



Making Evaluation Meaningful to All Educational Stakeholders

Paula Gangopadhyay¹

This checklist was developed to aid evaluators in making evaluation more meaningful to the diverse makeup of educational stakeholders in the current marketplace. With education reform in the forefront and accountability a key issue, community's involvement in education has greatly evolved in the past few years. As a result, the makeup of educational stakeholders has also changed dramatically. Collaborations, partnerships, and collective action are buzzwords in education today. But businesses, government, parents, media, and community partners do not speak the same language as the educational community. It is almost the tale of two different worlds that overlap the public and private sectors. Even though both are focused on issues of accountability, measurable outcomes, and connecting evaluation to strategic planning in school reform, the ideology and modus operandi of the educational sector and larger community are quite different.

Evaluators need to recognize the current makeup of educational stakeholders and format their products (reports) to be more meaningful and understandable to non-educational stakeholders in the community. This is critical in order to attract and sustain corporate funding and involvement in education, assist school board members in making important decisions about goals and objectives and optimize the partnerships for overall gains in schools. By using an appropriate evaluation design and delivery method, evaluators can create a win-win situation for all and can impact major policy decisions.

The following checklist is organized on three levels:

1. Assessing the Customer Base (pre-evaluation)
2. Formatting the Evaluation (during and post-evaluation)
3. Disseminating the Information and Educating the Stakeholders (post-evaluation)

1. Assessing the Customer Base

View the evaluation work from the stakeholders' perspectives. Consider your evaluation as “the product” and take into account the larger audience who will be using your product.

- Determine who the evaluation's stakeholders are—school systems, government, corporations, parents, media, etc. (This is critical to know upfront as it clearly delineates the context in which the evaluation results will be used.)
- Examine the stakeholders' vested interests in the evaluation. (Vested interests of community stakeholders may be tied to the local economy, politics, and other social issues indirectly connected to the project being evaluated. It is in the best interest of the evaluator to assess upfront some of these indirect links that may affect the use of the evaluation in the future.)
- Identify who is funding the evaluation. (It is important for the evaluator to know the funding agency's goals and involvement in the project. This may help set up the framework for intended use of the evaluation.)
- Find out if the evaluation will be built in from the inception of the project. (In many instances projects do not involve evaluators while the project is ongoing, rather they bring in evaluators to do summative evaluation with data collected by project staff. This makes the evaluation process not only tedious but challenges the authenticity of the methodology and results.)
- Examine the existing research on the given issue. (This will help you identify approaches, theories, and tools that may help you conduct the evaluation. It will also help you identify gaps in the research that your evaluation may fill. It is important to be informed about the subject area in which you are evaluating, as well as about similar previous evaluations.)
- Find out the asserting points of the contrary research. (For your evaluation outcomes to challenge an existing point of view or prevalent assumptions, it is critical to glean out the asserting points of the contrary research. Remember these folks will come back to challenge your evaluation findings, so place yourself in a strategic position by fully educating yourself about the opposition's asserting points.)
- Identify what policy implications the evaluation research may have. (This will help you assess the long-term impact of the project's evaluation findings.)
- Find out which local legislators will be interested in your evaluation findings. (Every evaluation aims to impact policymaking. Local legislators are the actors who can make use of the findings effectively and advocate for the cause. They can become the strongest and most influential proponents of your evaluation findings.)
- Assess local, state, and national media's awareness level, perception, and knowledge of the given issue. (Remember media can make or break the public's perception of a given topic.)

2. Formatting the Evaluation Report

Make sure your evaluation report is comprehensible to all stakeholders.

- Package your evaluation findings in a CASCADING MANNER to help the reader navigate from the key points (top) to the detailed format (bottom). (Most nonacademic stakeholders will glance through the key points and will *only refer to your actual detailed report "if need be."* Suggested sequence: 1) title page with project title and evaluation question(s); 2) table of contents; 3) author's notes on approach taken/logic model; 4) one-page, bulleted summary of findings and related policy implications (most important); 5) executive summary; 6) at-a-glance bar graphs/pie charts delineating main findings, 7) other supporting research in the field, 8) your 'in advance' counter-points challenging any prospective opposing views; 9) full detailed report; 10) glossary of terms used in your evaluation report.)
- Include simple, at-a-glance bar graphs, pie charts, and other graphic data displays. (These are helpful visual aids for stakeholders, and business people are especially used to seeing information presented graphically.)
- Clearly delineate the objectives for conducting the evaluation and provide author's notes on how you approached the topic and the rationale for using certain research methods. (Assume that the reader does not know your rationale and approach.)
- Always prepare a one-page, bulleted summary of the evaluation's findings and *related policy implications*. (This is an alternative approach to the traditional executive summary. Most non-educational stakeholders are looking for a single page that identifies the evaluation's main findings and their relevance to policymaking or education reform. This is your chance to make the first and lasting impression.)
- List references that support or endorse your findings. (To demonstrate that your evaluation aligns with findings of other notable researchers.)
- Cite your critics' *potential counter points* and support your findings with arguments based on empirical data. (Most evaluators wait for critics to challenge their findings, then counter them with their own support points. Remember media and the community stakeholders will not be interested in following a series of exchanges with supporting and counter arguments. To impact public opinion, make your point *the first time*.)
- Address strands of education reform related to your evaluation results and delineate the impact your findings may have on those issues. (These can be additionally excerpted to be included in the popular and widely read national and state level education publications and media reports.)
- Make specific recommendations on how to effectively use the evaluation findings and connect them to the overall strategic planning and change-management process of the project/organization. (This will help the organization make effective use of the evaluation findings for long-term systemic change.)
- Attach a glossary of research methods and terms used in your report. (Assume 80 percent of your readers will not understand the evaluation vernacular. Educate them to make your work more meaningful.)

3. Disseminating the Information and Educating the Stakeholders

Your role as the evaluator does not end with completing the report. To make a lasting and powerful impact on policy issues and in order to bring in systemic social change, your pro-active involvement is needed in the post-evaluation stages also. But remember you can make or break your case depending on *how you convey the message*.

- Disseminate your evaluation to *all* the stakeholders and not just your client. (This helps a wider audience to be aware of your research and opens the door for your involvement in future related projects.)
- Disseminate your findings in a *variety of ways* to a wider and nontraditional audience. (Consider disseminating your evaluation findings through local/regional Chamber of Commerce newsletters, letters to the newspaper editors, school newsletters, legislative briefs, and feedback workshops with various stakeholder groups and other means. Remember the wider the outreach, the greater the impact.)
- Make press releases catchy rather than detailed and wordy—provide the press the one-page bulleted findings rather than the executive summary. (Chances of misreading bulleted points are far less than gleaned points from executive summary.)
- Explore venues to educate all the stakeholders on how to use the evaluation. (For example consider educating the media by presenting to the editorial board of the newspapers, educating realtors, or briefing your local legislators.)
- Keep a log on who is accessing, citing, and using your evaluation report. (This is important for tapping into future clients as well as keeping track of how and where your evaluation findings are being used.)

¹ Author's Profile: As the ex-Executive Director of Commission for Lansing Schools Success (CLASS), a major school reform initiative in Lansing, Paula Gangopadhyay gained valuable experience in helping disintegrate and interpret available data in a readily understandable format to various constituencies. Paula calls it 'packaging in a user-friendly manner.' Her recommended format was applauded at the National Partners in Education conference as well as utilized by school districts for school reform action plans. The local school district since then has revised and enhanced the traditional format of evaluation reporting in order to make evaluation easily understandable by all stakeholders. Ms. Gangopadhyay is also an Education Policy Fellow from the Institute of Education Policy and has valuable experience in connecting evaluation outcomes to policy development processes.

Suggested Citation

Gangopadhyay, P. (2002). *Making evaluation meaningful to all educational stakeholders*. Retrieved from <http://wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists>

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