COURAGE, CONFIDENCE, CLARITY

MARK THE PATHWAY TO CHANGE

NSDC's deputy executive director addresses evaluation anxiety and the challenges coaches face

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BY TRACY CROW

JSD: I'd like you to talk about two key aspects of your work. One is evaluating professional learning and the other is coaching. In *Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development,* **2nd Edition, you write, "Evaluation — not just data — is increasingly important for changing schools. …**

The use of data, not just data alone, has the potential to transform teaching and learning and systems to support them." How do educators and schools make the leap from gathering data to conducting evaluations?

Joellen Killion: Data become information when they are analyzed and interpreted. To move from data

Q&A

to evaluation, we begin with a plan that sets a framework for the evaluation. The plan is created in the context of the professional learning we are evaluating. Data help us know where we are in relationship to where we want to go. We can use that data to create the pathway to get to our desired results. Data help us look at points along that pathway to assess if we are making progress in the right direction. So to move from gathering data to evaluation, we need a goal, a clear pathway to achieve the goal, and defined indicators of success along the way. Having an evaluation framework that includes, minimally, a defined goal, a clear process, and data describing where we are in relationship to where we intend to be is absolutely essential to use data effectively and to do a sound evaluation.

People engage in evaluation thinking and evaluation processes every day. They do it by making judgments about what they like and don't like. For example, we evaluate food, service we experience, or a person's behavior. Teachers and principals look at something going on in a school and make a determination about its value or effectiveness. Somewhere they hold a set of criteria, often implicitly, that defines what they consider valuable or effective. What I find is often missing is that people fail to make their criteria explicit. In schools, when we want to evaluate the impact of something, educators often fail to collect baseline data. To determine impact, a single set of data is insufficient. Measuring impact requires

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baseline data along with data gathered at a later time for comparison purposes. A single set of data only tells us where we are at the moment.

Educators are afraid of formal evaluation. I sometimes think their research training in advanced degree programs has led them to be afraid of it. Yet they engage in evaluation daily. I believe educators know more about evaluation than they think they do.

JSD: So what do educators need to know to conduct evaluations?

Killion: First of all, they need to know good program planning. In my approach to assessing the impact of staff development, the first step is planning a good program that has potential for producing results. It is difficult to evaluate a program that is insufficiently comprehensive and therefore unlikely to produce its intended results. The second step is identifying the questions to answer in the evaluation. These questions set the parameters for the type of data or evidence to collect, the data source and collection methodology, and how to analyze the data. We're constantly asking questions about our work, so asking questions is not a challenge. What is challenging is getting the right questions to guide the evaluation. Next, people need to be able to identify appropriate data sources and data collection methods. Choosing data sources and data collection methods requires thoughtful consideration about the feasibility, cost, and appropriateness of the decision. Increasingly, we are finding data that are extant in our systems, which can be used in evaluations without engaging in new or more intrusive data collection.

The part of the evaluation process that usually causes anxiety for most educators is data analysis. Many evaluations can be conducted with simple descriptive statistics such as addition,

subtraction, division, figuring means, medians, modes, and ranges rather than more complex inferential statistics. Microsoft Excel is a wonderful resource for those conducting any kind of data analysis.

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JSD: More than 10 years ago, you were working on the results-based staff development initiative — identifying content-specific staff development that resulted in increased student achievement. What has changed in terms of what we know about whether professional development makes a difference for students?

Killion: We have greater clarity now that professional development does make a difference in terms of teaching and student learning. Ten years ago, there was a strong belief that linking staff development with student learning was impossible. Today, that belief has changed, and so have researchers' and evaluators' attempts to assess the impact of professional development on student learning. One major change in the last 10 years is that the federal government, which formerly did not hold grant recipients responsible for assessing the link between teacher enhancement and student achievement, is now doing so. National Science Foundation grants such as the Mathematics and Science Partnership, for example, now require recipients to measure the impact of teacher professional development on student achievement. Beliefs about evaluation

have shifted evaluation practice, and I am delighted.

JSD: How can educators know if the professional development approaches that NSDC and others advocate are effective and based on research?

Killion: The field of research about the effects of professional development is expanding. The best ways to know if professional development is effective and based on research are to both read the research and conduct evaluations. NSDC has a plan to create an evidence database that will synthesize research about professional learning. There are already good sources of information about effective educational innovations. The national What Works Clearinghouse is one source for finding research- or evidence-based practices (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/). NSDC's collection of *What Works* books is another good source (see www.nsdc.org/connect/projects/resultsbased.cfm).

Sometimes the best practices are right within schools. If we would take time to study the effects of the practices we are engaged in, guide our study with critical questions about teaching practice and its impact, and use evidence about teaching and learning in the analysis process, educators would have their own action research to assess the impact of their professional development practices. These are all ways educators can know with some certainty that the practices they are engaged in are supported by evidence and make a difference in terms of both teaching practice and student learning.

To monitor progress along the pathway toward a goal, it is helpful to have a theory of change that identifies the pathway or actions needed to implement change. Along the pathway, educators can assess whether

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Professional history: Killion is a former school district staff developer, curriculum coordinator, and teacher in the Adams 12 Five Star School District in suburban Denver, Colo. Killion was a member of NSDC's Board of Trustees and served a term as president before she was employed as a staff member.

Publications: Killion is author of *Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development, 2nd Edition* (Corwin Press & NSDC, 2008), co-author with Stephanie Hirsh of *The Learning Educator: A New Era for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2007), co-author with Cindy Harrison of *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches* (NSDC, 2006), and NSDC's three-volume results-based *What Works* series. She contributes numerous articles to NSDC publications, including a monthly column on NSDC's Standards for Staff Development for the *Teachers Teaching Teachers* newsletter.

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each action produces the results that, when added together with the other results expected along the pathway, produce results for students. So, for example, when teachers or principals attend a professional development session on reading strategies, the step of attending the session is just one action along the theory of change that includes adapting the strategies for their students, curriculum, and classroom, trying them out, receiving feedback about their implementation, assessing students' ability to use the strategies, and eventually assessing students' ability to be better readers.

JSD: What does this look like in a school or district?

Killion: Let's say I am seeking better reading performance, particularly in the area of reading and interpreting informational text. I first look for examples of practices that have improved students' reading performance in this area and in schools like

mine. I might check the What Works Clearinghouse for programs that address improving students' ability to interact with informational text. I might look in my school to find out which teachers are successful with this particular reading skill. I might find other schools that do better in this area than ours does. In each case, I want to know what teachers know and do that helps their students be successful in this area. Second, I figure out what teachers at our school need to know and do differently to implement the strategies we discovered do make a difference. Then, we create a theory of change that includes the professional learning experiences for teachers to acquire the knowledge, refine their skills, expand their classroom practice, and implement the new practices with regularity and

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fidelity. Teachers may benefit from training, coaching, co-planning, peer coaching, developing common assessments, or analyzing student work, so I look for multiple and deeply connected learning opportunities in which teachers can collaborate to move knowledge and skill to practice and student performance. Along this pathway, I am assessing the results for teachers and students to know if I am making progress.

JSD: So you have these data — what do you do with them now?

Killion: Throughout this process, I'm analyzing the information to determine if every action I'm taking is producing the results intended. If not, I intervene. Continuous monitoring and reflection allow those involved in any innovation to know with a fair degree of certainty where they are along the path toward the goal. This monitoring, coupled with a willingness to fill gaps as they occur, increases the certainty that results will flow from the actions we take.

JSD: What is the role of school-based coaches in evaluation?

Killion: Coaches can contribute to evaluations in multiple ways. Most commonly they can lead evaluation conversations. There is a process called "evaluation think." Joy Frechtling of Westat used the term during the time she served on the Assessing Impact advisory board. She used the phrase to talk about how people are always thinking evaluatively. I have added

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some structure to how that thinking occurs. In a nutshell, evaluation think means that educators are constantly asking these five questions.
1. What's working?
2. How do we know that? What evidence are we using to tell us that our hunches about success are in fact true?
3. What's not working?
4. How do we know that? What evidence do we use to inform us that what we think isn't working really isn't working?
5. What are we going to do about it?

Coaches have a role in virtually every conversation they have with teachers to engage them in evaluation think. If a coach meets with a team of teachers, they can use the questions as a framework for their interactions: What's working in terms of student learning, what's not working, how do we know those things, what are we going to do about it? If a coach and a teacher are meeting individually, those five questions become the frame of an individual coaching session. But the most important part of the coach's role is to help a teacher take the data, know what it means, and to do something about it.

Additionally, coaches can help teachers access, read, and discuss research. They can assist teachers in conducting action research projects within their classrooms or schools. Coaches help teachers use data to make decisions about instruction. Coaches can help teachers examine their own practice and reflect on its effectiveness.

The most important role coaches have in evaluation is continuous evaluation of the impact of their own practices.

JSD: Much of your work recently has been in support of people in a coaching role. You coordinate the coaching academies for NSDC, and you write about the coach's various roles. How has this position changed?

Killion: The coach role has evolved enormously. Thirty-two years ago, I was a coach in a high school. My job was to work with underperforming teachers. My office was hidden away in a corner, because my principal believed it was important that the teachers I worked with were not seen working with me. Schools and districts that are implementing coaching now recognize that the center for learning for adults is inside the work that they are doing in schools. Districts are leveraging the ability to put a skillful learning facilitator, a coach, in schools to support that learning process of teachers in order to increase student learning. Coaches focus on refining teaching to improve student learning. When the work of a coach is student results-focused, coaches can make a difference in schools. This is one of the changes emerging in the work of coaches in the last few years.

JSD: What does a good coaching relationship look like?

Killion: A good coaching relationship is one in which the coach and the teacher are willing to talk less at the practice level and more at the belief level. The coach is willing to have very courageous conversations, challenging conversations with teachers about their belief systems and how their beliefs impact their instructional decisions. One of the things that often happens is that coaches are driven primarily by a desire to be liked. (See Killion's article on this topic, "Are you coaching heavy or coaching light?," in the May 2008 issue of *Teachers Teaching Teachers*.) They often avoid the really tough conversations, for example, conversations about equity in a classroom, or gender biases that may be evident, or inadequate

assessment of student learning, or unwillingness to differentiate for different learners. These are really challenging conversations for coaches to have with teachers, and they are particularly challenging if the coach's motive is to not disturb the status quo in any way.

I recognize that developing these relationships takes time. I meet coaches in schools who say over and over again that it takes time to build these relationships. Sometimes, though, they spend too much time doing that. Coaches can easily find that a whole school year has passed before they've attempted a single challenging conversation. I want to encourage people to recognize that a challenging conversation about a teacher's belief system can be one of the best ways to build a strong relationship.

JSD: What has to be in place in the school environment for coaches to recognize these are the kinds of conversations they need to have and also to give them the skills to be able to do it?

Killion: Coaches need plenty of practice and opportunity for professional development around having those conversations. On a more basic level, I still see a lot of coaching programs that don't have an adequate framework for success. This would include simple things like a good job description for a coach or even adequate preparation and ongoing support for coaches. Those are all essential. Training for principals in how to interact and support coaches in their schools is missing in many districts.

JSD: Do you think the proliferation of coaches indicates that job-embedded professional learning is more widespread than it was 10 to 20 years ago?

Killion: I do. People recognize

that the school is the site for adult learning and are beginning to place the resources at the school site to support that learning. We can train people in districtwide workshops or other workshops away from school and give them a foundational knowledge and build their skill, but that kind of learning process has limits. That isn't sufficient to produce changes in behavior, and we need changes in behavior to produce changes in student learning.

It's true that I can go to a districtwide workshop, a university course, a workshop away from the district, and I can learn about informational reading, I can learn about strategies for teaching informational reading, I can learn where the resources are. But I don't have access to support to take that knowledge and those skills and move them into practice, unless something has been specifically established to provide classroom-based support. That's what the coach does at the school site. Coaches can help teachers take the knowledge that they gain from those learning experiences, which are necessary and important, bring them into the school and into their classrooms, and now begin to talk about how to use this knowledge to change the way they teach and have an impact on students' learning.

JSD: In schools with strong professional learning communities, do you think the coach is needed less?

Killion: What's next for coaching, especially in schools with strong professional learning communities, is schools that don't need coaches because everyone will serve as a coach. There won't be a need to have a designated person responsible for leading that work in schools where all teachers have a strong sense of commitment to one another's professional

growth, share a collective responsibility about teacher and student success, and have strategies for learning and leading learning. We're a long way from seeing that in our schools, and there are some schools that are ready to explore making that shift. The trick will be to figure out how to make sure that all teachers have access to strategies, processes, and protocols, to learning and to lead learning among their peers. Traditionally in schools there is some kind of hierarchy where that work falls to the grade-level or department chair, a coach, or other teacher leaders. It would be delightful to see a time when we didn't have to have multiple layers of leadership and all teachers were leaders, and being a professional educator meant that you were constantly engaged in learning and leading learning. Before we get there, we have to recognize that teachers are capable of leading their own learning and work on developing the expertise in some before we think about how we develop it in everyone. In the meantime, though, we need competent, skillful coaches who not only develop teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills, but who are also committed to developing leadership skills and sharing leadership with other teachers. ■

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