

Public Abstract

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Title:UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM EVALUATION PROCESS OF A MISSOURI SCHOOL DISTRICT

The purpose of this study was to provide a utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1997) of a Missouri School District (hereafter referred to as The School District) program evaluation process. The distinguishing feature of the utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) approach is that it emphasizes intended use by clearly identified intended users. For this UFE, the primary intended user was the superintendent of a Kindergarten-12 (K-12) school district in Missouri; other stakeholders for this study were identified as the highest level of leadership within The School District. This group of stakeholders is collectively referred to as the superintendent's cabinet.

Literature suggests that the K-12 arena is not populated with professional program evaluators. As a result, evaluations typically emphasize outcomes at the expense of process assessment while also prioritizing compliance needs ahead of other stakeholder interests (Eddy & Berry, 2007). The problem addressed by this study was that The School District had not yet determined how to implement program evaluations that are routinely capable of maximizing the use of stakeholder time, overcoming geographic constraints, and providing anonymity where necessary while still promoting organizational knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The School District needed a program evaluation model that balanced organizational knowledge creation with cost effectiveness, efficiency, and compliance.

This study employed qualitative research processes and used the social construction of reality theory as a conceptual underpinning. The use of qualitative processes allowed for the collection of rich, thick descriptions (Merriam, 1998), which was particularly important given that the social construction of reality theory is predicated upon the importance of words, phrases, and narratives to construct meaning and diffuse knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

The chief research question asked whether or not a site-specific model for program evaluation could be generated. In response to the question, the study found that specific tools and processes could be generated. By implementing these tools, procedural issues could be rectified, which would, in turn, impact four facets of the organization: human relations, political, symbolic, and structural. However, the research also indicated a need for a fluidity in thought and practice that transcends the discrete processes normally conceived of within the confines of a model or what Morgan (1997) would call a "flexible style of organization and management" (p.44). Consequently, the study resulted in two types of conclusions-- procedural and process-use. Of particular interest is that the research findings could be aligned to three of the four evaluation industry-wide indicators of process use: enhancing shared understandings, increasing engagement, and program and organizational development (Patton, 1997; King, 2007; Harner & Preskill, 2007).

The most significant findings of the UFE were that a) The School District should implement clearly articulated processes, tools, and procedures, such as the type created as a result of this study, and b) The School District should also intentionally incorporate process-use within future evaluation practice as a method to deliberately provide for evaluation-capacity building and knowledge creation within the organization.