Building A Sustainable Roadmap for Continuous Improvement in Special Education

By Jennifer Baribeau, Ph.D.

The Power of Collaborative Program Evaluations

In recent years, there has been significant progress in promoting inclusivity, equity, and personalized support for students with diverse learning needs across states and districts. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened disparities in educational outcomes, particularly for historically marginalized groups.[1] School closures and the shift to remote learning disproportionately affected special populations, widening pre-existing opportunity gaps. These disruptions have highlighted the urgent need for schools and districts to reassess how they deliver services and interventions to ensure that students most impacted by the pandemic receive the support necessary to succeed.

As the education landscape continues to evolve post-COVID, the demand for effective and sustainable programs that address these complexities has intensified. This period of reflection presents an opportunity to reevaluate practices, policies, and structures with the goal of fostering greater equity in student outcomes. Now, more than ever, it is essential to acknowledge both the successes and ongoing challenges in providing high-quality, inclusive educational services. By focusing on meaningful change, educators can help make sure that all students, regardless of background, achieve academic, social, and emotional success.

In 2013, a Public Consulting Group (PCG) white paper highlighted the value of our collaborative program evaluation model in addressing the crucial question: "Is our program working?".[2] This question remains highly relevant in today's education landscape, where accountability is a growing priority. Our model has proven to be a powerful tool for organizations to assess program effectiveness and understand the underlying factors driving success or areas for improvement.

Through this model, districts, states, schools, nonprofits, and foundations collaborate with external evaluators to define the right evaluation questions. This partnership provides a comprehensive understanding of the context, incorporates diverse stakeholder perspectives, and customizes data collection tools to fit the organization's needs. The result is a blend of qualitative and quantitative data that informs program implementation, supports continuous improvement, and provides a clear assessment of student outcomes.

This white paper revisits our collaborative program evaluation process and delves into the next steps organizations must take once an evaluation is complete.

The Collaborative Program Evaluation Process

Knowing whether an educational system or program is working effectively is crucial for several reasons. First, it helps warrant that resources, including time and funding, are allocated efficiently. By assessing the effectiveness of educational initiatives, institutions can identify successful strategies and areas that may need improvement. This allows organizations to develop targeted and strategic allocation of resources in alignment with key priority areas.

Second, understanding the effectiveness of an educational system or program is essential for continuous improvement. If educators and administrators have insight into what is working

well and what needs enhancement, they can make informed adjustments to enhance overall educational quality. This iterative process of improvement is vital for adapting to evolving needs and staying responsive to changing educational environments.

Moreover, effective programs contribute to positive student outcomes. Knowing which aspects of an educational system are successful helps in replicating those practices, ultimately leading to improved student learning experiences and academic achievements. It also allows educators to tailor interventions to specific needs, ensuring that students receive the support necessary to close any learning or opportunity gaps.

Key questions that collaborative program evaluations can answer:

- Is the current system implemented according to plan? Why or why not?

- Is the current system having the desired effect? Why or why not?

- Is the current system achieving the intended outcomes? Why or why not?

Taking these elements into consideration, our reports from collaborative program reviews offer a detailed look into the educational system, aligning with best practices and current research. Recognizing that bridging the gap between theory and practice can be challenging when developing high-quality systems and programs.[3] As states and districts work to develop these systems our implementation support can build that bridge, offering education leaders a structured roadmap to facilitate sustainable systems change once a program evaluation is complete.[4]

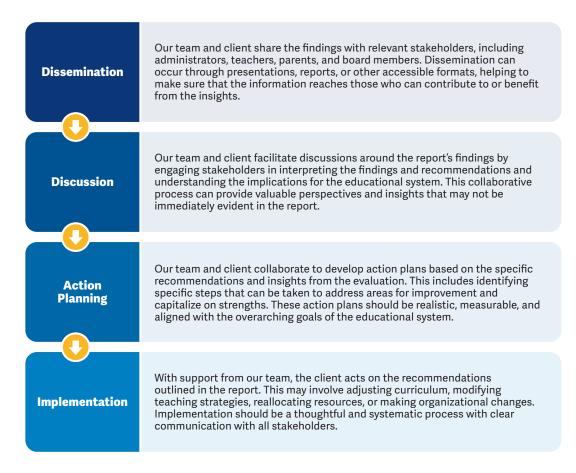## Creating a Roadmap and Implementation Support for Sustainable Change

In an era of heightened accountability in education, stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, and the community at large expect evidence of positive outcomes. Understanding the effectiveness of educational programs provides transparency and accountability, fostering trust among stakeholders, and supporting informed decision-making in educational policy and practice.

"Effective implementation capacity is essential to improving education."

– State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-Based Practices

The results of a program evaluation provide organizations with an assessment of the effectiveness of their current system or program through efficient resource allocation, continuous improvement, positive student outcomes, and maintaining accountability within the broader community. The culmination of a program evaluation results in a meaningful report that is designed to provide clients with an in-depth understanding of their current strengths and areas of opportunity while creating an ambitious and intentional roadmap forward.

Often, clients wonder what the next step is after they receive a comprehensive report with findings and recommendations. This is when the second phase of the evaluation process begins with several important actions that are taken in partnership with the external team. The key elements outlined below take the report from a useful document to an iterative roadmap where improvements can be implemented. Below are the four stages that take place once a program evaluation is complete, and the report has been developed.

Dissemination	Our team and client share the findings with relevant stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents, and board members. Dissemination can occur through presentations, reports, or other accessible formats, helping to make sure that the information reaches those who can contribute to or benefit from the insights.
Discussion	Our team and client facilitate discussions around the report's findings by engaging stakeholders in interpreting the findings and recommendations and understanding the implications for the educational system. This collaborative process can provide valuable perspectives and insights that may not be immediately evident in the report.
Action Planning	Our team and client collaborate to develop action plans based on the specific recommendations and insights from the evaluation. This includes identifying specific steps that can be taken to address areas for improvement and capitalize on strengths. These action plans should be realistic, measurable, and aligned with the overarching goals of the educational system.
Implementation	With support from our team, the client acts on the recommendations outlined in the report. This may involve adjusting curriculum, modifying teaching strategies, reallocating resources, or making organizational changes. Implementation should be a thoughtful and systematic process with clear communication with all stakeholders.

Collaborating with the external team in these areas proves invaluable for clients for several reasons. First, our team brings a fresh and objective perspective with specialized expertise to the table, offering insights and recommendations tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities identified during the evaluation process. This experience allows the external team to navigate the complexities efficiently, helping organizations translate findings into actionable strategies. Second, our team provides ongoing guidance and support to make sure there is a successful execution of proposed changes, helping to mitigate potential roadblocks and maximize the impact of the recommendations in the report. This involvement facilitates a smoother transition, fostering buy-in from stakeholders and promoting sustained improvement over time. Ultimately, the partnership between an educational organization and our team post-evaluation is instrumental in driving meaningful and lasting change within the organization. This support also leads to the next phase of development which is a roadmap that clearly supports the organization in developing a comprehensive plan for the next three to five years.

PCG's structured roadmap offers a clear, systematic approach to address the multifaceted needs within the system.[5] It provides a comprehensive strategy to identify, plan, implement, and monitor goals while safeguarding a focused and coordinated effort toward achieving them. Without a roadmap, the risk of disjointed efforts, inconsistent practices, and uncoordinated initiatives increases, potentially leading to the ineffective use of resources and hindering progress.[6] A well-structured roadmap not only guides implementation for systems change but also fosters collaboration among stakeholders, aligns policies, and encourages continuous improvement, all essential elements in creating sustainable change.[7]

Embedded within the action planning and implementation phase of the program evaluation, are the following key elements, based on each client's needs:

1. **Collecting Baseline Data** for the identified KPIs to establish a starting point for measurement and analyze historical data and trends to inform goal setting and action planning.

2. **Identifying Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** that align with baseline data collected. Some examples of KPIs include standardized test scores, graduation rates, teacher retention, and student attendance. KPIs are customized to your district or state's unique needs and context.

3. **Establishing Meaningful Goals** that are specific, measurable, attainable/ambitious relevant, time-bound, inclusive, equitable, and explicit (SMARTIE) from the recommendations in the report.

4. **Developing Actionable Strategies and Initiatives** to achieve the established goals and assign responsibilities, allocate resources, and set timelines for implementation.

5. **Allocating Resources** to ensure adequate resources (financial, human, and technological) are allocated to support the implementation of strategies.

6. **Implementing the Action Plan** in phases or stages, monitoring progress along the way, and providing professional development and training as needed to support staff.

7. **Monitoring and Evaluating** progress regularly against the established KPIs and adjusting strategies as needed based on ongoing evaluation and feedback.

8. **Communicating Progress** by sharing updates with stakeholders to maintain transparency and accountability. Celebrating successes and communicating challenges fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

9. **Reviewing and Revising** periodically by reviewing the effectiveness of the goals, KPIs, and action plan. Understanding changes may occur based on changing needs, emerging trends, and feedback from stakeholders.

Creating this roadmap supports continuous improvement across the system by fostering a shared vision among leaders and encouraging collective commitment to optimizing learning environments for all students. Through this collaborative process, leaders gain a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and expertise, which helps in developing high-quality systems and structures. The iterative nature of our implementation support promotes adaptive leadership, enabling leaders to adjust systems and structures based on evolving needs and emerging evidence. This approach enhances leaders' capacity to support all students and cultivates a culture of innovation and responsiveness, ensuring every student can thrive.

Conclusions

Combining our collaborative program review process and robust implementation support allows teams to place trust and confidence in the value of a comprehensive collaborative program evaluation. Such trust stems from our grasp of clients' context and concerns while developing a partnership aimed at achieving program improvement. Moreover, a collaborative program evaluation boasts several advantages in aiding districts as they embark on this crucial work:

- A robust evaluation design grounded in mixed-methods research that captures the nuances of the assessed system and/or program.

- Flexibility in the evaluation design to align with specific evaluation purposes.

- Heightened validity of results.

- Enhanced stakeholder buy-in for both the process and outcomes.

- Cultivation of a culture of ongoing improvement among practitioners.

- Strengthening practitioners' capacity to sustain progress monitoring beyond the review process through established goals and KPIs.

- Potential cost efficiencies and effective resource allocation.

The collaborative program evaluation model fosters a shared journey between evaluation teams and education leaders, aiming to enhance program implementation and effectiveness, thereby increasing the likelihood of improved student outcomes. Within this evaluative framework, our team uses data collection methods and analysis to ascertain the program's desired impact and suggest areas for enhancement. This lies at the heart of implementing evidence-based practices in a manner that truly resonates and delivers intended student outcomes. Although requiring ongoing commitment from all involved, a collaborative program evaluation yields substantial value to stakeholders by significantly increasing the likelihood of educational programs reaching their envisioned goals and objectives. It is through this process that we can continue to close the opportunity gap and develop high-quality systems and structures that are responsive to changing student needs.

Getting to Effectiveness: We Can Help

Comprehensive Program Reviews

PCG's comprehensive special education reviews will help you evaluate your programs' effectiveness and pinpoint specific areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. We can use an in-depth, mixed methods data collection approach to assess all aspects of special education services in your district.

You will learn how:

- The interventions offered in your organization can be optimized to support struggling learners academically and socio-emotionally.

- The academic achievement and functional outcomes for your students with disabilities compared to state averages and similar school districts.

- You can build a continuum of services that create an inclusive environment.

- To allocate personnel and budget resources to support growth in outcomes.

- To foster a positive culture and climate for students with disabilities and their families.

- To create and implement action plans for improving your services and supporting better outcomes for students with disabilities.

Our reports draw on our experience, evidence-based practices backed by research, and insights from our qualitative data analysis. We offer actionable recommendations tailored to align with district and state goals and initiatives.

Targeted Program Reviews

We work closely with you to customize the review design so you get the answers to your district's essential questions. Findings and recommendations are focused on helping you understand the root causes and have an implementation plan to drive change.

Instructional Reviews: Program-specific reviews in one of the following areas using a special education program standards review protocol process, Pre-K Students with Disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Emotional Behavioral Disabilities, Supporting Students with Significant Disabilities, Transition Planning Services, Gifted and Talented, and English Learners.

Facilitated Student Case Reviews: A focus group-style review with a variety of student documents, from eligibility forms to IEP records to student progress reports, to generate conversations about service improvement and map out underlying assumptions of how services are determined and implemented.

Operations and Compliance Reviews: Analysis of special education expenditures, staffing, and data management to help identify and understand linkages to student achievement, service delivery, and program management. Includes an in-depth analysis of current caseloads, documentation systems, staffing patterns, schedules, and overall delivery systems, as well as specific strategies for improving service delivery to improve outcomes and maximize financial resources.

Policy and Procedure Manual Writing: Conduct a gap analysis and research/ writing of your Standard Operating Procedure Manual (SOPM) for special education services to assist with optimizing processes and procedures.

Technical Assistance Services

We work closely with you to customize the review design so you get the answers to your district's essential questions. Findings and recommendations are focused on helping you understand the root causes and have an implementation plan to drive change.

Why Partner with PCG?

For over 30 years, Public Consulting Group (PCG) has worked with schools, school districts, and state education agencies to deliver Solutions that Matter for the greatest challenges that are faced by today's educators. PCG has provided districts and states across the country with innovative, customized solutions designed to raise organizational performance, enhance the quality of teacher instruction, improve special education services, and most importantly, position all students for success. Our approach is collaborative and holistic; we work in partnership with our many district and state clients to understand their unique needs and then leverage our extensive experience to design and deliver evidence-based solutions to meet those unique needs. As a thought partner to our clients, we focus on building strong, lasting client relationships by engaging in ongoing and meaningful communications.

About Us

Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) is a leading public sector solutions implementation and operations improvement firm that partners with health, education, and human services agencies to improve lives. Founded in 1986, PCG employs approximately 2,000 professionals throughout the U.S.—all committed to delivering solutions that change lives for the better. The firm is a member of a family of companies with experience in all 50 states, in Canada, and in Europe. PCG offers clients a multidisciplinary approach to meet challenges, pursue opportunities, and serve constituents across the public sector. To learn more, visit www.publicconsultinggroup.com.

About the Author

Jennifer Baribeau, Ph.D., is a Senior Advisor with Public Consulting Group and has more than 11 years of service in the special education field. After transitioning from the business sector, Dr. Baribeau served in a variety of leadership roles in special education throughout Massachusetts and Connecticut. In these various roles, Dr. Baribeau led program management and reform and developed policies and practices to support special education at the district level. Dr. Baribeau has presented on a variety of topics including understanding implicit bias in our work as educators, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), inclusive practices, and suspension practices for students with emotional disabilities. Dr. Baribeau was also an independent consultant for the Urban Collaborative at Arizona State University. In this role, she worked with districts and state agencies to assess needs, evaluate special education programs, promote culturally responsive educational systems, and help leaders design policies that promote improved student achievement for all. She received her B.S. in Business Management with a focus on Entrepreneurship from Westfield State University and her Ph.D. in Education from the University of Massachusetts. Jennifer served on the Board for the Massachusetts Council for Exceptional Children and prior to her leadership roles in education, she managed grant-funded projects for gang-involved and emotionally impaired youth in Massachusetts. Dr. Baribeau has taught graduate courses on special education, inclusive practices, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) at Harvard Graduate School of Education, the University of Massachusetts, and Springfield College.

To learn more about building a sustainable roadmap for improvement in special education, contact us today.

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Endnotes

[1]   Students with disabilities continue to lag behind peers on NAEP, 2022 https://www.k12dive.com/news/students-with-disabilities-NAEP-scores-lag/635566/#:~:text=Average%20score%20gaps%20between%20students,behind%20their%20peers%20in%202022.

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