VIGNETTE: Accounting for Negative Evaluation Findings

Purpose: Thinking creatively about negative evaluation results can be important for ongoing program development. This interview with an evaluator suggests a process for addressing negative findings, putting them in context, and using them to inform planning.

Source: Interview with Deborah Collins, evaluator with The Education Alliance at Brown University, October 20, 2008.

Questions for Reflection

1. What steps does Deborah Collins suggest taking throughout the evaluation to address the possibility of negative findings?

2. Collins asserts that most districts are not surprised by negative evaluation findings. What results do you anticipate will be not as strong as hoped in your program(s), and why?

3. What additional questions will you ask to determine the root cause of the negative findings? What steps will you take to incorporate lessons from negative findings in planning for subsequent years?

Accounting for Negative Evaluation Findings

Background: *Deborah Collins, an evaluator with the Education Alliance at Brown University, conducts Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) evaluations for districts in collaboration with American Education Solutions, Inc. In this interview she describes a process for addressing negative findings throughout an evaluation.*

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I think everyone is a little afraid of negative results. Districts want to understand more about their progress and the impact of their programs but aren't sure what to do with non-findings or negative results. The Alliance has really tried to engage in collaborative inquiry with a district to find out what they are doing well in their programs, but also point to the areas where, if we improve the program, it's going to really excel.

If we have been having ongoing conversations with a district about the data, debriefing around what we are learning as we move forward, we are probably already starting to anticipate what some of the areas are that aren't working well. When there have been negative findings, it's not necessarily a surprise to the district or to the sites that we are working with. We see it as a matter of: What more can you tell us to help us make sense of this and improve the situation? In some cases, it has helped to pull the data apart more by looking at different subpopulations or thinking about the other programs that might be going on at the same time. We need to ask: How do we separate this other initiative from what's going on with the magnet program? It's really working through data collaboratively and looking at these issues over time. I think our experience of talking through results each year—looking at the results from various perspectives; and running multiple types of analysis to see if it looks different if you parse the data in one way versus another—has really been very instructive for us and for the district.

Here is one example of how parsing the data in various ways can help explain negative findings, and at least point to another explanation we might not have thought about or that might validate our hunches. Evaluation results were not showing the magnet program impact on math scores that the district was hoping to see. They weren't really surprised, they just needed to understand why or what it was that might be contributing. We initially looked at the scores across schools and then we looked a little more deeply at individual schools.

One of the schools had a humanities and arts theme; another had a science and technology theme. Understandably, the school that's addressing more of the math, science, and technology content is going to have a wider variety of experience that might help students on their math assessments. Whereas in the humanities and arts, they might not have been focusing on that as specifically, even though it's a part of their curriculum. So that data just helped them realize that, while they are focused on the arts and humanities, they also needed to find some way to help that theme work across the curriculum into their math and science instruction, as well.

So I think that communication over time; revisiting the evaluation questions; looking at data; thinking through what might be some other explanations for why things are happening the way they are; all make a big difference in interpreting negative evaluation findings.