Scooping up meaningful evidence

*Backward planning,
combined with collecting evidence
each step of the way,
helps staff developers meet goals
of No Child Left Behind*

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation places new demands on educators at all levels. But perhaps no group will be more affected than staff development leaders. The accountability requirements under this federal program drastically reshape their roles. More notably, the legislation compels staff development

leaders to refocus their perspectives and, in some cases, to revise completely their efforts in the educational improvement process.

Two aspects of the NCLB legislation have special significance for staff development leaders. First is its requirement for "scientific, research-based programs." Second is the strong emphasis on accountability, defined in terms of improvements in student

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performance. These two aspects have profound implications for staff development leaders' responsibilities, especially in the area of evaluation.

RESEARCH-BASED PROGRAMS

Believing that educators have not always made wise decisions regarding the content and format of staff development, the NCLB legislation requires that only those strategies and methods "proven effective by the standard of scientifically based research should be included in school reform programs" (U.S. Department of

Education, 2002, p. 2). Furthermore, the legislation specifically defines "scientific, research-based programs" as: (1) grounded in theory; (2) evaluated by third parties; (3) published in peer-reviewed journals; (4) sustainable; (5) replicable in schools with diverse settings; and (6) able to demonstrate evidence of effectiveness.

Few of the programs and strategies attracting the attention of staff development leaders today can meet these stringent criteria. Only a small number are derived from our best professional knowledge, and fewer still can offer solid evidence to justify implementation (Guskey, 1996). Most are actually more opinion-based than research-based (Guskey, 1992). While they may have intuitive appeal and use the most current education lingo, evidence of their effectiveness in improving student learning is often scant or non-existent.

Staff development leaders therefore must be much more cautious in committing themselves to new programs and must weigh carefully the supporting evidence. They must become more skilled at reading research and at using resources such as the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), a federally funded clearinghouse of information on education-related topics, instead of simply surfing the Internet for information on new strategies or innovations. Because results can vary depending on context, they also must be willing to gather their own evidence and analyze effects in their own setting. Promising programs and ideas often fail in schools not because they are conceptually ill-founded, but because they do not align with school priorities or teacher needs (McLaughlin, 1991;

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Miller, Lord, & Dorney, 1994). Most importantly, staff development leaders must be wary of savvy entrepreneurs who are more concerned with what sells to desperate educators than with what works with needy students.

EMPHASIS ON STUDENTS

The accountability requirements in the NCLB legislation focus on the regular assessment of student performance and the evaluation of assessment results in terms of "adequate yearly progress." In other words, the emphasis is on improvement rather than status. Educators also must disaggregate assessment results by poverty, ethnicity, language, and disability status to ensure that all student groups are progressing toward proficiency, which is defined by each state's standards for learning.

For staff development leaders, this implies an entirely new orientation toward evaluation. Success in their efforts will no longer be judged in terms of how many educators participate in staff development programs or how participants regard the experience. Instead, staff development leaders must show that those experiences lead to specific improvements in student performance. This means they will have to plan staff development evaluations more carefully, be more explicit with regard to the intended goals, and identify ahead of time what evidence will be used to determine whether those goals are met.

These new accountability requirements frighten many staff development leaders, mostly because of their narrow view of evaluation. They see evaluation as a costly, time-consuming process that requires sophisticated technical skills and occurs as the final activity in a staff development program or experience. The evaluator's role, from their perspective, is to come in after everything is finished and figure out what benefits, if any, occurred.

Good evaluations of staff development do not have to be costly, nor do they require sophisticated technical skills. What they require is the ability to ask good questions and a basic understanding about how to find valid answers. Good evaluations provide information that is appropriate, sound, and sufficiently reliable to use in making thoughtful and responsible decisions about staff development processes and effects. But most important, good evaluations are carefully planned. A full 90% of the decisions affecting the format and conduct of any staff development evaluation are made during the planning stage, before the program or activity begins. If you plan well, evaluation pretty much takes care of itself.

PLANNING BACKWARD

Planning well requires staff development leaders to avoid the trap teachers often fall into when they plan their lessons. Teachers frequently plan in terms of what they are going to do instead of what they want their students to learn and achieve — and staff developers do the same. Their planning tends to be event-driven and process-based. They plan what they are going to do (literacy development, math problem solving, hands-on science, etc.) and how they are going to do it (seminars, study groups, action research, etc.).

The NCLB legislation requires that to change. Staff development leaders now must plan in terms of the student learning goals they want to attain. In other words, they must plan backward, beginning with what they want to accomplish in terms of learning and learners (Guskey, 2001a & b). The process usually begins with the school or district staff gathering and analyzing relevant data from assessments of student learning and from school records. Based on these data, they prioritize needs and establish the goals they want to achieve.

They also consider the sources of evidence they believe best reflect attainment of those goals, both in the end and at regular checkpoints or benchmarks along the way.

Planning backward may seem awkward initially, but it offers staff development leaders two noteworthy advantages. First, clear student learning goals help focus everyone's attention on staff development's ultimate goal: improved student learning outcomes. As such, it prevents planners from being distracted by peripheral issues that waste time and energy. Second and perhaps more important, planning backward compels staff development leaders to consider crucial evaluation questions up front, before any program or activity begins. Instead of thinking of evaluation as something that takes place only when everything is completed, they see evaluation as a focused endeavor that can guide ongoing improvements as well as inform final decision making.

FOCUSING EVALUATION EFFORTS

A useful way to facilitate the planning backward process and address the issues most central to any staff development evaluation is to reverse the order of the five evaluation levels outlined in *Evaluating Professional Development* (Guskey, 1999). These levels begin with participants' reactions to the experience (Level 1), consider participants' learning (Level 2), look at organization support and change (Level 3), document participants' use or implementation (Level 4), and finally, consider the impact on student learning outcomes (Level 5). They are ordered chronologically, based on how they would proceed in time. When planning staff development experiences and accompanying evaluation activities, however, staff development leaders must reverse that order.

First you must consider the student learning goals you want to

achieve (Level 5). For example, do you want to improve students' reading comprehension, enhance their skills in problem solving, develop their sense of confidence in learning situations, improve their behavior in class, their persistence in school, or their collaboration with classmates? Then you must decide what evidence best reflects those goals. Because staff development endeavors typically have multiple stakeholders, you also must consider what evidence different stakeholders trust. School administrators and board members, for example, tend to rely heavily on results from state assessments and standardized tests. Teachers, however, usually give more credence to the results from classroom assessments and their own observations of students' performance (Guskey, 2003). This means that you must plan to gather multiple measures of student learning on multiple occasions to satisfy different stakeholders' needs.

In addition, different indicators of student performance often paint a very different picture of what occurred. Would you be satisfied, for example, if state assessment scores improved but the number of students retained in the elementary grades rose significantly? Suppose that students attained higher scores on standardized tests but disliked the subjects they were studying? What if the percent of high school students scoring at the proficient level on state assessments went up, but so did the dropout rate? To get a more complete picture of both intended and possible unintended outcomes, you need to consider a broad range of measures, including not only achievement and cognitive indicators, but affective and behavioral ones as well.

Next you need to determine what instructional practices and policies will most effectively and efficiently produce the desired goals (Level 4). At this point, pertinent research evi-

dence must be a vital part of deliberations. Important questions need to be addressed, such as: What evidence verifies that these particular practices and policies will lead to the desired results? How good or reliable is that evidence? Was it gathered in context similar to ours? The NCLB legislation stipulates that educators should consider only "a program that has been found, through scientifically based research, to significantly improve the academic achievement of students participating in such programs as compared to students in schools who have not participated in such programs or has been found to have strong evidence that such programs will significantly improve the academic achievement of participating children." (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 2). This means that you must be very cautious before jumping on any educational bandwagon, always making sure that trustworthy evidence validates whatever program or strategy you choose. You also must decide what evidence best reflects the degree and quality of the program's implementation.

After that you must consider what aspects of organizational support need to be in place for those practices and policies to be implemented (Level 3). Some individuals believe this level of evaluation is unimportant and can be ignored. But experienced staff development leaders know all too well that many valuable improvement efforts fail miserably due to a lack of active participation and overt support from school administrators. Others prove ineffective because the resources required for implementation were not provided. The lack of time, instructional materials, or necessary technology can severely impede teachers' attempts to use the new knowledge

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and skills they acquired through a staff development experience. Sometimes, aspects of the organization actually pose barriers to implementation. "No tolerance" policies regarding student discipline and grading, for example, may inappropriately limit teachers' options in dealing with students' behavioral or learning problems. A big part of planning, therefore, involves ensuring that organizational elements are in place to support the desired practices and policies.

Next you must decide what knowledge and skills the participating professionals must have in order to implement the prescribed practices and policies (Level 2). In other words, what must they know and be able to do to successfully adapt the innovation to their specific situation and bring about the desired improvements. And finally, you need to consider what means can be used or set of experiences planned to provide participants with opportunities to acquire that knowledge and skills (Level 1). Workshops and seminars can be a highly effective means of sharing information and expanding educators' knowledge, especially when paired with collaborative planning and structured opportunities for practice with feedback. In other contexts, action research projects or organized study groups might prove more effective. In all situations, however, the methods used must be adapted to fit the specified student learning goals.

What makes this planning backward process so important is that the decisions made at each level profoundly affect those made at the next. For example, the particular student learning goals you want to achieve influence the kinds of practices and policies you implement. Likewise, the practices and policies you want to implement influence the kinds of organizational support or change required — and so on. That's why staff development planning that focuses only on events is so ineffective. There are just so many vital decisions that need to be made before considering such an event.

Complicating matters further is the context-specific nature of this work. Even when educators agree on the student learning goals they want to achieve, the best practices or policies to attain those goals may differ depending on the context. In other words, what works best in one context with a particular community of educators and a particular group of students might not work equally well in another context with different educators and different students. This is what makes developing truly generalizable best practices in staff development so exceptionally difficult. What works always depends on where, when, and with whom. Still, if staff development leaders plan carefully and commit themselves to collecting meaningful evaluation evidence at each step along the way, they can make sure that context-specific problems are addressed in a timely manner and misdirected efforts put back on track.

SUMMARY

The No Child Left Behind legislation poses significant challenges to staff development leaders, especially with regard to evaluation. But these challenges press us to move in a direction we need to go. They require abandoning certain practices that are steeped in tradition while taking up others that may be new and unfamiliar. They demand new kinds of thinking, skill, imagination, leadership, and courage. They require moving out of our comfort zone and into areas that for many are unexplored. Staff development leaders willing to take on these evaluation challenges, however, are likely to find new levels of success and new levels of reward for their efforts.

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