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Foreword

Assessment of school programs is an essential component of the effective middle-years education. Educators, community leaders and members of the public cry out for a means of measuring the effectiveness of their schools. The preponderance of the literature suggests that a review of test scores and other quantitative data is the route to program evaluation. Sadly, little regard is given to more broadly informative strategies for assessing the effectiveness of school programs.

In this monograph Sandra Schurr provides insights into a tough topic while ensuring that the suggestions and strategies are useful to both practitioner and researcher. The emphasis in this work is on generating both qualitative and quantitative data which are clear, insightful and relevant to teachers, principals, parents and members of the public.

The format of this monograph serves as a step-by-step guide to conducting a meaningful assessment of a middle-years program. Each section reviews current thinking regarding a topic and offers a series of questions for the school evaluation team to answer as next steps are considered. This opportunity for the reader both to learn and to reflect on the evaluation process sets this volume apart from other literature on school assessment.

Too often educators shy away from asking and answering the tough questions about their school's program. A focussed school improvement project that seeks improved student achievement requires that these questions be addressed. *How to Evaluate Your Middle School* provides a much-needed guide for middle-years educators to work aggressively and collaboratively at providing answers to the tough questions. It provides strategies for using derived answers to maintain a focus on the development and implementation of educational experiences appropriate to early adolescents. Therein lies its greatest value.

– Ronald Williamson
Executive Director
National Middle School Association

Introduction

Why was this book written?

One can't develop, implement, nurture, refine or improve a middle-years program without an evaluation component in mind. The essential elements of a middle-years program should drive the evaluation process rather than the evaluation procedures driving the way a middle school does business. Although this position should be obvious, the reality is that many schools assess their status only on such things as student achievement scores, numbers of retentions or suspensions or percentages of students receiving achievement awards.

Although numerical and objective figures are an important part of the evaluation process, they should not become ends in themselves. A fair evaluation must be supported by other methods of assessment including attitude surveys, personal interviews, formal observations, individual checklists and shadow studies of students. These evaluation tools and techniques provide valuable means of clarifying statistical data and also support efforts to bring about needed changes.


This publication provides middle-years educators at the school site with a variety of options for conducting their own self-evaluation, for assessing how well they are doing in the pursuit of excellence at the middle level. It is also intended to make evaluation a manageable process in terms of available time, energy, cost and expertise. In this age of school accountability with state and national

assessments, teacher empowerment and site-based management the emphasis on evaluation needs to come from within – from the bottom up – and from the heart as well as the mind.

Who should use this book?

Because there are very few separate middle schools in Australia, the issues concerning appropriate schooling for students from 10–15 years affect nearly all schools. Evaluating the educational provision for middle years is important both within individual schools and across clusters (secondary schools and their feeder primary schools).

This monograph is written explicitly for practitioners, for teachers and principals. It is written in a language that should have special appeal for the nonexpert who wants to experiment with the elements of evaluation in order to discover the real benefits that can come from a meaningful evaluation effort. The book has been created to provide a set of guidelines for conducting an informal, in-house evaluation by a school-based improvement team. Although outside consultants may be used as part of the process, there is much more to be gained from an in-house process which increases acceptance of results. All stakeholders in the school community should be represented in some way as part of the evaluation team or effort so that students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents and taxpayers can all have a part in making their school a better place to work and learn.



What can be gained from the materials included?

When a school or cluster decides to conduct its own self-study, it is important that the evaluation planners have access to basic information about the major elements of a meaningful evaluation program. Although not trained evaluators, the evaluation leadership team needs to become familiar with the essential elements of an effective evaluation. Members need to understand and be able to use basic evaluation terminology. They need to examine the various methods of data collection in order to develop a customised evaluation plan that fits the local situation. In addition they need to know how to interpret and make good use of the evaluation results. In short, even amateur school evaluators need to develop a working knowledge of both 'the art and the science' of what goes into an evaluation project.

How is it designed to be used?

All members of a school or cluster should become reasonably familiar with the contents of this monograph. They need to understand what is involved with a school-based evaluation effort. The most meaningful evaluation activities are those conducted by a team of 'informed amateurs' who know enough about evaluation to be competent, but who are not discouraged by their limitations. Once a staff has internalised this material, decisions can take place to get the evaluation underway.

If we are to change education to meet the demands of the information age, we must overcome our habit of using product-oriented assessment techniques to measure process-oriented education. We need to redesign assessment to fit the goal of the restructured school ... [Therefore], we must expand the range and variety of the assessment techniques we use.

– A.L. Costa

Why evaluate your middle-level program?

Unfortunately, when educators hear the terms *evaluation*, *assessment*, *measurement* or *accountability* many negative connotations surface in their minds. We tend to equate such concepts with test anxiety, with predetermined failure, with internal stress and with personal frustration rather than with optimism and enthusiasm for self or program diagnosis and ultimately school improvement. The reasons for this condition are many.

To begin with, many educational decisions are based on incomplete evaluation results or inconclusive evidence. Confusion about the role and the dichotomy of formative and summative evaluation procedures and the inability of scholars to reach consensus as to their precise meaning have often confused those responsible for its implementation. Too, one often forgets that evaluation is not an end in itself, but should serve as an important springboard for looking at the discrepancy between 'what is' and 'what should be'. Evaluation is intended to be ongoing and self-perpetuating. It is never static.



In addition, pressure from the tax-paying community, from federal or state legislators and from funding and grants for initiatives force hasty decisions that are counterproductive to the long-term goals of the organisation. It is time that we put long range plans and expectation before instant (but false) gratification or unrealistic deadlines to

solve long-standing problems. Finally, misuse or overuse of test results can take a disproportionate amount of time and energy from the primary business of teaching. Only through the widespread participation and commitment of all those affected by the evaluation outcomes will the desired individual growth and change occur.

To use this handbook effectively, it is important that we have a common nomenclature. To distinguish among the varied terms, we will take the position of Choppin (1990) who states that 'measurement' requires the assigning of a numerical quantity to some element and is rarely carried out for its own sake. Although it may be included in an assessment or evaluation, it is more to be regarded as a basic research procedure. Similarly, he takes the stance that 'assessment' should be reserved for application to people and not to programs. Therefore, that leaves the term 'evaluation' as the purpose for this publication because it applies to abstract entities such as programs, curricula and organisational variables. This, of course, implies making a comparison to other programs, curricula and organisational patterns.

Reasons for evaluating

To get an evaluation project off the ground it is desirable to identify the many reasons or purposes for doing an evaluation. Worthen (1990) suggests that most program evaluators agree that a constructive program evaluation can



play either a formative purpose (helping to improve the program) or a summarative purpose (deciding whether a program should be continued). He also cites six possible reasons for spending time on program evaluations:

1. decisions about program installation
2. decisions about program continuation or expansion
3. decisions about program modification
4. gathering evidence to rally support for a program
5. gathering evidence to rally opposition to a program
6. contributing to the understanding of basic psychological, social and similar processes associated with the program.

Formal evaluation of any middle school can be a very time-consuming, expensive and complicated process. Although there is much to be gained from such an expenditure of resources, we believe that most schools would rather conduct an informal, in-house and inexpensive evaluation that is compatible with today's emphasis on school-based management.

Evaluation, of course, always involves some risk on the part of the evaluators because of both limitations or impediments of current program evaluation models and procedures. In some cases, for example, evaluation efforts lack an adequate knowledge base. In other cases, program evaluators fail to understand the political and affective nature of evaluation approaches and techniques either because of ignorance, inadequate training or limited resources.

In spite of these variables, much is to be gained by conducting an evaluation that involves all stakeholders as long as it can be manageable, informative and can lead to needed changes. Approaching the evaluation of one's workplace, one's home away from home or one's community centre should be a positive and rewarding experience for all involved. Anything less than this perception on the part of staff, administration, students or parents will only inhibit the activities and taint the findings. The challenge, then, becomes one of widespread participation of all individuals associated with the formal education process.

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Questions to consider

1. What elements of our middle-years program do we want to evaluate?
2. What reasons or purposes do we have for wanting to evaluate each of these program components?
3. What will we do with these evaluation elements and how will we involve them in the evaluation process?
4. Who are the stakeholders for each of these evaluation elements? How will we involve them in the evaluation process?
5. What resources (people, dollars, data sources etc.) are available to us in conducting this evaluation process?
6. What tools and techniques are available to us in conducting this evaluation process?
7. What indicators will we use in conducting the evaluation for each of the program components? What criteria will be established to determine 'what is' and 'what should be'?
8. How will we coordinate the evaluation process and obtain meaningful consensus on evaluation standards, findings and recommendations?
9. How will we establish a positive and constructive climate for evaluation to take place in our school?
10. What is the most effective way to disseminate the evaluation results and obtain input from those involved?