

SCHOOL DISTRICT EVALUATION OFFICES:
ARE THEY WORTH THE MONEY?

Richard C. Williams
Pamela McGranahan

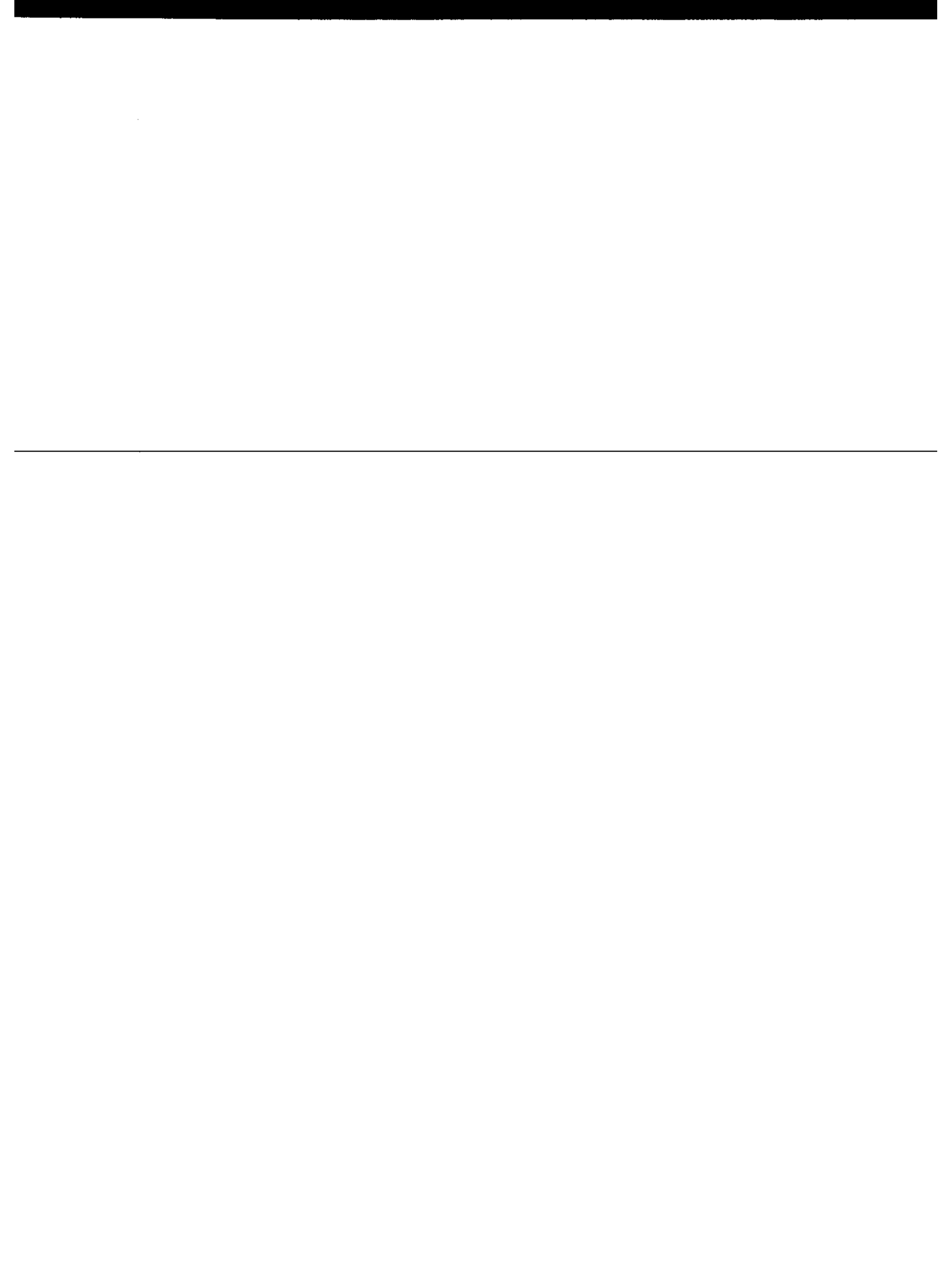
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Graduate School of Education
University of California, Los Angeles

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
Introduction	1
The Problem	2
A Basis for Decision	4



Introduction

It now seems clear that the era of federal support of school district education programs is drawing to a rapid close. Such programs as hot lunches, bilingual programs, and ESEA Title IV, to name a few, are either being cut back drastically or being eliminated altogether. At the same time, federal policy is moving toward block grants, which means that money will be funneled through the state educational agencies to the school districts; and school districts will have considerable discretion in determining how and when such funds will be spent.

These basic changes in federal support and policy will have serious ramifications for school districts and their clients. School districts will likely be faced with considerable turmoil as they struggle to sort out the claims various constituent groups will make on an ever shrinking budget of discretionary funds.

While attention has been focused on some of the obvious implications of this change, the fate of school district evaluation offices has received little attention. In most districts these evaluation units have either developed or grown directly as a result of federal and state educational policy. Most such programs carried a provision that continued funding would depend in part on the district's providing evaluation reports that showed evidence that the programs were being administered according to established policy and that the programs were achieving desired goals. While some districts were able to meet these evaluation requirements by hiring external evaluators, many districts eventually "pooled" the evaluation funds from the many projects into a district evaluation unit. In some instances these units were combined with already extant district testing

offices. Parallel to school districts' developing these offices was the development of evaluation as a separate field of research and inquiry. A federally-funded Center for the Study of Evaluation was established at UCLA, many universities developed evaluator training programs, special evaluation journals and associations were started. Evaluation became a commonplace phenomenon in many school districts and an established field of study.

The Problem

The questions that are, or will be, facing many school district administrators and boards are, "What shall we do with the district evaluation unit now that block grant funding no longer mandates specific evaluation? Should we use scarce resources to continue an evaluation office. Do the benefits of such offices justify the costs?"

There is considerable evidence that in many school districts, evaluation units have never played a very significant role in local school district decision making, in spite of their potential to do so. CSE-sponsored survey research and case studies of school district evaluation offices suggest that in many districts, evaluation offices have mainly collected and reported data to external funding agencies. In other districts, evaluation offices have disseminated much data, particularly testing data, within the district; rarely has anyone in the district, however, correlated the data with instructional activities, so that data-based instructional changes are made.

Does this mean most districts should drop or cut back their evaluation offices? Not necessarily! A decision to cut back evaluation units, while

perhaps justified in some instances, might be shortsighted for three reasons:

- 1) The evaluation unit's past activities and perceived limited impact may not accurately predict the evaluation unit's decision-informing potential. Indeed, there may be understandable reasons why the present evaluation unit has been limited in its scope, such as lack of funding or overwhelming dictates from external funding agencies that have severely curtailed the unit's choice of activities or direction.
- 2) There is evidence that the field of evaluation is developing in such a way that evaluation research can become a genuinely valuable decision-making tool for local school district boards, administrators, and teachers.
- 3) There seems to be increased administrative understanding of how evaluative information can be used to serve district needs. Administrators are using evaluation information in such diverse ways as: justification of budget requests; explanations to the public and parents about what is going on; input into decisions about text adoptions; staff development; and local school planning.

There are several reasons why evaluation may be more useful to school districts in the future than it has been in the past. One is essentially technical -- that is, the state of the art and the cost of computers and related software has undergone a virtual revolution. School districts can now have available at an increasingly reasonable cost computer terminals at local school sites. These terminals provide educators, teachers and

principals with an enormous tool for having readily available data relevant to administrative and institutional decision making. The evaluation unit can play a vital role in gathering, analyzing and displaying data for school site and district decision makers.

A related development has been the maturing of the evaluation field itself. In its early years, the field was largely preoccupied with evaluation design and related methodologies. After considerable progress had been made on that front, evaluation specialists began increasingly turning their attention to the question of evaluation utilization. That is, they realized that even the best designed evaluations are worthless if no one uses them. Recent attention has been directed at developing evaluations and designing district evaluation activities and processes in such a way that they can be of maximum use to district decision makers at all levels. What is more, a number of school districts have designed evaluation activities and procedures that have resulted in the evaluation units being directly integrated into school district decision-making activities. In such districts, the evaluation units have begun to fulfill a management information system potential.

A Basis for Decision

We suggest that as school districts begin the process of deciding what to do about these evaluation offices, they not make such decisions hastily or simply on the basis of past experience. Instead we suggest that as districts face this decision regarding their evaluation unit, they begin a multi-level inquiry into the unit's past performance and future potential. Such an inquiry might include:

1) Reviewing the unit's past work

The evaluation unit, or an independent agency, could present a review of the work the unit has completed over some period of time, such as the past five years, asking such questions as: what data have they collected and analyzed; what evaluations have they completed: what, in the evaluation unit's view, has been the impact of their work; what evidence is there that the work has contributed to informing decisions; why was the work done -- to satisfy external requirements, in-district requests, or at the office's instigation? A part of this review should consist of a survey of district staff (e.g., central administrators, site administrators, and teachers) asking their perceptions of the evaluation unit. How efficient and effective has the office been? What use, if any, have these various constituent groups made of the evaluation unit's work and reports?

2) Identification of work the unit and its clients want the unit to perform

Evaluation office personnel could describe the work and the kinds of evaluation reports they would most like to develop, including estimates of district capacities (such as money, expertise, computers) for doing the work. This could include a skills analysis of the people in the office, describing their strengths and knowledge in the areas of data collection, analysis, presentation, and interpersonal skills. Also, the district staff could contact other districts and learn about the kinds of functions and services being provided.

The evaluation office's various constituent groups could identify the work and kinds of reports they would really like to be available and why.

3) Establishing joint priorities

Representatives of the evaluation office and the various constituent groups could meet together to analyze what the office has been doing, and what it could be doing differently. Together, the group could clarify perceptions, establish priorities, and develop a list of potential, high priority activities.

4) Developing a plan of action

The evaluation unit could be asked to develop a plan to describe potential implementation of the previously agreed upon activities and products. An integral part of the development plan should be descriptions of ways that utilization of data generated from the office will be fostered. At this point it would be useful to the office, if necessary, to explore programs and procedures that have been developed in other districts to achieve similar goals. Such activities would probably have to be modified to meet specific local conditions, but there is no reason to start from scratch in such activities as: developing a criterion-referenced testing program, developing an instructional continuum, developing evaluation reporting formats that are easily read and understood by local school site educators or parent advisory committees, or in developing inservice training programs that will increase staff understanding and use of evaluations and test results.

If this process was used, appropriate district decision makers would have some basis upon which to make a decision about the future directions of the evaluation office that is more logically and fully developed than by simply extrapolating from past experiences. Such decisions are difficult in these times of shrinking budgets. But district evaluation offices can play an important role in district administrative and instructional management. We urge districts to take a careful and fully informed look at their units, and explore their potential use to the district.
