



LITERACY UPDATE

MARCH 06 Vol. 15 No. 4

Literacy Assistance Center

IN THIS ISSUE

3 What's in Your Wallet? 4 The Arts & Literacy
5 Recognition Ceremony 6 Career Development Institute 11 Student Demographics

How Are We Doing?

Using Evaluation to Inform Program Decisions

> *Anne Lawrence* *The Robert Bowne Foundation*

Four years ago I jumped the fence. After nearly 30 years as an adult educator, I became a program officer for the Robert Bowne Foundation, which funds programs that support literacy development for children and youth in their out-of-school time. When I arrived at the foundation, one of my first goals was to integrate evaluation into the fabric of our own work.

As someone who had served on evaluation committees in every program I ever worked for, as well as the LAC Assessment Group and state assessment committees, I was aware that traditional "accountability" evaluation is rarely useful for programs. My goal as an educator had been to make evaluation truly useful to me, as well as to the rest of the staff and the program participants. I wanted our

reports to give funders useful information on how well we were fulfilling our mission and accomplishing our goals. When I became a funder, I wanted the foundation to have the same information. I was a firm believer that integrating a well-designed evaluation was essential for any organization striving for excellence, whether it was a classroom, organizations we funded, or my own institution. This was not a hard sell at the foundation, which has been training evaluators and now program staff in participatory evaluation for more than ten years.

The Robert Bowne Foundation Evaluation

In developing our process, I was fortunate to be working with Dr. Kim Sabo, an experienced participatory evaluator. Our

first step was to ask the staff and consultants what information would be useful to them in evaluating the effectiveness of what they were doing. Since the foundation's strategic goals are directly linked to assisting programs in building organizational capacity, we wanted to know whether our grantees believed our management and programmatic technical assistance truly helped them. As the program officer, I also wanted to know what I could do better to assist them in reaching their full potential. Over the four years that I have been program officer, we have modified our evaluation design and questions as we learn what information is most useful to us. Here is our current version, which will no doubt evolve further over time.

continued on page 8

How Are We Doing? *continued*

RBF Evaluation Design 2005

| Evaluation Questions | Methods |
|---|--|
| <p>What is the current service delivery model in RBF grantee programs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Which activities are most often employed? > How integrated is literacy? > How strong is the overall management model within each grantee program? > In what areas do RBF grantees need assistance? > Which are the most significant areas of need? > What are common program goals for the year? | <p>Support visit questionnaire Final reports</p> |
| <p>How and to what extent have grantees changed due to their interaction with RBF technical assistance (TA) providers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Which types of TA were recommended and utilized? > How and to what extent have TA learnings been integrated into practice? Why? > How effective/useful is the new site visit strategy? > Which RBF technical assistance providers are most often engaged by RBF grantees? How effective are these services? | <p>Support visit questionnaire Final reports TA Survey</p> |

As we developed our own evaluation design, we noticed that some of our grantees had less staff turnover than others and were able to implement and sustain what they learned through technical assistance. To give us more information on how we could better support programs, we asked Dr. Sabo to look more closely at five that appeared to have successfully integrated our technical assistance and were able to sustain its benefits. Her case studies revealed that "quality" after-school programs share many of the traits found in other types of successful organizations, including large corporations. In most of them, directors and staff members believe that people and organizations have the ability to change and become more effective, and that change requires open communication and empowerment of community members, as well as a culture of collaboration. In his book *The Fifth Dimension* (Currency Doubleday, 1990), business strategist Peter Senge calls them "learning organizations." These are what I look for.

In the Field

Evaluation plays an essential role in a learning organization. It gives all stakeholders information about how the program is operating and how it can be improved. That said, a good evaluation process can be found in many forms. Here are examples of how some of our grantees have integrated and used evaluation in their programs.

Riverdale Neighborhood House began evaluating their program in 1999. One of the tools it uses is focus groups (six to eight individuals are interviewed on a particular topic). They conduct them with each

grade level of their program. The children are selected randomly and the focus groups last around 30 minutes. Students are asked what they like and dislike, and what they would like to change about reading and writing activities. Program changes made based on the information collected during the focus groups include adding magazines (such as *Sports Illustrated*) and books to the curriculum that the students said they enjoyed reading and giving students more opportunities to select what they read. (RNH describes its experience of integrating evaluation into the program in *Participatory Evaluation in the After-School Program, a Practical Guide*.)

At Global Kids, a program for young adults, the staff regularly solicits the opinions of participants. For example, the members of its Human Rights Activist Project (HRAP) choose a topic to investigate through discussion and exploration of human rights issues of major importance in their lives and the lives of others. They then determine the most effective way to use their collective skills to organize a campaign for social change. Participants are asked to fill out a survey form at the end of the year. Based on feedback from their first survey, as well as staff observations, the staff determined that HRAP members hadn't had enough time to explore the year's chosen theme in sufficient depth. As a result, subsequent year-end surveys have asked program participants to suggest themes they might like to explore during the next year.

continued on page 9

How Are We Doing? *continued*

Developing an Evaluation Process

Ideally, according to *A Participatory Model for Evaluating Social Programs* (The James Irvine Foundation, 2002), a program evaluation should:

- > Involve all stakeholders (the funders, the staff, the students, the board, and the community served)
- > Inform stakeholders and decision makers whether the program is successful
- > Identify ways to improve quality and inspire innovation
- > Increase responsiveness to the needs of students and other stakeholders

Integrating evaluation into a program is not a short-term project. About 30 percent of our former and current grantees have begun the process; most of them have devoted several years to evaluation training and tool development. To initiate the process, the staff should discuss their experience with evaluation, their views of current program work,

and what information they would like to collect if they didn't have to worry about time or other limitations. Regular meeting time should be set aside for staff members to read articles and share their own expertise. The staff should then experiment with a variety of evaluation tools. Finally, the program should bring in experts to offer advice. (An increasing number of foundations are willing to consider evaluation as a part of the program expenses they will fund. However, before bringing in an outside evaluator, the staff needs to be clear about what they want evaluated and how they want to be involved.)

As with most things, you learn about evaluation by doing it. This takes a lot of time and effort. It's worth the investment. As we have found in our own work at the foundation, an evaluation process woven into a program's everyday life gives all stakeholders, especially staff and participants, input into program design. It helps practitioners understand what they are accountable for. It gives participants continuous feedback on their progress. Finally, evaluation gives everyone involved a sense of what's working—and what's not. ●

CONFERENCES

March

15th Annual National Conference on Family Literacy
National Center for Family Literacy
March 19–21, Louisville, KY
www.familit.org/Conference/index.cfm

TESOL Academy 2006
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL)
June 23–25, Chicago, IL
www.tesol.org

April

Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) 2006 Conference
COABE and the Texas Association for Literacy and Adult Education
April 26–29, Houston, TX
www.coabe06.org/

2006 Reading Research Conference
International Reading Association
April 29, Chicago, IL
www.reading.org/association/meetings/research

May

The Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) Technology Conference
Beyond Technology: The Bigger Picture
May 1–2, Springfield, MA
www.beyondtechnology.org

5th Annual Health Literacy Conference
Beyond the Written Word: Alternative Solutions to Low Health Literacy
Institute for Healthcare Advancement (IHA)
May 4–6, Irvine, CA
www.ihah4health.org

47th Annual Adult Education Research Conference
The Many Faces of Adult Education
May 18–21, Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN
www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/informat.htm

June

Functional Context Education Workshop
June 1, North Bay, Ontario, Canada
www.nald.ca/WHATNEW/hnews/2005/stchjl28.htm

JOBS IN LITERACY

A more extensive and up-to-date list of employment ads is available online at www.lacny.org/jobs.

Executive Director

Literacy Nassau, an affiliate of ProLiteracy America, is seeking a new executive director. Responsibilities include resource development; program, staff & volunteer management; & advocacy for adult literacy. Bachelor's degree & nonprofit leadership/management experience req.

For more information, email literacyn@hotmail.com.