

**Schools use many different approaches to encourage students to stay in school and attend regularly. But how do we know that these efforts are making a difference?**

## EVALUATING PRACTICE

Most schools and school districts work to reduce truancy and increase high school completion. Many have implemented initiatives to prevent school-leaving or to intervene when students are frequently absent. But what data demonstrate that these initiatives made a difference? Are “evaluations” comprised solely of anecdotes and testimonials?

It may be unrealistic for schools to design formal research projects with experimental conditions that include control groups, discrete measures and detailed data collection, but projects should be evaluated to identify effective interventions and promising practices that can be shared or replicated.

### Plan the Evaluation

It is best to plan for evaluation at the same time that you design your program. But even if you have already started your program without an evaluation plan, it is not too late to make one—just harder because you may not have important baseline information that would have been easy to collect at the beginning.

Interventions focused on keeping kids in school may occur at different levels:

- primary prevention programs directed at all students
- interventions for students at risk of dropping out
- interventions for the small percentage of students exhibiting clear signs of early school leaving.

In a review of promising programs, Hammond et al (2007) found that:

- 60% included life skills development, such as conflict resolution, social skills, critical thinking
- 46% focused on family strengthening that included training in parenting skills and increasing school involvement
- 26% incorporated academic support strategies that included tutoring, homework assistance and computer labs
- 20% used behavioural interventions to change problem behaviours

In addition to keeping track of school attendance, evaluation plans for these programs included ways of evaluating the direct effects of the initiatives—improvement in life skills, family school involvement, academic skills and/or behaviour.

### Typical questions for defining your focus

- Are you trying to improve the attendance rate school-wide, or are you trying to improve attendance of selected students who are already attending irregularly?
- Are improved grades important project outcomes?
- Are you concerned about students who arrive late or only those who do not attend at all?
- Are you concerned about attachment and involvement when students are in school or just their presence?
- Are parent and staff attitudes important components of your intervention program?

Answers to these and other questions will help to shape both your intervention and evaluation plans. Pose clear and answerable questions and decide how you will determine the answers—before you start implementation.

Your plans, your outcomes and your evaluation should all be internally consistent. For example, if the intervention plan is focusing on improving the attendance of students who are already missing a lot of school, then you would want to concentrate on the attendance for those particular students—measuring it before and after the intervention is put in place. You would not want to use a measure of school-wide attendance rates to measure the success of this project.

It is important to have both short and long term outcomes and measures to determine whether, and to what degree, outcomes are met. Some prevention initiatives may take several years to demonstrate change; others show immediate improvements in the short term, only to fall back to the baseline when the novelty has worn off.

### Set Targets

Once you have decided what to evaluate and how to measure it, set high but realistic, targets. Following are some sample targets:

- Improve school attendance rates of grade 10 students by 5% per year compared with the attendance rate from the 2007-2008 baseline year
- Reduce the number of students absent 4 or more days per month from 17 in 2007-2008 to 3 in 2008-2009
- Increase the number of periods that Joe Student attends and is on time from 50% in October to 80% in January and February
- Increase positive perceptions of school climate of students and staff by 10% yearly from baseline survey measurement

Plan regularly scheduled data gathering (be it daily, monthly or yearly) to answer questions such as:

- Does the improvement continue or increase over time?
- Does the improvement continue after interventions are faded out or dropped?

In addition to determining if the program results in change, evaluation should also include the question—is the change significant? Remember that the term “significant” can have both a statistical and practical dimensions. Statistical significance may not translate to real world significance.

There is also the issue of the cost of the initiative relative to its benefit—has there been an adequate pay-off for the time, effort and financial resources dedicated to the project? If yes, there is validation to continue. If the answer is no, this should trigger an examination of both the choice of interventions and the integrity of its implementation. The project may need to be tweaked or completely redesigned.

### Quantitative or Qualitative Evaluation?

You will likely want to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data will answer the “did it work?” questions. These data could include attendance, grades and credits; a record of the number of students who received tutoring or counselling and numeric information from student, parent and staff surveys.

Qualitative data may help you to answer the “how” and “why” questions. Qualitative data can include observations, video files, or descriptive text passages and may come from interviews, focus groups and open-ended questions on written surveys. Questions might include “What effect did the tutoring program have on your class attendance? What would help you to get your children to school on time?”

### For Further Information see:

Hammond, C. et al (2007)

*Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs: A Technical Report*

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

[http://www.dropoutprevention.org/resource/major\\_reports/communities\\_in\\_schools.htm](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/resource/major_reports/communities_in_schools.htm)

National Center for School Engagement (2005)

*How to Evaluate Your Truancy Reduction Program*

<http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/HowtoEvaluateYourTruancyReductionProgram.pdf>