ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS

Evaluation Philosopy

At **Action for Healthy Kids**, our mission is to foster learning environments that support optimal child health and well-being. The foundation of our evaluation work ensures that our approach to program evaluation not only advances our mission but does so considering equity, context, rigor and adaptability.

This document outlines our evaluation philosophy. Our philosophy is not merely a set of guidelines—it is a commitment to a reflective and responsive practice that enhances the effectiveness and integrity of our work. We invite our partners, funders, and the communities we serve to engage with us in this ongoing process, working collaboratively to create healthier environments for all children.

Our Role as Evaluators

At **Action for Healthy Kids**, we view our role as evaluators not merely as data collectors, but as bridge builders, storytellers, and partners in dialogue. Our philosophy and process reflect a deep commitment to these multifaceted roles, which we believe are crucial for engaging in meaningful and impactful program evaluation.

Bridge Builders

Just as a bridge connects two points, as evaluators we act as connectors between data and decision-making. We strive to ensure that the information gleaned from our evaluations creates pathways for understanding and action, connecting program activities to outcomes. This role may involve translating complex data into practical insights that can inform practice, service delivery, and policy, ensuring that these insights are accessible to diverse stakeholder audiences.

Storytellers

In program evaluation, data tells a story. As evaluators, we take on the role of storytellers by bringing data to life. We report not only on what has happened but also illuminate the pathways through which change occurs.

Partners in Dialogue

Recognizing that evaluation is a conversational process, our role as evaluators involves asking the right questions and listening critically to responses. We facilitate discussions that support stakeholders to reflect on their experiences, interpret findings, and explore transformative ideas. Acknowledging that we are not always experts on the unique contexts and cultures that shape participants' experiences, we prioritize the importance of partnering with those who possess this lived experience.

Foundational Principles of Our Evaluation Philosophy

Systematic and Contextualized Evaluation

We prioritize a systematic evaluation approach that respects the context and complexity of the environments we work within.[1] Our evaluation work is grounded in the real-world context of school districts and respects the diverse perspectives their communities bring. As such, our approach aims to ensure that evaluations are not only thorough but also tailored to the specific dynamics of each program, maximizing utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy.[1]

Example: *Our approach to leveraging the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS) data exemplifies how we tailor strategies to meet school districts' individualized needs. By investigating disparities in youth substance use across Colorado, our Second Chance program is able to provide technical assistance to school districts where these inequities are most pronounced, offering targeted support for implementing non-punitive approaches to youth tobacco policy violations that is sensitive to the local dynamics of each district.*

Equity and Stakeholder Engagement

Central to our philosophy is the commitment to advance equity through our evaluation practices. This commitment prioritizes engagement of stakeholders as a way to ensure that our evaluations respect and incorporate the diverse values and needs of the communities we serve.[1,2,3,4] Through this practice that recognizes stakeholder engagement on a spectrum from feedback loops to active decision-making, we not only enhance the relevance and impact of our evaluations, but also support long-term sustainability by taking into account the resources and environments of our stakeholders.

Example: *Underscoring the importance of centering equity and stakeholder engagement in our work, our recent partnership with the USDA to evaluate a Healthy Meals Incentives grant (HMI II) utilized Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) practices to support collaborative decision-making and engagement of eight community-based organizations during the evaluation process. By forming and actively engaging a CBPR committee comprised of farm to school coordinators, non-profit directors, and program managers, we were able to select and implement evaluation tools in alignment with the unique community and cultural contexts of stakeholders.*

Methodological Rigor and Adaptability

To ensure reliability and robustness of our findings, we adhere to the highest methodological standards appropriate to our context and resources across all stages of our evaluations. Recognizing the dynamic nature of our work and the contexts in which we operate, our evaluations are adaptable, allowing us to respond to emerging needs and changing conditions, ensuring our evaluations remain relevant and effective over time.[4]

Example: *In alignment with our commitment to rigor while ensuring adaptability, Action for Healthy Kids partnered with the University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center to develop a robust yet flexible instrument to assess family-school partnerships. The development process integrated a comprehensive literature review, focus group discussions with intended users, expert panel reviews and cognitive interviews, culminating in a 55-item scale. The instrument was pilot tested among a diverse sample of parent/caregivers and school staff and advanced statistical methods were employed to ensure practicality for large scale application. These methods included principal component analysis (PCA), two-factor exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and polychoric correlation analyses, which refined the instrument to 24-items. An assessment toolkit was developed thereafter to assist school staff and administrators in effectively implementing the Family-School Partnership Assessment (FSPA), interpreting the results through a clear scoring procedure, and leveraging this data to foster meaningful improvements in family-school partnerships.*

Transparent Communication and Continuous Learning

We commit to transparent communication about our methods, findings, and the limitations of our work.[2] This openness not only fosters trust and accountability with our stakeholders, but also ensures that findings are used responsibly and effectively to inform decision-making and improve program outcomes. We are committed to continuous learning, using insights gained from our evaluation work to refine our methods and approaches.

Example: *Aligned with our commitment to transparent communication and continuous learning, our team conducts an annual review of our Fee-for-Service (FFS) programmatic offerings, which we encapsulate in a comprehensive data digest report. This process involves an analysis of all FFS program surveys from the year, pinpointing both strengths and areas of growth. Based on the insights garnered from this analysis, the evaluation team makes targeted recommendations aimed at both expanding successful programs and addressing areas requiring growth. These recommendations are presented to the program team and other stakeholders to ensure a broad base of input and oversight. By openly sharing our findings and the basis for our recommendations, we foster a culture of continuous learning that not only improves our internal practices but also elevates the communities we serve.*

The Role of Evaluation in Advancing AFHK's Mission

As an organization dedicated to fostering learning environments that support optimal child health and well-being, **we view evaluation as an essential service to advance our mission and catalyze change** within the communities we serve. By embedding evaluation deeply into our work, we ensure that our mission continues to move forward, grounded in evidence and amplified by diverse voices.

General Process for Program Evaluation

Our team's approach to program evaluation is informed by best practices in the field[1,2,3,4] and ensures that our evaluations are systematic, equitable, rigorous and responsive to the needs of the communities we serve. Below we provide a description of our general process for program evaluation.

1 ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS

Identification and Inclusion: We strive to identify all relevant stakeholders, which may include any of the following: district leaders, school staff, parents, youth, community members, state departments, and funders.[1] This ensures a broad range of perspectives and values are considered right from the outset.

Building Relationships: We focus on building trust and fostering relationships with stakeholders, emphasizing respect, reciprocity, and co-creation of the evaluation process.[3]

2 DESCRIBE THE PROGRAM

Comprehensive Program Description: We seek to develop a detailed description of the program, including its goals, activities, resources, stage of development, and the context in which it operates.[4]

Cultural and Contextual Relevance: We aim to ensure that the program description acknowledges and integrates the cultural and contextual relevance of the communities it serves.[3]

3 FOCUS THE EVALUATION DESIGN

Clarifying Purpose and Scope: We determine the purpose of the evaluation and clarify the key questions it aims to answer, ensuring that the evaluation design is directly aligned with the information needs of stakeholders.

Methodological Approach: We select appropriate methods that balance rigor and practicality, often employing mixed methods to capture both quantitative and qualitative data.[4]

4 GATHER CREDIBLE EVIDENCE

Indicator Development: Indicators are developed to measure program outputs and outcomes effectively, ensuring they are culturally valid and relevant to the program context.

Data Collection: We strive to implement data collection processes that ensure high-quality evidence.1 This may include any of the following: conducting pilot tests, training data collectors, and continuously monitoring data quality.

Program Evaluation Process

5 JUSTIFY CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing Data: Data are analyzed systematically to answer the evaluation questions appropriate to our context and resources. We use both statistical analysis for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data, ensuring that findings are robust and well-supported.

Equity Considerations: When reliable demographic data is present, we examine whether program impacts vary across different community groups with particular attention to (in)equity.

6 ENSURE USE AND SHARE LESSONS LEARNED

Actionable Recommendations: Our evaluations aim to produce actionable recommendations that stakeholders can use for program improvement. This involves close collaboration with stakeholders to ensure findings are understandable and relevant to their needs.

Dissemination and Implementation: Findings are disseminated through diverse channels, such as tailored reports, presentations, and discussions with stakeholders. We also seek to support implementation and sustainability of recommendations.

7 CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND FEEDBACK LOOP

Feedback Mechanisms: We strive to establish mechanisms for ongoing feedback from stakeholders to continually improve our evaluation process and methodology.

Adaptive Learning: Learning from each evaluation informs future evaluations, ensuring that our processes are always evolving and improving, reflecting both practical realities and the complex dynamics of the programs we assess.

By integrating these steps and maintaining a focus on equity, context, rigor and adaptability, our evaluations not only contribute to program improvement but also to the broader mission of fostering learning environments that support optimal child health and well-being. An example of our evaluation process in action can be found in Appendix A.

References

[1]Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1999). Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health. Available from: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/rr/rr4811.pdf

[2]American Evaluation Association. (2018). Guiding Principles for Evaluators. Available from: https://www.eval.org/Portals/0/Docs/AEA_289398-18_GuidingPrinciples_Brochure_2.pdf

[3]Equitable Evaluation Initiative. (2023). Equitable Evaluation Framework. Available from: https://www.equitableeval.org/_files/ugd/21786c_aab47695b0d2476d8de5d32f19bd6df9.pdf

[4]BetterEvaluation. (2014). Rainbow Framework. Available from: https://www.betterevaluation.org/generate/framework/53/pdf

Appendix A

Clay County Military-Connected Youth and Families Needs Assessment

Action for Healthy Kids serves military-connected school communities through programming around social-emotional and physical health. To better understand the needs and priorities that military-connected families have in supporting the health and wellbeing of military-connected youth, AFHK conducted a needs assessment in Clay County, Florida in early 2023.

The needs assessment **engaged parents, caregivers, teachers, and youth** through a survey and focus group. Though the sample sizes for the survey and focus group were small, **data was collected and analyzed** systematically and in alignment with best practices, which allowed us to **justify conclusions and provide actionable recommendations**.

The data from this needs assessment was used by AFHK and the Clay County School District to inform the development of tools and resources needed to address military-connected families' unique concerns. Needs Assessment recommendations included increasing communication between schools and families and providing school staff with professional development around supporting military-connected youth. In 2024, AFHK provided high school teachers in Clay County with professional development focused on techniques to support military-connected youth and facilitated relationship-building between schools and families through three school events.

This project highlights how data can be leveraged to create programming that meets district and community needs.

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