

## Interview Transcript: Get quality data into your evaluator's hands

- **Kim Morrison**, magnet school director, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, NC
- **Susan Saxon**, evaluator, The Education Alliance at Brown University
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### Interview Highlights

- Regular communication between a magnet program director and external evaluator supports high-quality data collection. District and evaluator staff are responsible for ensuring valid and reliable data for the evaluation.
- School staff buy-in for an evaluation can be generated by emphasizing the goal of using evaluation to create effective magnet programs.

**Morrison:** My name is Kim Morrison, and I am the magnet school director in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, North Carolina.

**Saxon:** And my name is Susan Saxon. I am a senior research and evaluation associate with The Education Alliance at Brown University, and I was part of the evaluation team that worked with Kim on the recent evaluation.

**Morrison:** Communication is the key to getting quality data, and so we had a lot of conversations early on about what we needed. We were very clear about what we needed; talked a lot about research questions that we felt would impact our district the most. So we had done a lot of time tweaking on that, and then trying to match that up with which data we could actually get.

**Saxon:** Communication is absolutely essential with the district people in building a good relationship—and particularly as an evaluator who doesn't even live in the same state where the schools are that we are evaluating, I need to have a good relationship with Kim. I need to understand the unique context of the particular district that I am working in; I need to understand the schools and also understand how their data is set up. So there is a lot to build on, a lot to work on, so we could get a clear understanding and to give them the best evaluation that we possibly can.

**Morrison:** One thing that we found that's really important to getting buy-in from everyone and making sure that people understand why we are doing evaluation was—we meet with our magnet school principals and our resource teachers at each school every two weeks, and so when Susan came, it was really important that they went in on the front end of this, to say the reason that we are doing evaluation is to help figure out if our programs are working, if they are effective; if they are not effective, what we need to do to adjust. And so, meeting with them every two weeks, we were able to also explain to them the process. We were going to say, Susan is going to put a data request in; most of this will come from the central level; but we will have surveys which your parents need to fill out, your students, and your teachers. So, right up front, having a really good relationship with the folks who are going to be giving us most of this information—they knew the purpose for why we were doing evaluation.

**Saxon:** There is different types of data collection, so when you are talking about collecting data from the district, that's one type of data collection; but part of our work in doing a good evaluation is collecting data in advance to help us understand the district, the district context, the different schools, choice programs that may be offered in particular schools. In this particular evaluation we were identifying the comparison schools to match up with our treatment schools, so we really had to do a lot of homework and collect data online, talking to Kim, really doing our research, to collect our data to inform our work, which would then inform the data request, that we would give to Kim.

The first step in obtaining good data, valid and reliable data, is you want to make sure that you have a person identified in the district who knows how to work with data, and who you can communicate with, and communicate with up front as well as down the line, after you get your data, if you have questions. And then you work with that person to make sure that they review their data prior to giving it to you, looking for: are there many missing values? To really think about, what is in that data, and is this good data that they are giving us? So again, it's key having somebody who knows what they are doing, knows how to look at data, and can answer those questions. The person should provide us with a code book so we know exactly what we are looking at—variable labels, value labels. We need that information to make sense of what we are getting.

**Morrison:** And the evaluator did a good job of sending us data—in the way that they had organized it and said, please verify that this is what you have sent us, and verify that this is in a form which you agree with, because it was not changed in any way. And so we verified that's what we sent to them, so then both ends looked at the data to make sure that it's what is accurate. So I think that was important. And, if there was data that looked different because there was a major drop all the way across the board with all of the subgroups or members, she called and she said, we are seeing this trend, can you explain, is there a contextual situation with this? And I said, oh yes, there is a new math test and the cut-off for the scores was different, which means you can't really compare last year's math scores to this year's math scores. But the evaluator doesn't know that and so, when they are looking through the data and they see a drop, we have already explained in our district and we have already talked about it a lot. We forget sometimes that we haven't let our evaluator know that there is a major change going on at the state level.

When you are a principal, all you need is one more thing at your school, but, when they get the buy-in, everybody knows when we received the grant that it was going to be a lot of work, but then it was coming to be very rewarding. And evaluation is one piece—receiving this money; being accountable—and they knew that from the very beginning. And I just think buying into it, and understanding that the evaluation is going to be a tool to help them, was just crucial. They knew that they were going to get data that they could use.