



Education brief: School evaluation

School evaluation is an essential part of helping schools to understand how effective they are. It supports them in establishing an accurate view of their performance against a clearly defined set of standards.

MacBeath (2005) describes school evaluation as: *'...a process of reflection on practice, made systematic and transparent, with the aim of improving pupil, professional and organisational learning.'*

What does school evaluation mean?

School evaluation is a formative process that enables schools to review their performance and identify strengths and successes, as well as potential areas for development.

The aim is to secure improvement in terms of institutional development, school performance, teacher performance and, most importantly, learner performance (both academic and in terms of their social and emotional well-being). However, as well as the desire to evaluate and develop themselves, schools often also have external accountability, for example to local government or community. School evaluation can support school leaders to approach this in a positive and professional way.

When introducing school evaluation, the context of the school is critical because it helps everyone involved in the process to understand the current situation of the school. The context can include aspects such as the size and type of school, its location, the staffing profile, provision, outcomes and resources. In many respects, school context is about enabling the school to tell the story so far. This enables people to make sense of where it is on its journey in relation to its over-arching vision and values.

It is pivotal for school leaders to create a culture where student learning is at the heart of school evaluation and improvement. Schools have a professional accountability and responsibility to governors, parents, teachers and learners to serve the best interests of key stakeholders. As a result of this, it is vital that school evaluation is a shared process that takes into account the views of stakeholders but, more importantly, does something with that information.

To be effective, school evaluation must lead to action, and where this is informed by evidence and research, it can lead to transformational change, seen as a continuous process rather than a single event (Kotter, 1996).



Getting started with school evaluation

To begin the process of school evaluation, schools should ask themselves three fundamental questions:

1. How well are we doing?
2. How do we know?
3. How can we get better?

In order to begin to explore these questions, it is important to understand what effective schools look like. School evaluation can help individual schools to benchmark themselves against comparable schools at a local, national and international level.

The most effective schools help all of their students, regardless of their backgrounds, to make progress in their learning and develop beyond their normal expected rate of growth. Although there is no single determinant of an effective school, it is beneficial to evaluate at a student, classroom and school level, looking at areas such as:

- the school's mission and educational values
- school management and leadership
- the quality of teaching and learning
- resources for learning
- school community engagement.



When starting an evaluation, it can be helpful to focus on what is important in your own school. This will make the process more meaningful for key stakeholders, increasing engagement and buy-in. Useful questions to consider at this point are:

- What do you want to find out?
- What information and evidence do you need to collect?
- How will you collect and gather that information?
- How will you use the information that you collect?

Usually, school evaluation involves schools collecting a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence. It is important that a range of evidence is collected and handled appropriately so that we focus on developing a culture of learning, growth and improvement, not just on performance.

Typical sources of evidence include:

- surveys of learners, teachers, leaders, and parents
- quantitative data analysis
- lesson observations and learning walks
- interviews and focus groups of learners, teachers, leaders, and parents
- work scrutiny and book reviews
- learner shadowing.

However, some schools use creative approaches and new technologies, for example photographs and other digital tools. A school might ask learners to take images of places where they feel happy or unhappy, or to record things that make them feel proud.



However, collecting and gathering evidence in and of itself will not lead to effective school evaluation. The key is to interrogate and interpret the evidence with care. A useful place to start is to ask some or all of the following questions:

- How robust and accurate is the evidence?
- What does it tell us?
- What does it not tell us?
- What questions does it make us ask?

Assessment only becomes formative and informative when we do something with it. School evaluation is the same; it is

only useful when schools do something with the information and use it to inform next steps.

A typical school evaluation process might include the following stages or steps:

1. Identify and share the focus of attention, e.g. quality of teaching and learning or student behaviour.
2. Plan and communicate the process (methods, timelines, resources).
3. Gather information (qualitative and quantitative).
4. Analyse data and information.
5. Identify improvement priorities.
6. Implement improvement strategies.
7. Evaluate the quality of these implementation strategies. Ask yourselves, 'How will we know?'

What is the theory behind school evaluation?

A school should focus on the growth of its students in all spheres of their development. But research shows some schools do this better than others.

School evaluation is, at its simplest level, a tool to establish the effectiveness of a school. Over time, educational research has tried to identify the characteristics of those schools that are most effective; those schools that improve the growth trajectory of all students beyond the developmental curve. However, research on effective school evaluation has changed and evolved:

- Early research (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972) overwhelmingly found that family and neighbourhood characteristics had a much greater impact on student performance than individual schools.
- Later research (Rutter et al., 1979; Mortimore, 1998) found that schools can make a significant difference rather than family and neighbourhood characteristics. Others, such as Edmonds (1979) identified replicable characteristics of effective schools.
- The most recent research has focused not only on what works in schools, but what works best. Here, the research indicates that the most important in-school variables to impact on student outcomes are the teacher (Hattie, 2009) and quality school leadership (Day et al., 2010).

There are different school evaluation models, and these can be grouped under three broad categories (Gallegos, 1994):

1. **Compliance models** which focus on assessing whether schools are operating according to pre-determined standards or practices.
2. **Diagnostic models** which are, typically, formative in nature and focused on improving student outcomes.
3. **Performance monitoring models** which focus on assessing school practices and student outcomes, often against norm-referenced data.



Within these categories, school evaluations can have different emphases or outcomes, for example:

- compliance and accountability
- school and system improvement
- accreditation and funding
- improving student outcomes.

To achieve these outcomes, school systems have adopted different models of school evaluation: some are inspectorial, others promote self-evaluation, and others use experts to assist in developing improvement strategies. Sometimes, a blended approach is used.

Critical components of effective school evaluation

In recent years, there has been significant investment globally in developing school evaluation systems and processes. An empirical review of the literature (Mason & Calnin, 2020) found strong support for three elements of school evaluations which are most likely to impact positively on student outcomes: external accountability, self-evaluation, and ongoing support.



The core message from this review is that external assessment is not enough. It needs to be combined with effective self-evaluation and ongoing support if school evaluation is to lead to:

- improvements in school quality
- changes in teaching
- advances in student learning outcomes.

Instead, external assessment activities need to be combined with high-quality self-evaluation capabilities which are underpinned by ongoing support to build schools' capacity to:

- understand the feedback they receive through external assessments such as school inspection and know what to do with it
- undertake high-quality self-evaluation processes: a school should be able to hold up a mirror to its practice and be honest about what it sees
- respond to areas of weakness through an understanding of the design and implementation of effective change strategies (Mason & Calnin, 2019, p.4).

Practical tips

- Start with what matters. It is important to measure what you value, not value what you can measure. A focused approach is important.
- Be open and transparent about the purpose and process of school evaluation so that everyone understands why it is happening. Communicate the process and timelines clearly to build trust and cooperation.
- Make sure that workload and teacher well-being are key considerations in the school evaluation process.
- Engage all stakeholders in the process. Where all stakeholders are engaged, they are more likely to accept the findings of the evaluation feedback and share responsibility for improvement.
- Ensure that participants have the capacity and capability to undertake evaluation activities with rigour. Provide high-quality training and support where it is needed.
- Involve a critical friend or relevant expert (O'Brien, 2014) in working through the school evaluation process.
- Use benchmarking data and information to evaluate progress and impact at key milestones.
- Celebrate successes: all schools have strengths and things that they do really well.
- Give feedback to the community. This may need to be formatted differently for each set of stakeholders, but it reinforces the value placed on the feedback provided and the actions which are planned for the future.
- Use educational research to inform next steps and identify actions and interventions.

Benefits of school evaluation

When school evaluations are effective in improving school and system performance, they yield a number of benefits.

- Effective school evaluation is an improvement in the outcomes for all students, regardless of background characteristics and prior performance.
- Schools with good self-evaluation processes tend to have a higher quality of teaching and learning (Hofman, Dijkstra & Hofman, 2009).
- An open and transparent self-evaluation process provides agency to key stakeholders – learners, teachers, leaders and the community. This builds capability and capacity and enables sustainable improvement.
- An effective school evaluation process will identify areas of the school's performance which are going well and should be celebrated by the school community.
- Equally, a school evaluation identifies those areas of school performance which require further attention and development. An effective process will help schools to prioritise what needs attention and invest their time and effort in things that have greatest impact.

What are the misconceptions of school evaluation?

- The main area of confusion at the school level is the purpose of an evaluation. If the purpose is accreditation or ranking, it will impact on the evaluation model and how it is used and its acceptance by stakeholders. Lack of clarity or ambiguity can undermine a school evaluation process.
- Similarly, school evaluation is often seen as a 'top-down' process being 'done' to the school as a means of accountability and performance assessment rather than improvement. Such models often involve external teams 'inspecting' the school to assess performance. These rarely improve student outcomes or lead to sustained change over time.
- School evaluations are often scheduled within a 'cycle', for example, every five years. This sends the message that 'school improvement' is episodic or only occurs at the time of the evaluation, rather than being embedded into the daily work of the school.
- When key stakeholders, such as teachers, feel that they are not engaged in the process and that it is being 'done' to them, they rarely engage in the process and the improvement strategies that arise from the evaluation.

How is Cambridge International supporting schools with school evaluation?

The Cambridge School Evaluation approach is informed by the literature into effective schooling and the characteristics of effective school evaluation models. Cambridge has adopted a model which places responsibility with the school to engage with and reflect on data about their performance. It is neither an inspectorial nor an accreditation model: it is based on reflection and school improvement, supported by a critical friend.

The Cambridge School Evaluation Service offers schools a guided opportunity to engage with their three main stakeholders – students, staff and parents – and collect data which will help them reflect on their performance, design improvement strategies and track progress over time in the key areas of performance as defined by the literature relating to effective schools. Our focus for school improvement is a culture of student learning and everything that contributes to that culture, such as leadership, teacher quality, governance and parental support and involvement.

Find out more about the Cambridge School Evaluation and Consultancy service by visiting www.cambridgeinternational.org/school-improvement

Where can you find more information?

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