Interview Transcript: Develop a theory of action for your program

- **Michelle Ungurait**, director of magnet schools and choice programs, Guilford County, NC
- **Deborah Collins**, director of research and evaluation, The Education Alliance at Brown University
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Interview Highlights

- Ideally, developing a theory of action is a collaborative effort between district staff and an external evaluator, right from the start.
- A logic model developed by a district team is the starting point for the collaborative work between district staff and an external evaluator.
- Initially, stakeholders may not see the need for a logic model, but, in the long run, it saves time and effort.

Ungurait: My name is Dr. Michelle Davidson Ungurait. I am the director of magnet schools and choice programs in Guilford County, North Carolina.

Collins: I am Dr. Deborah Collins. I am director of research and evaluation at The Education Alliance at Brown University.

Ungurait: From a district perspective, logic models are extraordinarily useful because in our county, we have 72,000 students. We have over 200 schools in elementary, middle, and high that are both choice programs and magnet schools. In any one school, hundreds of people will participate in that reform model or in that improvement model. And for many times in the documents such as the magnet schools grant, that's a couple of hundred pages that outline all six of those schools. The logic model is on one piece of paper and it has all the inputs with the anticipated outcomes. So people can clearly see different roles that are involved and different participation, from community to faculty to the school system, and then straight line to what we expect to do from all this effort, and sometimes funding. So it's incredibly useful from a district perspective.

Collins: The logic model really starts our conversation with the district. They have gone through months of planning, discussing, conceptualizing around their magnet school program. For us to read their application, review what we have heard within it, and then represent that in a logic model helps us look at context; it helps us look more specifically at their objectives; it helps us pinpoint where the best

places for us to situate our data collection activities, our conversations with them; and then to really focus on the key questions that they would like to address. So it's something we have to do right up front. We use that as our basically jumping-off point: Here is what we read when we look at your application; this is what we understand your program to represent; now talk to us about that. Where did we miss something? How can we understand that better? And then, each time—each year, in fact—we would be going back over this with you to make sure that we've not missed something that helps us check in on points where implementation might have to be adjusted in some way. So it's a really good vehicle to use to keep us all focused and make sure we have a common language around the way the program's rolling out.

Ungurait: As you try to answer questions and make sense of it together with the team—and again, this is not something you do alone; you work with a team to create the logic model because you are using that for a wider conversation either programmatically, with staff, or with your evaluator to make sure that you are on the same page in terms of understanding the program. So you might start with a template, but over time you are going to find that you want to customize that and adapt it; that there might be feedback loops that you want to incorporate into that, or ways that you show different iterations of that. So there are a lot of ways to play with the logic model. So I would encourage folks to start with the template: See if it fits and then start adapting from that. That's how you really start getting authentication around the logic model for use, so that it becomes a very useful tool.

Collins: I think that there are many initial challenges when trying to introduce a logic model; the first one is unfamiliarity with logic models. I think that both working with higher ed. individuals and school-based individuals, or community members, there might be this initial, why do we have to do that? Or, how do we have to do that? Or, that's one more thing that we are going to have to do. But I do think that it's a shortcut to work in the long run. I have about 9 years' experience now working with logic models in a variety of programs, and every single time that I have worked with a logic model when it's been done correctly, thoroughly, and on the front-end, it has really shortcut the amount of misunderstandings and the misuse of work later at the end of that project. So I suppose making sure that everybody understands what exactly a logic model is and how to create one is worth that time at the beginning of the project.