HOW TWO EVALUATION OFFICES HELP IMPROVE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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Introduction

School districts have managed, for decades, to survive without extensively utilizing evaluation offices. But increasingly, the public and school staffs want to do more than merely survive. They want to develop really effective instructional programs. We believe that testing and evaluation, when considered as part of an instructional management information system, can play an important role in a district's instructional improvement efforts.

Below, we describe two school districts' instructional improvement porgrams in Clark County, Nevada and San Juan, California, and discuss the key role testing and evaluation units have played in these districts' efforts.

Clark County School District, Las Vegas, Nevada

In 1981, the Clark County School District, Las Vegas, Nevada, was the nation's twenty-second largest district; from 1971 to 1981 it showed the highest population growth rate of the fifty largest districts. In order for board members and administrators to supervise and operate such a large district's instructional program, they must have extensive knowledge of what is happening in schools in relation to what should happen. It is in this context that the evaluation office (Research and Development Department) in Clark County has had special meaning and value.

In the late 1960's, the district evaluation staff's role was quite peripheral, probably typical of what one would find in many school districts. They spent most of their time and resources generating data and evaluation reports about federally subsidized programs. These reports, while generally well done, were intended largely for external funding

agencies; they were seldom used for internal district instructional improvement.

In the early 1970's some district administrators realized that the instructional program had become deficient. There was very little consistency in curriculum and instructional practice from school to school; the district's standardized test scores were nearly all below the 50th percentile, with many in the 20's.

Some urged the district to begin developing a comprehensive school instructional management and accountability system. The resulting plan was built on three basic components:

1) specific instructional and curricular goals and objectives must be clearly written and widely communicated;

2) methods for measuring whether or not instructional objectives were attained must be devised;

3) program improvement decisions should be based in part on assessment data.

The Research and Development Staff played an important role in designing and implementing these components.

First, the district established a set of instructional objectives, with accompanying evaluative criteria ("What should be"). These ranged in scope from simple math skills in the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide to annual priority goals adopted by the Board. At the school level, the heart of this component was a set of objectives and standards for school operation known as Elements of Quality.

The second component consisted of both formative and summative measures of the extent to which stated objectives were achieved ("What is"). The evaluation staff administered norm-referenced (nationally standardized)

tests in grades 3, 6, 8, and 11 and was integral in developing criterion-referenced tests (CRT's) to measure basic skill subjects in grades 1-8. Three forms were developed:

- one CRT was a general placement test administered at the beginning of the school year;
- another CRT was a series of diagnostic instruments used to identify students' specific learning needs;
- another CRT was an end-of-year measure of mastery of specific instructional objectives.

The evaluation staff also developed structured surveys of parent, student, teacher, and principal opinions and devised methods for directly observing instructional practices and student behavior.

The system's third component addressed the ultimate challenge of any data-based instructional improvement, namely, how to reduce the difference between "What should be" and "What is".

Utilizing testing and evaluation data, teachers, administrators, and the school board compared "What is" with "What should be," and decided upon high priority and realistically attainable objectives and activities which offered the greatest likelihood for instructional improvement. These included: developing a teacher inservice training program, improving the principals' clinical supervision skills, and devising a supervisory system that insured that instructional improvement was a top priority at all district levels.

Since implementing this system, measured student acheivement in basic reading and math through the eighth grade has increased approximately 20 percentile points. While exact causality is difficult to determine, we

believe the program has contributed greatly to this measured growth in pupil achievement.

The district's teachers, administrators, and board members now have a better control of our instructional destiny. In addition to a carefully developed instructional improvement program, we have a data-base of systematically collected and analyzed test results and evaluation reports that help us in identifying problems and determining solutions. This program could not exist without a capable evaluation staff that has and continues to provide leadership and assistance at all stages of the process.

San Juan Unified School District, California

In 1971, the San Juan Unified School District was like most school districts in the way it handled the evaluation of its ESEA Title I programs. The development of a single annual program plan and year-end evaluation report was the focus of its attention. These documents were faithfully submitted to the appropriate governmental agencies. However, the value of these evaluation activities to those at the site level was exceedingly limited.

A number of us, including many at the site level, believed that a greater return would be obtained if planning were shifted to the school level. In 1972, we received an additional incentive. The Early Childhood Education program became law and with it a mandate for site-level planning and evaluation. The law also created site advisory committees to carry out these activities.

The district began developing a site centered evaluation/planning model to help make school level planning a reality. The special projects evaluation unit (consisting of one specialist) assumed the responsibility for its development.

The first task was to define a school site planning process. The result was a six-step school site planning procedure:

(1) recognizing the problems that exist;

(2) determining their causes;

(3) selecting alternative solutions;

(4) selecting the best alternative(s);

(5) implementing the selected alternative(s);

(6) measuring its impact or success.

Most critical to the success of our model was the belief that evaluation and planning must be closely linked. Several additional factors were (and are) considered to be important to the success of the model as well:

- it must provide data that are important to the planner -- not only data of interest to evaluators;
- the reporting format must be such that the meaning of the data is clarified rather than confused;
- the report must fit into the planner's decision-making time cycle -- well in advance of the decision deadlines.

An important district concern had to do with who was to participate in the school site evaluation and planning process. In order to maximize ownership and commitment the school planning councils were organized to include parents, teachers, and (in secondary schools) students.

Working with school site council members, the district identified the data needed to make enlightened site decision making possible. Some of the data related to achievement as measured by norm-referenced tests; other data had to do with the opinions of significant groups (i.e., staff, parents, and students) toward their school's program and progress. To provide these data, the district developed the instruments of the Educational Program Assessment model. Its surveys contain items common to all schools as well as an opportunity for each school to add questions tailored to its needs. Data from the EPA instruments, norm-referenced tests, and a variety of other sources provide a rich base upon which to plan.

School site councils can, however, drown in floods of data. What is more, even if such data are understood, their implications for planning purposes are often murky. Several steps were taken to address this problem. First, we devised a procedure that reduced 300 test printouts down to six school profiles that graphically point out school performance and problem areas. These profiles include the information for six years, five grades, and six subtest areas. We arranged the data in order to facilitate comparisons between the various grades and years. The results of the EPA instruments were also produced in a concise graphic format.

To make site decision making more manageable, we divided the members of each school site committee into small groups, each completing the six steps of the planning process for a particular area of the curriculum.

Finally, we entered each completed school site plan and budget into a district word-processing system to enable school sites to modify their plans and monitor their budgetary status throughout the school year. This has greatly reduced the amount of paperwork at each school site.

As a result of these efforts, school advisory councils are no longer merely "rubber stamps." They now have the data and the means by which to make informed planning decisions and to assess, from year to year, whether or not the resulting program has produced the desired results.

It has taken the district about eight years to devise this system. (We have, unfortunately, not been able to discuss all of its components here.) Many parents, teachers and administrators have helped to think through its problems and solutions. They have been active participants throughout the model's evolution. We are now enjoying the results of our efforts. School site councils report an ability to play an important role in determining the destiny of their schools. They have a way to "stay on top" of things and to learn of the outcomes of previous decisions. Needed program adjustments can readily be made. It is rewarding to view the skill and confidence with which local staffs and parents fulfill their planning responsibilities. Communication and mutual support between school and community have, in many instances, never been better. Most importantly, our students' educational achievement appears to be steadily improving.

We are now devising a system to utilize individual site data for districtwide planning and evaluation purposes. If successful, our site

level information will also satisfy district needs with no additional data collection burden to schools. We can, then, better coordinate school-level planning activities with those which are best conducted at the district level.

It is our belief that the entire planning/evaluation process could not take place (especially in large districts) without a well trained evaluation staff that views the facilitation of effective and efficient site-level planning as its highest calling.

Conclusion

In comparing these two districts, one sees important differences and similarities. One difference is that curricular and instructional decision making takes place at different locales. While both consider instruction an important district repsonsibility, Clark County uses a more centralized approach which stresses a set of commonly agreed-upon objectives and instructional methods in all schools; San Juan emphasizes more local school site decision making which reflects the school site council's interpretation of local conditions and needs. Both approaches are effective; testing and evaluation systems can serve multiple approaches.

The systems are similar in that both have transformed a procedure that made minimal use of testing and evaluation data to one that makes such data a vital part of the instructional decision making. As "pioneering" districts in their efforts, it took each about eight years to develop, perfect, and install its program. While these districts' exact programs will not likely work equally well in other districts, the programs and their component parts can provide a foundation of ideas and procedures that can be used by other districts that are interested in utilizing testing and evaluation data as district instructional resources.