

# A Community-Based Model of Curriculum Evaluation

By inviting qualified volunteers to evaluate programs, one Maryland school system has received high-quality evaluations while strengthening bonds with the community.

Can community members serve as evaluators of major educational programs? Can parents and taxpayers make objective assessments? The answer is an unequivocal "yes" in the public schools of Howard County, Maryland—a system of 27,000 students and 47 schools. We found that inviting community members to serve as evaluators of major programs provided an avenue for constructive community input, improved the quality of our programs, and strengthened school/community bonds.

## The Design

In 1983-84, the Board of Education wanted an evaluation of our K-12 science education program. They also wanted community members—employees of several large scientific research firms and university science professors—to recommend strategies for improving the program.

In response to the board mandate, the evaluation office staff designed and developed a community-based evaluation model. The design invited local scientists, administrators, science

teachers, parents, students, and graduates to assess the science program. And consultants external to the system would also assess the program to balance the community component.

When we asked science professionals from the community to volunteer

as program evaluators, the response was overwhelming. Sixty-two scientists submitted applications for membership on the science review committee. As all of the applicants met the selection criteria, we invited them all to participate.

## The Process

A five-member steering committee was appointed to work with staff members in coordinating the activities of the review committee. Principals, science department chairs, and team leaders from all schools received a detailed orientation about the evaluation design and process. School staffs were assured that the evaluators would assess the science education program, not individual schools or teachers.

Commitment to objectivity was essential. We made it clear to parents on the review committee that the evaluation would not provide a forum to discuss personal concerns about one's children. Our guidelines specified that review committee members with chil-

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dren enrolled in the system visited schools other than those their children attended. Two committee members observed a science class at the same time, and both completed Observation Records. These two records were compared to determine if class activities had been perceived similarly.

The consultants and the science review committee worked independently, conducting separate evaluation activities and writing separate reports. Evaluators attended program orientation meetings, perused curriculum materials, visited schools, and observed science classes. They distributed questionnaires and interviewed parents, students, and staff members. Achievement tests and attitude scales were administered to students. The evaluators analyzed these data and documented their findings.

### The Product

Evaluators' findings and recommendations were organized around (a) program philosophy, goals, and objectives; (b) laboratory facilities, equipment, and materials; (c) print and nonprint instructional materials; (d) quality of the teaching process; (e) instructional support services; and (f) student achievement. We required that recommendations be derived from the findings; otherwise, they could not be included in the report. The recommendations of the science review committee and the consultants were well received by the board and public.

### Design Modification

We also used our community-based evaluation model to evaluate the mathematics education program in 1985-86 and the guidance program in 1987-88. The major modification we made to the model involved membership criteria for the review committee. For the mathematics and guidance evaluations, being a mathematics or guidance professional was not a criteria for membership. While many applicants had experience in mathematics- or guidance-related fields, persons with backgrounds in business and science served on the mathematics review committee, and several nurses and a lawyer served on the guidance review committee.

Each evaluation resulted in a comprehensive program assessment. With few exceptions, the consultants and the review committee identified similar strengths and weaknesses. For example, in the mathematics evaluation a need for more focus on problem solving was stated repeatedly, and in the evaluation of the guidance program a need for counselors at the elementary level was emphasized. That the different evaluators found common themes strengthened the credibility of their recommendations.

### Benefits

When parents and citizens are invited to evaluate major educational programs, benefits abound. Our school system saved approximately \$60,000 in the three initiatives, received high-quality program evaluations, and strengthened school/community relationships. Students will have a hands-on elementary science program, a mathematics curriculum that focuses on problem solving, and the services of guidance counselors in elementary schools. And the community actively participated in creating the future of its public school system. □

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