

 **VIGNETTE: Evaluation Lessons From One Cancelled Program**

Purpose: Before you can answer, “Is our magnet program effective?” you must first ask, “Did we do what we set out to do?” This vignette can help you reflect on why it is essential to conduct both an implementation evaluation of your program and an outcome evaluation.

Source: Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Discussion Questions

1. If the state welfare program had been implemented, what sort of data might you have collected to determine the effectiveness of the program?
2. How would you describe the importance of measuring program implementation?
3. How do you currently measure the effectiveness of other programs in your school district?
4. What strategies do you have in place to provide oversight of the implementation of each magnet school’s program?

Evaluation Lessons From One Cancelled Program

Background: This excerpt from Michael Patton’s book on utilization-focused evaluation,* describes the evaluation of a legally mandated basic resource management program for welfare recipients. Analyses of pre- and post-data indicated that the program was ineffective in meeting its objectives, so the program was cancelled. After an implementation evaluation of the program was conducted, it became clear why the program was ineffective—it had never been implemented!

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A state legislature established a program to teach welfare recipients the basic rudiments of parenting and household management. Under this mandate, the state welfare department was charged with conducting workshops, distributing brochures, showing films, and training caseworkers on how low-income people could better manage their meager resources and become better parents. A single major city was selected for pilot-testing the program, with a respected independent research institute contracted to evaluate the program. Both the state legislature and the state welfare department committed themselves publicly to using the evaluation findings for decision making.

The evaluators interviewed a sample of welfare recipients before the program began, collecting data about parenting, household management, and budgetary practices. Eighteen months later, they interviewed the same welfare recipients again. The results showed no measurable change in behavior. The evaluators judged the program ineffective, a conclusion they reported to the state legislature and the newspapers. Following legislative debate and adverse publicity, the legislature terminated funding for the program—a dramatic case of using evaluation results to inform a major decision.

Now suppose we want to know why the program was ineffective. The evaluation as conducted shed no light on what went wrong because it focused entirely on measuring the attainment of intended program outcomes: changed parenting and household management behaviors of welfare recipients. As it turns out, there is a very good reason why the program didn’t attain the desired outcomes. It was never implemented.

When funds were allocated from the state to the city, the program immediately became embroiled in the politics of urban welfare. Welfare rights organizations questioned the right of government to tell poor people how to spend their money or rear their children: “You have no right to tell us we have to run our houses like the white middle-class parents. And who’s this Frenchman Piaget who’s going to tell us how to raise American kids?”

These and other political battles delayed program implementation. Procrastination being the better part of valor, no parenting brochures were ever printed; no household management films were ever shown; no workshops were held; and no caseworkers were ever hired or trained.

In short, the program was never implemented. But it was evaluated! It was found to be ineffective—and was killed.

* Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text* (4th ed., pp. 309–310). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.