



## **VIGNETTE: Building Trust Between Evaluators and School Staff**

**Purpose:** Reviewing this district evaluator's insightful account of how school staff may perceive an external evaluation can help you anticipate and address staff concerns and needs.

**Source:** Interviews with Tom Watkins, internal evaluator for St. Paul Public Schools, MN, August 4, 2008, and October 20, 2008.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. Which best describes the attitude toward magnet funding and evaluation at your participating schools: "Cash cow," "mad cow," or "holy cow?"
2. Why do some urban school staff adopt a "bunker mentality?"
3. What steps did Tom Watkins take to build a receptive audience at the school for the magnet program and evaluation? How did this improve communication and, ultimately, the evaluation?
4. Do you anticipate that similar staff feelings will surface in magnet schools you are evaluating? If so, how will you address them to ensure successful interaction between the staff and the evaluator?



## Building Trust Between Evaluators and School Staff

**Background:** *St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) received funding through the Magnet Schools Assistance Program in 2007 to begin two new magnet schools and to rigorously evaluate their magnet program.*

*In this vignette, Tom Watkins, SPPS internal evaluator, describes attitudes and beliefs among school staff that affect magnet program implementation and evaluation. Specifically, he describes how eliciting staff perspectives built a relationship that allowed staff to move past “cash cow” and “bunker mentality” attitudes and successfully engage in the evaluation process.*

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“What I have realized is that there are several different ways in which people can look at a grant, a major grant such as this magnet grant. They can look at it as a “cash cow.” So, basically, it’s a source of money and we can spend, as long as we’ve got the right code and we can fit it in. It basically minimizes the accountability for creating change. That’s one extreme that can actually happen. One that I have heard about but has never really gotten to that point here is the “mad-cow” alternative where everybody is aware that this grant is happening because they have regular irritations everyday from the grant, all sorts of things that are uncomfortable and that they don’t like doing and that don’t make sense to them. They haven’t felt like they have been partners in the system. And so that’s another extreme that you can ultimately go to. Maybe the middle road somewhere is the “holy cow” where you are actually doing something great everyday, you are glad that you are part of the program, you are true to the original vision of it and you are extending it further. Other people that encounter it can see the exemplary nature of the program. It’s sort of a funny illustration, but I think that that tension does exist everyday in the program and it’s our job to constantly bring it back and have that right attitude. Here is a specific example.”

“You have probably noticed this with many urban schools: They are labeled a low-performing school through No Child Left Behind and maybe even preceding NCLB. There is a lot of accountability pressure on an urban school that has a lot of students from low-income backgrounds and other related challenges, such as a lot of English Learners. There is a “bunker mentality” that can come in where the school staff really feel they have to band together and defend their work to the public against communications from the state, the feds, and, to some degree, from the district. So, to me, the context for doing an evaluation has to acknowledge that the climate is not a neutral atmosphere. We need to recognize all the hard work and heavy lifting that this staff has taken on over the past year and begin by listening to what they feel are their greatest accomplishments, what their priorities are and so on. I try to acknowledge not just the teaching history but also the emotional history, if you will. These are relevant pieces of the context that evaluation can’t ignore and, in fact, we need to acknowledge and work with. At one high school we had to acknowledge the bunker mentality first to build a relationship and common understanding of goals and expectations. They needed to hear that we were all working to the same end.”



**Practice:**

**Set the stage for purposeful evaluation**

*Key Action:*

*Create communication pathways between key staff and evaluators*

“We also had to provide some background. It was a real wake-up call for me when I had an initial conversation with the staff and they did not have an understanding of integration history or magnet school history. Just simply being able to give an overview of that, connecting it back to Brown vs. Board of Education is important. You look at the typical teacher or all the teacher turnover that happens in urban schools and you realize they may not carry that kind of background. Giving that kind of context was essential to breaking down the bunker mentality and letting teachers know this shouldn’t feel like an attack on their professionalism or their work. It raises the level of ethical and moral interest on the part of various stakeholders, whether that’s teachers or any of the other stakeholders.”

“Once we did that, then we could move forward with the evaluation. The evaluators got great cooperation asking for information and data. With this preparation, the staff responded quickly to requests for information and gave honest feedback in the interviews.”