



UNDERSTANDING  
EVALUATION:

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THE WAY  
TO BETTER  
PREVENTION  
PROGRAMS



U NDERSTANDING

E VALUATION:

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T HE WAY

T O BETTER

P REVENTION

P ROGRAMS

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to Evaluation

This handbook has been written to enable school and community agency staff to carry out required evaluations under the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (DFSCA). However, its applicability is not restricted to programs supported through that Act. The handbook describes the why and how of program evaluation and outlines the steps in conducting evaluations. A premise guiding this handbook is that many evaluations that use simple designs can be conducted without formal training in program evaluation.

The handbook has three chapters. Chapter 1 is an overview of evaluation planning. Chapter 2 provides more detail on the steps in designing an evaluation, and Chapter 3 tells the story of an evaluation conducted by a fictitious school district. The handbook presents the basic concepts that guide program evaluation. Where greater help may be needed, the discussion refers the reader to the appendix and to more detailed information from other sources. The guide also indicates points in the course of designing and carrying out an evaluation where program officials may wish to consult with evaluation specialists inside or outside their districts or organizations.

An evaluation can be an important tool in improving the quality of a prevention program if it is integrated into the fabric of a program rather than added on after the fact. Program personnel are more likely to use the results of an evaluation when they play a role in deciding what to examine, conducting the evaluation, and interpreting the results. Many of the evaluation steps outlined in this handbook can be carried out by program staff in schools and community agencies.



## Why Evaluate Drug and Alcohol Prevention Projects?

Prevention programs that address drug and alcohol use are operating in a relatively new field. There are few interventions of proven effectiveness and the knowledge base is still growing. Thus, there are many reasons to conduct evaluations, including the following:

- ◆ To determine the effectiveness of programs for participants;
- ◆ To document that program objectives have been met;
- ◆ To provide information about service delivery that will be useful to program staff and other audiences; and
- ◆ To enable program staff to make changes that improve program effectiveness.

In other words, evaluations help to foster accountability, determine whether programs “make a difference,” and give staff the information they need to improve service delivery.

In addition, the prevention programs supported through the DFSCA are required to assess their activities and services. All grant programs funded under DFSCA must conduct evaluations, including programs funded through:

- State and local formula grants;
- Federal activities grants;
- School personnel training grants;
- Counselor training grants;
- Model demonstration grants; and
- Emergency grants.

The legal requirement reflects the need for Federal accountability in administering the DFSCA. The U.S. Department of Education must report to Congress on the effectiveness of the DFSCA in establishing prevention programs for grades K-12 and in reducing drug and alcohol use. The evaluations conducted by grantees will assist in that process. Evaluation can help expand practitioners’ and policymakers’ understanding of the effectiveness of DFSCA-supported programs.

This handbook will describe a variety of evaluation activities so that school districts and community agencies can tailor evaluations to their local program objectives and needs. For example, districts or agencies with limited evaluation resources may want to concentrate on finding out how effectively they are delivering the services that they set out to offer. An agency with restrictions on the services it can provide may want to know how those restrictions affect program delivery.

The staff of districts or agencies with greater resources and evaluation capability can expand their evaluations to learn how successfully they are affecting student behavior and then build on their projects' most successful components. Districts may also have obligations to report to local authorities or other constituencies on their programs' impact on student alcohol or other drug use. The most compelling argument for continuing a program is that it made a positive difference for participants and for a community.

## What is Evaluation?

Evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of data needed to make decisions, a process in which most well-run programs engage from the outset. Here are just some of the evaluation activities that are already likely to be incorporated into many programs or that can be added easily:

- ◆ Pinpointing the services needed—for example, finding out what knowledge, skills, attitudes, or problem behaviors a drug or alcohol prevention program should address;
- ◆ Establishing program objectives and deciding the particular evidence (such as the specific knowledge, attitudes, or behavior) that will demonstrate that the objectives have been met. A key to successful evaluation is a set of clear, measurable, and realistic program objectives. If objectives are unrealistically optimistic or are not measurable, the program may not be able to demonstrate that it has been successful even if it has done a good job;
- ◆ Developing or selecting from among alternative program approaches—for example, trying different curricula or policies and determining which ones best achieve the goals;
- ◆ Tracking program objectives—for example, setting up a system that shows who gets services, how much service is delivered, how participants rate the services they receive, and which approaches are most readily adopted by staff; or
- ◆ Trying out and assessing new program designs—determining the extent to which a particular approach is being implemented faithfully by school or agency personnel or the extent to which it attracts or retains participants.

Through these types of activities, those who provide or administer services **determine what to offer and how well they are offering those services**. In addition, evaluation in drug education can **identify program effects**, helping staff and others to find out whether their programs have an impact on participants' knowledge or attitudes about drugs and alcohol, forestall participants' use of drugs, or reduce drug use.

The different dimensions of evaluation have formal names: **process**, **outcome**, and **impact** evaluation. These three dimensions can also be thought of as a set of assessment options that build upon one another, allowing program staff to increase their knowledge about the activities they undertake as they incorporate more options or dimensions into their evaluation.

***Process evaluation describes and assesses program materials and***

***activities.*** Examination of materials is likely to occur while programs are being developed, as a check on the appropriateness of the approach and procedures that will be used in the program. For example, program staff might systematically review the units in a curriculum to determine whether they adequately address all of the behaviors the program seeks to influence. A program administrator might observe teachers using the program and write a descriptive account of how students respond, then provide feedback to instructors.

Examining the implementation of program activities is an important form of process evaluation. Implementation analysis documents what actually transpires in a program and how closely it resembles the program's goals. For example, after a new drug-free school policy has been adopted, how is it enforced? If the policy mandates parent conferences for all first infractions and suspensions for subsequent infractions, is the policy heeded? If not, why? What could be done to achieve better enforcement? Establishing the extent and nature of program implementation is also an important first step in studying program outcomes; that is, it describes the interventions to which any findings about outcomes may be attributed.

***Outcome evaluation***

***assesses program achievements and***

***effects.*** Outcome evaluations study the immediate or direct effects of the program on participants. For example, when a 10-session program aimed at teaching refusal skills is completed, can the participants demonstrate the skills successfully? This type of evaluation is not unlike what happens when a teacher administers a test before and after a unit to make sure the students have learned the material. The scope of an outcome evaluation can extend beyond knowledge or attitudes, however, to examine the immediate behavioral effects of programs.

***Impact evaluation looks beyond the immediate results of policies, instruction, or services to identify longer-term as well as unintended program effects.*** It may also examine what happens when several programs operate in unison. For example, an impact evaluation might examine whether a program's immediate positive effects on behavior were sustained over time. It might also look at whether the introduction of a community-wide prevention program with components administered by schools, agencies, and churches resulted in fewer teenage drug-related arrests or deaths.

Some school districts and community agencies may limit their inquiry to process evaluation. Others may have the interest and the resources to pursue an examination of whether their activities are affecting participants and others in a positive manner (outcome or impact evaluation). The choices should be made based upon local needs, resources, and requirements.

Regardless of the kind of evaluation, all evaluations use data collected in a systematic manner. These data may be quantitative—such as counts of program participants, amounts of counseling or other services received, or extent of drug use. They also may be qualitative—such as descriptions of what transpired at a series of counseling sessions or an expert's best judgment of the age-appropriateness of a skills training curriculum. Successful evaluations often blend quantitative and qualitative data collection. The choice of which to use should be made with an understanding that there is usually more than one way to answer any given question.

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Before assessing a program, it is critical to consider who is most likely to need and use the information that will be obtained and for what purposes.

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## Why Conduct Program Evaluations?

Evaluations serve many purposes. Before assessing a program, it is critical to consider who is most likely to need and use the information that will be obtained and for what purposes. Listed below are some of the most common reasons to conduct evaluations. These reasons cut across the three types of evaluation just mentioned. The degree to which the perspectives of the most important potential users are incorporated into an evaluation design will determine the usefulness of the effort.

## Evaluation for Project Management

Administrators are often most interested in keeping track of program activities and documenting the nature and extent of service delivery. The type of information they seek to collect might be called a “management information system” (MIS). An evaluation for project management monitors the routines of program operations. It can provide program staff or administrators with information on such items as participant characteristics, program activities, allocation of staff resources, or program costs. Analyzing information of this type (a kind of process evaluation) can help program staff to make short-term corrections—ensuring, for example, that planned program activities are conducted in a timely manner. This analysis can also help staff to plan future program direction—such as determining resource needs for the coming school year.

Operations data are important for responding to information requests from constituents, such as funding agencies, school boards, boards of directors, or community leaders. Also, descriptive program data are one of the bases upon which assessments of program outcome are built—it does not make sense to conduct an outcome study if results can not be connected to specific program activities. An MIS also can keep track of students when the program ends to make future follow-up possible.

## Evaluation for Staying On Track

Evaluation can help to ensure that project activities continue to reflect project plans and goals. Data collection for project management may be similar to data collection for staying on track, but more information might also be needed. An MIS could indicate how many students participated in a prevention club meeting, but additional information would be needed to reveal why participants attended, what occurred at the meeting, how useful participants found the session, or what changes the club leader would recommend. This type of evaluation can help to strengthen service delivery and to maintain the connection between program goals, objectives, and services.

### **Evaluation for Project Efficiency**

Evaluation can help to streamline service delivery or to enhance coordination among various program components, lowering the cost of service. Increased efficiency can enable a program to serve more people, offer more services, or target services to those whose needs are greatest. Evaluation for program efficiency might focus on identifying the areas in which a program is most successful in order to capitalize upon them. It might also identify weaknesses or duplication in order to make improvements, eliminate some services, or refer participants to services elsewhere. Evaluations of both program process and program outcomes are used to determine efficiency.

### **Evaluation for Project Accountability**

When it comes to evaluation for accountability, the users of the evaluation results likely will come from outside of program operations: parent groups, funding agencies, elected officials, or other policymakers. Be it a process or an outcome evaluation, the methods used in accountability evaluation must be scientifically defensible, and able to stand up to greater scrutiny than methods used in evaluations that are intended primarily for

“in-house” use. Yet even sophisticated evaluations must present results in ways that are understandable to lay audiences, because outside officials are not likely to be evaluation specialists.

### Evaluation for New Program Development and Dissemination

Evaluating new approaches is very important to program development in any field. Developers of new programs designed to prevent drug and alcohol abuse need to conduct methodical evaluations of their efforts before making claims to potential users. Rigorous evaluation of longer-term program outcomes is a prerequisite to asserting that a new model is effective. School districts or community agencies that seek to disseminate their approaches to other potential users may wish to consult an evaluation specialist, perhaps a professor from a local university, in conducting this kind of evaluation.

### Risks of Evaluation

Despite their value, evaluations are not always welcomed. Because they carry risks and use scarce resources, and because staff may be unsure how to conduct them, evaluations are often a low priority for programs. Evaluations are sometimes postponed until the last possible minute or avoided altogether. By understanding the potential difficulties before designing an evaluation, however, it is possible to avoid some of those risks or to minimize their effects.

Evaluations can create anxiety among program staff. Staff members may feel threatened by an evaluation because they believe that their individual performance is being scrutinized or that the program’s fate hangs in the balance. They may believe that the tools of evaluation are ill-suited to measure the positive changes they see occurring. The best method to overcome staff members’ fears and resistance is to involve them in designing the evaluation and in interpreting its findings.

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**Staff will be less likely to see an evaluation as interference if they are consulted in its design and execution.**

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Evaluations can interfere with program activities. Sometimes there are trade-offs between program evaluation and service delivery. For example, observation of a counseling session by an outsider may interfere with the group process. Administration of questionnaires may take time away from instruction or other activities. There are no simple solutions to these problems, but careful evaluation planning, limits on an evaluation's scope, and continued attention to its time and resource burden can minimize disruption. Again, if staff are consulted in its design and execution, they will be less likely to see an evaluation as interference.

Evaluations compete with services for scarce resources. For example, a program may have to balance the cost of an evaluation specialist or computer time to process data against the cost of an additional counselor. Careful planning can reduce evaluation costs, however, and a solid evaluation may help to reduce program costs later by highlighting opportunities for program efficiency.

Evaluation results may be misused. Care must be exercised in the interpretation of data in order to avoid exaggerated or unwarranted claims of program effectiveness. The inevitable loss of credibility from such practices far outweighs any short-term gains. To forestall problems, it is important to make sure that results are stated clearly and unambiguously. Vaguely worded reports are more likely to be misinterpreted or misrepresented by others. A later section of the handbook discusses ways to present evaluation data clearly and fairly.

## Steps in Planning Evaluations

Assuming that the benefits, risks, and costs have been considered and that the decision to proceed has been reached, there are practical steps in designing evaluations. This section outlines some of the decisions that school and community prevention program staff must make in planning program evaluations. Chapters 2 and 3 of the handbook will discuss these steps in greater depth, using a fictitious school district evaluation to highlight major activities.

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