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Publication #2008-02

January 2008

OUTCOME EVALUATION: A GUIDE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PRACTITIONERS

Part 4 in a Series on Practical Evaluation Methods

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BACKGROUND

Many out-of-school time programs want to learn more about how the children and youth they serve are faring. Outcome evaluations allow programs to do just that. This brief provides a basic review of outcome evaluations, discusses why they are important and when they are useful, and presents guidelines, strategies, and techniques for their use in out-of-school time programs. The brief also highlights the experience of an out-of-school time program that has conducted an outcome evaluation and provides a list of helpful evaluation resources.

WHAT IS AN OUTCOME EVALUATION?

An **outcome evaluation** is a type of evaluation that investigates whether changes occur for participants in a program and if these changes are associated with a program or an activity.¹ Such evaluations examine whether, to what extent, and in what direction outcomes change for those in the program.

Outcomes are specific attitudes, knowledge, behaviors, or skills of children or youth that programs aim to influence positively.² Examples of outcomes that can be examined in out-of-school time programs include homework completion, responses to conflict, employment, sexual activity, civic leadership, and drug use.

Outcome evaluations can be experimental or quasi-experimental.

- **Experimental evaluations** are random assignment studies that assess the overall impacts of a program or program activities and allow for conclusions to be drawn about cause and effect. In experimental evaluations, a lottery system is used to assign participants to a *treatment group*, which receives program services, or to a *control group*, which does not receive these services.³
- **Quasi-experimental evaluations** monitor outcomes over time for a single group (e.g., comparing the presence of intended changes in outcomes before and after receiving program services) or compare outcomes among individuals receiving program services to a similar population, a comparison group, or to national data.⁴

An outcome evaluation is distinct from a process evaluation. **Process evaluations** focus on whether programs and activities are operating as planned. **Outcome evaluations**, by contrast, investigate whether programs and activities affect outcomes for program and activity participants.

WHY SHOULD PROGRAMS CONSIDER CONDUCTING OUTCOME EVALUATIONS?

When called upon to produce evidence that their programs are working and are impacting program participants positively, program staff often offer anecdotal evidence. However, funders and community partners who may be interested in investing in the program may consider this type of evidence, by itself, to be insufficient. Evaluating outcomes for program participants is essential for ongoing quality management and as an indicator that the program is maintaining its level of effectiveness. Outcome evaluations can determine successful components of a program and enable practitioners to:⁵

- *Describe and understand the characteristics of the participants.* For example, findings from an outcome evaluation can reveal the number of program participants who plan to go on to college.
- *Strengthen program services and identify training needs for staff and volunteers.* If the outcome evaluation reveals that participants do not perform well in a certain area that the program hoped to influence, the program can then target this area to receive additional support, such as training or more resources.
- *Help understand program success and identify the services that have been the most effective.* An outcome evaluation can be designed to identify the specific components of the program that are the most successful with participants.
- *Develop long-range plans for the program.* If an outcome evaluation reveals a positive influence on a certain outcome, this information may encourage the program to pursue additional long-term funding and long-term program improvements to sustain and bolster this particular area.
- *Bring programmatic issues to the attention of board members.* The outcome evaluation report can be presented to board members to give them a closer look at the experiences of the program participants and can highlight areas of strength, as well as areas that may need additional support to foster improvements.
- *Attract funding to the program.* Presenting evidence that the program has a positive influence on program participants can influence funders' decisions to support the program.

WHEN SHOULD PROGRAMS CONDUCT OUTCOME EVALUATIONS?

Outcome evaluations can be conducted at different points in the development of a program, but experts in the field typically do not recommend conducting such evaluations for start-up programs that do not yet have fully integrated service-delivery models. Experts also do not recommend conducting an outcome evaluation without conducting an accompanying process evaluation. As noted above, findings from outcome evaluations can show whether or not participants are experiencing the anticipated benefits of the program, but these findings cannot pinpoint exactly what contributed to these benefits.⁶ In order to determine this, program staff needs additional information that can be gathered from process evaluations. This information can include program inputs, processes, staffing resources, level of services, and staff activities, as well as other outputs that can help in determining how—and how well—the program was implemented.

Outcome evaluations should be tailored to a program's current stage of development,⁷ which also affects the cost and options available for the evaluation methods that are chosen.

Outcome evaluations can be conducted:

- *During the "pilot-testing" stage of a program.* Conducting an outcome evaluation during the pilot-testing stage of a program's development can help to ensure that the outcomes that are chosen for the evaluation are relevant, are directly connected to the program's activities, and are in keeping with the

program's logic model.⁸ Planning the evaluation and implementation activities at the same time will also help staff to stay focused on the intent of the program and on the areas that the program wants to influence. This approach also can provide early evidence of success.

- *With a mature program.* An outcome evaluation can be useful to more established programs because it helps demonstrate to funders the effectiveness of the program and helps to make a case for continued program funding or expansion. Outcome evaluation findings (particularly those based on random assignment designs) during this time also help to determine “what works” for whom, and under what conditions.⁹

HOW SHOULD PROGRAMS CONDUCT OUTCOME EVALUATIONS?

Once a program decides to pursue an outcome evaluation, certain steps should be undertaken. The steps involved in planning an outcome evaluation are not always linear. It may be necessary to return to previous steps to reevaluate decisions that were made based on the availability of resources or on the feasibility of the evaluation activities. Overall, programs should be responsive to the changing needs of the evaluation design and flexible enough to create a better design when necessary.¹⁰

There are eight steps that programs may follow in conducting an outcome evaluation:

Step 1: Form a working group.

The first step in planning for an outcome evaluation is to identify key program staff, board members, and other stakeholders to serve on a working group for the evaluation. This group will make pivotal decisions, such as the type of evaluator that will be used (internal or external), the evaluation design, and the timeline for the project.¹¹ The working group can be small, usually with four or five members, but should represent varying perspectives, including that of a staff member who works directly with the program and its participants. Along with planning and helping to facilitate the evaluation, the working group can serve as a liaison between the evaluation team and other staff and volunteers so that they understand the purpose of the evaluation, what will be measured, and how the organization intends to use the findings.¹² In this way, the working group can calm the fears of any staff members who may assume that the evaluation process is meant to “check up on them” or scrutinize their work. This collaborative process gains buy-in from program staff on evaluation and informs the evaluator of the program's priorities.

Step 2: Determine the evaluation audience.

Before proceeding with the outcome evaluation, it is important to determine who will use the information that will be collected. When the evaluation audience is identified, it is also important to understand what information this audience is likely to want, and how it is going to use it.¹³ The evaluation design, methods, and reporting requirements that are expected by funders and other external stakeholders may differ from those of internal stakeholders, such as the Board of Directors, program administrators, and other program staff. For example, a program's funder may be interested in learning the number of youth in the program who go on to college or score well on standardized tests. On the other hand, board members or other program staff may be more interested in learning about young people's adjustment to college life, or their use of available supports when applying for college. In all steps of planning and implementing an outcome evaluation, one should be mindful of the audience that will be reviewing the outcome findings.

Step 3: Choose outcomes that will be measured by developing or revisiting the program logic model.

A logic model is a visual representation of how a program is expected to work, and shows the connections between the resources required, activities, and the intended changes or impacts that the program is expected to have.¹⁴ Logic models often identify the outcomes that a program hopes to achieve for its participants.

The working group and evaluation team should begin to look at the outcomes identified in the logic model to determine the particular outcomes that will be measured in the evaluation. The outcomes identified in the logic model can relate to the program participants but also to key people in the program participants' lives, such as parents and siblings, program staff, and members of the larger community. The working group and evaluation team should attempt to choose outcomes that measure a mixture of short-term, intermediate, and long-term impacts for the participants, so that the evaluation will help examine key issues at different steps and levels of the program. Programs should keep in mind that long-term impacts may be more difficult and costly to track and examine than are short-term impacts. Please see the Child Trends research brief, "Measuring Outcomes for Children and Youth in Out-of-School Time programs"¹⁵ to view examples of outcome domains that typically interest out-of-school time programs.

Step 4: Choose the outcome evaluation design.

Once a program has narrowed down the outcomes of interest, that program should choose an evaluation design that best suits the research questions under consideration. Factors that may influence the choice of design include:

- The *logistics and management* of the design and if it is feasible, considering the staffing resources that are available. For example, if an experimental or quasi-experimental design is chosen, does the program have the ability to identify, manage, and collect data on a control group?
- The *funder requirements and priorities* for the outcome evaluation. In some instances, a program's funder can request or require that certain outcomes are examined or a certain design is used in the evaluation.
- The *financial resources* available for the evaluation. Ideally, at least 10 percent of the program's budget should be allocated for evaluation. The evaluation design, type of evaluator, number of outcomes measured, and data collection methods will have an impact on the amount of resources necessary to fund an outcome evaluation.
- The *sample size* available for the outcome evaluation. A small program with a limited number of participants may choose to include all participants in the evaluation. However, a larger program (with 50 or more participants) may choose to use a *sample*, or a portion of the total program population, for the outcome evaluation. If a program chooses to sample participants, that program may need the assistance of an external evaluator to make sure the sampling procedures are carried out correctly.¹⁶
- The *staffing expertise* available to implement certain designs. For example, if a program wishes to implement a random assignment design, that program will need a staff member who is knowledgeable about implementing research-based lottery systems.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Different Outcome Evaluation Research Designs

| | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|--|---|
| Experimental Designs (Random Assignment) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can enable programs to draw cause-and-effect conclusions based on the findings. ▪ Can produce findings that are generalizable to a larger population (if sample size is large enough).¹⁷ ▪ Is considered the strongest design, with the most credible findings. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can be the most costly to implement. ▪ Requires specific staff expertise to implement. ▪ May raise concerns among internal or external stakeholders about denying program participants the services available in the program or new initiative. |
| Quasi-Experimental Designs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can be a relatively strong design when random assignment is not feasible. ▪ Can be implemented with fewer resources than experimental designs. ▪ Can be relatively simple to implement with in-house staff. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cannot allow for cause-and-effect conclusions to be drawn from the findings. ▪ May be difficult to find a comparison group with similar characteristics. ▪ Can only apply the findings to the sample examined and cannot generalize them to a larger population.¹⁸ |

Step 5: Choose the method of data collection.

The next step in the outcome evaluation process is to determine the information that is required to answer the research questions and to decide on how that information will be collected.¹⁹ The major data collection methods used for outcome evaluations are surveys or questionnaires (e.g., a survey on young people’s eating habits); tests and assessments (e.g., an assessment that measures young people’s life skills); interviews (e.g., face-to-face or telephone interviews with youth about their perceptions about school); observations (e.g., site-based observations of a program workshop or other activity by trained staff); and document reviews (e.g., reviews of young people’s attendance records). The following table provides examples of when certain data collection methods can be the most useful.

Data Collection Methods and Examples of Appropriate Use²⁰

| Data Collection Method | Appropriate Use |
|---------------------------|---|
| Surveys or questionnaires | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering background or demographic information • Capturing program characteristics • Tracking participation in the program • Capturing the perceptions of and satisfaction with the program • Capturing achievement of program outcomes • Obtaining specific information from a large group of people |
| Tests and Assessments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing achievement of program |

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| | outcomes |
| Interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting detailed, qualitative information • Gathering background or demographic information • Capturing program characteristics • Tracking participation in the program • Capturing the perceptions of and satisfaction with the program • Capturing achievement of program outcomes |
| Observations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing program characteristics • Collecting detailed information about the program's implementation |
| Document Review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering background or demographic information • Tracking participation in the program • Capturing achievement of program outcomes |

Tip: When choosing data collection methods, programs should take into account cost, response rate from participants, and the time required to collect the data.²¹ It may be helpful to integrate the data collection into the processes and procedures already conducted in the program to ease the burden on staff. For example, evaluation data can be collected during intake, when regular assessments are conducted, and during termination and exit interviews.²²

Step 6: Conduct a pilot test of data collection methods.

It makes sense to perform pilot tests and/or conduct cognitive interviews with methods of data collection to determine how well they fit with the population under consideration. Pilot testing can be done with a small sample of participants that is similar to the study group in the evaluation as a way to understand, for example:²³

- How long it takes to complete study materials (e.g., completing and filling out surveys);
- Whether items can be completed without assistance;
- Whether records are readily available, completed, and maintained consistently;
- Whether information can be collected within a certain time frame; and,
- Whether instruments or procedures are culturally and developmentally appropriate.

Step 7: Collect data for the outcome evaluation.

After piloting the data collection methods, it is time to actually implement the data collection process, which is one of the most critical elements of an outcome evaluation. Gathering the data from study participants will provide the foundation for data analysis and may help to reaffirm or refute previous assumptions about a program's effectiveness. The evaluation team must ensure that the data are collected in a systematic way to ensure that information is collected consistently and completely.²⁴ It is also important for the evaluation team to monitor the data collection procedures throughout the evaluation to ensure that the process of data collection and the timeline for data collection activities are being adhered to. The evaluation team should also consider:²⁵

- *When the information will be collected.* Data can be collected before the participant's participation in the program, at time of enrollment, during the program, or specific time periods after completion of the program, depending on the type of outcome and what the outcome evaluation is measuring.
- *Where the information will be collected.* The piloting of the data collection procedures can help the evaluation team determine the best location to collect information. Study participants may be more willing to complete data collection instruments accurately in a space that is comfortable and protects confidentiality.
- *Who will collect the information.* If data collection instruments will not be self-administered, the evaluation team should consider which individuals are best suited to collect information from the study participants. The evaluation team should consider potential differences between the person administering the instrument and the study participant, which could be based on gender, culture, or ethnicity, etc. Also, the evaluation team should consider if a program employee or a person not associated with the program will be better suited to gather the data. In all situations, it is important that the individuals administering the instruments maintain the confidentiality of the participants providing the information.
- *How the information will be stored.* The evaluation team must take the proper steps to ensure that study documents are kept in a secure place to ensure that data are not lost and that the confidentiality of the participants is maintained.

Step 8: Analyze and report the findings.

Data analysis involves taking “raw” data (that is, all the information collected from study participants) and converting these data into a format that synthesizes and summarizes the information. Data analysis can be a simple process of using spreadsheets and tables that descriptively show changes for participants. This type of data analysis may involve reporting percentages, averages, or numbers of the sample that achieved a certain outcome. To do more in-depth and comprehensive comparisons of types of participants by certain outcomes, more detailed analysis is required. To complete this type of analysis, it is wise to consult a professional evaluator or researcher, unless a program has in-house expertise.²⁶

In addition to being useful to the program being evaluated, evaluation findings can add to the evidence base for “what works” in out-of-school time programs. The evaluation report is the finished product of the evaluation. This report presents the findings and should be tailored to the evaluation audience that the working group chose in the evaluation planning process. Other groups that originally were not the targeted audience for the evaluation may also be interested in the findings. A program may want to consider publishing its findings to benefit from having a peer review and also to inform other organizations that may be interested in replicating the program. In doing so, it is important to present both positive and negative findings, because both types of findings provide a clearer understanding of what works in the program and what does not. A program can report findings by:²⁷

- Publishing articles in journals that are relevant to the out-of-school time field or that deal with issues that are similar to those faced by the out-of-school time population;
- Presenting information at meetings and conferences; or,
- Publishing the full report and other shorter research briefs on the program Web site

REMEMBER THE 8 STEPS WHEN CONDUCTING AN OUTCOME EVALUATION

Step 1: Form a working group.

Step 2: Determine the evaluation audience.

Step 3: Choose outcomes that will be measured by developing or revisiting the program logic model.

Step 4: Choose the outcome evaluation design.

Step 5: Choose the method of data collection.

Step 6: Conduct a pilot test of data collection methods.

Step 7: Collect data for the outcome evaluation.

Step 8: Analyze and report the findings.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Effective outcome evaluations identify strengths and weaknesses, provide information on how to improve the program being evaluated, inform policy and day-to-day program management decisions, and help build a program's credibility.²⁸ To achieve the full benefits of an outcome evaluation, the findings should be relevant and incorporated into program activities. Program staff members and stakeholders are more likely to use the evaluation findings if they understand and are active participants in the evaluation process. With such broad involvement, the program will have a better chance at having an outcome evaluation report that is truly meaningful.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The National Black Child Development Institute's Entering the College Zone Program and Stepping Stones to College Program
Greensboro, NC
www.nbcdi.org

In the following interview, **Stacey D. Cunningham, M.S.W., M.P.H.**, the former project director of the Entering the College Zone (ECZ) Program at the National Black Child Development Institute, describes her experiences with conducting outcome evaluations.

Q. Can you provide an overview of the history and background of the Entering the College Zone program?

A. ECZ is a college preparatory program that provides minority parents and students access to information about financial aid, college preparation, and setting education goals and helps student participants to enhance social and academic skills. The program began in Greensboro in 1995 with a seed grant from Kraft Foods, which saw a need for middle school students and their parents to be able to better navigate the college application process. Since then, ECZ has expanded to 28 cities. The Stepping Stones to College program, an expansion of the ECZ program that was piloted in Greensboro, includes follow-up sessions to help eighth-graders and their parents to understand the transition to high school and college preparation.

Q. Why did ECZ get involved with evaluating its program?

A. ECZ had traditionally been a one-day program, but we found that many of our funders and stakeholders wanted to know if we were reaching the kids that we needed to reach. We wanted to see the kind of impact that we were having on this population's behavior and attitudes toward college. We had anecdotal data, but could not really answer these questions based on solid research.

Q. Who funded the outcome evaluation?

A. State Farm Insurance Company was interested in outcomes and it agreed to support an evaluation of the ECZ program.

Q. What staff resources were necessary to complete the evaluation?

A. At our organization, we needed at least two people, the project director and the program associate, to help organize the evaluation process. Approximately 30 percent of our budget was designated for the evaluation, and we hired Child Trends as an external evaluator to conduct the evaluation for us. Staff members at our organization were mainly tasked with facilitating the work of the evaluators by providing feedback on the evaluation design, helping to organize the evaluation framework, and maintaining a strong connection between our programs and the evaluator.

Q. What outcomes did you examine in your outcome evaluation?

A. Some of the outcomes examined were school engagement, educational aspirations, school attendance, school grades, participation in other college preparation activities, positive self-concept, participation in extracurricular activities, parents' educational expectations for students, and parent-child communication about high school coursework and college plans.

Q. What methods were used in the evaluation?

A. We used pre- and post-surveys, which were administered at the ECZ workshop, and at the beginning and end of the Stepping Stones Program.

Q. How has this type of evaluation been useful to Entering the College Zone?

A. The outcome evaluation helped to frame the program for the next year, and helped us to share with the teachers where they needed to strengthen certain areas of the program. It has also helped us to see what the students were getting—and what they were missing—from the program.

Q. What challenges did you face during the outcome evaluation?

A. Having a small sample size was our major challenge. It was difficult to try to identify and look at different ways to keep students involved in the evaluation. We provided incentives to the participants, but since we only had a sample of 30 students, it was a challenge to retain a large enough number to be able to report program impacts.

Q. What have been the major findings from the outcome evaluation?

A. The major positive findings between the pre- and post-test surveys included an increase in the number of students who spoke with parents about their career plans, who knew what to expect in college, who knew someone who could help them with an internship, and who increased their overall knowledge about college-related issues. The negative changes between the two time periods were an increase in the percentage of respondents who had ever been suspended in school or who had been placed on probation. What stood out to me the most was the impact this program has had on this community. For the last two years, parents, teachers, and members of affiliates have come up to us telling us about the amazingly positive impact that the program had on them and their kids. We found that the information may be out there, but we're the key that gives people access to this information. The data we collected helped to reinforce what our students and parents have been saying.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PROGRAMS

Child Trends – Measuring Outcomes for Children and Youth in Out-of-School Time Programs: Moving Beyond Measuring Academics. This *Research-to-Results* fact sheet highlights outcome domains and sample outcomes that relate to child well-being and identifies resources that may be of use to programs as they measure outcomes for program participants.

Available online at:

http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends_2006_10_01_FS_Outcomes.pdf

Child Trends – Glossary of Research Terms for Out-of-School Time Program Practitioners. This *Research-to-Results* fact sheet provides additional information on research terminology and research methods, and well as real life examples of research in action.

Available online at:

http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_06_15_FS_Glossary.pdf

Child Trends – Logic Models in Out-of-School Time Programs. This *Research-to-Results* research brief describes the key components of a logic model, identifies why logic models are useful, discusses different types of logic models, and lists resources available to programs for creating logic models.

Available online at:

http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_01_05_RB_LogicModels.pdf

United Way of America – Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach. This step-by-step manual is a useful guide for programs in the health and human services field that wish to monitor program outcomes.

Available online at: <http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes/resources/mpo/>

Administration on Children, Youth and Families – Program Manager’s Guide to Evaluation. This publication was produced by the federal agency to inform programs about what program evaluation entails, how it can be conducted, and how it can benefit the staff and families involved.

Available online at:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/other_research/pm_guide_eval/reports/pmguide/pmguide_toc.html

W.K. Kellogg Foundation – Evaluation Handbook. This handbook provides information for people with a range of evaluation experience who seek to conduct evaluations without external support.

Available online at: <http://www.wkcf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf>

Harvard Family Research Project – Out-of-School Time Program Research and Evaluation Database. This Web site provides information about research and evaluation work on both large and small out-of-school time programs.

Available online at:

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html>

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). The NWREL is a nonprofit organization that provides research-based products, technical assistance, and training to improve educational systems and learning. The NWREL's Web site provides resources and tools specifically for out-of-school time programs.

Available online at: <http://www.nwrel.org/index.php>

United Way of America – Outcome Measurement Resource Network. This Web site provides outcome measurement tools and useful links to other sites with similar tools.

Available online at: <http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes/library>

University of Minnesota – Children, Youth, and Family Consortium. This Web site provides a list of research resources for out-of-school time programs.

Available online at: <http://www.cyfc.umn.edu/policy/capcon/outofschooltime.html>

Online Evaluation Resource Library. This Web site provides a large collection of plans, reports, and instruments from National Science Foundation evaluations in several content areas of education.

Available online at: <http://oerl.sri.com/index.html>

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