

Fostering an Evaluative Culture by Addressing a Breakdown in the Policy Development Cycle

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Abstract: *Systematic evaluation contributes to a strong governance function that leads to improvement and accountability in school systems. Evaluation is integral to the policy development cycle. Elected school board trustees in River City school division were challenged in their governance role by a lack of evaluative feedback on policies. A four-step change process was created to guide the development of an evaluation framework to address the gap and foster an evaluative culture within the board. The change process described could be applied by other school divisions to enhance their policy evaluation function. More broadly, the importance of careful planning and the benefits of a participatory approach to evaluation are integral pieces to any change effort.*

Keywords: *policy, evaluation framework, evaluative culture, change management, trustee*

Résumé : *L'évaluation systématique contribue à fortifier la fonction de gouvernance pour améliorer les systèmes scolaires et leur redevabilité. Le manque de rétroaction évaluative sur les politiques en place a engendré un défi pour le travail des conseillers scolaires élus du conseil scolaire de River City. Un processus de changement en quatre étapes a été développé pour guider l'élaboration d'un cadre d'évaluation dans le but de réduire l'écart et favoriser une culture d'évaluation au sein du conseil scolaire. Le processus de changement proposé dans l'étude de cas présentée peut être reproduit par d'autres conseils scolaires afin de bonifier leur démarche d'évaluation des politiques. De manière plus générale, l'importance d'une démarche de planification minutieuse et les avantages d'une approche participative à l'évaluation sont partie intégrante de tout effort de changement.*

Mots clés : *politique, cadre d'évaluation, culture évaluative, gestion du changement, conseiller*

A policy development cycle can appear deceptively straightforward: problem identification, analysis, development, enactment, implementation, and evaluation—repeat. Yet in reality every stage is complex and iterative. This practice note presents a change plan to address a gap in evaluation as part of the policy

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development cycle in an educational setting. I approached addressing this gap by developing a change plan in my role as an elected school board trustee and a credentialed evaluator. After setting the context, this practice note identifies the impetus and priorities for change, then offers a step-by-step process to inform the creation and implementation of a policy evaluation framework, with the aim to foster an evaluative culture. The practice note concludes with a discussion, offering reflections and practical applications.

CONTEXT

School board trustees are in a prime position to influence change and act as a bridge between the communities they represent and the education system (Mueller, 2011). Elected trustees make up the board that governs River City school division (a pseudonym)—a large, urban, and diverse K–12 school division in Western Canada—which serves as the case example for this practice note. As part of a policy governing board (Carver & Carver, 2009), trustees are responsible for creating, monitoring, and evaluating policies that shape organizational culture and practices, supported by a superintendent in the role of chief executive officer. Trustees, in their governance role, can positively impact organizational performance and student achievement through the creation and evaluation of policies (Dahler-Larsen & Boodhoo, 2019; Hanberger, 2016; Nienaber, 2014). Agron, Berends, Ellis, and Gonzalez (2010) posited trustees are “critical to maintaining momentum and producing effective outcomes throughout the policy cycle” (p. 528). Trustees are community leaders who can serve as champions for the policy evaluation process.

One of the ways school boards govern, put forward their values, and make change is by asking questions and developing policies. Trustees require evaluative information for assurance that existing policies have been implemented as intended and are achieving the desired results. Mayne (2009) argued leaders must request results, ask questions, and support use of findings. If leaders request evidence and ask questions to inform decision making, then collecting and interpreting evidence on what is working, what is not, and why becomes a routine part of the organization’s culture. Yet trustees do not necessarily come with preexisting knowledge of evaluation or know what policy questions to ask. Thus, capacity building specific to evaluation, in terms of the development of awareness, knowledge, skills, commitment, and leadership (Smith, Tang, & Nutbeam, 2006), can support trustees in carrying out their governance role.

IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Provincial education regulations mandate that school boards must regularly monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their policies. Standards set by the provincial government note superintendents are responsible for implementing policies and supporting their board in evaluating impacts. Although activities

related to evaluation, monitoring, and performance measurement take place in the organization, a coordinated approach for evaluation was lacking. No formal structure existed for collecting and using system-level and policy evaluation information for governance-level decision making.

In recent years the board enhanced its stakeholder participation opportunities as part of its policy development practices; as such, extending engagement practices to evaluation is consistent with the existing organizational culture, which indicates a readiness for change. As a member of the governance and evaluation board committee, I took on the role of change agent to plan the change with my colleagues with the aim of strengthening our governance function by focusing on our board's policy evaluation responsibilities. The mandate for the change was formally adopted by the board at a public meeting as a part of the committee's work plan.

PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

The priorities for change focus on raising awareness of the role of evaluation in the policy development cycle, the benefits of creating an evaluative culture, and skill building in this area. An evaluative culture denotes an organizational culture that seeks out empirical information on its performance and uses that information to learn how to improve (Mayne, 2009). The change process includes capacity-building opportunities to promote discussions, learning, and reflective practice, intended to enhance trustees' skills and knowledge of evaluation.

A key priority of the change was the creation of a framework to form the basis for systematic policy evaluation. An evaluation framework is a document that describes the overall approach and strategy to guide the evaluation. It aligns stakeholders' intended purposes for evaluation, questions, activities, and desired outcomes, leading to a more systematic, responsive, and performance-enhancing system (Guerra-López & Toker, 2012).

THE CHANGE PROCESS

Part of preparing for any type of change is choosing an appropriate change management model. Deszca, Ingols, and Cawsey's (2020) four-step change path model was selected as a guide because a goal of this model is to increase the adaptability of an organization through effective change management practices and engagement as well as fostering a learning and growth perspective. The steps in the model are *awakening*, *mobilization*, *acceleration*, and *institutionalization*. Table 1 provides the plan and an overview of the activities for each step of the process. In considering the inquiry cycle as part of continuous improvement, Deming's plan-do-study-act cycle (Henshall, 2017) was also applied to the change model. The model is iterative, moving between stages with purposeful monitoring and evaluation activities, adapting as new learning occurs.

The change process, intended to take place over 3 years, is expected to shift the organization from its current state to more of an evaluative culture.

Table 1. Overview of change process

CPM steps and PDSA stages	Actions
<p>Awakening: Year 1</p> <p>Plan: Understand the problem, scope it, and set goals. Determine what data to gather; collect and use information to predict challenges, identify considerations, and contribute to the feedback loop.</p>	<p>The G&E committee will scan, identify drivers, host facilitated discussions with the board and superintendent to begin capacity building, review the organizational readiness survey results to stimulate discussion, and complete an organizational stakeholder analysis. The trustees and superintendent will complete a presurvey to establish a baseline of awareness and evaluation skills, discuss the goals of the change process, collectively identify criteria by which to measure success, provide input into a communication plan and M&E plan, identify required resources, and establish feedback loops with regular updates.</p>
<p>Mobilization: Year 1 into Year 2</p> <p>Do: Carry out the implementation, document successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Gather, analyze, and share data to inform the process.</p>	<p>The superintendent will put a call out for members to form an advisory group, and participants will cocreate the terms of reference using similar ones that exist within the division as a starting point. Participants (trustees, superintendent, and advisory group members) will continue to engage in capacity-building opportunities. I will engage trustees and the superintendent in creating a policy evaluation framework using a participatory approach, include regular check-in on the process using feedback loops, and adjust as needed.</p>
<p>Acceleration: Year 2 into Year 3</p> <p>Study: Compare implementation to date with plan and note progress and areas of challenge. Analyze data collected and summarize learnings to inform changes to plan.</p>	<p>Participants will conduct action planning and implementation and adapt as new learning occurs when “piloting change” by evaluating a few policies. The G&E committee will share M&E findings and draft a sustainability plan to be presented to the board. Engagement will be expanded to the broader organization.</p>
<p>Institutionalization: Year 3</p> <p>Act: Consider what changes need to be made to the framework to fully implement. Address those changes and roll out the full implementation by carrying out the complete policy development cycle.</p>	<p>As change agent, I will lead participants in the full implementation of the change (if warranted based on findings from M&E). The G&E committee will conduct the postsurvey and after-action review, check the terms of reference for the advisory group to confirm its mandate is complete, draft a final report, and present findings from the change initiative at a public board meeting.</p>

Note. CPM = change path model; G&E = governance and evaluation; M&E = monitoring and evaluation; PDSA = plan–do–study–act.

DISCUSSION

The examination of a policy's viability, as [Alkin \(2011\)](#) noted, is inherently a political activity, as are decisions about who participates in the process. As such, it is beneficial to briefly discuss the importance of approaching this change in a participatory manner. Widespread agreement exists in the literature that promoting stakeholder participation when aiming to build evaluation capacity and foster change has benefits ([Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013](#); [MacLellan-Wright, Patten, dela Cruz, & Flaherty, 2007](#); [Zukoski & Bosserman, 2017](#)). The benefits include enhanced buy-in and shared ownership, increased likelihood of achieving intended outcomes, and improved utilization of findings to inform decision making and organizational learning ([Guerra-López & Toker, 2012](#)). As [De Weger, Van Vooren, Luijckx, Baan, and Drewes \(2018\)](#) explained, stakeholder participation in evaluation can serve as a lever to bring about organizational change. Increased utilization of findings, specifically, is an important benefit to highlight as the uptake of findings with regard to education policy is limited ([Chapman & Ainscow, 2019](#)) yet crucial to informing sound decision making.

In addition to the participation of the trustees and superintendent, the change plan includes the formation of a “policy evaluation advisory group” (advisory group). The call for and establishment of the advisory group, made as part of the mobilization step, includes development of an engagement strategy to promote meaningful connection with stakeholders. The advisory group will aim for representation of a variety of stakeholders—for example, students, staff, caregivers, Indigenous elders and knowledge keepers, and representatives from ethnocultural communities. When stakeholders are diverse, promoting the theme of “learning together” throughout the change process can assist in levelling the unequal social hierarchies that exist ([House, 2019](#)). [Voegeli, Schmitt-Boshnick, and Krupa \(2021\)](#) found identifying the purpose is essential for the success of an advisory group's contribution. Possible purposes include improving the appropriateness of the process, navigating challenges, championing the change, enhancing communication with the broader organization, and facilitating utilization of findings. The use of an advisory group is consistent with existing organizational practices and was successfully applied to inform River City school division's actions toward eliminating systemic racism and support equity throughout the division.

A deliverable of this work was the creation of a policy evaluation framework. A primary goal of the framework is to provide trustees with relevant, reliable, and valid evaluative data that offer answers to their questions to inform policy-related decisions. Evaluative-type questions serve as a guide for evaluations of policies and can centre around process issues, such as those related to implementation. Impact evaluation questions can focus on effects of the policy—positive, negative, and unintended—by assessing if the organizational culture has changed and if the policy has affected a particular subpopulation differently than the whole. Additional questions, such as what changes are needed to achieve more equitable results for different populations, highlight how policy evaluation can provide a foundation for action to identify and address unjust practices and promote equity

(Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). In addition to establishing evaluation questions, the board discussed criteria by which to make evaluative judgements. As Patton (2021) argued, “Without criteria, there can be no judgment. Without judgment, there can be no evaluation” (p. 4). Relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and sustainability were discussed, described, and defined for use as criteria included in the framework.

REFLECTIONS

Evaluation is not an end in itself but an act incorporated in the governance structure to generate information to inform decision making and action (Lindgren, Hanberger, & Lundström, 2016). Creating and applying this change plan was intended to support the board to better understand policy implementation and impacts. Unfortunately, and despite the best-laid plans, the pandemic and competing priorities affected my ability to fully carry out the complete change process as initially intended. Furthermore, due to a delay in starting the change, the election cycle fell in the middle of the process, resulting in a shift of board members. However, policy development skills are an existing part of onboarding of new trustees. This process can be extended to include policy evaluation as the term unfolds to maintain momentum.

Nevertheless, a change plan was developed, and a policy evaluation framework was created. In addition to participation by the trustees and the superintendent, student senators and some staff were also engaged in the process. The framework is now supporting the completion of the policy development cycle and is referenced by trustees and staff when developing policy to ensure future evaluability. The full effect of implementing this change, however, will only be realized when further participation is fostered and more stakeholders have a voice in informing the change. From a social justice perspective, a specific focus should lie in better understanding the lived experiences of those impacted by policies—for instance, marginalized students and staff—to inform the framework and with the aim to address inequities. This requires fully carrying out the policy development cycle by applying the framework as a guide when conducting policy evaluations to generate synergies and coherence in terms of planning, knowledge sharing, and learning.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

This note offers guidance on how to approach the creation of a policy evaluation framework with the aim of fostering an evaluative culture in a specific context, considering a comprehensive change management perspective. The process could be applied by other school divisions and extended to other disciplines to support policy evaluation. More broadly, the importance of careful planning and the benefits of a participatory approach to evaluation are integral pieces to be considered as part of any change effort.

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