ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH SERVICES

TRYING OUT A REAL TIME ADVOCACY SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS: GUIDANCE AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR KIDS COUNT GRANTEES

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BACKGROUND

In 2006, ORS developed A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Guide explores ways of thinking about evaluation of advocacy and policy work, and presents a framework to name outcomes associated with advocacy as well as broad directions for evaluation of advocacy and policy outcomes.

In 2007, ORS initiated a pilot to test the Guide's framework and evaluation directions in "real world" contexts. Since 2007, ORS has worked with five KIDS COUNT grantees [California, Connecticut, Georgia, North Carolina and Oregon] by guiding a process that has involved:

- Identification of a theory of change and outcomes and performance measures that connect to advocacy and policy strategies;
- Development of agreement about priority measures for evaluation
- Discussion about data collection approaches that could best support documentation and evaluation of priority measures

The pilot has helped us all learn how the framework really works when it gets into the real world, including what issues can arise during evaluation planning and what it would take to document performance measures and/or evaluate priority outcomes.[1]

Key lessons from the pilot experience are:

- There is **growing interest and focus on advocacy evaluation** among advocates and their funders.
- To support evaluation, **advocates are interested in identifying simple, useable tools** that they can implement themselves, without a large resource burden.

During the pilot, some advocates specifically mentioned their interest in a practical tool to use during intense efforts that would capture data about short-term incremental gains in an effective and meaningful way. Essentially, the request from KIDS COUNT grantees was: "I'm in the middle of legislative session. Things are moving fast and I don't have lots of time. Is there a quick and easy tool I can use to document progress?"

This brief describes how ORS approached advocates' request, and presents considerations and guidance on how advocates could effectively try out a real time self evaluation approach to document and support their work.

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[1] See *Considerations for Advocacy Evaluation Planning: Lessons Learned from KIDS COUNT Grantee Experiences* (2009). Prepared by Organizational Research Services for the Annie E. Casey Foundation

REAL TIME ADVOCACY SELF EVALUATION TOOL: A GAP IN THE FIELD

After exploration, ORS confirmed a gap in the field with regard to a real time advocacy evaluation tool – we found no ready tool or framework to support real time advocacy self evaluation. Certainly, it is possible to track certain activities and outputs as part of real time self evaluation.[2] In addition, there are real time tools for developing strategies[3] and reflecting on an intense period of advocacy retrospectively.[4] There is also a real time evaluation framework currently being implemented to track changes related to the adoption of universal pre-Kindergarten in California. However, this framework is part of an external evaluation and involves a resource-intensive multi-method approach well beyond what most advocacy organizations could implement themselves.[5]

Responding to this noted gap, ORS began developing a set of questions – a draft tool – that advocates could implement themselves to reflect on and document progress in real time. ORS shared versions of this tool with both KIDS COUNT grantees and other advocates, and received significant push-back. Specific concerns that advocates shared were:

- The questions were too structured to fit well with advocacy efforts which are often dynamic and responsive.
- The questions were too unwieldy and predisposed to contingent answers, and therefore unlikely to provide useful data or give a good picture of progress.
- The process of documentation was likely to be time consuming and not fit well with advocacy efforts - i.e. what would be the cost vs. the relative value of documentation?)
- The questions couldn't easily be "rolled up" to demonstrate overall progress in a meaningful way.
- What would be the risks to sharing documentation?

Despite concerns, KIDS COUNT grantees reiterated the value of having a real time self-evaluation approach. However, ORS recognized that this type of evaluation was likely to be best supported by a process, rather than by a discrete tool.

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[2] See: *A Handbook of Data Collection Tools: Companion to A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy*.
[3] See: LaPiana, David (2007). *The Non-Profit Strategy Revolution: Real Time Strategic Planning in a Rapid Response World.* St Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.
[4] See: Innonet's "Intense Period Debrief" in A Handbook of Data Collection Tools: Companions to A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy.
[5] Coffman, Julia. Presentation at the 2008 American Evaluation Association annual conference regarding real time evaluation of the David and Lucille Packard Foundation's Preschool for California's Children Initiative, which utilized multiple data collection approaches including bellwether interviews and policymaker ratings.

Development of a Real Time Self Evaluation Process

ORS recognized that real time self-evaluation is grounded in what Michael Quinn Patton calls “developmental evaluation.” That is, ORS sought a flexible evaluation approach focused on asking important questions, discerning applicable learnings and thinking evaluatively to adjust or plan strategies. This approach seemed more appropriate to real time advocacy evaluation than other, more traditional evaluation approaches that focus on judging merit and worth, or measuring outcome achievement.

Further, real time evaluation presents some challenges in terms of balancing the need for useful data and the need for quick implementation and analysis. ORS felt strongly that the development of a real-time self-evaluation process needed to include the perspectives of both evaluator and advocate in order to increase the likelihood that advocates would view the process as relevant, credible, and worthwhile. Thus, ORS sought to partner with KIDS COUNT grantees in the development of a real time self-evaluation process. ORS and KIDS COUNT grantees began to outline a process that advocates could use in real-time when implementing advocacy strategies. The following key considerations were identified:

- A real time advocacy self-evaluation process is intended to support documentation of strategic progress, including short-term incremental gains as well as factors that influence how change occurs, what needs to change, what has been learned and what contextual factors impacted the work.

- Besides documentation of strategic progress, the process could also support decisions about actions to take, planning and learning that enhance advocacy efforts. Additionally, documentation could inform communication with funders, partners and stakeholders.

- The real time self-evaluation process seems best suited for efforts with a defined goal and a clear beginning, middle and end, such as advocacy strategies implemented during a legislative, budget or rules review session, those implemented in conjunction with a ballot initiative or those associated with a particular grant.

- Advocates already incorporate regular reflection and strategic thinking into their work. A real time evaluation process emphasizes how to focus this existing habit as part of an ongoing evaluative practice.

ORS and KIDS COUNT grantees agreed that a real time self-evaluation process includes:

- Selected guiding questions that could be used at the beginning, during, and at the end of a specific time-bound advocacy effort to support planning, real time reflection, and documentation of efforts.

- Considerations regarding how questions might be reasonably and effectively integrated into advocacy efforts given that the context and goals of advocacy can change rapidly and unpredictably. A real time evaluation process would ideally work within that context in order to enhance professional development, strategic decision-making and communications with funders.

REAL TIME SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS: GUIDING QUESTIONS

A real time self-evaluation process encompasses three distinct phases during which different questions would be useful:

Phase 1	Focus	Sample Questions
Planning and/or coordination prior to the beginning of a specific effort	▪ Support planning ▪ Identify result(s) being sought	▪ What is the precise goal of the work? What will be accomplished? ▪ What will it take to successfully realize the goal [resources, strategies, approaches, skills]? ▪ Identify key influencers: Who/what can help goal happen [allies, conditions]? Who/what can stop it from happening [opponents, threats, conditions]? ▪ What past lessons would help us now? ▪ What message(s) will move key influencers? ▪ Who will develop key messages? How or by whom will messages be delivered? [“Secret weapons”? Trusted voices?] ▪ Have the best advocacy practices for doing this work been identified?

Phase 2	Focus	Sample Questions
During implementation of advocacy efforts related to a grant period or during a time-limited effort. (Note: there is no standard guidance in terms of the frequency with which questions could/should be implemented. See below for more discussion.)	▪ Support documentation and reporting of progress made to date	▪ Are goals, approaches and assumptions still applicable? What new information or conditions have emerged? Do we need a Plan B? ▪ Are resources still adequate? Do we have enough capacity to do what needs to be done? What else is needed? ▪ Are our identified practices/approaches working? ▪ Who are our allies? Who are our opponents? ▪ Are key advocates/partners checking in regularly? ▪ What progress has been achieved? ▪ What are we doing well? ▪ What needs adjusting?

Phase 3	Focus	Sample Questions
Reflection, debrief and/or follow-up planning after the effort.	▪ Document extent to which goals were achieved ▪ Reflect on key learnings ▪ Support future planning	▪ What did we intend to accomplish? What did we actually accomplish? ▪ What contributed to results, both positive and negative? ▪ What insights might inform future strategy development? What worked well? What needs improvement? ▪ Did we bet on/identify the right practices/approaches for this work? ▪ Did we have adequate resources? What were the most critical resources? ▪ What new opportunities exist?

IMPLEMENTING A REAL TIME SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS: HOW TO DO IT?

While advocates generally agreed on the types of questions that could be part of a real time self-evaluation process, agreement about how advocates might go about implementing the above questions has been more elusive. Some of the initial concerns expressed by advocates are difficult to address – e.g. what is the right frequency with which reflective questions should be asked during a specific advocacy effort? What is the right amount of documentation? What level of specificity of documentation is needed? What are the most useful types of documentation formats, outputs or products? Can real time documentation be summed up into a meaningful overall story of how advocates made progress?

There are different perspectives among advocates regarding useful documentation approaches, as well as the cost-per-value of documentation. Advocates expressed concerns about the capacity (mainly staff time) required to facilitate and document a real time evaluation process. This concern has merit as many advocacy organizations are very lean, and staff with multiple responsibilities may find it hard to prioritize evaluation or the documentation of reflections. Further, advocates expressed that real time documentation should fit well with the way in which advocates work so as not to be overly burdensome. While there seem to be opportunities to implement a real time process without creating a large "add-on" activity - ideas include addressing and documenting relevant questions during regular strategy meetings or check-ins or other existing activities - it is likely that some degree of additional effort would be required. The degree to which extra efforts are considered "burdensome" varies across advocacy organizations.

Despite the extra efforts likely to be required to implement a real time process, some advocates view the resulting documentation as valuable in that it provides an opportunity to better convey credibility and progress to funders. Further, some advocates shared that documenting lessons learned could support on-the-ground strategy adjustments, future strategy planning, and the professional development of those who are new to the field of advocacy. These advocates tend to see documentation as connected with the reflective habits already embedded in good advocacy organizations, and they see how a real time evaluation process could be an opportunity to "formalize" that reflection. Documentation might take the form of scaled responses to key questions (e.g. using agree-disagree, frequency or high/medium/low scales), or a short narrative.

However, not all advocates see the value in documentation. Some advocates note that more informal "debrief" conversations with funders following significant periods of activity have been well received, and are sufficient to communicate progress. Therefore, there is not a high degree of motivation to spend time more formally capturing or documenting efforts, even in the most basic way.

Another question advocates raised is how much to share documentation of real time reflections with external audiences? As stated above, some advocates believe that such documentation will be useful for funders. However, other advocates express concerns that openly revealing details or learnings about strategies could have negative consequences. For example, relationships with key influencers who wish to remain below the radar could be disrupted or opponents could receive advantageous information.

ORS' current view is that developing standard guidance regarding implementation of the real-time questions is challenging. Methods of documentation, frequency of documentation, degree of detail, and approach to data synthesis and summary will likely be dependent on the unique circumstances of each advocacy organization's context and work. Similarly, it is difficult to provide specific guidance regarding what information should be shared versus what remains confidential as it is likely to be quite different for different organizations facing different contexts and pressures.

While the development of specific implementation guidelines remains a challenge, it is clear that many advocates do see benefits to asking key questions in real time and documenting these for the purposes of informing, strengthening and communicating their work. Therefore, it seems that a logical next step is for advocates to actually try out a real time evaluation process within their own organizations to see what works well and what doesn't work. Then, advocates who try a process could share their experiences approaches and/or products with others. From these real world examples, it may be possible to lift up insights that can help to shape more specific guidance regarding implementation, such as the frequency and format of documentation, or even a useful tool or set of tools.

While advocates can undertake the process independently, funders may also wish to support advocates who try out a real time self-evaluation. Following are two possible ways funders could support advocates:

1. Offer stipends to advocates to offset the time required to try out the real time evaluation process.
2. Provide support via an external evaluator who can work with advocates as they try out a real time process. An external evaluator could provide guidance as advocates determine how to implement the process, or help to facilitate reflective discussion among those who try it out. An outside evaluator could also provide support by documenting advocates' discussion of key "before, during and after" questions, and helping to identify and summarize key reflections.