

## Sustaining Evaluation Efforts After the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Individuals With Disabilities Education Act

### Overview

In June 2009, Austin Independent School District (AISD) received \$17.3 million for initiatives from 2009–2011 under the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (ARRA IDEA). Of the \$17.3 million, \$16.9 million were allocated to IDEA-Part B; the remaining funds were for IDEA Preschool. After set-asides for indirect costs and private schools, \$16.6 million remained.

AISD staff, under the guidance of the superintendent and the district's board of trustees, and along with community partners, parents, and representatives from nonprofit organizations in Central Texas, targeted the funds for projects that addressed one or more of the following goals:

1. Eliminate the student achievement gap
2. Reduce disproportional representation of special education students, especially minority students<sup>1</sup>
3. Improve special education processes
4. Reduce student dropout and increase graduation rates
5. Improve teacher quality and evaluate programs

Project staff maintained transparency with stakeholders, set measurable goals, monitored their own progress, reported results regularly, and created sustainability plans for project services and activities, where appropriate. Some grant funds supported evaluation of \_\_\_\_\_ continually and easily; improving procedures \_\_\_\_\_ processes (e.g., staff management of students' information through district servers); and

## **Why Evaluate?**

A program or project can be evaluated for a variety of reasons. Sometimes evaluation is required by a

are needed immediately or over a period of time); and the value placed on the outcomes of an evaluation (e.g., whether the information will be used for critical decisions).

The remainder of this report provides guidance and suggestions for staff who need to conduct evaluation activities themselves or who need to know the types of critical questions and issues to address when working with someone who is providing evaluation support. One of the reference sources used for this summary is the National Science Foundation (NSF) User-Friendly Guide to Project Evaluation (2002).

## Getting Started

Evaluation activities can be focused on one or more possible topics. Sanders (1992) suggested examples of educational activities or projects that could be the focus of an evaluation (see Appendix B). For the evaluation to be useful, project managers and their teams should determine and clearly articulate what the program or project is supposed to accomplish. In many cases, the program outcomes already have been determined in some general way. The challenge is to make sure that outcomes are clearly and specifically defined, measurable, and agreed upon by all key stakeholders and decision makers involved with the project.

The first step is to define how program goals relate to objectives, activities, measurable benchmark measures (if appropriate), and outcomes. The NSF (2002) guide to project evaluation outlines a simple, step-by-step approach to defining questions related to program goals and objectives (see Appendix C). In relation to this process, it is critical to determine the project timeframe. By developing a logic model or project management process model, all of the necessary components of an evaluation can be laid out in conjunction with how the project or program is designed to be carried out over time. Several resources on logic modeling or project management exist, yet a simple matrix (see Appendix D) can be used to begin an

i8(f)-4( )10(t(u)-410( p2241p(A)-610]r( o)-2)8(f) Td6p(A)-610lim-1(r))TJ( o)-d.D

## **Data Types and Data Collection**

Many data t

supporting the program outweigh the 2-point gain on the test? It also is important to determine whether the results of the analyses are based on a representative group of people being examined or targeted in the project so that outcomes can be generalized to other similar groups. For example, if a program seemed to produce benefits for students with a learning disability, would it have similar positive benefits for students with an emotional disturbance? Also, consider whether the results can be repeated if the project or program recurred under different circumstances or in different locations. In some situations, the results of one data analysis may conflict with those of another. In either case, efforts should be taken by program staff to understand whether results are meaningful and significant, and, if applicable, to investigate the reasons different program analyses have disparate results.

Often, data can be explained or interpreted in more than one way because many factors influence results in the field of education. The way in which the results of a data analysis are interpreted is important, regardless of whether the results are good, bad, or neutral. How results are perceived, shared, and used by program staff and/or the evaluator with others (whether inside or outside the organization) will affect people's decisions and perceptions about the programs or projects. Careful consideration should be made when deciding what information is shared and how it is shared. Clear expectations and agreements should be communicated prior to the beginning of an evaluation so all key stakeholders are aware of how evaluation information will be communicated and used. Fair, objective, and informed data interpretation is essential for effective program evaluation.

## **Data Presentation and Use**

Results from

makers may be necessary to ensure your evaluation results do not remain unused. Think about how your results may look to others not directly related to the project's daily activities.

## **How AISD Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) Staff Can Help**

AISD DRE staff provide program evaluation support and services in a variety of ways. All DRE work is funded through local, state, or grant sources that are described annually in the department's evaluation plan.<sup>7</sup> The scope of the evaluation work depends on the amount of funding provided and extent of evaluation activities outlined in each program or project evaluation plan. The department's goal is to support all stakeholders by providing information that clients at every level use to make critical decisions. This goal is defined through three objectives:

- Provide user-friendly, accurate information targeted to needs
- Communicate effectively with central office and campus staff
- Establish integration with the district leadership process

The DRE menu of services includes the following:

- Consultation
  1. Planning
  2. Logic modeling
  3. Survey designing
  4. Sampling
  5. Collecting data
  6. Summarizing data
  7. Making referrals, as needed, to independent evaluation consultants (external to AISD)
- Data collection
  1. Gathering data from AISD data sources and systems
  2. Requesting or gathering data from Texas Education Agency or other external agencies
  3. Combining data sets
  4. Administering surveys
  5. Creating and administering specific data collection forms
  6. Observing and collecting information on activities
  7. Leading interviews or focus group discussions
- Assistance with data collection, interpretation, and reporting
  1. Designing methodology
  2. Developing surveys
  3. Interpreting survey data
  4. Reporting or presenting findings
- Ad hoc data requests/reporting (see <http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/research/guidance.phtml>)<sup>8</sup>
  1. Surveys (design, administration, analysis)
  2. Student academic achievement
  3. Data for monitoring parts of the district's 5-year strategic plan

4. Data for grant applications and grant reporting
5. Student, staff, and parent data summaries
- District and campus surveys (see [http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/evaluation/survey\\_reports.phtml](http://www.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/evaluation/survey_reports.phtml))
  1. Employee coordinate survey
  2. Teacher survey
  3. Staff climate survey
  4. Student climate survey
  5. High school exit survey (only seniors)
  6. Parent survey
  7. Central Office work environment survey

## **Examples of Recent Evaluation Work With AISD Special Education**

### **Planning and Reporting**

At the beginning of the ARRA IDEA grant in AISD, a template scope document was developed through the collaboration of the Special Education Department's grant leadership team and the program evaluator for the grant. Each project team used this project tracking document to record information in the following categories: team membership, goals and objectives, activities implemented, measurable outcomes, staff funded for the project, other project expenses, and meeting minutes. During the first year of the grant, the document helped team members formulate the details of their project activities and keep track of the discussions that occurred each time they met. It also provided a way for the teams to provide updates, as needed, to the Special Education Department's grant leadership team in meetings held every 6 to 8 weeks. As the grant continued in its second year, the document was used primarily for recording meeting minutes.

For the mid-year and annual reporting process, the program evaluator, in collaboration with grant managers, created documents for each project team to use in documenting and reporting its project's results and identify





1. Efforts were made to get special education students to participate in the senior (12th-grade) student exit survey coordinated by DRE and administered at the high schools.
2. In the annual employee coordinated survey, administered by DRE, questions were submitted by staff from the Special Education Department, included in the survey, and sent to a sample of campus staff for feedback about services.

### **Data Analyses**

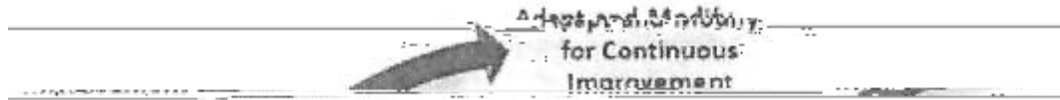
The following are examples of data analyses and support provided by DRE staff to Special Education Department staff.

- In the project that provided campus funds to help eliminate the achievement gap, DRE staff provided TAKS performance analysis for special education students who received intervention in reading and/or math. A summary report of TAKS results for all AISD special education students was provided. In these reports, results were provided by school and state.

ecir

## Appendices

Appendix A: Public Education Leadership Project (PELP): A Problem-solving Approach to Designing and Implementing a Strategy to Improve Performance: Synopsis



. Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University (2010)

## Appendix B. Examples of Possible Focus Points for School and/or District Evaluations

- Program needs assessments: to establish program goals and objectives
- Individual needs assessments: to provide insights about the instructional needs of individual learners
- Resource allotment: to provide guidance in setting priorities for budgeting
- Processes or strategies for providing services to learners: to provide insights about how best to organize a school to facilitate learning
  - 9 Curriculum design: to provide insights about the quality of program planning and organization
  - 9 Classroom processes: to provide insights about the extent to which educational programs are being implemented
  - 9 Materials of instruction: to provide insights about whether specific materials are indeed aiding student learning
  - 9 Monitoring of student progress: to provide insights about the effort and persistence of learners
  - 9 Teacher effectiveness: to provide insights about the effectiveness of teachers in aiding students to achieve goals and objectives of the school
  - 9 Learning environment: to provide insights about the extent to which students are provided a responsive environment in terms of their educational needs
  - 9 Staff development: to provide insights about the extent to which the school system provides the staff opportunities to increase their effectiveness
  - 9 Decision making: to provide insights about how well a school staff – principal, teachers, and others – makes decisions that result in learner benefits
  - 9 Community involvement: to determine the extent to which community members can aid in the decision-making process of the school
  - 9 Board policy formation: to provide insights about the extent to which the board is using its authority to communicate its expectations to the staff
- Outcomes of instruction: to provide insights about the extent to which students are achieving the goals and objectives set for them

Sanders (1992)



Appendix D. Planning Matrix and Logic Model

Sample Project Management Planning Matrix Template

Program goals, objectives and evaluation questions	Who is responsible	Target groups	Activities	Timeline of activities	Expected outcomes	Data sources and methods	Data analyses and reporting

Sample program outcome logic model

Resources

Program

Products



## Appendix F: Possible Educational Data Sources and Collection Methods

### Professional development opportunities

- Records of attendance

- Initiation of activities (logs, updates from staff, other documentation)
- Progress made in activities (logs, updates from staff, other documentation)
- Activities completed (logs, updates from staff, other documentation)



## References

Cousins, J. B., & Whitmore, E. (1998). Conceptualizing participatory evaluation. In E. Whitmore (Ed.), (No. 80, pp. 5-23). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Covey, S. R. (2004). New York: Simon and Schuster. Retrieved from <https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits.php>

Doolittle, M. (2010a). Retrieved from <http://www>

