Data Is Delicious!

Book Review

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The latest book in the series Current Issues in Out-of-School Time, edited by Helen Janc Malone, covers the history, current context, and nuts and bolts of data and evaluation. *Measure, Use, Improve! Data Use in Out-of-School Time* is filled with practical approaches providers have used to develop their capacity for measurement and data use.

The dramatic punctuation in the title is not there to trick you into thinking data is exciting, as a parent might exclaim "broccoli!" with a little too much enthusiasm. In the case of *Measure, Use, Improve!* the exclamation point is sincere. The power of data for OST program improvement is, in fact, exciting.

Readers will come to share this excitement—to believe that their programs and organizations can in fact collect meaningful data and use it to improve. The opening section, Setting the Stage, frames the "why" of data use, making the case for investing time and resources in evaluation. The chapters lay out funda-mental principles: that data collection should begin with questions, that evaluation is a collaborative process, and that it must be part of a system of continuous quality improvement. Authors share lessons from their many years of experience at LA's BEST, After-School All-Stars, and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr., Foundation.

The second section, Building Blocks of Evaluation, helps readers see concretely how to build a culture of program improvement informed by meaningful data. The chapters break down the basics of data collection for readers who are not familiar with the process. In two chapters, authors from the YMCA share program-level experiences with data analysis and the national organization's blueprint for capacity building. Other authors address real-life data challenges and solutions. Every Hour Counts, a national OST intermediary organization, shares its measure-

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ment framework. Spoiler alert: The framework supports more than measurement! Another chapter shows how youth can participate in evaluation.

The next section, Developing Systems of Evaluative Thinking, gives concrete strategies and how-to's for readers who crave actionable ideas. Chapters cover how to develop evaluative thinking and show how two statewide systems, in Minnesota and Wyoming, have fostered a culture of evaluation. Another chapter covers how to solicit and use youth feedback. More system-level thinking focuses on how organizations can use data to change or expand their focus.

Building organizational capacity takes time. The authors in the last section, Using Data and Evaluation to Improve Staff Capacity, describe decades of work. One chapter shares experiences from statewide work in Michigan. Another describes how authentic partnerships between evaluators and youth development staff can strengthen an organization. The third concentrates on how to use data specifically to support staff.

This book is compelling because the authors consistently bring data and evaluation work to life, telling stories of struggles, missteps, and successes. They include enough detail that readers can find commonalities with their own situations and identify processes they can adapt. For example, though James Specter's description of how After-School All-Stars embraced evaluation is specific to this national organization, the process and thinking he describes are valuable for many types of organizations. Similarly, many chapters offer concrete strategies, such as action plans, measurement frameworks, and sample evaluative thinking questions, to move the book from theory to practice.

The voices represented range from statewide afterschool networks, national youth organizations, and local OST programs to funders, whose perspectives are often mysterious to grantees. Youth voice is featured in chapters by Joseph Luesse and Kim Sabo Flores, who write about youth participation in evaluation, and by Valerie Threlfall, who discusses ways to include youth feedback.

Similar themes keep coming up in different sections. Repetitive? Maybe, but the consistency is also reassuring, suggesting that the field is on the right track. The main issue OST practitioners have with data is surfaced right away and repeated throughout the book: Even though we all agree that we need data to improve programs, the reality of collecting and using data can feel overwhelming. Continuous quality improvement takes time, resources, and effort. Several chapters mention multi-day retreats devoted to data and evaluation.

The authors in this book do not try to sugarcoat the very real challenges, but they do emphasize that the effort is worth the time and resources spent.

Resources are not the only necessary element. OST organizations also need to create cultures of evaluative thinking. Authors emphasize again and again that data are useful only when people reflect on them and respond. As Kim Firth Leonard of the Oregon Community Foundation put it, the OST field strives for "data-informed" rather than "data-driven" decision making (p. 124). Building a culture of evaluative thinking requires buy-in from all stakeholders. In Chapter 16, Miranda Yates, Stephanie Mui, and Jennifer Nix suggest that stakeholders need a "deep belief in the power of evaluation as a mission-driven activity and social justice tool" (p. 288). If everyone held this belief, imagine what we could do with data!

A central idea of the book is that data use improves not only programs but also the field. As programs improve, the field learns what works and what to leave behind. For example, in Chapter 16, Jamie Wu, Trevor Davies, Lorraine Thoreson, and Laurie Van Egeren describe how Michigan's data-informed improvement work with 21st Century Community Learning Centers has benefited local programs, state efforts, and the OST field nationwide.

Indeed, this book is itself is a field-building effort. It documents decades of data work in OST, offering a perspective on how far the field has come, how far we need to go, and how much time and effort it takes to use evaluation effectively for program improvement. Bringing together the stories of diverse organizations and youth practitioners makes each individual story more powerful.

This book would make good reading for practitioners just entering the field. (The whole series is a gift to anyone looking to create a strong syllabus for a youth development course!) More seasoned practitioners, researchers, evaluators, and funders will also benefit from the book's historical perspectives and lessons learned.

Providers who feel overwhelmed by the prospect of working with data will be heartened to read the ideas, strategies, and lessons in *Measure, Use, Improve!* The authors convey sincere and contagious optimism, even as they acknowledge the challenges. They are cheerleaders for the power of data to advance the impact of OST. It turns out that broccoli really is delicious.