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Author: Sanders, James R.

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TEXT: Forms and functions of evaluation in small schools can vary. This digest reviews the status of evaluation and describes three evaluation strategies that school leaders with few resources and limited time can use to monitor quality and to establish directions for school improvement.

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF EVALUATION IN SMALL SCHOOLS?

Elementary and secondary educators generally agree on the importance of assessing the quality of the services they provide their students and communities. Evaluation, the

process of determining quality of schools and how to improve it, should be an integral part of all school operations.

We know that the largest school systems of the United States invest heavily in evaluation functions (Lyon and Others, 1978; Stufflebeam, 1980). However, in smaller school districts there is often less effort invested in school evaluation (Lyon and Others, 1978; Kennedy and Others, 1980). Formal evaluations in small school districts are typically done by university-based consultants, but colleges and universities are not accessible to all districts (Adams, 1971; Baker, 1977).

Scriven (1973) has identified several functions of evaluation in schools. These include support for administrative decision-making, curriculum improvement, staff development, public relations, instruction, counseling and diagnosis of student and staff problems, and planning.

Cool (1977, in Sanders, 1978) has also described elements in a school district that could become focal points for evaluation. These include the following:

- general needs assessments;
- individual needs assessments;
- resource allotment;
- processes or strategies for providing services to learners, such as: curriculum design, classroom processes, materials of instruction, monitoring of pupil progress, learner motivation, teacher effectiveness, learning environment, staff development, decision making, community involvement, and board policy formation;
- outcomes of instruction;
- and --accountability.

Recent studies of school district evaluation practices (Kennedy and Others, 1980; King and Others, 1982; Sanders, 1983) indicate that small school districts with limited funds do participate in this process, but not in a coordinated, systematic, and well-communicated way.

There is little consistency in the forms of evaluation used by small schools. It has, for example, been found that teachers often use evaluation processes for solving individual problems of instruction and classroom management, but they do so without consulting other instructors. Testing (both standardized and other types) is common practice, but those practices are often not well-developed or coordinated. Curriculum changes are frequently made through informal evaluations, or sometimes through benign neglect. Priorities for inservice and other professional development activities are set through these informal evaluation processes, with little utilization of data or discussion. New materials and methods are tried out and evaluated without much sharing of findings.

The one element almost universally missing is systematicity in evaluation activities (i.e., planned, purposive, cyclical, comprehensive, and well-communicated evaluation). Systematic evaluation could improve communication and utilization of the outcomes of evaluation work, and improve the efficiency of evaluation in small schools. Evaluation

has not been more systematic in the past in small schools for several reasons:

1. Evaluation expertise (i.e., staff with formal training in educational evaluation) is not often available in small schools. Related to this limitation is the existence of many misconceptions about evaluation.
2. Time available to staff for taking on formal evaluation tasks is very limited.
3. Resources, including evaluation instruments and funds for evaluation, are nearly nonexistent.

In recent years there have been many attempts to overcome these constraints and to realize evaluation processes' potential for enhancing the functioning of small schools. Three successful attempts are described below.

WHAT KINDS OF EVALUATION STRATEGIES ARE USEFUL FOR SMALL SCHOOLS?

1. The Program Review Committee Approach for Curriculum Evaluation. A Program Review Committee (PRC) is established. It could be a district-wide committee composed of the superintendent or assistant superintendent for instruction, an elementary principal, a junior high principal, department chairpersons (secondary), grade level chairpersons (elementary), and an instructional specialist. Or, it could be a building committee composed of the superintendent or assistant superintendent for instruction, the principal, grade level chairperson (elementary) or department chairpersons (secondary), and an instructional specialist. An advantage of a district-wide PRC is K-12 articulation; a major disadvantage is the logistics involved in getting people together.

Each year the PRC conducts a thorough review of one or two programs (e.g., language arts, mathematics, sciences, social studies, arts, physical education, counseling, special education, vocational and technical education). A schedule is established so that each program undergoes a thorough review once every 5 years.

Grade and/or department level committees are established to study their areas of responsibility on a continuing basis, make minor changes as needed, and compile data and proposals for more changes, which are presented formally to the PRC when the 5-year review is conducted. These committees conduct and keep records of ongoing needs assessment for their areas, look at alternative models, materials, and objectives for better approaches to instruction and meeting student needs, and try out pilot programs during the 4 years that they are not up for review. Their fifth year presentation to the PRC is based on the previous 4 years of effort.

The PRC reviews program proposals and budget presentations, gathers additional data as needed during the year-long review of a program area, and then presents

recommendations, with the approval of the superintendent, to the school board in a regularly scheduled spring meeting. Major decisions--covering items such as budget allocations, curriculum development, course offerings, testing, staffing, inservice, new materials, equipment, or facilities--are then made by the school board for a 5-year period.

2. The Problem-Solving Approach for School Improvement. At the building level, an annual "stockading" is held on a day in August prior to the opening of school. The principal conducts a session with all school professionals, defining the strengths and weaknesses of the school from criteria for excellent schools developed by the principal and staff. Then, priorities are set regarding deficiencies to address during the school year. The group then establishes committees for studying the problems and for presenting recommendations for change, and discusses or shares ideas about how each committee will proceed. Finally, the day ends by identifying any needs for and making plans for obtaining outside reviewers or assistance.

Each committee then proceeds with its own plan and schedule until mid-winter, when recommendations and justification for changes within the school are made to the full faculty. Each committee proposal includes a clear statement and documentation of the problem or need, as well as objectives and a recommended strategy for change. Proposals that are deemed satisfactory are then implemented. They are evaluated at a post-school year stockading meeting after the close of school. Problems or needs that appear unsolvable are looked into by the principal and faculty at the mid-winter meeting. As needed, consultants are brought in, special development projects are planned, and/or thorough searches for workable solutions that have been developed elsewhere are undertaken with a report presented at the annual post-school year stockading session.

The annual stockading days are used to inventory the strengths and weaknesses of the school, to discuss what remains to be done on work undertaken during the past year, to evaluate changes that were implemented in the past year, and to discuss evaluation and improvement plans for the next year.

3. The Discrepancy Approach for Assessing School Needs and Planning. Again at the building level, the staff members in a small school district can define what they believe are ideal characteristics for their school. This can be done through a discussion of the characteristics teachers would look for if they were evaluating another school. Alternately, the principal could interview every teacher at the beginning of the year about the characteristics each believes makes up a good school. These values can be supplemented by characteristics found in accreditation standards and in research literature on effective schools.

The principal organizes the resulting list of characteristics by: (1) school organization (grade structure, personnel assignments, school calendar, time schedules, the image of

the educated student, pacing, availability of services); (2) curriculum (effectiveness, comprehensiveness, materials, resources, ability to meet student needs); (3) school climate (standards, expectations, student/staff respect and trust, enthusiasm for learning, availability of support, attendance, vandalism, physical plant, recognition of achievements); and (4) instruction (interruptions, testing and grading, practice, grouping, leadership, professional development, support).

Once written up, this description of the school's ideals becomes a common vision for all to strive for. Realizing that no school is perfect, however, and that there is always room for improvement, teachers could be asked in a staff meeting to underline wherever they believe their school deviates from its vision. On a blank piece of paper, teachers and the principal can list what they underlined and describe what, in particular, needs work. A staff member can collect the papers, tabulate how many times different discrepancies were listed and later report where the clusters of concerns seem to be. Then, staff task forces composed of those who feel strongly enough to want to work on a problem area can be formed, and project plans formulated. If done every 3 years or so, this evaluation approach will help keep a school dynamic and ensure that it continues developing in the direction of the collective vision of its staff.

SUMMARY

These descriptions suggest strategies small schools can use to overcome evaluation difficulties. Through systematic evaluation, small school staffs can work together--with leadership evolving according to need--to improve the quality of their schools.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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