Setting the Stage for Evaluation of the Jacksonville Next Generation Initiative

Carolyn D. Herrington, Ph.D.
Kimberly Berry
Christine Johnson

Center on Education Policy
Learning Systems Institute
Florida State University
The Next Generation Initiative supports local efforts to improve children’s academic achievement through a strategic, collaborative focus on two areas: strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and improving the quality and availability of outside-the-classroom learning experiences. The initiative supports the existing Duval County Public Schools Title I Neighborhood Learning Networks established in collaboration with the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida. Working with school-based Title I Family Involvement Centers, the Next Generation Initiative aims to increase collaboration among the schools and organizations serving children and families at both the district and neighborhood level.

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Key Points

1. Setting goals and objectives, identifying an explicit theory of change, and developing milestones are key to developing an effective evaluation approach.
2. Contemporary evaluation approaches are more conducive to collaborative projects with varying stakeholders and differential needs. A hybrid approach that combines elements of approaches might be most appropriate.
3. Contextual factors that drive the program must be considered when choosing among evaluation approaches.

Introduction

The goal of the Jacksonville Next Generation Initiative (JNGI) is to support local efforts to improve children’s academic achievement through a strategic, collaborative focus on two areas: strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and improving the quality and availability of outside-the-classroom learning experiences. One product of the initiative will be a model for linking out-of-school learning with learning in the classroom through the school-based Family Involvement Centers and Neighborhood Learning Networks (NLNs) at selected Title I schools within Duval County Public Schools. This will be a potentially scalable model to integrate existing community services with the school, and in turn, increase coordination of services for family and student success. Currently, the district and neighborhood schools lack the capacity to initiate and sustain these linkages over time. This project will help build that capacity through scaffolding and support.

The Florida Institute of Education (FIE) at the University of North Florida (UNF) is building capacity by providing scaffolding at multiple levels. The purpose of scaffolding is to enable inwardly thinking schools to become outwardly thinking schools that access the resources of the neighborhood to improve children’s outcomes. Scaffolding is being provided using principles of effective coaching: demonstrating, debriefing, co-teaching, and implementing.

A strong evaluation design will be essential to the long-term success of this initiative and will be critical in providing guidance in the short run. However, selecting the right evaluation approach will be difficult. Research shows that designing an effective evaluation has proved extremely challenging in similar programs in other locales (Boyd & Crowson, 1993; Knapp, 1995; McCall, Ryan, & Plemons, 2003). Research has documented that programs such as this one face considerable challenges involving multiple partners, multiple funding streams, diverse geographic zones, diverse participants, and expectation for change that is dependent primarily on the valued-added from collaboration. All of these factors need to be reflected in the choice of an evaluation approach (Brookings Institution, 1998; Connell & Kubisch, n.d.; Cross, Dickmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Fagan, 2009, Supovitz & Taylor, 2005).

Evaluation Designs
A critical function of evaluation is to identify what works and what doesn’t. An equally valuable purpose is providing information to guide changes as evidence shows need for adjustments or recalibration. Both of these functions are challenging in evaluations of all programs but might prove especially challenging when collaboration is a key element.

A review of the literature for successful evaluation designs for initiatives involving collaborative community engagement suggests the need to provide reliable information in three essential areas: identification of the initiative’s goals and objectives, an understanding of the theory of change underlying the program, and determination of milestones over the life of the program.

Three key components of an effective evaluation approach

Goals and objectives. Goals are broad statements about intended results for the targeted audience (i.e., children and families in the case of the JNGI). When designing an evaluation of the Community Schools Pilot Program, the Scottish government outlined five key goals to be evaluated each year, including “increasing the attainment of young people facing the ‘destructive cycle of underachievement’, …meeting the needs of every child, …[and] raising parental and family expectations and participation in their children’s education” (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2003, p.1). While this example is geographically distant, the goals with time specific objectives are applicable to the JNGI. For example, a goal may be to increase school readiness of children living in the NLN neighborhoods. Objectives clearly state intended outcomes in terms that are measurable and time specific. For example, an objective might be to increase the percentage of children passing the school readiness test from 60% to 70% by the end of 2012.

Theory of change. A theory of change explains how implemented activities are expected to bring about desired outcomes. Usually a theory of change is expressed in the form of a diagram or narrative. In collaborative initiatives, a myriad of activities may be viewed as influencing outcomes. The theory of change, agreed upon by collaborative partners, should focus on those considered to have the greatest impact. As the theory of change is developed, it is also important to identify the contextual factors that may affect the implementation and effectiveness of those activities. For example, if the goal is to improve school readiness for children in the neighborhood, one of the primary activities might be to offer training for parents in enriching their children’s learning opportunities outside the school setting. A contextual factor in this case might be family cultural background, which could affect not only the language in which training is provided but also how parents are reached.

Milestones to measure progress. The experience of collaborative initiatives to date indicates the importance of having milestones along the way to provide collaborators, stakeholders, and funders clear indicators of progress (Kubisch et al., 2002). Milestones are measurable in the short-term. Examples include the design of a new system for referring children and their families for services, the completion of a pilot study, or making a policy change to facilitate pooling of collaborators’ resources.
Data Collection and Analysis

Successful evaluations require the collection of different types of data to provide information to support the multiple objectives and goals. A successful evaluation design should attempt to be economical in the data collected and at the same time responsive to the multiple interests of different partners. Balancing these requirements is difficult but necessary.

Most approaches require attention to collection of similar data over different points of time, collection of data about processes as well as outcomes, and focus on short- as well as long-term goals and objectives.

Collection of similar data over time. One of the simplest and enduring evaluation data collection processes is to collect data on the same phenomenon at different times in the life of the initiative. An important caution, however, is that these data need to closely reflect the features of the initiative and the expected impacts.

Data collected should closely reflect the features of the initiative and the expected impacts.

Data should meet the several criteria. First, the data should be carefully selected with regard to their consistency and availability over time. For example, a school district that consistently administers a parent survey might modify the questions over time to reflect changing interests and priorities. Second, data need to be sensitive enough to detect changes that the program components are designed to produce. For example, because appreciable changes in high school graduation or neighborhood poverty rates may take a generation, shorter-term outcomes might be the focus of evaluation.

Processes and outcomes. Current discussions around accountability in public sector programming have cautioned against the displacement of program outcomes with program processes (Herrington, 1991). However, program outcomes can only speak to the effect of an intervention; they cannot provide understanding as to why the intervention had (or did not have) the intended effect. Recent evaluation designs emphasize the importance of understanding the processes that occurred to better guide improvements, replication, or decisions regarding program continuation (Bruner et al., n.d.; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). In collaboration-based initiatives, it might be more appropriate to focus on process activities rather than outcomes because the near-term phenomenon of interest is the activities of the collaboration partners, jointly or separately (Emihovich & Herrington, 1997).

Short- and long-term goals and objectives. The very nature of the goals and objectives of community-focused, school-based, community and agency collaborative projects is such that the desired outcomes might occur far in the future. Some have estimated that broad-based improvement in the lives of children
and families in low-income neighborhoods may take 10-20 years. This long-term view requires an evaluation design that includes measures of desired outcomes (e.g., readiness for kindergarten, school attendance rates) in ways that will capture impacts in both the short and long term. It also requires careful thought as to the sequencing of the expected impacts (e.g., student attendance rate changes should be a leading indicator for later grade retention rate changes).

Goals and objectives should be aligned with data tools to ensure that the goals and objectives are measurable. The table below is an example of how to align defensible goals with program activities and tools.

Table 1. Goal Alignment Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Theoretical or Research Base</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Evaluation Tool</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linking existing children’s services programs with low performing schools</td>
<td>Neighborhood effects (Bowen, Bowen, &amp; Ware, 2002) Parent involvement (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey &amp; Sandler, 1995; Jeynes, 2005)</td>
<td>Working with public libraries and parks and recreation department to create web of literacy activities in neighborhoods</td>
<td>FAIR assessments, benchmark tests, circulation statistics from public libraries, community center attendance rolls</td>
<td>Monthly, Quarterly, Yearly</td>
<td>Increased benchmark scores, increased circulation of children’s books, increased family use of community center programs</td>
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Developing a Theory of Change for the Jacksonville New Generation Initiative

Program designers and participants often have a theory of change in their minds: an idea of how and why they expect the initiative to work. These theories might not be aligned and might even be conflicting. For example, some participants could believe that change will only occur if the targeted community is involved in the planning. Therefore, any approach that omits this element will violate these participants’ implicit theory of change. In the absence of efforts to make explicit the assumptions underlying the theories of change in use and their implications for program implementation, an evaluation may not include the data elements or analyses necessary to test the theories appropriately.
Participants, be they agency representatives, recipients of targeted services, or program implementers, need to be involved at the outset in activities designed to make explicit the theory of change underlying the initiative. Alternatively, the theory of change can be constructed in a shared set of activities by the different partners. In all cases, the theory needs to be explicited and the linkages among program components, impacts, and results must be clear. Participants should understand the logic that supports the expectation that activity A might result in outcome B. Collaborations over many years with many partners will involve a host of such linkages. Time, thought. and effort put into deriving, making explicit, and collecting any existing evidence to support the theories underlying these linkages will be a cost to the program. However, the costs are much greater if these efforts are not made early and with a degree of thoroughness. Furthermore, other benefits might result such as being more better knowledgeable about partners and their preferred strategies and management styles.

Once the theory of change is clarified, it should be tested. Three tests may be applied to determine the suitability of a theory of change to the initiative (Connell & Kubisch, n.d., p. 3).

- **Is the theory plausible?** Do evidence and common sense suggest that the activities, if implemented, will lead to desired outcomes?
- **Is the theory doable?** Will the economic, technical, political, institutional, and human resources be available to carry out the initiative?
- **Is the theory testable?** Is the theory of change specific and complete enough for an evaluator to track the progress of a comprehensive initiative in credible and useful ways?

**Types of Evaluation**

Traditionally, evaluation has judged the merit or worth of a program based on objective outcomes or indicators that have been developed or decided upon by a team of experts. While traditional approaches were sophisticated in their own right, many in the field identified shortcomings in these approaches. Often investments were made in evaluations that were not used by program staff members and decision-makers. Many evaluators also realized that they were missing elements useful to the evaluative process, such as the experiences and perceptions of program staff members and program participants. Therefore, new evaluation approaches have evolved to accommodate the complexity of collaborative projects.

Several of the new evaluation approaches seem conducive to the needs of collaborative projects. The **responsive evaluation approach** (Abma & Stake, 2001) uses the views of the stakeholders about the program activities as the measure of value. The evaluator functions as a supportive facilitator who ensures that all voices are heard without making judgments about the program activities. The control of making judgment is given to the stakeholders. The presumed objectivity of outcome measures used in traditional
approaches may be sacrificed to ensure that the evaluation is useful. The focus of responsive evaluation is on usability rather than objective measurement of outcomes.

**Program theory-driven evaluation science** (PT-DES) is another approach that may be conducive to the needs of a collaborative project. Within program theory-driven evaluation science, evaluators “work collaboratively with stakeholders to develop a common understanding of how a program is presumed to solve a problem of interest” (Donaldson, 2005, p. 20). This approach assists evaluators and program staff members to explore the program theory.

PT-DES includes a three-step model. The first step is to develop a program theory including assumptions about how the program is designed to address the needs of participants. The second step is to formulate and prioritize evaluation questions based on program theory. The final step is to answer evaluation questions using a systematic and defensible method similar to a more traditional evaluation approach. While the final report might look like a traditional evaluation report, the process differs because the evaluators work collaboratively with the stakeholders to develop theories behind programs and identify solutions to program challenges.

**Participatory evaluation practice** is a form of applied social research in which trained evaluation personnel work in partnership with practice-based decision makers (King, 1998). Participatory evaluation approaches include primary stakeholders when designing the evaluation process. The evaluators work with program staff members to design an evaluation that will optimize staff’s use of results. However, the evaluators retain some control over the evaluative process.

**Utilization-focused evaluation** considers the end user as the leading audience during the development of the evaluation process (Patton, 2002, 2011). The evaluation is designed to involve intended users of the evaluation in making decisions and to develop the capacity of the end-user for evaluative thinking. This approach focuses on the psychology of use, e.g., the understanding that users are more likely to use the findings if they have ownership in the evaluation process. Utilization-focused evaluation builds the capacity of users to continue to think about the program in an evaluative way even after the formal evaluation period has ended.

**Appreciative inquiry** in evaluation develops the best of what already exists in organizations in order to create a better future. There are typically three steps in appreciative inquiry. First, program staff members identify what is working well in their organization. The second step is to envision how what is working well can be expanded into other areas of the organization. Finally, program staff members implement the desired changes.
Appreciative inquiry focuses on the positive aspects of the program and applies these processes to other areas (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006).

The suitability of an evaluation approach (see Table 2) differs based on the desired outcome for the evaluation. If program staff members would like to use traditional indicators to measure traditional outcomes, the evaluation approach used in that situation will differ from an evaluation approach that is designed to elicit views from stakeholders or determine usefulness by program staff members. As described earlier, the JNGI assumes that collaboration, while challenging, will facilitate progress toward shared goals and will add valued resources (from new resources as well as adding value from existing resources through collaboration). Therefore, the approach chosen needs to be designed to capture the activities of collaboration, identify the activities pursued to enhance collaboration, and identify the measures, both proximal and distal, that capture the impacts of collaboration.

An example of an evaluation in Florida that captured the activities of collaboration is the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida’s Miami Children’s Initiative Community Strategic Plan Evaluation Report (Walby, 2010). In this report, evaluation focused on the collaborative planning process using a pathway of change (or theory of change) perspective. The approach that best fits this type of evaluation is the PT-DES approach. However, the actual approach was not PT-DES in its purest form, but the approach was adapted to meet the needs of the project. Another example of an evaluation of a neighborhood learning program in Florida is the Evaluation Update of the Parramore Kidz Zone (PKZ) in Orlando (Health Council of East Central Florida, Inc., 2009). This evaluation focused on traditional measures of descriptive statistical success along with measures of progress toward the yearly goals. Also included in the evaluation were interviews with the residents of the neighborhood and participants in the program. This evaluation contained elements of a responsive evaluation approach along with an objectives-oriented approach.

For the JNGI, it may be necessary to use a hybrid of evaluation approaches to achieve the desired goals. A utilization-focused evaluation allows the program staff to help guide the evaluation process and develops the capacity of the program staff to think about how they can use evaluation in their daily activities. A program theory-driven evaluation approach can help the JNGI think through the theories behind the activities they are developing and determine if there are evaluation questions they need to answer to solidify the theory. Appreciative inquiry may be used to examine the positives that have developed from the existing NLNs and expand how the NLNs can spread these successes into other program activities. Each approach has merit, but it is important to recognize that they are approaches instead of frameworks.
Table 2. Evaluation Approaches Conducive to Collaborative Projects

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<tr>
<th>Evaluation Approach</th>
<th>Major Theorists</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| Responsive          | Robert Stake and Jennifer Greene (Abma & Stake, 2001; Greene, 2005) | • Uses the views of the stakeholders about the program activities as the measurement of value.  
• Evaluator functions as a supportive facilitator.  
• Accuracy of traditional outcome measures sacrificed to ensure that the evaluation is useful. |
| Program Theory-Driven | Stewart Donaldson (2005)                              | • Evaluators work collaboratively with stakeholders.  
• Three step model:  
  1. Develop program theory;  
  2. Formulate and prioritize evaluation questions; and  
  3. Answer evaluation questions. |
| Participatory        | Egon Guba, Yvonna Lincoln, and Jean King (Alkin, 2004; King, 1998) | • Trained evaluation personnel work in partnership with practice-based decision makers.  
• Considers usefulness to primary users when designing the evaluation process.  
• Evaluators retain some control over the evaluative process. |
| Utilization Focused | Michael Quinn Patton (2002)                           | • Considers the end user the leading audience during the development of the evaluation process.  
• Designed to make decisions with the intended users of the evaluation.  
• Develops the capacity of the end-user for evaluative thinking.  
• Users may be more likely to use the findings due to ownership in the evaluation process. |
| Appreciative        | Hallie Preskill and Terrie Catsambas (Coghlan, Preskill, & Catsambas, 2003; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006) | • Develops the best of what already exists in organizations in order to create a better future in that organization.  
• Three steps in appreciative inquiry  
  1. Identify what works well;  
  2. Envision expansion of what works well; and  
  3. Implement desired changes. |
This means that they should be customized to fit the context in which they are used. Each approach could be adapted or combined with other approaches to meet the needs of initiative.

**Special Features of Community and School Collaborative Initiatives**

Collaborative activities, particularly in the human and social services, usually rest on the premise that additional value can be derived from existing initiatives or programs based on improved efficiencies or service delivery resulting from the collaborative activities. This premise is a challenge to traditional evaluation methodologies that derive from input/output equations and assume a treatment will result in a change.

Collaboration-based interventions usually have multiple participants, strategies, and desired outcomes. Collaborative partners usually derive their expectation of improved outcomes from “multiple strands (economic, political, and social), which operate at many levels (community, institutional, personal network, family, and individual), are often co-constructed in a collaborative process by diverse stakeholders and evolve over the course of the initiative” (Connell & Kubisch, n.d., p. 1). These expectations and strands present challenging conditions for successful evaluation.

For example, implementation in collaborations targeting children, families, and neighborhoods is often complex, variable, and incomplete (Knapp, 1995). While similar conditions are present in many other types of programs that need evaluation (such as health, transportation, and water management), in collaborative projects these conditions are almost always present. They are often the defining trait of the collaborative (Connell & Kubisch, n.d.). In fact, flexibility, idiosyncrasies, and convergence of disparate influences are at the very heart of many collaborative initiatives. This complexity impacts evaluation components such as measurement, analysis, and attribution of causality. These complications often spill over to other aspects of the evaluation efforts (Connell & Kubisch, n.d.).

Context is a variable that might prove paramount in community-oriented collaboratives. What works in one setting or set of circumstances might not work in another. A critical factor in one context might be minor or inconsequential agent in another context. Although it is often difficult to capture critical elements of the context and the independent and collective effects on desired outcomes, research has well-documented the central role of context in programming success (Brown & Fiester, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Patton (2002), who has written extensively on evaluation, stressed the need to be efficient and economical in design and implementation. The three-part test for plausibility, feasibility and testability can help program leaders develop an evaluation design that is relevant to what they are trying to accomplish, credible to external stakeholders, and executable within a specific context. The application of the criteria up front when the theory of change is first under construction can maximize the feasibility, quality, and utility of the evaluation.
Sensitivity to the importance of context can be built into effective evaluation decisions and recognized as a limitation on generalizing from one context to others.

**Questions for Consideration**

1. What theory of action will inform the project?
2. How will the theory of action be made explicit for program staff?
3. What are the short-term and long-term outcomes for the project?
4. What factors are important for data collection and analysis?
5. What baseline data are available?
6. What is the time line for the evaluation?
References


