The data difference -
Using evaluation research to inform policy and practice in early childhood

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MSASS Research to Practice Seminar. March 4, 2010

Presentation Outline

• Context and origins
• Role and process of evaluation
• Meaning from data
• Data into practice
Context and Origins

• Comprehensive community initiatives
  ◦ Invest in Children is an example
  ◦ Effort to build community capacity for all children and families in their early years
  ◦ Theory of change about specific programs and system/ community change

• Role of evaluation in CCIs
• Methodological challenges

Context and Origins

• Comprehensive community initiatives
• Role of evaluation in CCIs
  ◦ Implementation and early outcomes
  ◦ Quality of program components
  ◦ Long term benefits
  ◦ Continuous course correction

• Methodological challenges
Context and Origins

• Comprehensive community initiatives
• Role of evaluation in CCIs
• Methodological challenges
  ◦ Numerous pieces and part
  ◦ Measuring system change
  ◦ Population impacts vs. program outcomes
  ◦ Comparison groups
  ◦ Quality control

The example of Invest in Children

• Launch of Early Childhood Initiative in mid 1999 (now called Invest in Children)
• Brain research
• Return on investment
• Early Childhood system
• Evaluation as a core value
Invest in Children in Context

- Originally a three-year initiative began July 1, 1999; $40m in funding from governmental and 23 private sector funders); now a $22m annual budget
- IIC mission is to plan, fund, coordinate, and evaluate services for children prenatal to six and their families
- Organized under the Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood in 2004

Invest in Children: Goals & Programs

- **Goal 1: Effective Parents & Families**
  - Home Visiting
  - Early Childhood Mental Health

- **Goal 2: Safe & Healthy Children**
  - Health Insurance
  - Primary Lead Poisoning Prevention
  - Medical Home

- **Goal 3: Children Prepared for School**
  - Profession Development, centers & homes
  - Special Needs Child Care
  - Universal Pre-Kindergarten

- **Goal 4: A Community Committed to Children**
Role & process of evaluation

- Role of evaluation adopted as a core operating principle by IIC
- Evaluation is ongoing, integrated into program development and implementation
  - External evaluation
  - Program monitoring
- Commitment of philanthropic funds has allowed investment in evaluation over time

IIC evaluation

Building on strengths –
- Powerful child registry of all kids born in County since 1992 and served by IIC and others
- Ability to draw on routinely available administrative data to monitor program delivery and outcomes
- Solid experience in measuring -
  - Parent and caregiver knowledge, attitudes, and behavior
  - Quality of care settings to which children are exposed
Evaluation process for Invest in Children

- Develop program logic models to reflect the basic theory underlying the strategy
- Work with lead agencies and other key stakeholders to develop specific evaluation questions
- Create proposal and evaluation plan for review by Invest in Children Executive Committee
- Conduct evaluation; methods include surveys, interviews, administrative data, observations, case record review, etc., as appropriate
- Report findings to Executive and Partnership Committee, programs, and community

Evaluation process for Invest in Children

- Instruments
- Data Systems
- Encouragement
- Frustrations
Conceptualizing the overall approach

Invest in Children Logic Model

Strategies
- Effective Parents and Families
- Safe & Healthy Children
- Children Prepared For School
- Community Committed to Children

Programs
- Home visiting
- Early Childhood Mental Health
- Medical Home
- Parenting
- Family Child Care Homes
- Regional System
- Professional Development

Outputs
- Number of children and families reached
- Children received, early and with continuity
- Families effectively access range of available services
- Caregivers effectively engaged

Intermediate Outcomes
- Parents and caregivers have increased knowledge and skills
- Children receive appropriate care at home and in other settings
- Caregivers effectively engaged

Longer-term Outcomes
- Positive movement on community-level child well-being indicators
- Community ethic around our youngest children

Scope of Services Delivered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
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<tr>
<td>Any IIC Service</td>
<td>177,121</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medicaid</td>
<td>144,462</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newborn Home Visiting</td>
<td>54,940</td>
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<td>Family Child Care</td>
<td>30,624</td>
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<td>Ongoing Home Visiting</td>
<td>30,438</td>
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<td>Early Intervention</td>
<td>15,323</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Needs</td>
<td>2,784</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Service data July 1999 through December 2007
Disseminating evaluation findings

• The potential audiences for evaluation findings will not come looking for you
• Use creative ways to take findings to:
  • Program staff
  • Media
  • Key stakeholders
  • Community
• Models that can be replicated by other systems
**Evaluation purposes**

- Program planning and improvement  
  → formative evaluation

- Accountability  
  → summative evaluation

- Knowledge generation

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**Elements of a learning partnership**

- Ongoing external evaluation by university-based social science researchers
- Development of quarterly program indicators for tracking the progress of strategies in relation to service targets
- Creation of program logic models to specify both the intentions of the program elements and to provide a framework for the evaluation of program effects
- Forming of an Executive Committee including County officials, funders, and program operators, who engage in program refinement decision making based on evaluation data and other input
Making meaning from data

- Balancing scope with quality
- Working to blend efforts over time
- The challenge of singular focus
- Evaluation as a tool not an end in itself

Pitfalls – Example #1

- Agreeing on an evaluation measures upfront but interpretation becomes problematic
  - Quality of home-based child care (makes program look bad)
  - Child maltreatment (makes program look good)
Raising quality in home-based care

Child maltreatment rate dropped from 3.2 in 2000 to 1.0 in 2005
Pitfalls – Example #2

• Complications by design
  ▫ Selling rigor to get better answers but nobody’s buying
  ▫ Eventually finding opportunities to build in better designs

No assignment to conditions

• Creation of comparable groups for evaluation prevented by ethical, legal, clinical, and logistical barriers
• Eventual progress achieved by focusing on -
  ▫ Roll-out of new service additions that cannot be offered to everyone
  ▫ Group-based assignment
Pitfalls – Example #3

- Determining if the evaluation relationship really matters –
  - Did anything change? (program design, program development)

Examples of changes based on evaluation in IIC

- Goal 1 – Effective parents
  - Enhanced services for teens
  - Expanded newborn home visit to older moms
  - Engagement strategies for ongoing home visiting
- Goal 2 – Safe & healthy children
  - Pursuit of a medical home strategy
- Goal 3 – Children ready for school
  - Pilot of technical assistance doses for family child care home providers
  - Informing the UPK pilot
Evaluation challenges

- Invitation – who called for the evaluation?
- Language – do we understand each other?
- Fear – what is the true goal of the evaluation?
- Scope/focus – can we really measure this?
- Control – internal or external?
- Resources – when and with what budget?

Data into practice

Observations...
- Data don’t make policy... People with data make policy
- Policy shapes research
- Everyone wants outcomes... few want to pay for them (or pay very much)
- The great divides still need to be bridged
Do's: For the evaluator

- Push program staff to ask the research questions
- Understand the program you are evaluating. Numbers tell you one part of the story... people tell you the other part
- Consider the viewpoint/feelings of program staff when you present results
- Present your data so policymakers and program staff can understand it. Keep it short.
- Draw implications. Be ready for the media.

Do's: For program staff

- Embrace evaluation as a tool rather than a threat
- Get ALL staff on board to prevent sabotage
- Learn basic principles regarding data collection
- Be ready to listen to hard truths. Use the data to improve the program.
**Do’s: For Funders/Policymakers**

- Provide adequate funding for the evaluation component (Mandate is even better!)
- Allow programs time to learn from the evaluation and improve before you pull the plug
- Make decisions based on data (not perceptions, relationships, beliefs, etc.)

**In the perfect world...**

- All programs have adequately funded rigorous, yet practical evaluations that were developed through a collaborative conversation between program staff and evaluators.
- The evaluation results are presented to program staff in an understandable and sensitive fashion and staff embrace the findings as a means to improve the program and show impact.
- Policymakers/Funders reward the above.