



Questions Board Members Should Ask

ABOUT PROGRAM SUCCESS

Sonal Bhuchar & Cynthia Knox

Editor's note: While the example given in this article is specifically about a reading intervention program, the questions posed and thought process involved, can be applied to nearly any program evaluation.

School board members are charged with making reasoned decisions that support school district success. As school board members, we sought our positions based upon our keen interest in supporting student achievement and academic excellence. However, the work of governance of a school district is focused on many issues: financial stewardship, operational management of available resources and growth, construction, facilities management, and more.

Often imbedded within this large-scale framework, student achievement and response to intervention requires a sharp, singular focus on evaluating and supporting the strongest programs to help bridge the

achievement gap.

No decisions are more important than those related to instruction, especially those related to interventions for a district's most at-risk students. This article presents three important questions that we believe will help board members as they make these critical decisions.

As an example, we were asked to make a decision with regard to an intervention for first graders who were struggling in reading. The intervention being proposed for expanded implementation was Reading Recovery, a school-based intervention program with a reputation for success in several countries. We were also aware that this program had both supporters and detractors.

QUESTION 1: *What is the need for this program?*

As board members, we often felt that we were presented with “laundry lists” of programs. We were also aware of the fact that schools are somewhat notorious for implementing and shortly thereafter, discarding programs in a merry-go-round type of cycle. In our minds, there had to be a compelling need in order for our district to expend limited funds on some new product or program or to maintain and/or expand one that was already in place.

In our example, we knew instinctively that reading is critical to learning success, but it was important for us to hear the research supporting that belief. Articles clearly documenting the critical need for children to learn to read in the early grades were important to our consideration

when comparing the priority need for an early reading intervention versus, for example, a secondary remedial reading program.

With research information in hand supporting early intervention for struggling readers, we next wondered what the scale of need was in schools that were requesting this intervention. Given the diversity of our district, we wondered if we had children in all of our elementary schools who entered first grade with significant challenges in learning to read. The data we sought was to know, by school, how many children entering first grade were nonreaders. Before considering an early reading intervention, we needed to know numbers. We were surprised to learn that in every elementary school we had more than a handful who were significantly challenged in learning to read. In other words, there appeared to be a need for some type of reading intervention districtwide.

Since, in our example, we were considering expansion of a program, it was also important to find out the

data on numbers of children who qualified for the intervention in schools that were early implementers. Naturally, a follow-up question was the extent to which that need had been met. If our early implementation of an intervention did not show results in terms of meeting needs, it would be difficult to vote for an expansion. The answers to our second question provided further insight in this regard.

QUESTION 2: *What is the research base for effectiveness for this intervention, and what are the measurable outcomes?*

As board members, we were certainly not experts on effective reading interventions, and we knew there was debate across the country on what types of reading programs work best. We expected the district's instructional leadership team to be informed of best practices and programs that work. So it seemed logical for them to support a program request with research that

backed up its potential for success.

In reviewing many requests for instructional interventions over time, we realized that some publishers present "research" that proudly displays the effects of their products. However, it is important that board members also seek out independent sources of research results that confirm the effectiveness of programs. We expected the district to have that information available to us, and if it was not available, to be able to defend "effectiveness" as described by the program publisher or originator.

In the case of the decision before us, it was informative to be provided with results from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. The WWC reviewed research related to 26 beginning reading programs and rated them comparatively based upon results. As board members, we



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wondered why the district had selected the particular program under consideration as

compared to other similar programs, and the information at this research site helped us make our own comparisons between available programs.

Other pieces of data were also important to our decision making. For example, did the intervention under consideration have results over time and in settings similar to our own? Were the results robust? In particular, it is of interest to board members whether the positive outcomes children experience in the proposed program are lasting. If the results produce a short-term “bump” in performance but children then fall behind again, chances are board members will be faced with making a decision regarding the purchase of other interventions in the future for

these same students.

In other words, do the children who succeed in the proposed intervention continue to make gains as they progress through the grades? In our example, the district provided third-grade reading results on the state’s required assessment for children who had received the intervention in first grade.

If, as in the case of our consideration of expanding a program, there is already data available of the intervention’s effectiveness in one’s own district, this information is especially salient. District personnel should be able to provide that data and provide findings relative to the extent of progress disaggregated by ethnicity, income, etc. As well, the district should be able to provide any secondary benefits accrued through the implementation of an intervention, such as an increase in teachers’ overall instructional expertise based upon training they may have received.

Of note, board members should expect to receive information annually on the impact of implemented

interventions on student success. Board members also need to be confident that the program will be continuously monitored and that students will be evaluated in a meaningful and timely manner.

QUESTION 3: *What are the costs associated with this intervention, and how does that compare to its effectiveness?*

The question of costs for an intervention is one familiar to all board members, and most would agree that costs need to be reviewed within the context of effectiveness. A modestly priced program may be appealing from a budgetary viewpoint, but if it does not produce results, it is expensive. A program considered expensive may raise eyebrows, but if it is a short-term, highly effective intervention that improves student success over time, it may be the most cost-effective option.

Detailed budget information, clearly defining costs associated with implementing a proposed program,



We talked to several experienced school board members in Wisconsin about how they make decisions on their board.

from Wisconsin School Board Members

Why is using data important in school board decision-making?

Howard Kruschke (Saint Croix Central School District): For years, efforts were made to improve student achievement based on WKCE test results. Not enough data was available in a timely fashion to affect necessary changes. In 2010, our board adopted the Key Work of School Boards as well as implementing MAP (Measures of

Academic Progress) testing to get a better idea of where we were performing. The data showed we had weaknesses in reading, math and science. We used that data and realigned our curriculum. By 2014, we had made a major jump in those keys areas.

Tom Steiner (Trevor-Wilmot Consolidated School District): Data is essential for us. It helps us make sure we are serving our students. In our classroom, our teachers are reviewing MAP scores to see what lessons took. Our teachers automatically review the data and check what elements need more attention. This has been huge for us. It has produced incredible results.

provides essential data for board decision making. In our example, costs were projected for staff salaries, books, instructional supplies, and training. This was necessary information for us, but it was not sufficient for determining cost effectiveness.

Two areas of questioning proved beneficial to us in our decision making. First, since salaries were involved in the proposal we received, we wanted to know how many students would be impacted by the teachers. In this instance, the intervention teachers did not spend all day working in the program but rather spent half of their day in a general education classroom and half within the intervention setting. This raised a second question of potential “spill-over” benefit to the general education students based upon the additional expertise the teachers gained from training in the specialized program. It was also important for us to note any other potential impact these teachers might have on the school as a whole, such as training for other teachers.

In other words, was there benefit in the half salary per teacher beyond the students they served in the intervention itself? Again, it is important to know numbers served, but it is also essential to compare costs for those served within the framework of outcomes that can be expected — both to those served and beyond.

Secondly, length of program for the served students in the intervention may also have bearing on cost effectiveness. Board members will want to note whether, for example, students are in the program for only a few weeks, a year, or longer. Ideally, the program will be short-term and upon exit, students will return successfully to their general education classrooms with no additional outside instruction required.

In our example, we learned that potentially eligible students currently not served by the proposed intervention were likely to be retained or referred to a long-term special education placement. Based on that knowledge, we compared costs for serving students in the proposed program

versus costs for retention or special education. Subsequently, we determined cost effectiveness by comparing these two program options to the intervention under review in terms of cost and effectiveness.

In closing, we are confident that if board members will utilize these questions as they consider whether to approve a proposed intervention for struggling students, they will be well-prepared to make that decision and to defend it, if necessary. In our example, we were provided with ample information to answer our questions, and as a consequence, we voted with confidence. ■

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What questions do you think about when your district is considering a new product or program?

Kruschke: The first thing we ask is ‘What is it going to do to help student achievement?’ We ask ourselves ‘Are these products going to achieve what we want? What are the benefits versus the costs? How will it align with our K-12 curriculum?’

Steiner: Does it address a need? Would it benefit the students? Do we have the resources to implement and maintain it? Are there opportunity costs involved? If we adopt it, will it cause us to suffer in other areas? As a board, we try to look at how everything ties together and works on a district-wide level.

How do you weigh costs of a new program versus the potential benefits?

Kruschke: We recently looked into purchasing Chromebooks for each of our students for a 1:1 program. We formed a technology committee and looked at what it would cost to implement the program, how would it impact

student achievement, what policies we would need to consider, cost of care, maintenance and other factors. The committee weighed the costs and benefits and with school board approval, we decided to go with it. Early indications show that the Chromebooks are helping boost student engagement and enhance achievement in the classroom.

Steiner: When we think of costs, we not only think of funding but we also think about our staff time and resources. We want to make sure we’re not overburdening our staff. There are a lot of extra things that teachers are required to do now with educator effectiveness and other initiatives. We want to make sure that they are able to keep their focus on the students. □

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