

K-12 Partnership *Report*

Measurement and Evaluation: A Strategic Tool for Partnership Design and Management

For many who design and manage K-12 education partnerships, the subject of measurement and evaluation is an uncomfortable one. Those who design initiatives may care more about intangible measures of performance, such as personal observations of student engagement, or they may be more invested in how the partnership works (the process) than in what the partnership produces (the outcomes). And those who work directly with students may be skeptical of the relevance of the data being collected (as is often the case with standardized testing), or they may not have been informed as to whether, or how, the information will be used.

However, while it is important to acknowledge and address the concerns of project participants, these concerns must not be allowed to drive decisions on data collection and analysis. Those who do not appropriately incorporate measurement and evaluation into their work run the risk of working very hard on the wrong things, with nothing to show for their efforts. The fact remains that employing a smart and strategic approach to measurement and evaluation can be the single best way to build initiatives that retain partners and change lives.

This article will cover key issues in developing partnership-led measurement and evaluation initiatives that produce strong student and stakeholder outcomes.

Intentional program design

All too often, partnership initiatives are inspired by an interest in working with children, with outcomes as an afterthought. For example, a civic group may want to form a partnership to focus on reading to elementary age children, believing that this will lead to improved student

reading skills or a greater appreciation of literature. A museum might launch a ‘trunk show’ to engage children in various scientific fields. Or a chamber may want to work with schools to start a career awareness program, assuming that students hearing from businesspeople in different professions and industries will be more likely to pursue postsecondary education opportunities.

These all seem to be worthwhile concepts, and it’s fine to begin the campaign development process with models like these in mind. However, without setting a specific set of measurable objectives to work toward (backed by existing research), and putting in place ways to measure whether your intervention is working, you’ll have no way of knowing whether your work is paying off, and whether you’re making an impact in meaningful ways.

What partnerships need to do, in other words, is build a causal model. A causal model, simply stated, describes how you want things to look; how they look now; and how your intervention is going to help students go one point to the other.

The elements of a causal model

Take the reading partnership as an example. If the partners are to create a causal model to drive their initiative, they must first seek to establish their primary goal. In the process, they will necessarily begin to lay out the criteria by which their work can be judged.

Their initial softly-worded goal, “to improve student reading skills,” is not specific enough: it does not describe an end state, but rather indicates that any improvement in reading skills is a success, no matter where students end up. (For example, a student who advances two years in reading ability, and one who advances two months, would both be considered successful interventions even if both started two years behind.) Goals that focus on undefined progress allow partners to focus on incremental improvements, no matter how minor, rather than help students meet needed performance standards. They allow partners to pursue any approach, rather than seek out the models that will help children make the gains they need.

Partners should instead develop a goal that clearly describes the desired end state; this way, all parties can

Also in this issue:

Letter from the Publisher.....	4
Thomas Jefferson: A Partnership-Driven High School.....	5
KPR Case Study: Luxottica Mentoring Partnership.....	7
The Benefits of Tracking In-Kind Contributions.....	9
Research Review: Involvement of Business in Education.....	11

share an understanding of what success looks like, even if they haven't identified their starting point or how to travel between the two. For our example, this might be that "all children in the program will read at grade level." Notice that this goal paints a clear picture of the objective that everyone can understand, and that it points to one or more criteria by which it can be measured.

If the stated end goal does not explicitly lay out the criteria by which outcomes will be assessed, program designers must add that information. For example, if our civic group wished instead to instill a love of literature into each participating student, they would have to define what they meant: it could be based on the number of books each student read, or on a post-program survey of participants to gauge their attitudes about literature.

Evaluation metrics should be objective and independent. Ask students how well they read, for example, and you are likely to get rosier data than if you gave them an independent test. Ask program leaders to evaluate the performance of the students they've worked with for the past several months, and many students are likely to be graded upwards out of affinity, 'extra points for effort,' and as a vote of confidence in their own ability as mentors or instructors. While understandable, none of this helps you in your efforts.

Once you've determined where you want students to end up as a result of your intervention, the next step is to determine their starting point, assessed according to the measurement criteria you set forth during the goal-setting phase. If your goal is to get students to read at grade level, you have to know how far they need to go: are they close to grade level now, or are they several years behind? If you want them to be engaged in science, what is their current level of interest? Only by marking their starting points can you develop a program that is capable of moving them a specific distance.

With this information in hand, you're now ready to design your partnership program. You have a specific objective based on measurable criteria, and you know students' starting points. It's time to build a program model that will take students from where they are to where you want them to be.

Your first step in designing an intervention is to review all available research on the subject. Going on a hunch is a disservice to both the students, who need your help, and the community and school participants who are contributing their time to your program. It is much better to design your program according to available evidence than to run with what you assume will work.

At this point, you've identified a measurable goal for your intervention; identified students' starting points; and built a research-based plan for helping students get from one point to the other. There are still two steps you need to take before launching your program.

Address other aspects of the partnership

Up to this point, you've focused solely on academic outcomes. However, to attract and retain partners, you must set measured goals for partner outcomes.

To establish a measurement and evaluation model for partner outcomes, the first step is to find out what your partners want to achieve as a result of participating in the program. Certainly, they'll want to help students succeed, but they need to see some kind of return as well if you plan to retain them over the life of the program.

The answer to this question must come from your partners; assuming you know their interests creates the risk that you'll fail to meet their needs. That said, here are some examples of often-cited partner outcomes:

- A civic organization may require members to volunteer a certain number of hours each month
- A business or chamber may be most interested in ensuring a capable local workforce, or even more specifically in identifying future workers for their operations
- A business may be interested in boosting employee morale and retention by providing volunteering opportunities
- A church may have a service mission to meet the needs of youth living in poverty
- An informal learning organization (museum, etc.) may want to fulfill its outreach mission, and also build local interest in order to boost attendance

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Again, partner interests vary widely; it's best to work with them directly to establish the returns they wish to receive from their participation.

Establish a measurement scheme

Once you've determined your primary goals for both students and partners, it's time to put measurement tools into place to gauge your progress towards reaching those goals. Selection of specific tools or measurement models will depend on the goals that have been set: reading skills can be assessed through various commercially available tests, beliefs and attitudes can be measured through surveys, and so on. When it comes to partner outcomes, it is important to work with partners collaboratively to decide which types of measurements will help them determine whether their goals are being met, and who is responsible for collecting that data.

Some additional considerations on measurement:

- You should establish control sites - i.e., sites with comparable student populations that do not receive your intervention - to see whether changes in your target population are actually being caused by your program or by external forces.
- You should measure frequently where possible, with smaller-scale assessments if need be. This will allow you to change course if your intervention isn't working, and will allow you to identify any patterns in the rate of growth among participants.
- When possible, you should enlist independent practitioners and independently-developed assessments to gauge progress. It's very easy to introduce a positive bias into your results if you design and/or implement your own assessments.
- Think carefully about what data you need to gauge progress for your target audiences (students and

partners), and collect only the information that you know you'll use. Measurement takes time and it usually takes money - minimize its impact on your program by collecting only that which you'll actually use.

- Program participants sometimes resist collecting data because they don't understand whether or how the data will be used; take the time to explain why you're collecting information and how that information will be used to improve student and partner outcomes.

Operational measurements

While operational efficiency does not sit with student and partner outcomes as a primary objective, it is nonetheless an important element of a strong program. Efficient operations allow you to serve the greatest number of children through your program; furthermore, it is an important issue for partners who contribute time, money, and other resources and want to see the greatest return for their investment in your work.

Some operational aspects of your program that you may consider tracking include:

- For an out-of-school initiative, how much does it cost to acquire each new student participant?
- What is your retention rate?
- What is your cost to serve each student?
- What percentage of your revenue is spent in areas unrelated to student service? How much is going to administration, or to outreach?
- How many months of operating capital do you have set aside to avoid service interruption?

The measurement and evaluation cycle

Of course, collecting all this data is of limited value unless you actively use it as part of your management efforts. One use is as a benchmark against future efforts: determine how well you performed in previous years and find ways to improve outcomes and efficiency. If your program is found in multiple markets, you can also compare performance across sites to identify possible improvements.

Collected data should also be analyzed as part of your program's annual review. As board members revisit the goals and methods that make up your program, they can review recent performance data to see whether the initiative is achieving its objectives and whether new research points to more effective ways of producing the same or better results.

Regardless of the type of partnership program you manage, the collection and use of relevant data has the potential to transform your program into one that produces exceptional outcomes for students and partners alike.

