

## Interview Transcript: Set the stage for purposeful evaluation

- **Tom Watkins**, program evaluator for the BioSMART magnet program, St. Paul Public Schools, MN
- **Sheila Arens**, external evaluator for the BioSMART program, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)
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### Interview Highlights

- St. Paul Public Schools staff looked for particular key qualifications in an external evaluator.
- Ongoing, clear communication between the evaluation team and school staff is critical; a resource manual is one approach to keeping staff informed of all aspects of the evaluation.
- Each member of the evaluation team, whether internal or external, has an essential role and responsibilities for the evaluation process.

**Watkins:** I am Tom Watkins. I am the BioSMART program evaluator, so I am the internal evaluator on the evaluation team. We also have an external evaluator from McREL and we have an experimental design expert at University of Wisconsin-Madison; that's Geoffrey Borman.

**Arens:** And I am Sheila Arens. I am the external evaluator for the BioSMART Program.

**Watkins:** The key purpose of the evaluation is always going back to, are we actually hitting our mission, are we actually on the mark? And so to me, anybody who is supervising a program or responsible for a team aspect within the program wants to know that; they want to know, how are we actually doing?

I think that main thing that we wanted to learn in looking at this magnet program is really the effectiveness of a pretty extensive school reform strategy. But it wasn't just restricted to that big question; it was also looking at lots of the little questions: What are the contributing active ingredients, if you will, to this school reform approach? And one of those things is the Professional Learning Communities; another part is interdisciplinary science. So there were a lot of sub-questions that were also of interest.

**Arens:** McREL, in particular myself, I have been involved in a number of evaluation projects with St. Paul Public Schools. We really were brought in early on to be the external evaluator, really helping them think through their application process and think through the places where evaluation would make sense.

**Watkins:** We really need an external evaluator that is reputable, somebody that is really solid and well-known nationally and maybe even globally with regard to that particular area. We need somebody who really is relevant to urban school systems; they understand school systems; they have a need for more information with urban school systems. And we need somebody who is responsive to our needs. We have somebody to really represent that experimental design piece and someone to really drive the overarching evaluation, and somebody within the inside to give that perspective as well. And I just see each part as contributing quite a bit and drawing, I think, the best out of the program. To me, the key thing has been that it has been an ongoing commitment on the part of all parties to keep the communication up and to be open and honest around the different issues that arise.

**Arens:** And I think one of the things that's important for people to realize is that the amount, the frequency of communication, ebbs and flows; and for district people to understand that, toward the beginning, when they're slammed with lots and lots of other work, they are going to be receiving lots and lots of requests from the evaluators, too, and so just to expect that, but to also expect that the communication needs to be ongoing, and while it might not always be as intense, it's necessary—that's all toward the end of a better final product. One of the things that we thought was really important was for us to develop a mechanism for communicating to the teachers and to the school staff. I think they probably have a lot of questions about why are we being asked to do this extra survey, or why are we being asked to administer another survey for our students? And so what we did was developed a resource manual that teachers could reference and that allows them to know who is involved, who the players are, what are the roles and responsibilities of the people who are involved in the BioSMART Evaluation and in the BioSMART Intervention, and who do they go to if they have questions, and kind of what's the big picture? So give them a sense of what they can expect down the road and what our goals are.

**Watkins:** The elements of evaluation that are really vital are there, no matter whether you have a grant program going or not. It's about having an effective school. It's about actually meeting the needs of the students. And that evaluation process does nothing more than that at its core; that's the key responsibility that we have in education. I think having that as a habit of mind—that you are going back to and reflecting on—you know, really, are we doing what we said we were going to do? Really, are we getting the impact that we intended to have? And I think that that becomes part of the momentum of change.