

A Practical Approach to School Improvement

The Wisconsin School Evaluation Consortium provides a common set of processes and materials by which local districts assess and improve their own programs.

Since 1979, a voluntary, cooperative approach to school improvement and diagnostic program evaluation has been evolving in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin School Evaluation Consortium (SEC) is an outreach program of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, funded 80 percent by the school districts that receive its services. It exists to provide help to its members as they assess the effectiveness of their educational programs. Assessment procedures are based on a common core of assumptions, practices, and SEC-

developed manuals (Landon 1984; 1985) Landon and Shirer, 1981, 1982, 1984), but are customized to fit each district's evaluation needs and local circumstances.

Twenty-two K-12 districts and 45 individual high schools joined the university to initiate the consortium in 1979. Current membership includes nearly 1,100 public and nonpublic elementary, middle, and high schools in the state. The growth of the voluntary program is attributed to the genuine desire of school personnel to examine their programs and do something spe-

cific with the results. While the particular purposes of the SEC evaluation projects vary from district to district, most of them focus on one or more of the following questions:

1. What are the links among what schools want students to learn, how learning is delivered, and what students actually learn? Given a better understanding of these links, what can schools do to allocate human and dollar resources to improve student learning?

2. How can ongoing, systematic procedures be established that monitor school effectiveness in a practical way?

3. How can credible information about the quality of the school system be organized and disseminated to parents, taxpayers, and government?

Local Adoption

Each district is encouraged to modify the basic approach and is assisted by an SEC staff consultant. When local districts own their own projects, they have a greater vested interest in making the plans work. Despite differences among the plans, however, some generalizations can be made.

1. *All projects are planned in advance by a group that includes teachers, building- and system-level administrators, and school board members.* These groups have the greatest stake in evaluation results and have the power to promote or sabotage any changes suggested by an evaluation study. Assisted by SEC training, each group—or steering committee—decides what will be assessed, what supportive data will be needed, what the evaluation schedule will be, who will be appointed to the committees that write the self-assessment reports, and how time and dollars will be provided by the district to allow those committees to do their work. The different perspectives of the steering committee members provide a healthy set of checks and balances. Negotiation of differences, in fact, is designed to produce a final plan acceptable to all groups within the school system. Such a unity is necessary to make the changes identified in the evaluation reports. Differences of perspective, in addition, should be worked out before an evaluation project begins. The idea is to provide everyone involved with a clear set of expectations about what the evaluation involves.



There is a greater likelihood for genuine reform when those inside schools take responsibility to examine the quality of their programs. SEC trains teachers and administrators from the School District of Keaukua to clarify what they are trying to help students learn, and to explore relationships between intended learning, methods of delivery, and learning outcome.

Once drafted, a plan must first be approved by the full school board and then by the SEC Board of Control, which is elected by the membership and sets policy for the organization. Board approval depends on three things. A district must follow the seven-point SEC planning process. It must include language in its plan that prohibits the use of evaluation data or findings in judging the performance of an individual teacher or administrator. Finally, it must include a realistic time frame in which to complete the evaluative tasks the plan outlines.

2. *When districts decide what to assess, their priority items relate to issues of curriculum articulation.* The SEC manuals provide step-by-step guides for measuring student outcomes at different levels of specificity and for measuring some 16 school practices often correlated with student achievement. Districts, when they plan, choose some of these items to measure their evaluations and almost always decide to measure outcomes at a general level (determining the extent to which general indicators of program quality such as standardized test scores, college grades, employer opinions, and the like show satisfactory program performance). They focus primarily on such questions as whether teachers actually emphasize the stated objectives, whether enough time is both allocated and spent for instruction about these objectives, whether the objectives omit or unduly repeat any important ideas, whether the sequence of instruction makes sense, and whether books and other materials help or hurt the chances of students learning what they are supposed to learn.

3. *Most districts decide to assess their programs on a K-12 basis.* Their interest is in determining what happens to students as they move through an instructional sequence and whether all parts of the school system are pulling in the same direction. One superintendent put it this way: "We want a school system, not a system of schools." It is, parenthetically, often true that power centralizes when times are difficult or resources are scarce. Also, the manifestation of centralized power often results in standardizing the wrong things. School systems are no exception to this phenomenon. A K-12 approach to evaluation can, if misused,

threaten building and teacher participation in decisions about how best to work with the students they serve. A fundamental question before a K-12 evaluation begins is: what should be orthodox within a school system and what issues should building principals and teachers be allowed to do as they see fit? SEC evaluations indicate that school systems ought to identify and guarantee that students have a chance to master a limited set of instructional objectives no matter what school within the system they attend. Moreover, the system ought to identify priorities regarding what needs to be done to improve student chances to succeed in mastering these objectives. The system has a vested interest in *what* should be done. On the other hand, principals and teachers must decide *how* learning takes place and *how* to implement systemwide initiatives for instructional improvement in their own buildings.

4. *Most districts assess a few programs each year rather than assessing all programs at the same time.* As a result, some evaluation activity is taking place in most SEC districts all of the time. Reviewing all programs simultaneously can choke a district with data, committee meetings, and recommendations. If action is the goal, then it is essential to be realistic when setting the evaluation schedule in the first place. Few school districts have more than 8 percent of their total budget remaining once fixed costs (salaries, benefits, utilities, transportation) have been paid. By developing the evaluation/improvement agenda a bit at a time, chances of implementing it are increased. Second, when projects are K-12 in scope, elementary teachers, who teach all basic subjects, cannot realistically be expected to either participate in simultaneous reviews of all subjects or, more importantly, be able to absorb possible changes in teaching about them all at once. Finally, many school districts try to combine the evaluation/improvement cycle with other ongoing activities, which, in any case, they would complete on a cyclical basis. Examples of such activities include textbook adoption, summer curriculum revisions, and the development of criterion-referenced tests.

5. *Most districts use their evaluation to meet their requirements to conduct*

an evaluation mandated by an accrediting agency. In Wisconsin, the regional accrediting agency is the North Central Association, which has for many years encouraged its members to meet their evaluation requirement in a way that leads to school improvement. The SEC model represents an approved way, in Wisconsin, for schools to meet this requirement. In practical terms, this means that teachers and principals can use one project of their choice to meet both locally developed purposes and regional accrediting requirements.

6. *Most districts choose to have their self-evaluation reports audited by an outside team selected by the SEC office.* These audits involve more than 1,000 Wisconsin teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, professors, state department of education personnel, and citizens each year in formal assessment procedures. The outside teams provide districts with new ideas, with an unbiased reaction to the quality of their programs, and with a layer of credibility for the evaluation findings that would be otherwise absent.

Although the SEC deliberately cultivates idiosyncratic evaluation in its member districts, then, there is more than a little consistency in the ways schools actually use the model. The basis for an evaluation is a plan that identifies the important questions a school will answer and exactly how the school will go about answering them. The right to decide what questions to ask and how to answer them belongs exclusively to the local school district. All SEC districts, however, begin the process with a common set of evaluation materials and a common core of assumptions about how to conduct evaluations. They are assisted in their projects by an SEC staff person. And, once a district has made its decisions about key questions and credible evidence needed to substantiate answers to them, it has available to it specific evaluation instruments, data gathering forms, analytic procedures, and surveys that specifically relate to the questions it has selected.

How Well Does It Work?

The ultimate purpose of an SEC evaluation is action designed to improve instruction. For that to happen, a

school district must have information it can use, developed through procedures it finds credible. What constitutes improved instruction, of course, remains debatable. And no major studies, to date, have addressed the claim that SEC evaluations result in improved instruction. However, a good deal of anecdotal data suggest that improvements are taking place. One indicator is the program's staying power in member districts. School districts belong to the SEC one year at a time; no long-term contracts are signed. If a district decides that the process was not useful, it can terminate its membership. Fewer than ten districts have done so in five years. Furthermore, the phenomenal growth of the organization, which has occurred largely because members refer nonmembers to it, suggests that districts of all sizes and in all locations have found the approach useful.

Within individual member districts, actions taken to improve instruction are monitored internally by the steering committee and externally by outside audit teams, which usually visit the district once a year. With the continuous evaluation approach, determining whether or not improvement activities have occurred between audit team visits becomes almost routine. The quality of implementation activities within districts varies. However, reports from teachers, administrators, and school board members have been generally enthusiastic and are becoming more so.

A number of districts have tied their evaluation projects to set-aside money that cannot be used without reference to the evaluation findings. Other districts have tied the evaluation findings to formal building improvement plans in which principals and teachers decide how they will implement a change identified in the evaluation report. Some districts are reporting gains in test scores about specific objectives the evaluation revealed needed more emphasis. Teachers are interviewing text salespeople about the degree to which instructional materials relate specifically to the key objectives of curricular programs identified in the evaluation. There is a growing sense that school systems are providing time to teachers and administrators to discuss what they are trying to

"When those with power in a system are unhappy with what is happening, something is likely to be done about it."

help students learn, how they can provide more effective learning assistance, and what the relationships are between intended learning, methods for delivering learning, and learning outcomes. There is also evidence that many school systems are using the results of these discussions to develop specific plans designed to make changes they believe will make a difference.

There have been other, less direct, results of the program. Most significantly, the program illustrates what can happen when a major university joins forces, in both a fiscal and programmatic sense, with its clientele. The University of Wisconsin-Madison, by providing dollar support and backing, allows the program to be offered to client school districts for a modest cost. The benefits of direct, continuing relationships between the University and the schools are obvious to both.

The School Evaluation Consortium would not exist if educators were indifferent to public concerns about school quality. In fact, the organization was formed because educators themselves wanted to provide the impetus for school improvement. When there are complicated issues that must be resolved within complicated organizations, there are no quick fixes. Such is the case with the assessment of school quality. But when those inside schools take the responsibility to examine the

quality of their programs and use the findings of their examination to do a better job, there is a greater likelihood of genuine reform. □

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