

## **Evaluating the School Improvement Planning Initiative**

Evaluation Context. The School Improvement Planning Initiative (SIPI) grew out of an interest by state education leaders to ensure that site-based planning processes addressed key issues of concern, namely closing academic achievement gaps. Spurred by federal legislation, the State Department of Education (SDOE) required local schools to develop plans and implement strategies to improve student outcomes. The SIPI was designed to provide technical assistance to school teams on behalf of the SDOE to reinforce school improvement planning efforts. Trained facilitators worked directly with schools to improve the planning, implementation, and monitoring of local activities designed to improve education and social services to students. Of note, the SDOE's research determined that the rapidly growing African-American and Hispanic student bodies were disproportionately represented in under-performing schools, echoing educational disparities in national studies.

Entry, Contracting and Design. The SDOE was interested in the following evaluation questions: (1) How were schools responding to and using the technical assistance services? (2) Were schools changing practices with respect to planning, implementation, and monitoring? and (3) Did the use of consultants' services have an effect on academic outcomes? The SDOE provided \$30,000 for a one-year evaluation.

The SDOE requested a proposal from a local non-profit education policy agency with an evaluation unit. The agency previously worked in partnership with the SDOE on a number of projects. The lead evaluator had conducted previous evaluations at local and state levels. Initial discussions with the lead associate from SDOE identified key expectations and constraints.

The evaluation team proposed a multi-method approach to answer the primary evaluation questions. The team's plan emphasized evaluation of key processes and the lead evaluator, based on his experience, cautioned SDOE officials about the weight placed on academic outcomes as a primary indication of success. The design included four data collection methods: (1) a telephone survey of a sample of team members from each school planning team, (2) a web-based survey of all team members from all 27 school planning teams, (3) a review of each local school's pre- and post-initiative School Improvement Plan (SIP), and (4) an analysis of school-level academic outcomes before and after the initiative. Human subjects approval was obtained from the SDOE's Institutional Review Board for school team member participation in the evaluation activities. Junior staff on the evaluation team conducted most of the data collection and analyses, under the lead evaluator's supervision. It was agreed up front that the evaluation's final products would be a PowerPoint presentation for use by state officials, and a written report with recommendations.

Data Collection. Evaluation staff administered telephone surveys to three key individuals on each school-based team. These structured interviews covered a wide array of information regarding implementation and asked about participant background, experiences working on the team, understanding of old and new processes, successes and challenges, and suggestions for the future. A web-based, self-report survey of team practices and procedures was administered to all team members across all schools using the technical supports. A standardized protocol for reviewing the SIPs was developed to assess the variety and quality of improvement activities included in the plans. School-level academic outcomes for the year prior to and year following use of the technical supports were acquired from state officials and analyzed.

Data Analysis and Interpretation. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted, with the SIPs serving as the primary data source. Two junior members of the evaluation team independently reviewed each school's pre- and post-initiative SIPs using the coding scheme developed by the lead evaluator. The two coders met to gain consensus on their reviews, with the lead evaluator serving as the final reviewer and tiebreaker of coder disagreements. From this analysis, a typology of schools was developed on the basis of the changes found in the SIPs: those with fully developed plans, partially developed plans, and minimally developed plans. To further describe key characteristics of planning teams, content from the structured interviews was analyzed for the three types of schools. Information from the surveys on team practices and procedures was aggregated across team members providing each school with an overall team response on several variables of interest. School-level academic outcomes were defined as the percentage of students meeting the state standard for reading, math, and writing. Analyses of variance were conducted examining between- and within-group differences on team practices and procedures and changes in academic outcomes prior to and following implementation of the technical assistance supports.

Although the evaluation of the initiative found that the technical assistance supports were being implemented well, there was little evidence to suggest that academic outcomes were significantly affected. Results from the structured interviews confirmed that schools with fully developed (i.e., specific and integrated) plans used the technical supports at higher levels and were more positive about their value to the school improvement planning process. A positive relationship between level of quality in the plans and ratings of team practices was also found. For example schools with more comprehensive plans also had better practices. However, analysis of academic outcomes indicated few schools improved over time, regardless of the quality of their plans.

As findings were reviewed and vetted by the lead evaluator, drafts were shared informally with the lead associate at the SDOE via email and teleconference. Some feedback was offered on the findings and substantial guidance on the briefing product was given.

Dissemination and Utilization of Results. The final evaluation briefing was delivered to a large group of state officials responsible for local school improvements. Several officials asked questions about the results, but seemed particularly interested in the choice of methods. Others, who were not part of the original sessions for planning the evaluation, openly challenged the appropriateness of the methods. Some officials questioned the premise of the initiative and proposed it be discontinued, bolstered by the results that schools in resource challenged communities were not fully utilizing the supports. The lead evaluator emphasized the early stage of the initiative and again cautioned the state officials about the focus on academic outcomes so early in the initiative. Feeling dismayed by the lack of information that showed improvements in academic scores, officials asked if further analysis could be done to identify which schools were low academic performers and not using the technical support services. The lead evaluator, uncertain of the officials' intention, expressed concern about this request and instead offered to conduct further analyses and develop a "profile" describing low achieving schools not using the support services. State officials also discussed sharing the results with team members at local schools. Concerned that negative findings might dissuade teams from continuing to use the supports, the officials recommended that the evaluation team develop a document listing initiative successes and lessons learned that could be disseminated across schools. Finally, the evaluation team recommended several areas of improvement and suggested ways in which officials could adjust the initiative to better support schools.