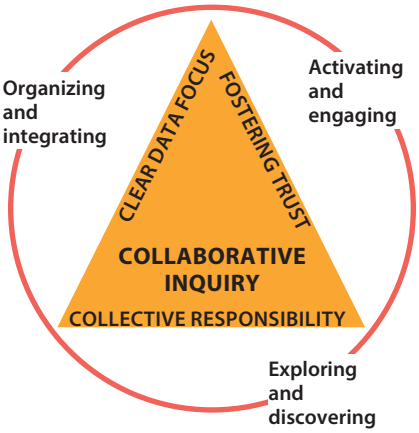
PARTNERS IN A COMMON CAUSE

EXTERNAL EVALUATORS TEAM WITH PRACTITIONERS TO BUILD DATA USE PRACTICES

BY STEPHANIE B. WILKERSON AND MARGIE JOHNSON

For many districts, evaluation is an afterthought to implementing a new initiative. Educators participate in professional learning experiences, apply what they learn to their practice, and then, at some point, school and district staff begin wondering if the initiative is making a difference. Then they scramble for nuggets of data that provide any evidence of effectiveness. There is another way.

A partnership between educators in Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee and external evaluators with Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia (REL Appalachia), with



Collaborative Inquiry is a data-based team process that consciously uses the collaborative learning cycle and the qualities of effective groups.

— Metro Nashville Public Schools Collaborative Inquiry Community of Practice

funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, used a well-defined process to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of a new data use initiative from its inception. This article highlights how the partnership approached evaluation, the process external evaluators used to build internal evaluation capacity among the Metro Nashville district staff, and the valuable lessons partnership members learned about fostering successful evaluator-practitioner partnerships.

HOW THE PARTNERSHIP BEGAN

In July 2012, Metro Nashville Public Schools hired Margie Johnson to build the capacity of educators to use data for making informed decisions. Johnson began by conducting a needs assessment in the district and reviewing national research on data use practices.

Collaborative inquiry emerged in the literature as a promising practice for bridging the gap between data and results (Love, 2009). Simply put, collaborative inquiry is stakeholders working together to uncover and understand problems and test out solutions together through rigorous use of data and reflective dialogue (Love, Stiles, Mundy, & DiRanna, 2008; Lipton & Wellman, 2012). However, translating this research into practice can take substantial planning and capacity building.

Therefore, Johnson reached out to Stephanie Wilkerson at REL Appalachia to help build educators' capacity for using the collaborative inquiry process. In 2014, we jointly launched this capacity-building initiative with a group of 40 Metro Nashville educators. By 2016, this group grew to include more than 300 educators across the district.

OUR APPROACH

Before implementing collaborative inquiry with schools, we determined that if our initiative is about teachers implementing a collaborative approach to using data, we needed to model what we expected of teachers. We needed to ask questions about collaborative inquiry, collect multiple sources of data, and synthesize it so that we could make informed decisions — and we needed to do so in a way that modeled the collaborative inquiry process. Therefore, we grounded our approach to evaluating collaborative inquiry in four guiding principles.

1. **Begin with the end in mind.** We identified the information needs and priorities of stakeholders and how they would use evaluation findings to address those needs. This helped us identify the key questions that would drive the evaluation. Intended use by intended stakeholders guided all aspects of the evaluation, from initial design to reporting (Patton, 2008).
2. **Engage practitioners in the evaluation process.** Contrary to typical practice, external evaluators did not develop or implement the evaluation independently. Instead, evaluators, central office staff, and school staff worked collaboratively to build the district's internal capacity to sustain evaluation activities for the long term. A participatory approach ensured the evaluation addressed relevant questions, represented the voices of practitioners and multiple stakeholders, was feasible to implement, and would result in meaningful recommendations (Cousins, 2003).
3. **Be systematic and pragmatic.** To ensure that findings would be credible, relevant, and timely, we followed a systematic and pragmatic approach to evaluation. First, we identified the root causes of barriers to effective collaborative inquiry, then we developed logic models to define the outcomes we would expect to see if we overcame the barriers to effective collaborative inquiry. Next, we aligned evaluation questions and instrumentation with intended outcomes. We chose feasible qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to measure outcomes that were reasonable to expect during early implementation (Wilkerson & Haden, 2014).
4. **Be transparent.** We made information regarding the evaluation activities and findings accessible anytime through a collaborative inquiry tool kit website and blog posts. We welcomed anyone who wanted to be involved in the evaluation. We created opportunities for central office and school staff to provide feedback on the evaluation plan, instrumentation, and report.

OUR PROCESS

Because of our emphasis on building internal capacity to evaluate collaborative inquiry within the district, we framed all phases of the evaluation from development to implementation as professional learning opportunities. Our capacity-building activities encompassed three phases of the evaluation: developing the evaluation plan, implementing the evaluation plan, and reporting findings.

Developing the evaluation plan

Over a six-month period, we held a series of face-to-face meetings to develop the evaluation plan. We began by considering the type of information the evaluation would need to provide to stakeholders. During this phase, we introduced the concepts of formative *(to improve)* and summative *(to prove)* evaluation, the purpose of each, and how each might meet stakeholders' information needs.

We created the following evaluation purpose statement: *"The overall purpose of the evaluation approach is to build trust while providing information to stakeholders at all levels about teacher instruction and student learning results from the collaborative inquiry work. The evaluation will inform district decision making for professional learning and implementation support based on the identification of exemplary models of successful implementation and barriers in middle schools."*

The purpose statement served as the foundation for developing key and supporting evaluation questions and identifying the best evaluation design and data collection methods to address the evaluation questions. When selecting appropriate methods, we considered time burden, competing or opportunistic data collection activities for other district evaluations, how to triangulate data, and appropriate sample sizes and strategies.

We assigned tasks and responsibilities for instrument development, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and reporting that coincided with a feasible timeline. We also identified the district resources necessary to implement the evaluation plan. Once we drafted the evaluation plan, we presented the plan to a larger group of district and school staff and solicited their feedback to guide final revisions.

Implementing the evaluation plan

Implementing the evaluation plan occurred over a six-month period and included developing instruments, modeling their administration, and collecting and analyzing data. We jointly developed items for structured interview and focus group protocols with teachers, instructional specialists, and principals. We also developed and provided professional learning for using a collaborative inquiry Innovation Configuration map as both an evaluation and professional growth tool (Hall & Hord, 1987). (See sidebar on p. 47.)

Additionally, to provide the district with a validated instrument for

COMPONENT A: ESTABLISHES AND MAINTAINS A CLEAR FOCUS THE TEAM ...		
A	**B**	**C**
• Establishes norms, purpose, and an agenda for each meeting. • Uses group strategies and structures, including the collaborative learning cycle, to engage all group members and to minimize off-task behavior. • Develops an action plan for next steps before leaving the meeting and makes plan on how to monitor progress.	• Establishes a purpose and agenda for the meeting. • Addresses all the agenda topics in the allotted time. • Develops an action plan for next steps before leaving the meeting.	• Fails to have a stated purpose or agenda for the meeting. • Discusses random, off-topic, or irrelevant issues until the allocated time is over.

USING INNOVATION CONFIGURATION MAPS IN EDUCATION

What is an Innovation Configuration map?

An Innovation Configuration (IC) map is a tool that identifies and describes the major components of an innovation, capturing present practice as well as next steps for reaching implementation goals (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2013; Roy & Hord, 2004). An IC map unpacks each component of an innovation by describing clear and specific behaviors (practices) along a continuum of ideal to less-than-ideal levels of implementation. An IC map eliminates misconceptions about what a program looks like in practice by communicating a common set of behaviors and expectations related to implementation of an innovation.

How can educators use an IC map?

Educators can use an IC map for professional reflection and growth, research, evaluation, and dissemination. As a reflection and growth tool, individuals or teams can use an IC map to self-assess their progress in implementing an initiative, set goals, and identify areas of additional professional learning resources and support. An IC map can assist leaders in guiding change when they are observing and providing feedback and assistance to aid teachers in achieving higher levels of implementation fidelity (Hall & Hord, 1987). Researchers and evaluators can use an IC map to measure changes in practice over time, implementation fidelity of an initiative, and impacts on practice. An IC map also is an effective dissemination tool for bringing new schools and educators on board in implementing an initiative because it clearly defines the initiative and implementation expectations.

What does the Metro Nashville Public Schools collaborative inquiry IC map look like?

The IC map includes four components of collaborative inquiry: establishing and maintaining a clear focus on data, taking collective responsibility during the collaborative inquiry process, fostering a culture of trust when using data, and using the collaborative learning cycle when investigating relevant data to guide decision making. Each component has levels and variations of practice from ideal to less-than-ideal levels (left to right). Above is an example of one component from the IC map.

References

Hall, G.E. & Hord, S.M. (1987). *Change in schools: Facilitating the process.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. (2013). *Innovation Configurations: Guidelines for use in institutions of higher education and professional development evaluation.* Washington, DC: Author.

Roy, P. & Hord, S.M. (2004). Innovation Configurations chart a measured course toward change. *JSD, 25*(2), 54-58.

measuring teacher data use practices, REL Appalachia developed the Teacher Data Use Survey with an accompanying administration guide and reporting template (Wayman, Wilkerson, Cho, Mandinach, & Supovitz, 2016). As part of the survey development process, district staff piloted the survey and provided feedback on its construction.

District staff participated in professional learning on administering the evaluation instruments by reviewing the survey and protocols, discussing best practices in administration, and conducting joint site visits to schools

where REL Appalachia evaluators modeled administration of the interviews and focus groups, followed by a debriefing of techniques.

Then district staff conducted the remaining interviews and focus groups and learned how to develop post-interview analytical memos to summarize their initial analyses of the data. To further support data analysis, REL Appalachia evaluators created spreadsheets for automatically calculating descriptive statistics and generating graphic data displays for the structured interview questions (e.g. yes/no) and the Teacher Data Use Survey. The spreadsheets serve as templates for district staff to use for future administrations of the instruments.

Reporting evaluation findings

As part of the capacity-building process for evaluation, our top priority was to create reporting templates that the district could use in the future to communicate findings to various audiences. As such, we designed three ways to communicate evaluation findings: a full comprehensive report organized by evaluation questions and including recommendations, a three-page executive summary, and an infographic with key findings and recommendations. Although REL Appalachia evaluators led this process based on their experience with reporting, district staff contributed to the report writing and revisions.

LESSONS LEARNED

After 18 months of developing and implementing an evaluation of collaborative inquiry, we gained many insights into what makes evaluator-practitioner partnerships successful. The partnership created greater awareness and understanding of the evaluation process along with greater buy-in than if we implemented the plan externally or within the district's research, assessment, and evaluation department. We offer the following recommendations based on lessons learned to guide evaluators and practitioners who may be interested in establishing collaborative evaluation partnerships:

Engaging practitioners in the data collection process is an important component of building internal capacity for evaluation.

Establish shared agreements for the partnership. Shared agreements include establishing a shared purpose and goals for evaluation as well as setting clear guidelines and approaches for conducting the work collaboratively. This also includes setting reasonable expectations for the roles and responsibilities based on the strengths of each party in the partnership. External evaluators bring a wealth of technical evaluation skills that can improve the rigor and credibility of evaluations, whereas practitioners offer context-specific knowledge that enhances access to data as well as the relevance and utility of evaluation findings.

Honor commitments. Evaluations take time, so it is important for partnership members to set tenable timelines for evaluation activities. Practitioners often have competing district priorities that at times will take precedence over evaluation activities. Having central office support for the evaluation will help practitioners honor and commit to their responsibilities.

Work small, share big. A smaller group of between five and 10 partnership members is a manageable number of participants for delving into deeper hands-on professional learning around evaluation plan and instrument development, data collection, and reporting. It would have been a cumbersome process to attempt to engage a larger group of practitioners in the evaluation development and implementation process. However, providing opportunities to invite larger groups of stakeholders to the table to provide feedback during each phase of the evaluation helps to build buy-in and ownership of the evaluation and its results. Communication channels such as internal websites, blog posts, and emails serve as effective ways to share information about evaluation activities and findings.

Scaffold support for data collection. Engaging practitioners in the data collection process is an important component of building internal capacity for evaluation. Practitioners often will have existing trust and rapport with study participants that external evaluators lack, which can be valuable in conducting interviews and focus groups. To this end, providing scaffolded support for data collection professional learning should include discussing research-based best practices, modeling data collection techniques, observing data collection, and allowing time to debrief data collection activities and ask questions.

Design evaluation tools for sustainability. Development and use of data collection and reporting templates support practitioners in conducting data collection, analysis, and reporting activities that they otherwise might not have the experience to complete. Templates for generating summary statistics, graphic displays, and

infographics equip practitioners with the tools they need to sustain evaluation activities beyond the partnership with external evaluators. When developing tools, it is important to take into account skill level, time, and resources available for practitioners to conduct evaluation activities. Including input from practitioners in the development and refinement of templates ensures that evaluators will meet their needs for data collection and reporting.

Use evaluation data to inform implementation. An evaluation conducted at the end of an implementation is like an autopsy. The data try to explain what might have happened. When evaluation is integrated at the beginning of a professional learning initiative rather than after implementation, evaluation information is more relevant, timely, and useful. By partnering with evaluators throughout the implementation process, practitioners are able to use evaluation data for monitoring the progress of implementation and providing targeted, differentiated support for schools.

GENERATE BUY-IN, SUPPORT, AND PARTICIPATION

We walk the talk when we engage in evaluation practices that will help us know if our professional learning is making the difference we seek for educators and students. Partnerships between external evaluators and practitioners draw on the strengths of both parties, which can result in evaluations that are relevant to the local context and that generate buy-in, support, and participation from multiple stakeholders.

Practices such as beginning with an understanding of how stakeholders will use evaluation information, engaging practitioners in the evaluation process, using a systematic and pragmatic evaluation approach, and inviting multiple voices to the table increase the likelihood that intended audiences will use evaluation findings to make decisions about funding, professional learning, and resource support.

Additionally, a partnership with external evaluators can equip practitioners with the skills and tools they need to sustain evaluation activities. Building practitioners' capacity to ask relevant evaluation questions, collect multiple sources of data, and use effective strategies for communicating findings empowers practitioners to use evidence to support the impacts of professional learning. When evaluation is integrated during the early phases of an initiative, rather than as an afterthought, it can provide ongoing, formative feedback to guide implementation and improvements that will lead to intended impacts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Collaborative Inquiry Toolkit:** www.mnpscollaboration.org
- **Teacher Data Use Survey, Guide and Report Template:** www.relappalachia.org/products/rel-appalachia-reports/teacher-data-use-survey-tools-and-administration-guide
- **Video:** What is an Innovation Configuration map? www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZVisgcS4tA
- **Video:** Example of an Innovation Configuration map: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TpsKImsSLQ

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