



 **VIGNETTE: How We Handled Emerging Data Issues**

Purpose: You may experience many data-related misunderstandings and problems as you plan your evaluation and collect data. To help you anticipate and address such problems, this vignette describes some common data collection issues and how Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools staff addressed them at the outset of their evaluation.

Source: Interview with Kim Morrison, Magnet Schools Program Manager, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, NC, July 24, 2008.

Questions for Reflection

1. Kim Morrison describes several potential issues associated with data. What are they and how did district staff address them?
2. Which of these issues are you likely to face in your district?
3. What structures and people exist or will you put in place to avoid data collection issues throughout your evaluation?
4. How is communication specifically used to avoid data issues? How, when, and between whom will communication be used in your district to avoid or address data issues?



How We Handled Emerging Data Issues

Background: *Direct and indirect measures are used in evaluation in a variety of fields. This fictitious conversation between a magnet director and the external evaluator highlights how the indirect measures don't always generate accurate data in response to the evaluation question. Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools staff received Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) grants in both the 2004 and 2007 funding cycles. They are conducting an MSAP rigorous evaluation as part of the 2007 grant cycle. In this interview, Kim Morrison, the Magnet School Program Manager, talks about the importance of data collection, the role of the data department, and how her district supported direct collaboration between the data department and the evaluator.*

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Data collection is really key to a successful evaluation. We have already gone through this process for two cycles now and so we pretty much know that we can handle it. We have access to disaggregated data like minority-majority [Black/Hispanic-White] data. We can analyze data by gender if we choose to do that. The biggest piece, of course, is the academic achievement data. We also have surveys about school climate. We have field surveys and teacher surveys and principal surveys in our district. So, we get tons of data. But there are key questions we have to address, like: "Are the data in the right form?" or "Is this really the data that will help our evaluator tell us what we need to know?"

I think some school districts are probably challenged because they do not have an existing databank. They don't have people who are gathering the data all the time. And in our system, you really just have to sit down with our data managers and say, "Here's what we need and here is the form that we need it in." It's not an issue of whether we can get this data—we can get the data here.

But we've had to negotiate issues of data collection based on our evaluation questions. For example, one of our research questions dealt with free and reduced-price lunch, which was intended as an indirect way to measure the racial composition of the student population. But our school system won't allow that lunch data to be released at the student level, even if we could do it with an anonymous number system. So, we can't really address a question that deals with our program's impact on free and reduced-price lunch counts. Our question needed to change, so we've switched to measuring program impact on the minority versus majority—Black or Hispanic versus White—ratio in our student population.

Once we know what data we need, we hold conference calls with the external evaluators. They tell us what data we need and ask if we can get the data in a specific form. In our most recent round of data collection, our district's director of data services gave us a document with everything highlighted; here is what we have, here is where we got it, here is where the test changed at the high school level, here is where the test changed at the middle school level, here are the years this data covers, here is the exact format we used. It was very good data, but there is a lot of conversation that must happen to get it in that shape. I feel you have to have a good relationship with everybody involved to make something like this happen.



Right from the beginning and throughout the evaluation process, the data department and evaluators need to communicate regularly. Our evaluators set up a regular conference call and they send questions about their data needs beforehand. After the conference call, there are follow-up calls, where the evaluators say, "Okay, now that we know this additional information about the district, we want to look at a different data set instead because we now know that the data we initially wanted will be difficult to get."

Equally important is having the right person in the data department helping you. You need to know that this person is fully capable of handling your data requests, and will get you the data you need in the form you need. Also, you need data people who are easy to work with. That is hugely important because, as you know, working with data can get really complicated. People on the evaluation team can get upset because someone didn't provide enough data, or because we need different data, or we need to measure things in a different way. The person that we have worked with this year is just really easy to work with. In fact, yesterday I said, "I need to see this data in this format," and she responded right away that she could get it to me next week. This really helps with making a data collection process go smoothly.