

Introduction to Policy Evaluation

School jurisdictions invest valuable time and resources into developing and implementing healthy school policies. Evaluating these policies helps to demonstrate the value of this work and enhance overall accountability.

Policy evaluation involves the collection and synthesis of credible information to support decision-making. It is intended to go beyond hunches and opinions like, “it feels like this policy is working”, to provide meaningful information that will shape future decisions¹.

Purpose

This resource provides background information on policy evaluation. It also offers rationale for policy evaluation, outlines key definitions and provides a framework for school jurisdiction leaders to consider when planning a policy evaluation. This resource is a supplement to information contained in [Developing and Implementing Effective Healthy School Policy](#) and is part of the [Healthy School Policy toolkit](#).

Policy evaluation is broad in scale and scope. School jurisdictions that do not have professionals with expertise in evaluation or quality improvement may wish to consider engaging an experienced evaluation consultant, an academic researcher or other trained professional.

Why evaluate?

Evaluating healthy school policies is “critical to helping improve policy content, enhance policy support and implementation, and ensure that policies are meeting their objectives and responding to the changing needs of governments and schools”².

Policy evaluation serves multiple purposes^{1,3}. It can:

- document the policy development process
- determine the extent of policy implementation, support, and compliance



- provide evidence that the policy has (or does not have) a positive impact for students and staff
- build understanding of the intended and/or unintended effects of a policy
- create an evidence base for innovation and overcoming barriers
- improve accountability for the school jurisdiction and its school communities
- increase the likelihood of buy-in for future policy development among administrators, staff, parents, and community partners

Getting started with policy evaluation

It is important to remember that not everything needs to be evaluated. Before undertaking a policy evaluation, school jurisdictions should consider the following evaluation standards and their uses^{4,5}. Each standard is accompanied by conversation starters to guide planning.

EVALUATION STANDARD ^{3,4}	CONVERSATION STARTERS ⁴
UTILITY: Ensures that the evaluation will be valuable and meet identified needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who needs the information, and what do they need? How can the evaluation include a range of stakeholder perspectives? How will the evaluation results be used?
FEASIBILITY: Ensures that the evaluation will be realistic, diplomatic and frugal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How much time, money and effort can be put into evaluation? What is the expected level of participation from schools (and the associated burden)? What is realistic?
PROPRIETY: Ensures that an evaluation will be conducted in a way that is ethical, fair, legal and just ^a .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can we evaluate in a fair and ethical way? What steps need to be taken for the evaluation to be ethical? How can we be inclusive of those affected by the policy, including those who are often overlooked or excluded?
ACCURACY: Ensures that evaluation will serve its intended purposes and support valid interpretations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Throughout the evaluation process, how can we be accurate given the purpose of the evaluation and the needs of stakeholders? What evaluation type will lead to accurate information – content, implementation or impact evaluation?

Planning a successful policy evaluation

The policy evaluation process has six inter-related steps (see Figure 1). These steps provide a stable framework for a thorough evaluation, though steps may or may not occur in sequence³.

Engage stakeholders

The process begins by actively recruiting and engaging with a group of stakeholders who can provide insight into the policy and its evaluation. Be sure to connect with those directly impacted by the policy being evaluated, such as students, teachers, parents, school administrators, community partners, Elders and local leaders. Consider how to support the participation of those who may be typically overlooked³.

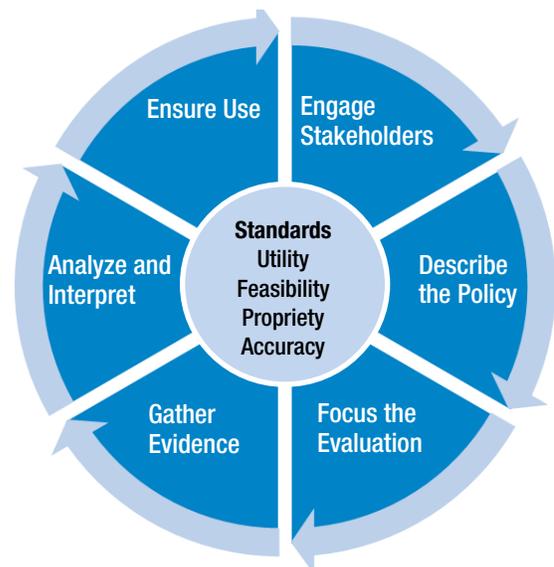


Figure 1: Key Steps in Policy Evaluation^b

^a Consider consulting with a research ethics board prior to beginning your policy evaluation. It may be appropriate to discuss your project with your own school board ethics committee. A pRoject Ethics Community Consensus Initiative (ARRECI) also provides guidelines for quality improvement and evaluation projects in Alberta. For more information visit: www.aihealthsolutions.ca/arecci/guidelines

^b Adapted from: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2013). Step by step: Evaluating violence and injury prevention policies: Briefs 1 – 7. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/about/evaluation.html>

Describe the policy

The second step involves describing the policy that is being evaluated, and focusing the evaluation design to ensure the work will be responsive and useful. Ensure that all stakeholders have clarity and consensus on the policy being evaluated, what it is supposed to accomplish and its underlying logic. Discuss roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders in supporting the evaluation³.

Focus the evaluation

Next, consider the key questions that need to be answered as part of the evaluation. Use this information to confirm the evaluation goals and purpose, and choose an evaluation type that meets these needs (see box for more information). Focusing on a single evaluation type helps to ensure efficient use of resources³.

Types of policy evaluation³

Content evaluation helps to determine if a policy is clear, feasible, appropriate and acceptable. It explores whether a policy is likely to be understood and accepted by the population it is intended to impact. This form of evaluation can be most useful during the development of a new policy, or when an existing policy is being modified for a new setting or population.

Implementation evaluation examines whether a policy has been carried out as intended. It explores how the policy implementation process has worked and what needs to be done differently. It considers the effective use of time and resources, and explores any unintended effects of a policy. This type of evaluation is typically done when a policy has been in place for at least six months, but often after several years.

Impact evaluation provides evidence that a policy met its intended purpose. It helps to determine the efficiency and/or effectiveness of a policy. This form of evaluation is most useful after many years of policy implementation.

Gather evidence

The next step involves seeking out data that can help to answer the key questions of the evaluation. Consider data that are already available and new data that need to be collected. If possible, collect both quantitative data (i.e., numeric data) and qualitative data (i.e., non-numeric data); both types

work together to inform a comprehensive policy evaluation³.

A wide variety of data collection tools can be used to gather evidence to support policy evaluation. Refer to Appendix A for more information on tools to support both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods, like surveys, interviews, observations and documents.

Analyze and interpret

The fourth step involves exploring the information that has been gathered, and interpreting it so that it can be used to draw conclusions or judgments. Consider convening a workshop or facilitated conversation so that all stakeholders have an opportunity to explore collected data, make sense of the information, find meaning and draw conclusions. Look for consistencies and/or contradictions in the data, discuss findings that were expected (or surprising) and consider a range of explanations. When drawing conclusions, be explicit about the limitations of the evaluation (e.g., potential biases) and try to be objective. Conclusions and/or recommendations need to be supported by the data collected³.

Ensure use

The final step in the policy evaluation process involves using results. This step supports a culture of learning and celebrates the efforts of a school jurisdiction or school to use evaluation to inform decisions and do what is best for the school community. In this step, reflect back to the original goals and purpose of the evaluation, and consider how to best share findings in relation to local context. Use a variety of tools for sharing evaluation results, such as brief summaries, full reports, presentations, graphics and social media³.

Conclusion

Although policy evaluation can be complex, it is increasingly being seen as a means of building continuous improvement into healthy school policy development and implementation. This resource can be used to drive policy evaluation efforts that are inclusive, practical and well-integrated into the work of school jurisdictions.

References

1. The Society for Safe and Caring School Communities. (n.d.). Five simple steps for evaluating school-based programming interventions. Retrieved from: <http://resources.safeandcaring.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/5.-WITS-evaluation-plan-design.pdf>
2. Taylor, J.P., McKenna, M.L., & Butler, G. P. (2010). Monitoring and evaluating school nutrition and physical activity policies. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 101, suppl 2, S24-S27.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2013). Step by step: Evaluating violence and injury prevention policies: Briefs 1 – 7. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/about/evaluation.html>
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Program Performance and Evaluation Office. (2017, July). Evaluation standards. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/eval/standards/index.htm>

Appendix A

TOOLS TO SUPPORT GATHERING OF EVIDENCE

SURVEYS

Surveys are an effective tool to reach small or large audiences, and can be tailored for use with students, teachers, parents, community partners and other groups. Surveys can incorporate a variety of measures and allow for multiple response styles, including rating scales, checklists, and closed- and open-ended questions. Sometimes, school jurisdictions have access to survey data derived from large-scale, validated survey tools used at the school or jurisdiction-level to measure aspects of student well-being and/or school climate. If none exist, a number of low-cost online survey tools make it increasingly easy for school jurisdictions and individual schools to design surveys, and collect and analyze responses without external support. For example, surveys can be used to understand:

- students' likes or dislikes of physical activity opportunities at school
- students' self-reported intake of foods and beverages at school
- students' self-assessments of the level of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity accrued during school hours
- parents' perceptions of facilitators (or barriers) to healthy eating at school
- teachers' comfort level with incorporating movement breaks in the classroom
- administrators' ratings of the extent to which jurisdiction nutrition policy is fully implemented at the school level

INTERVIEWS

Interviews are intended to explore a topic in-depth and to capture different perspectives. They can be very useful in understanding the extent to which a policy was implemented as intended. Interviews can range from very flexible to highly structured, where the conversation is more focused. They can be done on a one-to-one basis for more sensitive topics or in group settings (e.g., as part of a school-wide staff meeting or jurisdiction-wide professional learning opportunity). One advantage to group interviews is that participants may bounce ideas off each other, allowing greater opportunity to share ideas, build consensus or explore alternatives.

OBSERVATIONS (and documentary evidence)

Teacher observations and their anecdotal documentation brings lived experience to policy evaluation, providing important insights and context around how policies may impact teachers, classes and students. Observational data can also include examples of student work, photos and videos of classroom-based or school-based activity, lesson plans and activity logs. For example, observations related to healthy eating at school might include menus or photos to showcase the types of foods and beverages available for sale at schools, or documentation of food marketing at school. Observations related to physical activity policy might include having teachers watch students' activities before, during and after school hours, or working with community partners to map out routes that students use for active travel to/from school (e.g., walking or cycling).

TOOLS TO SUPPORT GATHERING OF EVIDENCE

WORKSHOPS

Workshops typically use a variety of techniques to collect information, such as group discussions, focused conversations, brainstorming sessions, presentations and question-and-answer sessions. Workshops often involve an intentional effort to create an informal atmosphere that is conducive to discussion.

EXISTING DATA

School jurisdictions may be able to gather existing data to inform policy evaluation. In particular, it can be useful to review school plans to look for and document evidence of awareness or compliance with healthy school policy. For example:

- explicit references to specific policies on healthy eating and/or physical activity, such as the use of non-food based rewards for students, documentation of health-related professional development for teachers or expressed support for movement-based teaching and learning
- evidence of activities led by a health committee and/or student-led health club
- school-level goals, strategies, activities or indicators that align with jurisdiction-level healthy eating and/or physical activity policy