

# OVERVIEW

## Evaluating The Effectiveness Of Prevention Programs

### What is Program Evaluation?

#### Asking relevant questions

Program evaluation has to do with collecting information about a program in order to answer questions asked about it. The types of questions asked when evaluating a prevention program in particular primarily focus on issues of assessment: *'Did we accomplish what we set out to achieve?'*<sup>1</sup> Finding the answers to evaluation questions entails scrutinizing both program results and the qualities that make the program work.

The specific type of information an evaluation seeks to investigate depends upon its intended audience. The type of information an audience is looking for will frame the scope of evaluation questions developed. These questions, in turn, will determine the evaluation design and dictate the kinds of information collected that will help answer the evaluation questions.

#### More than just a matter of opinion

In order to establish evaluation findings as objective, the evaluation must be carried out in a systematic manner based on scientific methods of research. This means following procedures that obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to the program under evaluation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, J.D., and Nederhooft, B. (1987) *Handbook for Evaluating Drug and Alcohol Prevention Programs*. p.2.

This handbook is organized around the most basic phases of the evaluation process regardless of the particular evaluation model employed. They consist of:

- Phase I:** Preparing for the evaluation
- Phase II:** Choosing the right evaluation questions
- Phase III:** Designing a data collection plan
- Phase IV:** Analyzing and interpreting the data collected
- Phase V:** Reporting the findings

Within each of these phases, steps are outlined to provide you, as the evaluator, with the means to conduct an evaluation that can reliably substantiate information beyond mere opinion.

## **Need for reporting accurate results**

The United States Department of Education must report to Congress on the effectiveness of prevention programs, and their ability to reduce violence, alcohol, and other drug use in K-12 grades as funded under the SDFSA. In order to meet this requirement, local education agencies are asked to evaluate the accomplishments of their funded prevention programs. Providing accurate information within the context of a quality evaluation does more than just satisfy federal accountability. More importantly, accurate information provides local education agencies with the means to make meaningful decisions about which prevention strategies to implement and which policies to adopt.

## **How Do We Know Our Prevention Programs Are Actually Changing the Behavior of Our Youths?**

### **Effects are not always immediately apparent**

The ultimate goal of any prevention program is to change the attitudes and behaviors that put youths at risk. A unique characteristic of prevention programs is that they seek to avert a problem before it starts. When prevention programs are evaluated, it becomes necessary to show that something did not happen which would likely have happened if the prevention program service had not been provided.

A second characteristic of prevention programs is that results cannot always be assessed immediately. At the time of program completion, participants may be able to demonstrate a gain in skills or knowledge, a change in attitudes, perceptions, and/or intentions. Changes in behavior, however, may not manifest themselves for months or even years following the program. Measuring success rates

of prevention programs, therefore, becomes more complicated than measuring the success rates of something like a job-training program for example. The question then becomes, how do we evaluate the effectiveness of prevention programs?

## Support of scientifically based research, in general

There already exists a body of scientifically based research<sup>2</sup> that demonstrates the positive effects of the various SDFS prevention programs and activities currently in use. This body of evidence supports claims that these programs influence participants, not only in reducing the use of violence, alcohol and other drugs among youth, but also in providing youths with beneficial skills that can be incorporated into their lives. These studies, which demonstrate the effectiveness of those prevention programs, assume that they work within any school given the targeted population.

### NOTE

SDFS Coordinators need to know whether the implementation of a specific program is effective for the given situation within their district. *In other words, is the program applicable to district-specific conditions?* Is it producing positive results efficiently within the target group?

## Demonstrate evidence of program effects, in specific

By using sound methodological evaluation procedures, district coordinators can assess whether the program is accomplishing what it was designed to do. Assessment simply requires asking evaluation questions concerning how well the program objectives were accomplished and if the program goals were achieved.

<sup>2</sup> For state code definition of scientifically based research, see Appendix 1

Gathering evidence to demonstrate the impact of a program on its participants requires the formulation of an evaluation design plan that includes:

- ☑ Assessing how faithfully to program design the program has been delivered;
- ☑ Measuring program outcome objectives using various and appropriate student performance standards;
- ☑ Establishing baseline and comparison data to which program outcome data may be compared.

Building these three components into a program evaluation is essential to document evidence of program effect.

## Getting Started

Each district's evaluation projects will vary depending on resources available, on the scope of the evaluation, the quality of evaluation questions, as well as the evaluation design to be implemented.

### **All evaluation projects should produce:**

- ☑ A documentation of what happened in the program,
- ☑ A description of which strategies worked best in the program,
- ☑ A measurement of program outcome objectives.

### **At the onset of an evaluation, address such basic questions as:**

- Who is your audience?
- What type of information does this audience want to know?
- What activity/activities can you measure to answer your evaluation question(s)?
- How will you collect information about these activities to demonstrate evidence of effect?
- From whom and from what source will information be provided?
- What is the timeline for data collection?
- In what form and by what means will results be reported to your audience?

## Things To Remember

1. There is no perfect *one size fits all* recipe that determines success or failure of an evaluation. Each district's situation is different and will require variations within evaluation activities.
2. A program evaluation does not have to be overly complex. A narrowly focused evaluation yielding meaningful results is more useful than one that tries to *bite off more than it can chew*.
3. A program evaluation does not have to be something external to staff responsibilities. Many evaluation activities are already a part of staff duties.
4. This evaluation project is not just about accounting for outcomes, but also about gaining relevant information in order to make meaningful decisions to improve the implementation of a program.
5. Ultimately the results of the project should benefit our youth.

## NOTES