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The e-guide: effective, efficient evaluation in education

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The E-Guide: Effective, Efficient Evaluation in Education



This resource has been prepared by Sallie Newell & Anne Graham for the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University.

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The Centre welcomes feedback on both the development and implementation of this document from our partners. The Centre considers that collaboration with individuals, professionals, service providers and academic colleagues concerned with children can lead to better outcomes for children and young people.

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1. Introduction

Opportunities often arise for School of Education academics to develop research links with local schools, usually through requests for help with program evaluations (eg: 'we need to find out whether program X works so we can seek more funding'). It is likely these requests will increase over coming years, as at least 85 schools in the SCU footprint will receive 4-years substantial additional funding through COAG's **National Partnership on Low Socioeconomic Status School Communities**, which will be rolled out over the next three years.

Unlike the associated National Partnership on Literacy & Numeracy, the Low-SES Partnership allows schools considerable scope to implement their own strategies, or existing programs "to address the complex and inter-connected challenges facing students in disadvantaged communities". Appendix A lists local NSW schools currently selected to receive funding through these two National Partnerships. In addition, 15% of the Low-SES Partnership budget is reserved for applications from schools outside the selected group, although the timing and process for schools to apply are not yet clear. Also unlike the Lit-Num Partnership, the Low-SES Partnership currently has no structured or compulsory evaluation processes, although NSW DET have developed an optional "Community Engagement" survey which collects views (of a variety of school & community members) regarding 22 items around schools' relevance, communication, engagement with and support for families and about community engagement in children's learning. In addition, some Low-SES schools are using the tools required as part of the Lit-Num Partnership (see the Recommended Weblinks section for more details about both Partnerships).

Therefore, the Low-SES Partnership offers considerable scope for research and/or evaluation projects exploring the effectiveness of different interventions or approaches: for example, in relation to the potential benefits of increasing students' meaningful participation in school administration or increasing parental engagement in schools. Whilst the nature of programs and the needs of schools will differ markedly, within and outside these National Partnerships, there are some general principles of program evaluation that are relevant for most programs. This "E-Guide" (Effective, Efficient Evaluation in Education) has been developed to assist you to say 'yes' next time you receive a call from a school requesting assistance with 'research'. It provides an overview of learnings from the CCYP's experiences with providing evaluation advice &/or support for many organisations, across over 40 programs.

Potential Benefits of Research and Evaluation Partnerships with Local Schools

- **Schools can benefit** from receiving hands-on support with interpreting the numerous data they are required to collect, as well as with developing and implementing projects to explore locally-relevant issues and/or seek additional funding. This support can be particularly cost-efficient where academics, or university students, can contribute time at no or minimal cost.
- **School students can benefit** from opportunities to be active participants in projects, as well as from the likely indirect benefits of being in schools interested in better understanding and/or enhancing the services and support they offer their students.
- **Academics can benefit** from opportunities to hone their research and evaluation skills by work on real-world projects, possibly as part of achieving their research workloads. However, all projects should be realistically-costed, with dollar values of any "in-kind" contributions.
- **University students can benefit** from the opportunity to work on, and learn from, real-world projects as part of their course requirements.

2. Defining Program Evaluation

Traditionally, the field of program evaluation has been dominated by “summative” evaluations, which assess the quality or value of a given program at a particular point in time. This is apparent in many formal definitions of evaluation, for example:

“The systematic collection and analysis of information to make judgments, usually about the effectiveness, efficiency and/or appropriateness of an activity” (Australasian Evaluation Society, 2006 p.3);

“Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, personnel, products, and organizations to improve their effectiveness” (American Evaluation Association, 2007 p.1); and

“The systematic and objective assessment of the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of development interventions” (The World Bank, 2007 p.2).

However, the CCYP views program evaluation as something broader than this: it is an opportunity to work towards our aim of enhancing the safety, wellbeing and participation of children, young people and their families – by engaging those delivering the programs, in more of an “evaluative learning” process, which is defined as:

“... an ongoing, collaboratively designed, and stakeholder-led evaluation process that has the primary purpose of serving organizational learning by evaluating the whole logic model” (York, 2005 p.8).

EXAMPLE: A PRINCIPAL SEEKS YOUR HELP WITH ASSESSING WHETHER HAVING A FREE BREAKFAST PROGRAM HAS IMPROVED CHILDREN’S ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE?

A traditional summative evaluation might analyse average, whole-school academic performance data for a number of years before the breakfast program was introduced – and compare them against performance rates achieved since the program was introduced. This would provide the Principal with a Yes/No answer to their question but little context with which they could determine the real meaning of that answer: a “Yes” could be the result of some other school-wide change that happened around the same time as the breakfast program was introduced (meaning the answer to the Principal’s question is really “No”); and a “No” could be the result of only already well-performing children attending the program (meaning the answer to the Principal’s question is really “Don’t know”).

The CCYP approach would engage the Principal and other relevant stakeholders (eg: teachers, children &/or other adults involved with the breakfast program) to refine the question, in order to achieve a more meaningful answer:

- Is the principal really interested in the program’s impact on the whole school, or just on the children attending it?
- What are the steps by which such a program might influence academic performance (eg: encouraging school attendance, improving children’s concentration &/or behaviour in class, improving child-staff relationships, etc)? By evaluating progress against each step, we learn much more about the program’s strengths and weaknesses.
- Does how often children attend the breakfast program influence any change in their academic performance?

This approach is in keeping with recent French research which compared the choices, decisions and actions of novice and experienced evaluators: they found that the latter group tended to take a more social, active, diagnostic and pragmatic approach and to consider a broader range of factors and issues that could affect the conduct or ultimate usefulness of the evaluation (Tourmen, 2009).

3. Characteristics of an Evaluative Learning Approach to Program Evaluation

Primary Aim

To deliver **robust, responsive and respectful** program evaluations that provide **rich, credible and meaningful** information about their implementation and impact.

Underlying Principles (within a school setting)

- **Collaborative & participatory**, whereby those involved in delivering the program contribute to developing and implementing an appropriate evaluation plan and tools;
- **Inclusive**, whereby data are gathered from as many of the program's key stakeholder groups as possible, including directly from children and young people, wherever possible;
- **Capacity building**, whereby the nature of the evaluation process seeks to enhance the school's motivation, understanding, skills, resources and practice in relation to planning and evaluating their activities; and
- **Value adding**, whereby an explicit desired outcome of the evaluation process is to enhance the school's current service delivery.

Theoretical Underpinnings

An evaluative learning approach will likely incorporate elements from various evaluation theories or models but is most closely-aligned with Empowerment Evaluation (EE), which:

“... aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation and self-evaluation of their program and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization” (Fetterman et al., 2005 p.28).

EE conceptualises an evaluator as a “critical friend” and is based on a fundamental belief in people's desire and capacity to understand their own situation and to create appropriate solutions, when provided with the necessary tools and conditions.

Roles of the Evaluator

This approach requires an evaluator to undertake a wide variety of roles throughout the course of an evaluation – as summarised in the following table (from Skolits et al., 2009).

EVALUATION ACTIVITY	EVALUATION PHASE	EVALUATOR'S PRIMARY ROLE		POTENTIAL SECONDARY ROLES	
Evaluation management	All phases	MANAGER	Address evaluation administration & role coordination	• Diplomat	• All roles
Initial client contact	Pre-evaluation Phase	DETECTIVE	Determine evaluation need & alignment with evaluator skills, competencies & interests	• Manager • Diplomat	• Use advocate
Evaluation contracting		NEGOTIATOR	Agree an evaluation contract between evaluator & client	• Manager • Designer	• Other roles
Evaluation planning		DESIGNER	Develop a realistic & responsive evaluation design to address the client's need	• Manager • Researcher	• Reporter • Other roles
Initial implementation	Active evaluation phase	DIPLOMAT	Establish trust & rapport with stakeholders	• Manager • Researcher	• Reporter • Use advocate
Data collection & analysis		RESEARCHER	Collect & analyse reliable & valid data	• Manager • Reporter	• Diplomat
Evaluation judgment		JUDGE	Make evidence-based judgement of worth &/or opportunities for improvement	• Manager	• Researcher
Evaluation reporting		REPORTER	Share evaluation results with appropriate stakeholders	• Manager • Diplomat	• Researcher
Evaluation use advocacy	Post-evaluation Phase	USE ADVOCATE	Promote & support improvement & change	• Manager • Reporter	• Diplomat • Other roles
Evaluation reflection		LEARNER	Reflect on the evaluation to improve future practice	• All roles	

4. Putting an Evaluative Learning Approach into Practice – with Schools

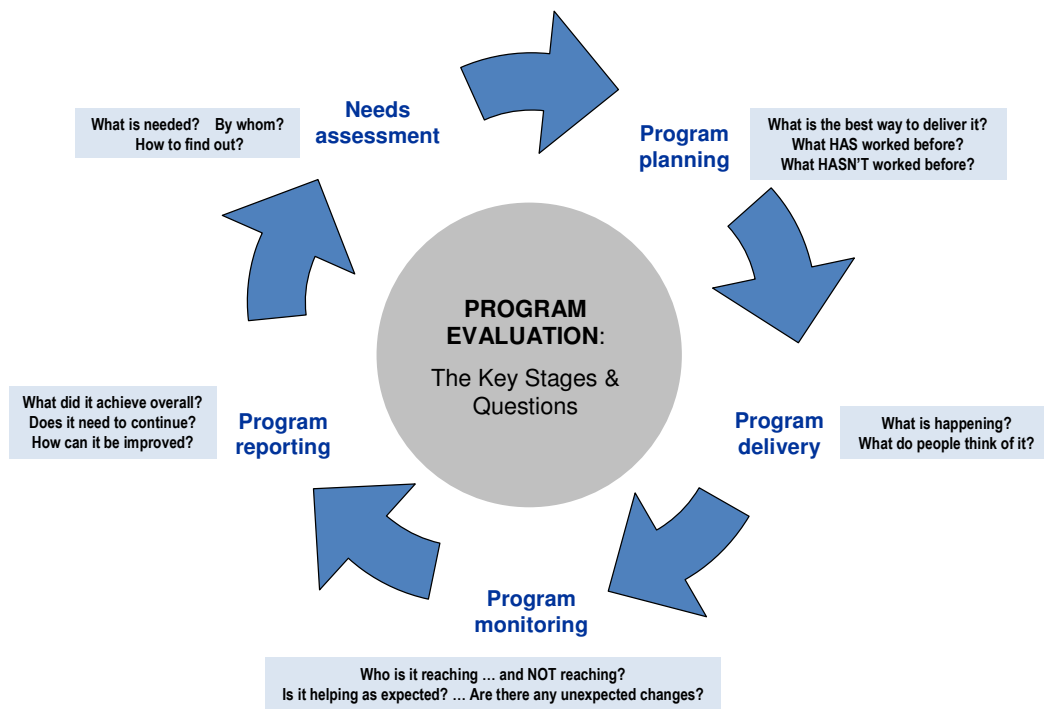
Phase 1: Determining the Feasibility of a Potential Program Evaluation

From our experience, this is **THE MOST IMPORTANT PHASE** of any program evaluation, particularly for achieving the primary aim of delivering a robust, responsive and respectful evaluation that provides rich, credible and meaningful information about the program being evaluated. It involves the evaluator meeting, preferably face-to-face, with an interested school to:

- Gather information about the nature and scope of the program to be evaluated, the purpose of the evaluation, its ethical implications and any funds available to assist with it – this information is critical for an evaluator to determine whether they have, or can access, the capacity (in terms of time, skills, content knowledge and/or other resources) to deliver the desired evaluation ... OR whether they can re-negotiate towards an evaluation that is realistically deliverable;
- Develop a mutual understanding of, and respect for, each other's organisational values, goals, priorities and philosophies – this is critical for establishing the open, trusting and transparent relationship required to deliver an optimal collaborative evaluation; and
- Negotiate both parties' expectations, roles, responsibilities, rights and obligations in relation to the program evaluation – which is a critical element of our collaborative approach.

Phase 2: Designing, Conducting & Reporting a Program Evaluation

The following diagram illustrates the cyclical nature of program evaluation, its key stages and questions. Ideally, an evaluation strategy would be planned and incorporated as a program is being developed (ie: at the Needs Assessment or Program Planning stage) but, more often, schools will approach you after a program has been running for some time (ie: at the Program Reporting stage). While this has implications for designing the requested evaluation, it also presents an opportunity to establish the school within an ongoing evaluation cycle.



The table below provides an overview to assist you with navigating each of the key program stages above.

Program Stage	Main Questions	Where to Get Answers	Key Principles
Needs Assessment	What is needed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students, teachers and/or families • Talk to "experts" with experience in similar areas • Explore existing literature, plans & any available school data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about what need you're trying to address • Ensure the target group see it as a need (and one they'd like help with) • Build on existing knowledge
Program Planning	What is the best way to deliver it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students, teachers and/or families • Talk to "experts" who've run similar programs – about what worked & what didn't • Explore existing literature about relevant programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about who the program is targeting • Use realistic and SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant & Timebound), with the following structure: Verb / Outcome / From/ To / By (eg: Increase / attendance / from 85% / to 95% / by end of 2010) • Learn from others' successes & challenges
Program Delivery	<p>What is happening?</p> <p>What do people think of it?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive (database or paper-based) program management system to keep track of the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – nature, extent & frequency of program activities – numbers & types of students, teachers and/or families engaging (or not) with the program – students, teachers and/or families' feedback about the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish the system as early as possible – collaboratively with those who will be using it • Gather information from all key stakeholder groups., wherever possible • Expect the system to evolve • Expect the program to evolve
Program Monitoring	How is it helping individuals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect relevant impact & outcome indicators at the start & end of the program (using existing, routinely-collected school information, wherever possible) • Ask students, teachers and/or families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear about what the program is trying to achieve • Develop at least one key indicator for each program objective • Gather information from all key stakeholder groups., wherever possible
Program Reporting	<p>What did it achieve overall?</p> <p>How can it be improved?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group-level analyses of the information collected during the "Monitoring" stage • Ask students, teachers and/or families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report across the whole program logic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Process indicators re: how the program was implemented, attended & received – Impact indicators – re: if/ how it affected participants' knowledge & attitudes – Outcome indicators – re: if/ how it affected participants' skills &/or actions (perceived or measured) • Develop at least one indicator for each program objective • Triangulating similar information from different sources (eg: students, teachers and/or families) strengthens credibility • Use any available comparison data (from the school or state data)

5. Some Recommended Weblinks

- **Evaluation within the National Partnership on Low SES School Communities** – includes links to various plans, tools and workshops developed to assist schools with self-evaluation activities – with a focus on literacy, numeracy and community engagement (some are available to only those with access to DET intranet). Developed by the NSW Department of Education & Training. <https://www.lowsesschools.nsw.edu.au/section/89-about-the-low-ses-school-communities-national-partnership.aspx>
- **Evaluation within the National Partnership on Literacy & Numeracy** – a brief overview about the self-evaluation requirements for schools receiving this funding. Developed by the NSW Department of Education & Training. http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/learning/yr7_12assessments/npa/npainformation.pdf
- **School Self-Evaluation Guidelines (2010)** – a practical guide to “engage school communities in reflecting in a systematic, comprehensive and detailed way on their achievements in regard to student learning, engagement and wellbeing and student pathways and transitions”. Developed by the Victorian Department of Education & Early Childhood Development. http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/account/operate/2010_SSEGuidelines.pdf
- **Evaluating Your Project (Practice Brief, Issue 1)** – a brief, very practical guide to planning and implementing a program evaluation. Developed by the South Australian Community Health Research Unit. http://som.flinders.edu.au/FUSA/SACHRU/PDF/briefs/pracb_1_Evaluating_Your_Project.pdf
- **Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations** – a download-able set of principles and guidelines to consider when commissioning, preparing, conducting or reporting an evaluation. Developed by the Australasian Evaluation Society. http://www.aes.asn.au/about/Documents%20-%20ongoing/guidelines_for_the_ethical_conduct_of_evaluations.pdf
- **Program Evaluation Tipsheets** – a series of over 90 succinct & simply-written tipsheets offering practical advice around commonly-asked evaluation topics and issues. Developed by Penn State University's College of Agricultural Sciences. <http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/titles.html>
- **The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation** – an online guide covering all aspects of program evaluation – what it is, how to understand it, how to do it, how to use it to improve programs and benefit staff and families. Developed by the US Department of Health & Human Services' Administration on Children, Youth, & Families. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/other_resrch/pm_guide_eval/reports/pmguide/pmguide_toc.html
- **Evaluation Techniques Series** – a collection of briefing notes about some newer evaluative approaches. Each guide outlines the basics of one approach, featuring a mini-case, based on one grant-maker's experiences, and answering some common questions about its use. Developed by GrantCraft. <http://www.grantcraft.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageID=742>

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7. Appendix A: Local NSW Schools Receiving National Partnership Funding

PARTNERSHIP ON LOW SOCIOECONOMIC SCHOOL COMMUNITIES			
SCU Campus	PRIMARY ONLY SCHOOLS	OTHER SCHOOLS	
Coffs Harbour	Aldavilla PS Baryulgil PS Bellbrook PS Coffs Harbour PS Copmanhurst PS Dorrigo PS Dundurrabin PS (via Dorrigo) Eungai PS Frank Partridge VC PS (Nambucca) Gillwinga PS Green Hill PS (Kempsey) Iluka PS Kempsey East PS Kempsey South PS Kempsey West PS Kinchela PS Lowanna PS Macksville PS Maclean PS	Medlow PS Millbank PS (Willawarrin) Moorland PS Nambucca Heads PS Nymboida PS South Grafton PS Stuarts Point PS Tucabia PS Tyalla PS Ulmarra PS Ulong PS Westport PS (Port Macquarie) Willawarrin PS William Bayldon PS (Sawtell) Wooli PS St Mary's (Bowraville) St Joseph's (West Kempsey) St Patrick's (Macksville)	Macksville HS Maclean HS Melville HS (Kempsey) Kempsey HS Nambucca Heads HS South Grafton HS Bowraville CS Coffs Harbour Learning Centre Kempsey Adventist School Macleay Vocational College (South Kempsey) St Paul's College (West Kempsey)
Lismore	Albert Park PS (Lismore) Ballina PS Barkers Vale PS Cabbage Tree Island PS Casino PS Casino West PS Coraki PS Drake PS Goonellabah PS Kyogle PS Lismore South PS	Old Bonalbo PS Rappville PS Tabulam PS Tuntable Creek PS Urbenville PS Wardell PS Wiangaree PS Woodburn PS St Joseph's (Tenterfield) St Joseph's (Coraki)	Casino HS Kyogle HS Tenterfield HS Bonalbo CS Nimbin CS St Mary's (Casino) Woodenbong CS ALESCO Learning Centre (Lismore) Rainbow Ridge Steiner School (Nimbin) Tuntable Falls Community School
Tweed Heads	Cudgen PS Murwillumbah East PS Murwillumbah South PS	Tweed Heads South PS Tyalgum PS Uki PS	

NOTE: Full list of schools: <http://www.nationalpartnerships.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/announcements/yr2009/schoolsinnatpart.pdf>

PARTNERSHIP ON LITERACY & NUMERACY		
SCU Campus	PRIMARY SCHOOLS	OTHER SCHOOLS
Coffs Harbour	Aldavilla PS Port Macquarie PS Sawtell PS	South Grafton PS William Bayldon PS (Sawtell)
Lismore	Coraki PS Lismore Heights PS	Lismore South PS St Mary's (Casino)
Tweed Heads	Tweed Heads PS Tweed Heads South PS	Mullumbimby Christian School Pacific Coast Christian School (Tweed Heads South)

NOTE: Full list of schools: <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/national/schools/index.htm>

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