

Evaluation in Education Program Funding: Enhancing Program Quality and Cost Effectiveness

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The Challenge: Making the Best Use of Limited Resources to Support Our Schools

Educational programming to support our schools, delivered by institutions of higher learning or community-based or other non-profit organizations, represents a partnership of all stakeholders, including members of the community, funders and grant recipients/program implementers.

Education research and the results seen in our children attest to the potential power of educational programming in enhancing achievement and aiding in the growth of self-confidence, self-expression and teamwork skills.

As school districts strive to accommodate mandates for standardized testing and content priorities in a climate of tightening budgets, Missouri schools have increasingly relied on external programming to augment and support curriculum across content areas.

At the same time, cultural and service-based non-profit organizations have expanded their missions to include education, delivering educational programs in classroom, after-school and community settings. The means to objectively determine the success of these programs often are lacking.

Public and private funders, upon whom schools rely for partnership and non-profits depend, must apply care in determining what programs to fund using the limited means they control. Their own evaluation capacity often is limited, although their need for this information is vital.

The challenge is to maximize the positive impact of curriculum support and informal education programming in our schools and in our community while assuring curricular relevance and cost-effectiveness. Non-profit organizations engaged in educational programming must continue to mature into their increasingly vital roles. As many such organizations have relatively small staffs and limited experience in evaluating their programs, help is needed.

Evaluation as the Key

Effective evaluation is a necessary component of program design and delivery. Evaluation can refine needs, improve program design, address mid-course refinements as programs are delivered, and objectively assess programs' success in achieving stated objectives. Effective evaluation can be define what are reasonable expectations for a program.

Professional evaluation methods applied to educational programming supports internal decision-making for funders, reducing unwanted subjectivity and providing a firmer basis on which to predict the likely success of proposed programs.

Evaluation is not just a summative activity to be reported at the end of a program. All phases of programming benefit from a well-developed evaluation and reporting plan. Such plans usually require only a reasonable amount of effort to implement.

As many organizations offering and funding education programming lack experience and internal capacity to manage evaluation needs for their programs, a process of education and external support is needed to help them succeed.

Dynamic Evaluation

Dynamic evaluation connects funders, organizations delivering educational programming and the people they serve in ways that strengthen programs and their implementation. When these evaluation methods are incorporated into all phases of program development and delivery, programs are more likely to have realistic objectives, professional management processes, and success in achieving their aims. The capacity of organizations promoting education programs to successfully engage their target school or after-school audiences also is improved. Evaluation helps organizations grow in a healthy manner. Finally, with objective measures of success in hand, funders are in a better position to reflect on their funding decisions and to prepare for the future.

For more information on how dynamic evaluation improves the quality of educational program funding, contact **Martha A. Henry, Ed.D., President, or Keith Murray, CEO, M.A. Henry Consulting, LLC.**