

Increasing Accountability through Better Collaboration

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The Independent Evaluation and Collaboration for Improved Student Outcomes

President Bush's 2007 State of the Union report provides a blueprint for strengthening *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Not surprisingly, accountability remains an important fixture in the act, with states now required to report data in such a way that the data can be compared state-to-state and aggregated nationally. The report specifically addresses the disaggregation of achievement results to prevent states from "hiding" their failure to include particular groups of children (Bush, 2007).

This emphasis on accountability from the top has trickled down into many aspects of education. Organizations doling out funds, whether federal, state, local or private, want to know what is happening with their money. With the increased accountability requirements and expenditure responsibilities that grant funding agencies have to monitor how grant funds are being used, non-profits in receipt of funding and that offer academic interventions are being asked to report school data as outcomes. As they struggle to meet new requirements, it becomes important for independent evaluators, school systems and state agencies to improve collaboration.

An Example of Collaboration that Works

Like other programs funded by grants, the North Carolina Support Our Schools (SOS) program depends on a quality evaluation to document achievement of its stated goals. During the first four years of the program, collecting credible and useful data was difficult and the cost was high. This is no longer the case. Improved evaluation strategies and greater agency collaboration have strengthened accountability for the statewide after-school program in North Carolina. Evaluators estimate that collaboration saves this particular program at least 6,000 costly person hours, while increasing the integrity of the collected data. The data collection method developed for the SOS program can be replicated and used to evaluate other programs which require school-based data.

The Program

The North Carolina Support Our Students (SOS) program, begun in 1994, is intended to provide quality after-school activities for students in both urban and rural

communities. Administered by the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (NCDJJD), the program awards grants from \$60,000–\$250,000 to diverse, non-profit organizations throughout the state. Organizations receiving grants include Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, faith-based groups, community councils and school systems. Although each program selects activities and services specific to student needs in the community, all programs have been shaped by the original SOS goals, as outlined in the 1994 Crime Control Prevention Act. The goals are to:

- Reduce juvenile crime;
- Reduce the number of young people who are unsupervised after school;
- Improve the academic performance and the attitude and behavior of youth participants;
- Meet the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social needs of young people; and
- Involve community volunteers to improve the coordination of existing resources and to enhance collaboration between agencies.

Now in its 14th year of operation in North Carolina, SOS serves over 16,000 students in all 100 North Carolina counties. Sites are open a total of over 186,000 hours and operate with 1,246 staff members and 800 volunteers.

Past Evaluations

The Evaluation Plan

Before 1999, SOS evaluations were the responsibility of the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (NCDJJD), which relied heavily on local SOS staff to provide data. SOS organizations were required to submit to the NCDJJD an annual report that documented progress toward stated program goals. For example, data might be provided to show that students did (or did not) improve academic performance, attitudes and behavior as a result of an SOS program. The NCDJJD then concatenated the data from the individual annual reports into a single report and provided it to all SOS organizations in the state.

The Evaluation Results

Regardless of the time and effort SOS program staff devoted to their annual evaluations, the data and reports were not very useful.

- Many non-profit and faith-based organizations could not obtain academic achievement and school behavior data. Many were not familiar enough with these types of data to make clear requests to school systems.

- Many schools did not have the data readily available. Retrieving it could be costly and time-consuming for SOS staff.
- Many smaller SOS agencies could not afford to produce a quality evaluation report. Collecting, compiling, and reporting data depleted valuable resources needed to operate their programs.
- The forms and methods used to collect data—and the types of data and reports submitted—varied too widely to render credible and consistent data. Often, the data collected were not sufficiently reliable or complete to promote continued support for the program or to identify promising services, activities and practices for program improvement.

Current Evaluation

In 1999, seeking an improved evaluation plan, the NCDJJD contracted with an outside agency to prepare evaluations for the SOS program, and also collaborated with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) which provide the evaluating agency with student data that many SOS organizations found difficult to obtain. Since 1999, the evaluation plan has been designed to accomplish three goals:

- Describe who was served and how they benefited from the services.
- Identify practices that resulted in desired outcomes for students.
- Provide information that could be used to improve programs.

The Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan that developed from the collaboration is quite different from the one used prior to 1999. Following are components each partner provides and a description of the evaluation process.

Evaluation Components

Components of the current evaluation plan include:

- Standard, simple forms developed by the independent evaluating agency, used to collect or submit program data. The forms—which may be used for phone, mail or Web-based surveys—are used by SOS program coordinators, directors, students and evaluators.
- Complete and reliable longitudinal student data, provided to the evaluating agency by the NCDPI. Data include achievement tests and demographic characteristics that help define the students being served.
- A more complete and relevant annual evaluation report, distributed by NCDJJD. Unlike earlier reports, the current evaluation report now contains information, summaries and handouts that encourage and support program improvement. The report includes data specific to each SOS grant recipient's program, compares data for their program to data for the overall SOS program, and identifies effective practices.

Collaborative Process

Tasks in the evaluation process are assigned to the appropriate collaborating partner.

- SOS program staff use standard forms to submit easily obtainable data to the evaluating agency. These data include student identification codes and which school each student attends. After combining the data from each program, the evaluating agency gives these data to NCDPI.
- NCDPI merges program data with the academic achievement and student characteristic data already in the NCDPI database. After removing student-level identification, NCDPI provides the entire database (program data plus student achievement and characteristic data) to the evaluating agency. This resulting database identifies which SOS program is associated with each line of data, but student-level identifiers have been removed.
- Participating students, their teachers and SOS staff members complete the evaluating agency surveys that provide subjective information to enhance the SOS evaluation. Although surveys are anonymous, those taking the surveys identify which SOS program they're affiliated with.
 - Students indicate which activities they like best, whether or not they have changed their study habits, what they would be doing if they were not in the program, and other valuable information.
 - Students' teachers provide information about students' participation in class and changes in their attitudes.
 - Program coordinators indicate enrichment and academic activities their particular program provides, success stories about students, and "wish lists" for items they'd like to acquire or changes they'd like to implement.
- After analyzing the database received from NCDPI and combining these data with information received from student, teacher and staff surveys, the evaluating agency is able to report results several ways: for the state SOS program overall, by various subgroups and by SOS program. NCDJDP then provides each SOS grant recipient with evaluation information specific to their program.

The Evaluation Results

The benefits of the revised evaluation plan and greater agency collaboration are significant.

- More complete, credible, reliable, and consistent data have strengthened the integrity and quality of the evaluation and made strong accountability a natural product of the evaluation process.
- The burden of evaluation tasks has been lifted from local program staff, enabling them to devote their time, energy and money to the program itself.
- The overall cost of evaluation has decreased at every level. Evaluators estimate that collaboration with NCDPI saves at least 6,000 costly person hours that SOS

- program and school staff would otherwise spend collecting or providing achievement data. Staff have more time to spend with the students.
- More complete and useful information is provided to SOS agencies in helpful formats. Program coordinators learn what is working in their programs, and what improvements could make the program more successful in achieving its goals.
 - In addition to each SOS agency's report, the evaluating agency provides a summary of each county's program for each program coordinator. These snapshot summaries can be presented to local merchants and agencies to secure additional funding, goods and services. For example, program coordinators have used these simple handouts to receive free pizza to serve at evening parent functions and to recruit local agencies to provide instructors in dance, tae kwon do, art and other enrichment activities for the students. Program directors have also used evaluation results to attract other funds, more than doubling the SOS dollars that support students in the after-school programs.
 - Valuable information about practices that promote the best outcomes for specific student groups is now readily available to all SOS agencies.

The Future

In North Carolina, the collaboration among two state agencies and an independent evaluation firm is but one example of the ways collaboration can help provider agencies produce meaningful evaluations in a cost effective manner. By significantly reducing the time required to collect legitimate data, SOS staff are able to spend more time doing what benefits everyone—spending time with students. Not only is less time spent preparing the evaluations, but the data collection and analytical methods are uniform for all SOS agencies, which allows for meaningful comparisons. Since 1999, the accuracy of data being collected has improved significantly, giving the SOS staff and NCDJDP agency a more reliable and valid picture of the impact the program is having on the students, and which strategies are working best.

Amid budget cuts, the future holds few guarantees, but credible and cost-effective evaluation will always be an asset—if not a requirement—for launching and sustaining programs with ambitious goals. As the NCDJDP, NCDPI, the evaluating agency and SOS organizations have demonstrated, programs do not need to stay locked into ineffective evaluation plans. All of the components and strategies outlined in this paper are replicable and can be used to evaluate many types of programs. Most notably, through collaboration with independent evaluator, granting agencies are better able to ensure programmatic and fiscal accountability and meeting their expenditure responsibilities.