services to anticipate problems and deal with them in advance, or at least develop strategies for doing so.

It has not been the author's intention to demean the present "state of the art." To the contrary, many large cities are already dealing with the exigencies of Title One evaluation in spite of the difficulties they face. As the real benefits of evaluation become increasingly clear to the clients for whom such information is interded, many of the difficulties suggested in this paper will be dealt with by top management. Until that time, however, the role of the creative pessimist will be a vital one in facilitating the provision of information about Title One Programs.