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PROMISING PRACTICES IN PROGRAM EVALUATION

Introduction

This Issue Brief addresses the topic of PDG grant evaluation which is an integral component of the Program Evaluation Product Suite. The suite is designed to provide a synthesis and summary of program evaluation decision-making and execution by PDG State Grantees. The Issue Brief summarizes PDG grantees promising practices related to implementing and overseeing evaluation activities.

Evaluation can...

- Leverage existing systems and expertise
- Describe progress made toward desired outcomes
- Identify opportunities for improvement
- Inform future strategies and activities
- Document outcomes and successes to share with stakeholders, policymakers, and funders

PDG State Grantee Responses to Evaluation Requirements

The evaluation of their PDG grant created opportunities and challenges for state grantees. State grantees viewed evaluation as important for compliance, and many also recognized the benefits of employing a multi-pronged evaluation orientation. Many state grantees supported more robust evaluations that addressed key questions of concern to leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders within their states.

To ensure all state agency personnel engaged in the grant program evaluation activities were prepared to conduct the evaluation, state agency personnel recommended reviewing key evaluation terms and definitions for different types of evaluations. Table 1 provides a snapshot of various evaluation approaches, their definitions, and describes how they relate to the PDG grants.

SPOTLIGHT ON PROMISING PRACTICES

- Conduct a review of the original solicitation, the state's grant proposal, the reviewers' comments, and federal guidance regarding the evaluation.
- Account for state agency procurement processes and requirements.
- Determine financial resources, personnel, and systems which exist and are needed.
- Implement a plan for addressing key evaluation and monitoring requirements, and strategic questions of interest.
- Assess what is feasible based on pilot testing and stakeholder input.

Table 1. Evaluation Approaches and Relationship to PDG State Grantees

Approaches	Definition	How the Approach Relates to PDG Grants
Performance Measurement/ Performance Monitoring	The ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments, particularly progress toward pre-established goals. This type of evaluation is typically conducted by program or agency management.	All PDG grantees were required to monitor the degree to which the state and sub-grantees carried out planned activities and to report on the number and characteristics of children and families served on an annual basis.
Implementation Evaluation	Evaluations of the extent to which a program is operating as planned and the degree to which activities are implemented in conformance with statutory and regulatory requirements, program design, and professional standards.	PDG grantees were required to report some implementation evaluation data annually. Many expansion grantees set aside funds for external evaluators to assess the implementation of planned activities to learn whether planned activities were being implemented as originally planned and consistently across communities.
Outcome Evaluation	Evaluations that measure the extent to which a program or grant initiative achieve outcome-oriented objectives. This type of evaluation focuses on outputs and outcomes (including unintended effects) to judge program effectiveness but may also assess program process to understand how outcomes are produced.	PDG grantees were not required to conduct outcome evaluations but many expansion grantees contracted with outside experts to perform outcome evaluations.
Impact Evaluation	A form of outcome evaluation that assesses the net effect of a program or grant-funded initiative by comparing outcomes with an estimate of what would have happened in the absence of the program or funding. It is different from an outcome evaluation in isolating the program or funding's contribution to achievement of desired objectives.	A few PDG grantees contracted with external evaluators who oversaw rigorous evaluation approaches to assess the degree to which PDG led to improvements in child outcomes. The designs included a range of quasi-experimental approaches.
Cost-Benefit Evaluation and Cost Effectiveness Analyses	Evaluations that compare a program's outputs or outcomes with the costs (resources expended) to produce them. Cost-effectiveness analysis assesses the cost of meeting a single goal or objective and can be used to identify the least costly alternative for meeting that goal. Cost-benefit analysis aims to identify all relevant costs and benefits, usually expressed in dollar terms.	Some PDG grantees contracted with experts to assess the costs of the new or expanded preschool services. Some local communities used a new tool to calculate the Cost of Preschool Quality Preschool to include not only the cost of direct service provision but also the costs of monitoring and ensuring adequate infrastructure to support quality.
	Source: U.S. GAO 2019	Source: Ceelo.org

All PDG grantees engaged in performance monitoring and most conducted implementation evaluations. Most of the states receiving expansion grants conducted outcome evaluations, and a few states also examined the impacts and costs of expanding preschool. Table 2 presents a snapshot of the range of evaluations PDG grantees employed and associated example questions.

Table 2. Evaluation Approaches and Example Questions

Approach	Example Evaluation Questions Posed by PDG State Grantees
Performance Measurement/ Performance Monitoring	Is the state implementing the activities articulated in the proposal according to plan? Is the state providing services to the target sub-grantees (districts that were part of the grant) and programs? Are sub-grantees serving the target number of special education children in inclusive settings?
Implementation Evaluation	Are districts engaged in a consistent set of activities to recruit and engage children and families? Are schools and classrooms offering a consistent set of coaching and professional development supports? What barriers are districts, schools, and classrooms facing in implementing activities with fidelity (that is, consistency)?
Outcome Evaluation	Are teachers engaged in PDG activities demonstrating increases in professional development outcomes? Are classrooms improving in quality (based on independent observations)? Are children's learning outcomes improving?
Impact Evaluation	What impact did PDG have on children's socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes? That is, did children who received PDG perform better than comparison children in terms of socio-emotional and cognitive well-being?
Cost-Benefit Evaluation and Cost Effectiveness Analyses	What is the cost of PDG per child served? How does this vary depending upon the length of the school day? How does this vary based on where the child receives services (e.g., public school preschool versus community-based preschool settings)?

Source: PDG Evaluation Reports (See Appendix B).

Strategies to Effectively Design, Implement, and Oversee Evaluations

Many state agencies overseeing PDG evaluations reported that they began by considering why each type of evaluation activity was needed and who would ultimately be using the information the evaluations generated. While the grants included stringent performance monitoring requirements, grantees were allowed to use funds to support a range of evaluation activities. Grantees had discretion over the types of evaluations, the evaluation designs, the approach to data collection (including instruments) analytic techniques, reporting formats, and dissemination approaches.

Some of the successful strategies and promising practices recommended for individuals charged with overseeing similar grant-funded evaluation activities in the future are presented below.

- **Begin by reviewing the original solicitation, the state's grant proposal, the reviewers' comments, and federal guidance regarding evaluation.** Virtually every federal grant solicitation includes information regarding evaluation requirements. In the PDG grant solicitation, some states interpreted the language as requiring an external evaluation and incorporated it into their proposal. However, not all states had the same interpretation and therefore did not propose an external evaluation in their proposal. Regardless, it is important to consider specific information regarding the monitoring and evaluation requirements for the grant, and to consider reviewers' comments to determine if adjustments to the evaluation approach should be made to address any critiques or concerns raised by the reviewers. This is especially true in situations where newly hired staff administering the PDG grant are not familiar with the proposal. Challenges can also arise if time is not spent understanding what was proposed and why it was proposed.

- **Identify the personnel responsible for overseeing each evaluation activity early in the grant cycle.** State agencies that effectively designed and implemented PDG evaluations clearly identified who, within the state agency, was responsible for overseeing the evaluation activities. These individuals often worked closely with internal monitoring staff to design performance evaluation systems, and also contracted with external evaluators who were responsible for implementation, outcome, impact, and cost-benefit evaluations. It is imperative to clearly articulate who is responsible and to ensure that the state agency staff person or staff charged with overseeing evaluation activities has the necessary authority. It is also essential to quickly engage personnel responsible for overseeing grant-related activities and those who will be affected by the activities to ensure early buy-in and, also, to tailor evaluations to address their issues, intents, and concerns.

- **Develop a plan for addressing the key grant requirements and strategic questions of importance to key stakeholders in the state.** Rather than simply responding to federal requirements, states that documented important aspects of their PDG implementation and outcomes employed a strategic approach. Some states referred to their state's Early Learning Council strategic research agenda and used evaluation funds to address key questions of concern to policymakers and stakeholders.

- **Determine resources** that exist within the program, the state agency, and the field that can support the evaluation approach and the range of evaluation activities. Rather than starting from scratch, many successful grantees reported that early in the grant cycle, they considered what resources were in place that they could build upon including knowledgeable personnel within their agencies, evaluation experts engaged with the state agency, and federally funded technical assistance (TA) providers. For example, a number of states had existing systems to monitor state-funded preschool. Rather than simply building a new system to meet the new monitoring requirements, these states reviewed their existing resources and capacities, consulted with agency personnel and external experts, and determined how they could augment their existing systems to obtain needed PDG grant data.

- **Understand state agency procurement processes and requirements** for contracting with an external evaluator. It is critical to understand these requirements as early as possible as, often, the process can take considerable time and energy. If these contracting processes and procedures are not considered early, the evaluation can be delayed resulting in the absence of baseline data.

- **Pilot test new data collection systems** before going to scale to ensure subsequent implementation is informed by early lessons learned. Many states reported that changes to existing systems required data sharing agreements that took time to negotiate and that building

Important issues to consider:

- When do you need to get started and will you be able to engage the evaluator? When will you need to begin if you want to show a difference over time?

- When will you have access to data and findings?

- What procurement procedures are in place? (How long will it take to get a solicitation posted and a contract in place?)

- Where are existing data and where are data that you need to collect? Do you have the authority and resources to compile the data?

- Why are you collecting the data?

- Who will collect and who will use the findings?

- Are there opportunities to participate in a community of practice to learn from experts and others engaged in similar evaluations?

information technology systems also exceeded the grant deadlines. Instead of simply building a separate system, some states used the first year of the PDG grant to pilot test a new system that would later be built into their existing infrastructure. One state used an online survey to capture data from sub-grantees and another asked sub-grantees to complete paper reports. Personnel from these states reported that they used input from internal state staff, sub-grantees, and those affected by the grant-related activities to refine their data collection processes. They reported it was important to incorporate input before new data collection was incorporated into their existing systems.

- **Obtain cost estimates of desired evaluation approaches and performance monitoring processes before developing solicitations.** Obtaining estimates of the costs of a range evaluation approaches and monitoring processes is important to ensure a desired scope of work is matched with the available budget. One state reported that the first round of public solicitations had underestimated the cost of the robust evaluation that the state desired. This state reissued the solicitation after receiving proposals that did not meet the state's needs. The revised solicitation included a larger budget and allowed contractors to have a higher indirect rate to cover the scope of desired evaluation activities.

- **Consider what is feasible in relation to time demands.** It is important to considering the amount of time needed to procure an outside vendor to conduct an external evaluation, to obtain data sharing agreements if agency data are collected by a different state agency, to obtain Institutional Review Board approval, and to collect and analyze the data. Multiple PDG State Grantees delayed baseline data collection because of challenges with some of these activities that are necessary for external evaluators to begin their work. Developing a feasible timeline is important for a quality evaluation.

- **Set up processes to use data for continuous quality improvement.** For data to be useful for continuous quality improvement (CQI), it is essential to set up systems for regular reporting and reflection. It is equally important to set up regular times for key stakeholders to meet to review reports and reflect on lessons learned. In the absence of established processes which include time devoted to reflection, data will likely not be used. States that have successfully used findings from monitoring and implementation evaluations report that they have the time to reflect -0 and the authority to make changes to improve ongoing activities.

- **Ensure adequate time and resources are devoted to engaging diverse evaluation stakeholders.** In the spirit of participatory evaluation, it is vital to ensure those responsible for providing evaluation data are part of early discussions and can frame the evaluation questions and study design. To ensure the evaluation results are useful to the range of key stakeholders, it is important to devote adequate time and attention to engaging service providers, families, and others who are being asked to participate in evaluation activities.

- **Engage experts and advisors to review the evaluation design including potential instruments.** Technical experts and advisors can ensure the overall approach reflects cultural and linguistic competence, is sensitive to issues of racial equity, and employs appropriate instruments. In addition, specific technical issues related to addressing constraints can be more easily navigated with input from experts and peers.

- **Develop and implement a dissemination plan so key stakeholders have access to evaluation findings.** PDG State Grantees that have used evaluation findings to garner support for preschool expansion have developed dissemination plans and have actively engaged stakeholders in

reviewing and reflecting on findings. A number of states issued press releases, engaged external evaluation partners in testifying before their legislature, and held public meetings to disseminate findings regarding the outcomes of the PDG grants.

- **Create systems and processes that will be sustained beyond the life cycle of the grant.** A few state grantees reported they built systems and processes which could be sustained beyond the PDG grant cycle. To accomplish this, some states built separate systems to monitor their new PDG grants, while other states chose to build onto an existing system already in place. Whichever option they chose, states established a robust approach for monitoring quality.

Evaluation Constraints and Capacities which Need to be Considered by PDG State Grantees

States that have effectively designed and implemented PDG project evaluations have addressed the following questions:

- **What capacity does the state agency or office have to manage or contribute to the evaluation plan and reporting?** It is important to acknowledge that state agencies have a range of capacities in terms of number of personnel and capacity to manage large grant initiatives and associated evaluation activities. Prior to receiving the PDG grants, some states had few full-time permanent staff who were responsible for early learning. In some instances, a single individual was responsible for hiring new staff and getting the new grant underway as the state was hiring new PDG personnel. In contrast, other state agencies had entire divisions with staff who could nimbly move to the new grant and assist with evaluation oversight. State agency staff charged with leading the grants reported that the number of personnel at the state agency was less important than matching the scope of evaluation activities to the existing staff and skill capacity.

- **Do the individuals overseeing the evaluation activities have the technical capacity to oversee the evaluation?** State personnel charged with overseeing the PDG grants typically have deep content knowledge, but few are evaluation experts. Nonetheless, it is important for those overseeing the evaluation activities to have sufficient technical knowledge to ensure external experts/evaluators have technical capacities to conduct the evaluation as planned. In the absence of this knowledge, those overseeing the PDG grants frequently reached out to external experts such as federally funded TA providers, professors, or think tank evaluation experts.

- **Do those responsible for evaluation activities have appropriate authority to oversee the evaluation?** Individuals charged with overseeing the PDG grants might not have the authority to oversee all of the required evaluation activities. In some instances, separate state offices oversee a range of policies that affect evaluation processes. It is also important that those charged with evaluation oversight, review state laws and regulations to ensure that the proposed evaluation activities are consistent. For example, jurisdictions are inclined to have specific requirements regarding data collection which need to be accounted for from the very start of the evaluation process.

- **What funds are budgeted to support monitoring and evaluation activities?** It is important to carefully review applications/proposals for federal funding to ensure adequate funds were set aside for evaluation activities. If insufficient funds were budgeted for evaluation activities, it is important to consider whether it is possible to leverage other resources to fulfill revaluation requirements. It is also important to ensure the scope of the proposed evaluation is matched to the budget available

for evaluation activities. Some PDG State Grantees asked sub-grantees to fund portions of the evaluation to ensure the budgets were sufficient.

- **What internal and external resources are available to the state agency for help with the evaluation plan and design?** Often personnel within a state agency have evaluation expertise or experience with the procurement process needed to engage an outside vendor. It is important to leverage existing resources rather than starting from scratch. For PDG grants, the federal government also supported multiple TA providers who offered numerous opportunities for grantees to participate in communities of practice and peer exchanges to learn from one another and from experts. In designing and implementing evaluations, these opportunities and resources helped grantees address technical issues and implement more robust evaluations.

- **What external resources such as funding from philanthropies or government agency sources could support evaluation activities?** Some state agencies have existing contracts with vendors that could be amended to begin evaluation activities in a timely manner. Other funding sources from philanthropic organizations or governmental agency sources may also be tapped. It is important to consider what capacities and resources could be leveraged to support new evaluation activities.

- **When should evaluation findings be reported to be most useful to different stakeholders?** It is important to consider various potential audiences for the PDG evaluation findings, and when they would need to have the findings, at the beginning of planning the evaluation. Internal stakeholders are often best served by receiving ongoing performance monitoring findings and implementation evaluation activities to make mid-course corrections. External stakeholders, such as federal funders, often need findings from these activities on an annual basis.

- **What political capacities or constraints exist that could have an influence on the planned evaluation activities?** It is important that those overseeing the evaluation are aware of the political context that could influence the "inputs" or resources devoted to grant activities. In fact, the PDG Expansion Grants were based on state commitments for ongoing funding. Still, changes in political contexts, including shifts in political leadership, can lead to and result in sudden and abrupt changes in funding commitments. In some instances, states increased funding, while in other instances changes in political support had the potential to decrease state matching funds. It is important to account for these political changes and to track how such changes might affect the proposed and implemented activities. In addition, changes in political contexts could lead to changes in potential stakeholder timelines and interests in viewing evaluation findings. For example, new legislators might have an interest in seeing outcome, impact, or cost analyses on a timeline that differs from what was originally planned.

Highlighting Several PDG Grant Evaluations

Massachusetts worked with an evaluation specialist at the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care who was supported by federally funded TA providers to administer several evaluation approaches that would meet the needs of the range of stakeholders. The implementation evaluation found that after two years of operating the PDG grant:

- The basic structure of the program and the roles of each partner were fairly well defined across communities.

- Management structures were in place, services for families were offered and delivered, and professional development and financial supports were offered to teachers and assistant teachers.

The longitudinal outcome evaluation found that:

- Classrooms taught by teachers receiving PDG funds scored higher than non-participating classrooms.
- Parents of children in participating classrooms made economic gains during the preschool year, presumably because they were able to work while their children were in safe, full-day, full-year programs.
- Overall the children who participated in the program were entering kindergarten with a strong preparation for success.

The impact evaluation employed a regression discontinuity design – a specific quasi-experimental technique to compare the outcomes of children served with PDG Program funding with children similar in age not benefitting from PDG funding. The evaluation found that:

- Across standardized measures of English vocabulary and letter/word recognition skills, preschool children served by the PDG grant demonstrated significant growth and reflected more growth than seen in a nationally representative sample of preschool aged children.
- The greatest gains were seen in English vocabulary growth, despite the fact that children entered preschool much farther below the expected skill level for English vocabulary than in other skills and went on to significantly close the gap.

Certain PDG states (e.g., Maine, Rhode Island, Virginia) contracted with an independent research firm to conduct a comprehensive external evaluation to measure the impacts of their PDG program on children's school readiness and later academic outcomes. For example, the Virginia Department of Education worked with an outside evaluator to conduct both a formative and summative evaluation of its PDG program, the Virginia Preschool Initiative Plus (VPI+).

The VPI+ evaluation included implementation, outcome, and cost analysis approaches. A few of the key findings from these evaluations are:

- Participating programs offered full-day schedules, providing on average five hours, 20 minutes of instructional time each day.
- Nearly all VPI+ classrooms met the requirement of having 18 or fewer children.
- Children who attended VPI+ demonstrated a gain of 20.8 months in early literacy skill development and 15.4 months in math skill development within a 12-month timeframe.
- VPI+ participation increased kindergarten readiness skills.
- VPI+ benefited children in high-needs communities across all school readiness domains including literacy, math, approaches to learning and social and emotional development.

Montana engaged in ongoing, formative evaluations that could yield actionable data to inform instruction and continuous program improvement. These data included results from child progress assessments, assessments of classroom quality and teacher interactions, and observational data.

Montana promoted and supported PDG subgrantees to implement Continuous Improvement goal setting practices that led to the intentional use of program-wide data-based decision making. These practices resulted in the alignment of program-wide goals, teacher professional learning, and child outcome goals. Montana also contracted with outside experts to complete more in-depth implementation and outcome evaluations.

A spotlight on Louisiana's development of "performance profiles" to inform families as they consider where to enroll their children, and to inform communities to guide program improvement was an innovative evaluation strategy worth describing. The performance profiles are the product of the state's new early childhood program unified rating system. The rating system has two components: (1) ratings that relate to positive child outcomes (i.e., adult-child interactions as measured by CLASS), and (2) information on classroom best practices (e.g., curriculum implementation, child assessments of learning, teacher credentials). Each program's rating is converted to a specific number of stars. Louisiana's online *School and Center Finder* helps families make informed decisions about education and care programs for their children. The Finder provides an overview of schools and centers within a geographic area and the number of stars each program has based on its performance profile.

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Evaluation Resources

[Assessing Accountability and Ensuring Continuous Program Improvement: Why, How and Who](#) (2011), *Ellen Frede, Walter Gilliam, and Lawrence Schweinhart,* In P*re-K Debates: Current Controversies and Issues* Edited by Edward Zigler, Walter S. Gilliam, and W. Steven Barnett.

[Improving Early Education Programs through Data-based Decision Making](#) (2011), *Shannon Riley-Ayers, Ellen Frede, W. Steven Barnett, and Kimberly Brenneman,* While state-funded preschool programs have been growing, reliable guidance on how best to study program effectiveness remains limited. This working paper from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) presents five options for studying program effectiveness, summarizing each option in chart form, and providing estimated costs for each evaluation.

[State Approaches to Evaluating Preschool Programs](#) (2015), *Shannon Riley-Ayers and W. Steven Barnett.* This report presents guidance for state policy makers for evaluating the quality and effects of a preschool program. The information is valuable as states consider monitoring for program quality and continuous improvement as well as conducting a program evaluation for effectiveness. This document is the first in a series of Short Takes designed to be quick resources on key issues of importance to [Preschool Development Grant](#) (PDG) states. While geared towards a PDG audience, the information in Short Takes is often of interest to other states and early childhood policymakers.

[State of the States Policy Snapshot: State Pre-K Monitoring and Evaluation Policies](#) (2013), *Diane Schilder and Megan E. Carolan.* This policy brief from the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) discusses why evaluation and monitoring systems are important for quality early education and the data states collect to monitor and evaluate Pre-k programs.

[Preschool Program Quality Assurance System Discussion Guide](#) (2015), *Kate Tarrant.* This discussion guide is designed to facilitate policymakers' review of their state's Preschool Program Quality Assurance Systems (PPQAS) and serve as a tool to examine and strengthen current approaches. PPQAS often involve shared responsibilities between State Education Agencies and Local Education Agencies and other local partners.

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