

## EVALUATION STRATEGIES

### Steps in Planning Evaluations

Program evaluation is the measurement of outcomes and the comparison of those outcomes with expected or desired results for the program. While the most common use of evaluation is that of accountability, equally important uses include:

- determining program effectiveness
- determining what works and what doesn't
- providing information that enables staff to make changes to improve program effectiveness
- providing "proof" for skeptics, thereby increasing the sustainability of and continued support for effective programs and practices

The time to start evaluation is *prior* to program implementation and preferably before the program is completely developed, so the information collected can guide decisions related to program design. Too often, the evaluation component of a program takes a "back seat" in the planning process. Unless there is a concerted effort to make evaluation an integral part of the program design, the planning and implementation team runs the risk of inadequately reporting outcomes, progress and impact. As a result, the chances of program survival are greatly reduced. When developing the evaluation plan, consider the following steps:

- *Identify the evaluation's users and decision makers* to determine which questions will be most important, what data will be seen as credible, what kinds of analyses should be conducted and how results should be shared. This "users" group should include the "evaluator" (who may well be a designated staff member or administrator in small programs with limited resources), key decision makers who will use the evaluation and staff responsible for the delivery and/or supervision of program services. Additional consumers may include parents, school board members, community agencies, other schools, funding agencies and local print or broadcast media.

- *Specify the program goals and objectives and clearly identify the desired outcomes.* A common evaluation question is “Is the program effective?” To answer this question, the planning team must be able to clarify what the program hopes to accomplish — its goals and objectives. At times, this can seem tedious, particularly to those who think they know what is needed, but it is often surprising to discover different people have different expectations. Time devoted to carefully performing this step is well worth the effort. It will be made up later as clarity and unity of purpose make future decision making that much easier.
- *Select and refine the evaluation questions.* Before a decision can be reached regarding the process of choosing relevant evaluation questions, the group must first determine the broad purposes of the evaluation. Is the evaluation to be formative or summative? Where should emphasis be placed — on process, outcome or impact issues? Which parts of the conflict resolution program should be examined?

Next, the evaluator will need to guide the process of selecting appropriate evaluation questions. In school settings the reality is there is never quite enough time or resources to answer all the questions about program practice and effects the consumers might pose. Perhaps one of the more efficient methods is to agree on a limited number of evaluation questions at the same time program goals and objectives are established. If this is not possible, another strategy to limit the inquiry is to ask evaluation users to complete the statement, “We need to know \_\_\_\_\_ because we need to show/decide/account for \_\_\_\_\_.”

Once agreement has been reached on the range of possible questions, the final selection of evaluation questions should be based on several criteria. They include the benefits and costs of answering or not answering the questions (it may be that some are too costly to answer), the availability of data to answer the question, the extent to which answers to the questions will prove useful to the users, and the possibility that some of the questions may require a certain level of expertise in evaluation that is not available to the school district.

- *Develop a detailed description of the evaluation methods.* What data will be collected, from whom, and using what techniques? Describe how the information gathered will relate to the evaluation questions. Under what conditions will the data collection take place? What methods will be used to standardize data collection? The best evaluation designs will employ multiple methods of gathering similar or complementary information. One strategy might be to identify at least two measures of success: qualitative and quantitative. If the desired results converge, they can

confirm in several ways that the program is moving in the right direction. Examples of quantitative and qualitative measures are included at the end of this section.

- *Ensure adequate resources are available to carry out evaluation functions.* Evaluation is labor intensive. The evaluation plan should outline who will be responsible for each evaluation task. Plans must be included for (1) regulating the flow of data; (2) protection of subjects, adhering to state and federal privacy laws, informed consent, and limited access to identifying information; and (3) data analysis and summarization.
- *Set timelines for every phase of the evaluation process.* Include timelines for data collection, analyzing, summarizing, and preparing reports. Establish checkpoints with evaluation users' groups to ensure involvement by all members, deal with any problems that may arise, and make decisions about necessary changes in the plan over time.

### **Using the Results of Evaluation**

Once the evaluation findings are compiled, strategies must be developed to report the results. How the results are shared will depend, in large part, on the intended audience. It is not unusual to have several audiences for a conflict resolution program evaluation, each requiring different information or a customized presentation. For example, an evaluation conducted to improve program implementation will yield a report that is very different from a report required in an evaluation dealing with compliance and accountability conducted for a funding agency or school board. Further, in the case of a report intended for local media, the findings may be presented in the form of a press release. Students can be extremely effective in reporting program evaluation results to the media, parents, board members and other groups.

It is important to review results with teachers, support staff and program staff before completing an evaluation report. This can be accomplished by preparing a draft report and conducting a meeting to discuss the findings. The evaluation team will thus gain additional perspective on the meaning of the data before the final draft is written.

The final evaluation report is usually written as a summary document that includes a technical appendix. More detailed information should be included in a back-up technical report. The evaluation team or program staff may be called upon to make presentations before various groups. Preparing a set of six to eight simple summary graphics representing key evaluation results is helpful.

Report oral and written evaluation findings by:

Explaining why the evaluation was conducted

Stating the purposes of the conflict resolution program and how it was developed or selected for the school

Indicating what the staff, school board, or others wanted to learn from the evaluation and why

Explaining the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze data

Sharing highlights of the results

Describing implications of the findings for program operation and maintenance, expansion, redirection, and sustainability as appropriate

Suggesting recommendations for the future — short- and long-term actions that can be taken to improve the program

The evaluation is ultimately a device for program staff to make adjustments to improve program effectiveness. The report should never portray the results as the final word on the program, but rather present the evaluation results as part of a continuous and evolving process.

Quantitative Measures	Qualitative Measures
Number and/or reduction of disciplinary referrals, violence related suspensions, bully/victim incidents	Participant satisfaction — an increase or continuation of support by teachers, parents, and/or students
Number of peer mediation sessions	Pre-test, post-test as an objective measure of how much participants gained from a given lesson or activity
Percentage of referrals for peer mediation made by staff	Change in classroom or school climate
Number of students using peer mediation	Reduction of racial intolerance.
Number of students participating in anger management sessions	Positive reaction to program by local media
Percentage of peer mediation reaching or failing to reach agreement	Participant observation--an observer becomes immersed in a given situation, experiencing it to some degree as a program participant.
Percentage of peer mediation agreements violated later	Interviews
Frequency of conflict resolution curriculum use by teachers	Focus Groups

## SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Needs assessments are most helpful when feedback is collected from a variety of groups associated with the school, including students, parents, teachers, other school staff and administrators. It is also important to determine the “assets” of the school and community — the resources available and the strategies that are in place and working well. To determine the nature of conflict in the school and how conflict is presently addressed, program planning teams may wish to develop a survey that includes questions related to some of the following items.

1. The extent to which conflicts interfere with teaching and learning
2. The number and kinds of conflicts
3. Perceptions of school climate and safety at school
4. The extent to which diversity issues become conflicts
5. The percentages of conflicts that are student-student, teacher-student, student-school rules, or other configurations
6. Perceptions of the effectiveness of referral and discipline procedures
7. Existing attitudes and practices that will facilitate program implementation
8. Existing attitudes and practices that will be barriers to program implementation
9. Identification of people who have training and skills in conflict resolution
10. Identification of staff development opportunities
11. Identification of monetary and human resources that are available or will be needed

## ANALYSIS OF EXISTING DATA

In addition to the survey, another part of the needs assessment is conducting an analysis of existing data. Incidents documented for the California Safe Schools Assessment report can contribute to this data analysis. A review of school data collection systems and community information sources helps establish a baseline of measurable information, including:

Number of discipline referrals to administrators

Physical assaults, threats, incidents of vandalism/damage to property

Bullying incidents

Weapons-related incidents

Suspensions and expulsions for violent incidents

