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CHART A CLEAR COURSE



EVALUATION IS KEY TO BUILDING
BETTER, MORE RELEVANT LEARNING



BY CHASE NORDENGREN AND THOMAS R. GUSKEY

When we engage in professional learning, we do it for one big reason: to get better at supporting students. Rigorous and thoughtful program evaluations can provide the critical connection between well-designed programs or initiatives and continuous improvement that builds essential knowledge and skills for educators. Evaluation helps us examine what has been accomplished in a professional learning initiative and identify course corrections that can help the initiative improve.

The importance of high-quality evaluation is underscored in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning: Evaluation provides information that supports advocates, professional learning planners, and anyone who wants to know "about the contribution of professional learning

to student achievement" (Learning Forward, 2011).

Most importantly, high-quality evaluation provides the context around which educators make decisions about what professional learning is valuable for them. For most educators, the critical question is not whether professional learning works in general, but whether it works in their situation and context (Hirsh, 2013; Wiliam, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting impacts on student engagement with learning, state budgets, and many other aspects of educational systems underscore why the particular contexts of districts, schools, and students matters. Educators cannot afford to waste limited time and resources on programming that isn't driving improvements in the knowledge and skills of their educators and the outcomes of their students.

Those decisions rely on not just

the quantitative impact of a particular professional learning program on students and teachers, but also on the qualitative aspects of program design and implementation that lead to the success or failure of those programs in the specific districts and schools where they're used.

This article describes our approach for balancing rigor with relevance in developing an evaluation plan for professional learning focused on student assessment. Working from a systematic framework for understanding the impact of professional learning (Guskey, 2000), we developed an evaluation plan that seeks to understand the mechanisms through which the professional learning of our organization improves outcomes for students and supports continuous improvement of practice through evidence gathered from multiple stakeholders.



This example demonstrates the capacity of evaluation to inform the development of sustainable and effective professional learning practices.

EVALUATING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Although a critical factor in the success of school improvement efforts, professional learning is ill-suited to traditional methods of demonstrating effectiveness. The short duration of most professional learning initiatives, the confounding influence of leadership practices and other school initiatives, and context differences between schools make it difficult to statistically untangle the unique impact of professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

When studies fail to find a statistically significant impact — as has been the case in many randomized controlled trials in education (Lortie-

Forgues & Inglis, 2019) and especially in professional learning (Gersten et al., 2014; Yoon et al., 2007) — educators are left to scratch their heads and wonder whether the weak link was the program itself, poor implementation, factors related to policy around the program, or other context issues that inhibited success, such as ongoing access to professional learning materials or the freedom for teachers to collaboratively implement the new instructional approaches a professional learning initiative might recommend.

Recognizing the challenge of building meaningful but rigorous evaluations of professional learning, Guskey (2000) developed an evaluation model to further educators' and policymakers' understanding of the ways professional learning impacts schools, administrators, teachers and students.

This framework builds on the earlier work of Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 1977, 1978, 1996) and includes five necessary levels of evaluation for professional learning experiences (Guskey, 2002):

1. Participants' reactions: Did participants like the experience? Was their time well-spent?
2. Participants' learning: Did participants acquire the intended knowledge and skills?
3. Organizational support and change: Was implementation advocated, facilitated, and supported? Were resources sufficient to support success?
4. Participants' use of new

knowledge and skills: Did participants effectively apply their new knowledge and skills in classroom practice?

5. Student learning outcomes: How did the experience impact students? Did it affect students' performance, achievement, or well-being?

Each of these levels necessitates a different form of evidence for measuring impact. Level 2, for example, lends itself well to participants' self-assessments or reflections, while level 4 lends itself better to direct or indirect observation of instruction. Level 5 includes perhaps the widest variety of evidence, ranging from student assessment data to projects and performances, student records and portfolios, surveys and interviews, and other measures of students' cognitive, and affective change.

The objective of this evaluation framework is to collect evidence of impact rather than definitive proof that a program in isolation improves student outcomes (Guskey, 2002). This approach requires a desire to understand the impact of professional learning on educators' instructional practices, not just on test scores or other metrics of student outcomes.

We advocate beginning the process of designing a professional learning initiative with a clear logic model that starts with the end in mind. Stakeholders should first determine what outcomes they intend to change for students (level 5) and work backward

WHAT EVALUATION LOOKS LIKE

As with many new professional learning partners, our work with Acorn Public Schools (pseudonym) began with a comprehensive needs assessment: NWEA selected 10% of schools participating in professional learning to represent their peers, and each participated in a half-day site visit that included principal and teacher interviews, observation of instructional planning sessions, and observation of instruction.

These data allowed us to create three distinct learning paths for schools in Acorn. While all ultimately will receive the same learning over time, each pathway prioritized the knowledge and skills that would provide teachers at

that school the most substantial short-term successes based on each school's priorities and existing skills.

The participant survey was the next step in this process. With responses from over 1,300 teachers, we learned that, while teachers rated their knowledge of how to use assessment data relatively high, their actual use of these skills was relatively low.

Comparing average scores on these measures with other districts who have taken our survey helped underscore the need for a particular focus in Acorn's professional learning on how and why to use assessment skills.

This data informed adjustments to our professional learning plan that emphasized opportunities for practical

application of assessment skills and focused on the specific contexts in which those skills could be applied in the district.

As next steps, district leaders in Acorn will now work with us to bring the teacher observation instrument and participant portfolio into regular use. While considering these tools, Acorn has recognized the importance of making sure its own measures of effective teaching align with the measures of effectiveness highlighted by our professional learning.

Building alignment between our evaluation tools and Acorn's existing methods will provide the added benefit of deepening the alignment between our professional learning goals and district priorities.



from there, determining professional learning methods and content to target the intended outcomes, designing how the professional learning program will look in the classroom, how to implement it successfully, and so on. This process allows stakeholders to take into account their specific goals and unique aspects of school and district context (Guskey, 2014).

MAKING EVALUATION CONCRETE

Beginning from the road map established by this framework, one of us (Nordengren) began design work on an evaluation strategy to suit a particular professional learning program led by NWEA, an organization that provides professional learning on use of formative and interim assessment — particularly data from its MAP Growth interim assessment — to identify student learning gaps, personalize instruction, and ultimately drive improved learning for all students.

As part of that mission, NWEA offers a variety of types and contexts of professional learning, including in-person workshops, virtual workshops, consulting services, and asynchronous and online learning options. Our

evaluation strategy must flexibly accommodate each of these contexts while still addressing the bottom line for our stakeholders: How are we impacting student learning?

The evaluation strategy for NWEA's work with districts around the country includes four key components: assets and needs assessment, participant survey, classroom walk-through, and participant portfolio.

Assets and needs assessment. An assets and needs assessment identifies and prioritizes opportunities to impact the knowledge, skills, practices, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers and administrators and connects each school to a specific learning pathway through our available professional learning resources.

In addition to being a necessary part of a personalized learning experience, the needs assessment process provides better understanding of the specific outcomes that school and district stakeholders value throughout the evaluation process.

This step supports all five levels of Guskey's framework by beginning with outcomes in mind: identifying the most necessary and significant knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs educators

need for success with assessment practice.

Participant survey. A participant survey, given twice annually, asks teachers participating in professional learning to self-report their knowledge and skills in using assessment data and their attitudes and beliefs regarding professional learning and student assessment.

By aggregating results across all participants engaged in professional learning in a given period, this survey can track the accumulation of a knowledge and skill set over time (usually over several years). The survey focuses on levels 1 through 3, asking participants to demonstrate their learning and connect that learning with the organizational support they've received.

Classroom walk-through. A classroom walk-through protocol focuses on the use of assessment information in instructional differentiation and planning. Designed for use by itself, in combination with other evaluation instruments, or incorporated into existing district walk-through procedures, this walk-through of a typical lesson asks the

reviewer to note factors like teachers' use of learning goals and differentiation based on formative assessment, flexible grouping, and goal-setting processes. Walk-throughs target level 4, showing how professional learning has demonstrated in concrete changes in classroom practice.

Participant portfolio. A participant portfolio shows evidence of student learning outcomes by asking participants to provide documentation of the use of assessment data with students, such as content alignment and goal-setting processes. Reviewed anonymously by NWEA, portfolios provide evidence supporting level 5 by focusing on how students experience data-informed instructional practice.

By going beyond assessment scores to understand how teachers have created experiences that change how students interact with assessment, the participant portfolio demonstrates the breadth of impacts students may experience from their teachers' professional learning.

The design and implementation of this evaluation approach seeks to balance our, and our partners', simultaneous need for rigor and flexibility. The components can be modified to suit the context.

For example, when using the walk-through protocol, we emphasize the importance of strong inter-rater reliability within a district context and offer training to ensure raters (who are district personnel) are well-aligned. However, recognizing that districts use walk-throughs for many different purposes and with different areas of emphasis, we also allow users to customize the protocol for each context.

Similarly, districts may have existing practices for collecting artifacts from instruction that can directly feed into the portfolio process.

Engaging in these customizations reduces the burden of evaluation on educators and create greater continuity between evaluation activities and a district's general strategy for continuous improvement.

LESSONS LEARNED

After introducing this evaluation approach in five districts across the United States, we've learned the following valuable lessons about how to implement and benefit from evaluation of professional learning.

With focus, evaluation of professional learning need not be a difficult undertaking. Ideally, evaluations fit in with existing best practices in your school or district, such as needs assessment, gathering teacher feedback, and observing instruction. Using the data these processes produce can provide feedback to individual educators and, in aggregate, explain the overall impact of a professional learning program.

In one district we worked with, components of a professional learning needs assessment aligned with state requirements to conduct needs assessments every few years, allowing those schools to clearly align their professional learning plan with their overall plan for school improvement.

A variety of evidence provides the most complete picture. Focus on the various ways professional learning can impact schools, for example, by improving teachers' knowledge, changing your organizational culture, and cultivating different practices in the classroom.

In addition, consider the myriad ways these levels of change can manifest in student work, in observable changes in classroom practice, in the narratives of those living the change, and so many others.

In another district we work with, the participant portfolio exercise aligns neatly with the expectations the district has for students, who complete their own portfolios to describe what they've learned at three important touchpoints in their K-12 experience.

Understanding these diverse sources of data enriches the conversation around the outcomes of any learning experience and makes it easier to weed through the confounding variables of setting, context, and competing policies.

Begin with the end in mind.

Evaluation focuses on understanding the impact of a program on what its stakeholders consider important. The process therefore begins with understanding what improved student outcomes would look like for those deeply involved in the work and proceeds from there to understand the facilitators behind that success.

Needs assessment is a particularly valuable tool here, helping us understand what types of outcomes a district values and exploring the current practices and attitudes that might enable or constrain progress on those outcomes.

While getting to levels 4 and 5 can seem impossible when considered in the abstract, these early planning conversations can help narrow the focus of an evaluation to what's truly important to your stakeholders.

HAVING THE HARD CONVERSATIONS

The rapid change of this moment in education calls on us to be relentless in ensuring the resources we provide educators are meeting their needs and helping fulfill their objectives. Simply put, we believe we have a responsibility to rigorously interrogate whether the supports we provide students and their teachers actually work.

Doing so with rigor requires examining the complex interplay between the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes of educators. A thoughtful program evaluation strategy provides the tools through which professional learning providers and recipients can partner to better understand the value of their work together and keep the focus on improving outcomes for students.

The lessons learned through evaluation are critical for any school or district committed to better understanding itself and its role in student success.

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