

Evaluation for Performance:

Toolkit for Title IV Safe and Drug-Free Schools Programs

2005 (2nd edition)

Available Online: http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/0,1607,7-132-2941_4871_4878-15022--,00.html

James M. O'Neill, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Psychology Department
Madonna University, Livonia, MI;
O'Neill Consulting, Chelsea, MI

2003 (1st edition) co-authors:

Judith M. Pasquarella, M.P.A.

(former) Manager, Education Section
Office of Drug Control Policy
Michigan Department of Community Health

Henry J. Hastings, J.D., Ed.D.

(former) Acting Director, Michigan Institute for Safe Schools and Communities
College of Education, Michigan State University

This project was supported by the Office of Drug Control Policy (ODCP), Michigan Department of Community Health, with funds from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), Title IV, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the ODCP or USDOE. The toolkit may be freely reproduced; however, citation of the source is appreciated.

Suggested reference:

O'Neill, J.M., Pasquarella, J.M., and Hastings, H.J. (2005). Evaluation for performance: Toolkit for Title IV safe and drug-free schools programs (2nd edition). State of Michigan, Department of Community Health, Office of Drug Control Policy.

Chapter 5

Finding a Good Mechanic: External Evaluators

Do I need somebody to help me evaluate my program?

Evaluation requires time and resources, and sometimes a greater expertise than is available to you or your district. There might be parts of the evaluation that you know how to do, but can't do effectively because of limited time or resources. When your car needs attention, it's likely that you will save time and money by using a professional mechanic. The same might be true for your *program*, especially regarding technical services such as evaluation research design, data management or statistical analysis.

If you want help from a professional evaluator, involve that person as soon as possible because he/she can be very helpful even in the program planning stage. There are a number of reasons why early involvement of an evaluator is beneficial⁷:

- ***Gain a thorough understanding of the program.*** The first task of an evaluator is to clearly understand the program's design and intent, how each program component is supposed to work, and how the different components interrelate. The evaluator should have a thorough understanding of the program before starting any other evaluation task.
- ***Develop rapport with program staff.*** Program staff can be suspicious of evaluators and have concerns about the evaluation. A good rapport and open communication between the program and evaluation staff are important for the success of the evaluation. It usually takes time to develop trusting relationships and good communication patterns.
- ***Design the evaluation.*** It takes time to develop and agree on an evaluation design that will be appropriate for your program. Rushing through the design phase of an evaluation can result in a flawed design that will not adequately assess your program. The evaluation design should be developed before the program is implemented.
- ***Select/develop the appropriate indicators, measures and sources.*** The indicators, measures and sources selected for the evaluation need to be relevant to your program's objectives and goals, and they need to be appropriate for the program participants. Selecting the right indicators and measures takes time, and it must be done right. Once the indicators are selected, they need to be organized into a questionnaire or other data collection measures and then pilot-tested to make sure they will yield the needed data. If the tools need to be translated into another language, the translation process could take several weeks. Ideally, all of this work should be completed before the program begins delivering services so that data collection can commence with the first participants.

You'll Pay Later. . .



Waiting to get an evaluator on board until after the program has been fully implemented can be a costly mistake if there is not sufficient time remaining to conduct an evaluation. It often takes a few months of evaluation planning and preparation before data collection can begin. If you take shortcuts in the evaluation-planning phase, you'll end up with useless evaluation data and findings.

How do I find somebody to help evaluate my program?⁴

You may already have an established relationship with an evaluator. If you need to find an evaluator, the following are some sources you can use.

- **ODCP and other state or local agencies.** Most state or local government agencies have planning and evaluation sections or departments. You may be able to consult with individuals from these sections or they may be able to direct you to other local organizations or individuals who could work with you. People who work in these sections often know local evaluators outside of their agency.
- **Local colleges and universities.** Faculty in departments of sociology, social work, education, community psychology, and public health and university-based research centers often have training and experience in program evaluation. Some of these professors do outside work, including program evaluations.
- **Other local agencies that have used evaluators.** Agencies in your locale that are similar to yours and have worked with evaluators are a good source of information. Staff in these agencies can often suggest good local evaluators who work well with the types of programs you provide.
- **Research institutes and consulting firms.** Professional service firms and research organizations often employ experienced evaluators and will contract with you to conduct an evaluation.
- **Professional associations.** Associations such as the American Evaluation Association (<http://www.eval.org/>) and the Society for Prevention Research (<http://www.preventionresearch.org/>) may be able to provide names of local members who conduct prevention program evaluations.

How do I know the evaluator is appropriate for my program?

There is no foolproof method for selecting an evaluator who will fully meet your needs and be a good match for your program. However, there are some indicators that you can use to identify good candidates. The evaluator you hire should be able to do the following:⁶

- **Communicate in simple, practical terms.** A good evaluator will use language you can understand. If the person uses terms you are not familiar with, ask for an explanation.
- **Make an effort to understand your program.** An experienced evaluator will make every effort to understand what your program is about. He or she will take the time to ask you questions about and get to know your program before suggesting evaluation approaches.
- **Be willing to work collaboratively to develop an evaluation plan.** It is critical that you and your staff be involved in designing the evaluation. The evaluation has to meet the needs of your program and the funders, not necessarily the requirements of your evaluator.
- **Have experience evaluating similar programs and populations.** A good candidate will have some familiarity with prevention programs. Experience working with programs that have similar resource levels is also useful. Previous experience with your program's *target population* is very helpful because the evaluation design and methods must take into account important population characteristics (e.g., developmental level, culture).
- **Have the time available to conduct the evaluation.** It is very important that you have someone who has the time to do the necessary work. Ask candidates about their current work commitments and the percentage of time they are available to work on your evaluation. Compare their responses with your estimate of the time needed to do the work. Once the evaluation begins, regular meetings are also important for you to monitor the evaluator's performance. If the evaluator isn't local, travel expenses will raise the cost of the evaluation.

- **Have experience with measurement and statistical methods.** The evaluator must be able to use appropriate measurement and statistical methods to determine the effectiveness of your program. Someone who is inexperienced in measurement and statistics may use methods that underestimate or overestimate real changes produced by your program. If the evaluator you select cannot perform statistical analyses, it will be important that he or she receives assistance from an experienced statistician.
- **Be knowledgeable of human subject protection issues.** A good candidate will be able to talk with you about issues such as confidentiality and informed consent. Ask the candidates for samples of consent forms they have used in other evaluations and whether they have experience with IRB reviews.
- **Be willing to spend time at your program.** A good evaluator does not show up at the beginning of the program and then disappear until the program is over. It is important for the evaluator to spend time with your staff to understand how the program is implemented and to observe changes in the program over time. The evaluator will not be able to make any necessary adjustments in the evaluation design if he or she does not spend time at the program.

You may want to add other qualifications to this list or modify the list. One suggestion is to work with some of your senior program staff to prioritize the list of qualifications according to your program needs. You can then select the candidate whose qualifications best match your prioritized list.



Checklist for Using External Evaluators

Use the following checklist if you decide to utilize an external evaluator:

Get the evaluator involved early to:

- Gain a thorough understanding of the program.
- Design the evaluation.
- Selecting the best *indicators* (the types of information) to be collected.
- Select the best *measures* (the tools) used to collect the information.
- Select the most appropriate *sources* (the people/places) from which to collect the information.
- Develop rapport with program staff.
- Other:

Search for an evaluator at:

- ODCP and other state or local agencies.
- Local colleges/universities.
- Other local agencies that have used evaluators.
- Research institutes and consulting firms.
- Professional associations.

The evaluator you hire should be able to:

- Communicate in simple, practical terms.
- Make an effort to understand your program.
- Be willing to work collaboratively to develop an evaluation plan.
- Have experience evaluating similar programs and populations.
- Have the time available to conduct the evaluation.
- Have experience with measurement and statistical methods.
- Be knowledgeable of human subject protection issues.
- Be willing to spend time at your program.
- Other:

Notes: