

## Five simple steps for evaluating school-based programming interventions

There are many approaches schools can take to create more welcoming, safe, caring and respectful learning environments. Some schools may decide that as part of a comprehensive approach they will implement a school-wide instructional intervention program to enhance the social and emotional development and positive mental health of students.

There are a number of these programming interventions available. Some have a strong evidence base; many do not. Having a strong evidence base means that the program effectiveness has been measured in a carefully conducted study, clear predictable results have been identified, and the program can be replicated in different schools with similar results. *(For more information on evidence-based programming see **Choosing school-based programming interventions.**)*

Knowing that a program was effective for other schools makes it more likely that the program will have a positive impact. But a strong evidence base is not a guarantee; there are many factors that can affect programming outcomes. Collecting and analyzing relevant data at the school level throughout the year is a way of ensuring that the program is actually being implemented the way it was intended.

When school staff implement a specific programming intervention, valuable time and resources will be dedicated to the effort. Therefore, evaluating the effectiveness of the program is essential.

Evaluation has many benefits, including:

- creating accountability for all participants, including students, staff, parents and community partners
- supporting informed decision making at the beginning of the program and throughout the school year
- providing compelling evidence that the programming initiative is (or is not)
- making a positive difference for students and staff
- enhancing the credibility of the initiative
- increasing the probability of 'buy in' for future initiatives among staff and community partners.

A comprehensive evaluation plan goes beyond hunches and opinions ("It feels like this program is working" or "Students just love this program") by systematically collecting and analyzing relevant data to inform school improvement planning for both the short- and long-term.

This easy-to-use guide offers school leaders five simple steps that will ensure school staff are asking the right questions, collecting the most relevant data, and using the results in effective ways. Each step is illustrated by a fictional example of what a school might do to evaluate a program they are implementing. For this illustrative example, the school is implementing the WITS program. WITS is a Canadian evidence-based K-6 intervention program for creating responsive learning environments that help students improve relationship skills and deal effectively with bullying behaviour. (For more information on the WITS program visit: <http://www.witsprogram.ca/>)

## BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

Deciding to evaluate programs mid-stream or after the fact is counterproductive and provides little or no reliable information. It is critical to know from the outset what the goals are, the desired results and how evidence of these results will be gathered. To be effective, evaluation must be part of implementation planning and the school staff needs to start collecting relevant data *before* the program begins.

To do this, follow these five simple steps:

1. Identify desired results
2. Establish a baseline
3. Monitor the process
4. Evaluate results
5. Use data effectively.

While each step is relatively simple, there are some key questions that will help guide planning and decision-making throughout the process.

- What do staff, students and parents believe about healthy relationships and bullying behaviour?
- What is the degree of commitment to improve relationships and eliminate bullying behaviour on the part of school staff?
  - › Do they believe this is within their sphere of influence?
  - › Do they feel they have the knowledge and support necessary to do this work?
- What is the degree of commitment to improve relationships and eliminate bullying behaviour on the part of students?
  - › Do they perceive these issues as important?
  - › Do they believe that, individual students, the can make a positive difference?
- What is the level of parent interest and support?
- Do you have interested community partners? Are they willing to be involved? What can they contribute?

- What resources are available to support this programming initiative?
  - › What kind of expertise does school staff have? How can this expertise be shared?
  - › What kind of professional development is needed to build staff capacity in this area? What professional development is currently available?
  - › What kinds of instructional materials are needed to support the program? Are they available?
  - › Will additional funding be needed?
  - › What kind of jurisdictional support would be needed? What supports are currently available?

Note that you don't necessarily need to have answers to all of these questions immediately. However, considering them will at least give you the benefit of 'knowing what you don't know'. Identifying these gaps in current knowledge will be helpful as staff work through the process.

### STEP ONE: Identify desired results

No programming initiative can be considered successful unless there are positive outcomes. The process of developing a successful programming initiative, whether it be implementing a program such as WITS, organizing a one-time activity such as a Youth Action Project or developing a code of conduct for your school, begins with knowing what will be evaluated.

Identifying indicators of success at the beginning of an initiative helps define and clarify the purpose.

Evaluation ultimately answers the question "What will be different?" For example, how the program will impact:

- student understanding, attitudes and behaviour
- staff understanding, attitudes and professional practice
- instruction
- the school environment (e.g., organization, scheduling, activities, leadership, decision-making)
- level of community involvement.

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#### **EXAMPLE:** How Sunnyvale School identified desired results for the WITS program

Sunnyvale School is planning to implement the WITS Program in the coming year. Staff decided on this particular intervention program because it has a strong evidence base and aligns with their overall goal of making the school a safer place for all students.

This goal was identified through several brainstorming sessions at staff meetings and with the school council. There had been a number of playground issues over the school year and teachers were concerned that the overall school climate was not as positive as it could be. Over a six-week period they explored the following questions:

- What is the best thing about our school?
- What is not working at this school?
- What kinds of positive behaviours would we like to see more of?
- What kinds of problems behaviours would we like to see less of?
- What do we want students to say about this school?
- What would we like parents and the community to say about this school?
- What would have to change to make this true?
- What would be compelling evidence that things have changed?  
How can we gather this evidence?

Through this collaborative and reflective process, staff identified the following changes they would like to see in their school. They also developed indicators of success—descriptions of observable behaviours that would be evidence of these changes.

- **Students will understand** they have an important role to play in making the school safe, and they will demonstrate increased social responsibility in the classroom and on the playground.

INDICATORS:

- › Students use their WITS strategies when they experience bullying behaviour.
  - › Students recognize bullying behaviour and use their strategies to support others.
  - › Students seek adult help to stop bullying behaviour.
  - › Students describe their school as a safe place to be.
  - › Teachers observe students' increased sense of social responsibility in the classroom and throughout the school environment
- **Staff will have a stronger understanding** of their important role in modelling healthy relationships and preventing bullying and will consistently use the WITS strategies to have proactive conversations with students and to intervene in bullying behaviour.

INDICATORS:

- › School staff consistently model positive interactions with students, other staff and parents.
  - › School staff use proactive strategies to prevent and/or reduce bullying behaviour (e.g., actively supervising all areas of the school, reinforcing positive behaviour, providing specific feedback for problem behaviour).
  - › School staff respond consistently to bullying behaviour with a solution-focus approach and use the shared language of the WITS strategies.
- **Instruction** for all students includes reviewing and practicing the WITS strategies and participating in at least five WITS literature-based learning activities over the year.

## INDICATORS:

- › WITS strategies are prominently displayed throughout the school and in every classroom.
- › Each classroom teacher completes at least five WITS literature-based learning activities by May.
- **The school environment** will be adapted to better support healthy relationships and prevent bullying behaviour.

## INDICATORS:

- › School-wide assemblies in September introduce the WITS strategies and language to all students and staff.
- › WITS strategies are referenced and reinforced in monthly assemblies.
- › Students seek help when experiencing or witnessing bullying behaviour.
- › Staff respond quickly and proactively to students' requests for help.
- › Incidents of misbehaviour on the playground related to bullying behaviour decrease.
- **The level of community involvement** is increased to support students' social and emotional development and reduce bullying behaviour.

## INDICATORS:

- › Local firefighters participate in September assemblies.
- › Three firefighters make at least six follow-up visits to classrooms throughout the year and are satisfied that students can articulate their understanding of the WITS strategies and share tangible examples of how they are using them.
- › Families borrow literature from the school library's WITS corner.
- › Parents confirm that they are discussing WITS strategies with their children and are using the strategies and language in a variety of contexts at home and in the community.

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## STEP TWO: Establish a baseline

Being able to identify results or outcomes from a programming initiative depends on having a clear picture of what was happening *before* the program was implemented. Baseline data answers the questions "What is the current situation?" and "How big is the problem?" Baseline data ensures that the right things are being documented from the beginning and that outcomes can be connected to actions.

Examples of practical data-gathering tools for school-based programming initiatives include:

- pre- and post-tests
- surveys
- checklists
- self-reflections
- collections of artefacts
  - › student work samples
  - › sample lesson plans
  - › photos and video clips of learning activities
- activity reports
- interviews (with staff, students and parents)
- behaviour records
- observations
- anecdotal records
- focused conversations and brainstorming sessions with small groups
- student achievement data

A true experimental model, with random selection of two or more similar groups (one group receives intervention and others do not), produces empirical assessment results, but is not generally practical or appropriate for school-based initiatives to do on their own.

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### **EXAMPLE:** How Sunnyvale School collected baseline data before implementing WITS

In early September, the leadership team compiled the following baseline data:

- monthly statistics for discipline referrals over the past year (specifically for social difficulties with others)
- pre-tests asking students to suggest solutions for three scenarios dealing with bullying behaviour
- a survey on student, staff and parent perceptions of how safe and caring the current school environment is (for a sample of a survey, see *Safe and Caring Schools surveys* [EMBEDDED LINK](#))
- a record of staff discussion of student behaviours they would like to see more of, and less of.

This baseline data forms the basis of the evaluation plan and parallel data will be compiled in May so the two data sets can be compared and program results can be identified.

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### STEP THREE: Monitor the implementation

Monitoring implementation is addressing the important questions, “Are we doing what we set out to do?” and “Is everyone in the school doing what they committed to do?”

It is helpful to create a checklist of all the components that must be in place and all the things that must happen in order for a program to be successfully implemented.

It may also be helpful to collect artefacts to document components of the implementation process. For example, taking photos or videos of a related event, compiling and displaying student work samples or asking teachers to share a sample lesson plan can provide a rich data source of how the program is actually being implemented. An artefact collection can also be an opportunity for professional learning between teachers, students can learn from the display of each other’s work, and these examples can make expectations more visible and reinforce accountability.

An assessment of the implementation process ensures that the evaluation of the overall program effectiveness is valid. Program outcomes may vary due to differences in how well an initiative was implemented. Too often potentially effective programs fail because they have not been implemented the way they were intended to be and key components are not in place.

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#### **EXAMPLE:** How Sunnyvale School monitored their implementation of WITS

The principal downloaded the Implementation checklist from the WITS website (<http://www.witsprogram.ca/pdfs/schools/media-resources/step-by-step-guide-for-schools.pdf>) in September and the school leadership team reviewed this checklist at monthly meetings to ensure they were on track.

The team also collected student work samples, sample lesson plans and photos of WITS-related activities throughout the year to document successful implementation strategies. This data was used at the end of the year when the team shared the results of the program with the school community. The data also created a valuable reference for teachers, becoming a way of sharing ideas for learning activities for future planning.

Collecting this data also created a sense of accountability and teachers reported that sharing photos and sample lesson plans encouraged them to make the WITS activities a priority in their busy schedules.

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## STEP FOUR: Evaluate results

Evaluation should be a continuous process rather than a one-time event. Having a plan in place for gathering meaningful data from the very beginning of an initiative means there will be natural opportunities throughout the school year to analyze available data and use this information to make changes as needed, without waiting until the end of the year.

Typically a small team assumes responsibility for reviewing findings and making sense of the data. This team meets regularly throughout the school year to share information and discuss preliminary and summary findings. The team also looks for ways to use this data to inform other initiatives the school might be undertaking. They also need to be open to considering any data that becomes available that, although not part of the original plan, has the potential to inform the evaluation.

This team needs to ensure that there are multiple measurements (e.g., surveys, school records, discussions) from multiple stakeholders (including students, parents and staff) over time. This may result in contradictory evidence (e.g., teachers report one thing, students report another) but it is all useful feedback that needs to be considered. It is the team's job to use all of the evidence available to determine what has been accomplished, what may not be working (and why), and begin thinking about how what they are learning can inform future planning.

Toward the end of the school year the pre- and post- data can also be compared to identify quantifiable results. Conclusions about the programming initiative need to be supported by the data collected. The team needs to take time to consolidate learning and gains before making final decisions about whether to continue the program for another year or start something new.

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### EXAMPLE: How Sunnyvale School evaluated the results of the WITS program

In early May, the leadership team began a final review and analysis of the impact of the WITS program by:

- compiling the monthly statistics for discipline referrals since September and comparing them with the previous year's statistics
  - administering post-tests (asking students to suggest solutions for three scenarios dealing with bullying behaviour) to a random sampling of students in each grade and then comparing the results to the pre-tests administered in September
  - administering a second survey on student, staff and parent perceptions of how safe and caring the current school environment is and comparing results from September
  - revisiting the September staff discussion of student behaviours and having staff work through the recorded list and check where things have stayed the same, improved or declined.
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## STEP FIVE: Use data effectively

Sharing the positive outcomes of a programming initiative:

- encourages the school staff to reflect on what they did well and identify what they need to do differently
- contributes to professional knowledge about what makes a program successful
- reinforces the efforts of students, staff, parents and community partners who participated and contributed to the success of the programming initiative
- informs future planning.

Using data effectively is an important component of creating a culture of learning. And ultimately, using results effectively builds accountability and motivates and celebrates the efforts and learning of the school community. As Lorna Earle describes it, accountability is about intentionally doing what is best for students.

*“Accountability looks forward. Being accountable is not a ledger page or a spreadsheet. It means taking the information and using it to make judgements—about quality, about how good is good enough and, most importantly, about how to make changes that will enhance and extend student learning, for all children.”*

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### **EXAMPLE:** How Sunnyvale School used the data from the WITS program

As part of the launch of the program in September, the school leadership team committed to sharing results of the WITS program with staff, students, parents and community partners at the end of the school year.

Unfortunately, the monthly statistics for office referrals did not yield any useable data. The team concluded that the baseline data was skewed (there was no common agreement among staff on what constituted a discipline infraction that warranted an office referral) and the information that was recorded was sketchy.

At the June staff meeting the teachers considered the results of the student post-tests and came to the conclusion that students in Grades 4 to 6 demonstrated a strong grasp of the WITS strategies (perhaps as a result of the direct teaching of the strategies in the LEADS program) while students in Grades K to 3 were less able to articulate the strategies. School staff committed to more explicit teaching of and review of the strategies for these grade levels in the coming school year.

The administration of the second survey yielded promising data. Both parents' and students' perceptions of the school as a safe place showed a marked increase from September. This data was displayed on comparison charts and shared through the school newsletter. The post survey also identified two areas that the staff felt it was important to address in the coming year.

As part of a May professional learning day staff revisited the September discussion of student behaviours they would like to see more of, and less of. As a group, they worked through the recorded list and checked whether the frequency of these behaviours stayed the same, increased or declined over the year. From this analysis the staff was able to create a more complete picture of how relationships between students, and between students and teachers had improved over the year.

The leadership team shared a summary of this data with their community partners. As a result the community partners committed to supporting the program for one more year and agreed to mentor another community group who would be supporting a neighbouring school implement the WITS program the following year.

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