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STRATEGIC LEARNING

advocacy evaluation case study

the chalkboard project

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Introduction

Based in Portland, Oregon, the Chalkboard Project (Chalkboard) is "a non-partisan nonprofit working to unite Oregonians to make [the state's] K-12 public schools among the nation's best."[1] Chalkboard's approach to change is grounded in its civic engagement strategy, defined as "activities that provide the public with credible information, build support and a stronger voice among stakeholders, and mobilize key individuals and groups to advocate for education reform."[2] The breadth of Chalkboard's activities has included grassroots efforts to raise public awareness of education reform issues, engaging and partnering with key influencers, and partnering with local school districts to develop and implement innovative education reform models as a strategy to influence education policymaking.[3] Chalkboard is a project of Foundations for a Better Oregon (FBO), a philanthropic collaboration that includes six Oregon-based foundations.[4]

In 2009, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) expressed interest in supporting an evaluation of Chalkboard's civic engagement endeavors between 2007 and 2009.[5] The evaluation's intent was to document

1 Further information about the Chalkboard Project can be found at www.chalkboardproject.org.

2 As noted in the Chalkboard Project's Outcome Map (1/21/10)

3 Others may use the term *advocacy* to describe this type of work. For example, the Spring 2007 issue of *The Evaluation Exchange*, which was dedicated to advocacy and policy evaluation noted, "Advocacy here represents strategies devised, actions taken and solutions proposed to inform or influence local, state or federal decision making." (Volume XII, No 1, p. 1). Innovation Network's Point K website defines advocacy as "…'a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision-makers at various levels.' This means not only traditional advocacy work like litigation, lobbying and public education but also capacity-building, network formation, relationship-building, communication, organizing and leadership development." Retrieved from: http://www.innonet.org/resources

4 Foundations for a Better Oregon's six member foundations are: The Collins Foundation, The Ford Family Foundation, The JELD-WEN Foundation, Meyer Memorial Trust, the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation, and The Oregon Community Foundation.

5 The W. K. Kellogg Foundation had previously provided substantial support for a retrospective evaluation of Chalkboard's civic engagement work 2004-2006.

results of Chalkboard's civic engagement work during that period, which included two prior legislative sessions where Oregon's biennial budget was determined.

Chalkboard engaged a Seattle-based evaluation team, Organizational Research Services (ORS) and Cohen Research & Evaluation, to design and conduct the evaluation. Initial discussions led project staff and evaluators to recognize that the evaluation's circumstances and timing provided an opportunity to "try something new." In addition to retrospective inquiry, they decided to implement prospective evaluation. While retrospective evaluation focused on Chalkboard's efforts and related results between 2007 and 2009, the prospective approach was to inform *future* strategy and decision making by collecting and highlighting both internal and external perceptions about Chalkboard's current work, accomplishments, and opportunities, as well as Chalkboard's structure and approach.

Chalkboard's prospective evaluation presented an opportunity to try several recently developed tools and approaches. This brief describes implementation of some of these tools, synthesizes evaluator observations, and serves as a case example of how evaluation can support strategic learning and enhance advocacy and policy change efforts.[6]

Trying Something New: The Value and Purpose of Prospective Evaluation

Funders and nonprofits increasingly have recognized the potential of civic engagement and advocacy to further their broad social change goals. Over the past five years, leading philanthropic organizations have supported the development of new ways to measure progress and outcomes resulting from these efforts.[7] At the same time, there is growing awareness that evaluation can support civic engagement and advocacy while it is happening. *Strategic learning* is a term that has been defined as "using evaluation to help organizations or groups learn in real time and adapt their strategies to the changing circumstances around them."[8]

Prospective evaluation, meaning an evaluation that assesses ongoing work in real time, has emerged as one approach to support strategic learning around advocacy and policy change efforts. The prospective orientation, relatively new for evaluators, is an approach that has gained traction for advocacy and policy change evaluation. While more traditional evaluation approaches might primarily look back to assess impacts of advocacy strategies after the fact, or determine merit and worth of particular efforts, a prospective approach is aimed at assessing progress on route to long-term impact. By addressing broader strategic questions, prospective evaluation has the potential to add immediate value to clients by informing

6 This case study was adapted from a brief prepared by Organizational Research Services and Cohen Research & Evaluation that was submitted to the Chalkboard Project in December 2010.

7 For example, The Annie E. Casey Foundation supported development of *A Guide for Evaluation of Advocacy and Policy* (2007), prepared by Organizational Research Services and available at: **www.organizationalresearch.com**. In 2009, The Atlantic Philanthropies, The California Endowment and The Annie E. Casey Foundation convened Advocacy Evaluation Advances, a two-day session that brought together 120 funders, evaluators and advocates to discuss the role of evaluation in supporting advocacy. In addition, a 2009 issue of *The Foundation Review* (Volume 1, Issue 3) was devoted to evaluation considerations for advocacy and policy change.

8 See: Coffman, J. & Beer T. (2011) *Evaluation to Support Strategic Learning: Principles and Practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Available at: **www.evaluationinnovation.org**

their strategies in real time. For Chalkboard, prospective evaluation aimed to answer questions about how Chalkboard's strategies had supported advocacy efforts, key stakeholders' perceptions of Chalkboard, and key features of education reform policy discussion in the state of Oregon.

For Chalkboard's evaluation, which took place over an eight-month period, significant changes occurred in the policy environment during that relatively brief time. These changes included, but were not limited to, new federal funding streams designed to drive both state- and school district-level education reforms; state budget projections with immediate consequences for education funding; and statewide elections for key policy positions, including the State Superintendent of Schools and the Governor. These shifting facts called for considerable nimbleness from the project, necessitating adjustments in Chalkboard's direction for policy change and an accompanying revisit of its recently developed strategic plan. The dynamic environment also required evaluation planning to be an ongoing and iterative process. The Chalkboard experience characterizes the nature of civic engagement and advocacy work, and highlights the value of prospective advocacy evaluations, which are most usefully conducted at times when rapid feedback is needed to inform strategic decision making.

The Cornerstone: Articulating Chalkboard's Theory of Change via an Outcome Map

The first step in the evaluation process was to articulate Chalkboard's theory of change, depicted as an outcome map. A theory of change can be defined as a conceptual model for achieving a collective vision that provides specificity regarding the connections between strategies and logical outcomes. Development of a theory of change is often viewed as the essential starting point in designing evaluations for advocacy and policy efforts.[9]

For Chalkboard, a series of facilitated discussions resulted in a set of interconnected internal documents that included guiding principles, a list of underlying assumptions, and an outcome map *(see Appendix A)*. These materials drew on, and were collateral to, the organization's strategic plan. The outcome map provided a graphical representation of the project's theory of change by naming and connecting resources, strategies, near- and long-term outcomes, and ultimate goals. The outcome map was created through an iterative process of developing and revising drafts, first in conversation with the Chalkboard president and project director and, subsequently, with a larger team consisting of key board members tasked with overseeing the evaluation, additional Chalkboard staff, and select close-in consultants. The map was then presented to the full board and further refined. The value of iteratively engaging a widening circle of stakeholders in this process is noted under *Evaluator Observations*.

The outcome map identifies Chalkboard's work in terms of six outcome categories relevant for advocacy and policy change, and described in Organizational Research Services' *A Guide to Measuring Advocacy*

9 See: *A Guide for Evaluation of Advocacy and Policy* (2007). Organizational Research Services, on behalf of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, pages 11-12. Available at: **www.organizationalresearch.com**.

and Policy.[10] These outcome categories reflect recognition by advocates, funders, and evaluators of the importance of identifying and measuring the interim outcomes that take place on the way to policy change. Chalkboard's outcome map provided the necessary context to develop the set of prospective evaluation questions and data collection methods.

The outcome map, especially its near- and mid-term outcomes, served as a guiding "north star" throughout the prospective evaluation. A board member commented: "The outcome map reminded many of us about the complexity, the layers, and what is within and outside of our control." Outcomes and indicators were repeatedly referenced in framing evaluation findings and setting a context for reporting progress towards goals.

The very act of engaging in theory of change development was itself a valuable step in moving the work forward. Reflecting on the outcome map, Chalkboard's president and project director reported they "loved the process" and have widely shared the map itself. They remarked on the outcome map's usefulness in clarifying distinctions among priorities saying, "It elevated some and deflated others, and (it) forced us to be consistent in our strategies." They also commented that the map not only reflected the project's evolution of thinking on strategies and outcomes, but also "made our steps of progressing to the end goal—moving Oregon schools into the top ten—logical." In addition, this clear graphical representation was perceived as a useful tool in bringing board members "onto the same page."

Tools of the Trade: Developing and Refining the Prospective Instruments

Chalkboard's prospective evaluation involved the use of several new and innovative approaches to data and measurement. Evaluators sought methods and approaches where data could add "real-time" value to Chalkboard's decision making process, and were also eager to try out new tools, determine their usefulness, and note lessons for the field.

As noted above, rapid changes in context and on-the-ground circumstances meant that crafting prospective data collection tools was a developmental, adaptive process. Planning began in a traditional mode with a set of evaluation questions and an accompanying crosswalk to align questions with appropriate tools (*shown in Appendix B*). Subsequent shifts in the education policy environment required regular review and adjustments of planned evaluation tools, interview questions, sampling, and the timing of data collection.

A description of the prospective tools follows, along with reflections about their use and usefulness.

Internal Reflection

Internal Reflection is a debriefing and reflection method that engaged a group of Chalkboard staff, its lobby team, and several close-in external consultants in a conversation about outcomes following the recent state legislative session. Evaluators facilitated this discussion using a framework modeled after the Intense

10 Ibid, 2007.

Period Debrief,[11] a tool designed to capture feedback about results and lessons learned soon after an intense period of advocacy action. Areas of discussion were deliberately kept general and covered:

- Description of the political context during this time period
- What happened during the 2010 Oregon state legislative session
- Chalkboard's most important allies and champions, and how they helped further Chalkboard's goals during the short legislative session
- The challenges that prevented Chalkboard from moving priority issues forward
- Implications for plans in the period leading up to the 2011 session.

Although political circumstances led Chalkboard to postpone its goal of introducing a key piece of legislation in the 2010 session, several achievements surfaced from the group's reflection that may not have been fully recognized otherwise. Most of the achievements and identified challenges that emerged were aligned with the outcome map's near-term outcome areas, such as changing s*ocial norms and attitudes* and *strengthened alliances*. Even though most of the participants had not seen the outcome map, they mentioned achievements that were tightly aligned with the map, further validating Chalkboard's theory of change. Internal Reflection findings were reported via a confidential memo and were organized by outcome categories. They were accompanied by a list of considerations regarding current opportunities and challenges.

The composition of the Internal Reflection group raised some considerations for future use of this debriefing technique. Participants were selected based on their knowledge of Chalkboard's work and desired goals. However, some participants, especially those with current or previous independent consulting relationships with Chalkboard, did not seem comfortable sharing their perceptions with each other. In retrospect, it may have been useful to construct the group differently or to conduct individual interviews with some of the participants instead.[12]

Bellwether and Pulse Interviews

The evaluation team employed two types of key informant interviews. Interviews with identified policy "bellwethers" investigated the general political environment for reforms aligned with Chalkboard's objectives.[13] Bellwethers are people whose positions require that they track a broad range of issues and stay politically informed. In this case, interviewees were selected from a sample of those deemed knowledgeable about the general environment for policy change, including education reform.[14] The bellwether interview

11 Intense Period Debrief developed by Innovation Network. See: *A Handbook of Data Collection Tools: A Companion to the Guide for Measuring Advocacy and Policy* (2007). Prepared by Organizational Research Services for The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

12 For example, a variation of this technique would be the "360-degree debrief," an approach where evaluators interview key informants, including allies and outside stakeholders, as well as the opposition (where feasible). Findings are then discussed with the advocacy organization in a group setting. See: Foster, C. & Louie, J. (2010) *Grassroots Action and Learning for Social Change: Evaluating Community Organizing*. Washington DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation and Blueprint Research & Design.

13 The bellwether methodology was developed by Harvard Family Research Project. See: Coffman, J. & Reed, E. (2009). *Unique Methods in Advocacy Evaluation*. Presented January 21, 2009 at the *Advocacy Evaluation Advances conference*, Los Angeles, CA.

14 Bellwethers were identified by Chalkboard staff in collaboration with evaluators and selected to represent those "in the know" about the general environment for policy changes, including education reform efforts. The bellwether sample included

questions sought to capture independent views about the status of Chalkboard's issues on the policy agenda, political will to move ahead with these issues, and effectiveness of Chalkboard's messaging and approach. While bellwether interview data added depth to the total evaluation effort, the approach may be more useful in circumstances where advocates are not closely in tune with the policy or political landscape. Because Chalkboard is a politically savvy organization, bellwether interview findings alone did not offer substantial new insights about the state education policy environment or opportunities.

Evaluators also conducted what were termed "pulse" interviews, or key informant interviews intended to check perceptions relating to Chalkboard's work, structure, and approach. The sample included those familiar with Chalkboard—both allies and those with differing views. They included representatives of the media, FBO member foundation trustees, elected officials and staff, and leaders of civic organizations. To encourage candid responses, pulse interviewees were selected from a pool of individuals suggested by Chalkboard, but the final selection of respondent names was not shared outside of the evaluation team. Questions uncovered key informants' perceptions of Chalkboard's credibility, its degree of alignment with influentials, and the effectiveness of its civic engagement strategies.

An overall challenge was securing interviews with bellwethers and other key informants. While members of Chalkboard's staff and board members had an appetite for engaging with the evaluation effort, this enthusiasm was not universally shared by all identified key informants, some of whom had taken part in lengthy interviews and reflections for Chalkboard's prior evaluation in 2007. The result was that some bellwethers and "pulse" interviewees elected not to participate in interviews; the implications are noted below (*see Evaluator Observations*).

Policymaker Rating Tool

The Policymaker Rating Tool is used to assess political will among an identified group of policymakers. The ratings can be used as a baseline, with repeated assessments used to track inroads with legislators.[15] In Chalkboard's case, evaluators facilitated a discussion with a carefully selected group composed of staff, Chalkboard lobbyists, and the lobbyists for two partner organizations. The group collectively came up with a consensus rating of each of Oregon's state legislators, who were assessed in three categories: demonstrated interest in Chalkboard's policy issues, inclination to promote the issues with others, and the policymaker's own level of influence.[16]

Chalkboard's president and project director commented the Policymaker Rating Tool was especially useful as it helped bring tangible and "eye-opening" results to the staff's and board's attention related to what would be required to secure deep legislative support. Chalkboard's President also highlighted the value of hearing the perspectives of participants, especially allies from outside of the organization. Finally,

representatives from the Oregon state legislature, the Oregon Department of Education, the media, the business community and others familiar with the policy landscape. Bellwether interviewees were offered confidentiality; interviewees were told that their names would be included in a data summary but that their comments would not be attributed to them by name.

15 The tool used in this evaluation is based on work by David Devlin-Foltz and colleagues from the Advocacy Planning and Evaluation Program at The Aspen Institute.

16 As an internal check on reliability, the group members also rated their own level of confidence in the accuracy of the ratings.

the results served as a useful reference point—a factor which, combined with the tool's other benefits, prompted the evaluation team to recommended this assessment be repeated on an annual basis.

Allies and Champions Tracking Log

The evaluation identified strengthening and leveraging partnerships and alliances as both an important part of Chalkboard's strategy and an area in which progress was expected. To help Chalkboard systematically document useful information about partnerships and alliances, evaluators created a simple spreadsheet based on review and input from Chalkboard staff. The tracking log was developed, but not fully implemented, in the evaluation period. The tool was designed to serve a dual purpose: to help build and share institutional knowledge regarding allies/partner organizations and to help track changes in collaboration, depth of relationship, and degree of shared agenda between Chalkboard and allies/partners. The information captured will be used to inform Chalkboard's strategy and maintain a record of progress or changes in relationships with key partners and allies that can be shared with board members and others.

To implement the alliance tracking log, staff will use the template as a frame to record notes and observations about meetings or interactions with partners and allies, collecting these in a single repository. Using a spreadsheet for this type of tool makes it easy to synthesize and track information about the number of partners and allies by type, changes in the degree of partner influence, and the strength of alliances/partnerships. However, staff perceived that diligently tracking this information could be overly time-consuming, a potential barrier to the tool's use. Instead of using the new tool, it may be possible for staff to track information by adapting existing internal systems. With either approach, an important variable is staff capacity (*see Evaluator Observations*).

Reporting Prospective Findings

Prospective findings were reported primarily through a series of confidential memos. In order to ensure timeliness and optimum utility, initial findings were submitted to Chalkboard staff within days of data collection. Findings were often presented in the context of the outcomes and indicators identified in Chalkboard's outcome map. The memos also identified relevant considerations, opportunities, and challenges. Chalkboard's president and project director reported they read each memo and prepared feedback independently, and then conferred with each other before speaking with the evaluators. Chalkboard staff and evaluators typically discussed the initial findings by phone and evaluators adapted data products as necessary. In most cases, finalized versions of the memos served as evaluation deliverables.

Findings were further shared through two Learning Circles.[17] These sessions were designed as an opportunity for key board members, project staff, and the evaluation team to collectively consider data and the implications of evaluation findings, along with other information and the overall context, to distill guidance for strategic decisions. Prior to each session, the evaluators drafted data summaries, which the

17 Cohen, C. (2006). Evaluation Learning Circles: A Sole Proprietor's Evaluation Capacity-Building Strategy. *New Directions in Evaluation, **111***, 85-93.

project staff sent out to all participants. The evaluators also worked with staff ahead of the meeting to craft a set of guiding questions that surfaced key strategic issues and informed salient decision points.

During each Learning Circle, project staff updated the group on noteworthy aspects of the policy landscape, new developments in key local and national contacts and alliances, and potential and achieved funding sources. These project updates directly informed the discussion's direction, while data offered a "guard rail" to help frame and focus the dialogue. As an example, prior to the second Learning Circle, Chalkboard received notice of a $13.2 million federal award to support implementation of their "proof of concept" education reform model, the CLASS Project. Much of the Learning Circle discussion then honed in on the implications of this funding for Chalkboard's "role of value," areas for a "laser focus" in the next several months, and issues for near-term consideration by the full board. Available evaluation data provided grounding, and informed thinking about both opportunities and areas where course adjustments were needed.

The evaluators facilitated and documented each session, while also serving as thought partners in the conversation. Within a few days of each session, the evaluation team reported back on the conversation via short memos that highlighted discussion points, considerations, and questions to be raised with the full board.

Evaluator Observations

As noted previously, prospective evaluation approaches are relatively new; evaluation of Chalkboard's civic engagement and advocacy efforts provided an excellent opportunity to try out several methods and tools. Below are observations related to the prospective evaluation, which highlight overall lessons learned and areas for ongoing consideration. Observations are meant to be broadly instructive for those who fund, implement, and evaluate civic engagement and advocacy efforts, but they may be particularly relevant for evaluators.

1. Coupling retrospective and prospective approaches provided an opportunity to meet multiple evaluation needs, and highlighted the distinct benefits of evaluation that fosters real-time learning. As has been described, when examining advocacy and civic engagement efforts, prospective evaluation methods are useful to gauge progress and clarify the landscape and current opportunities. Retrospective evaluation, by comparison, is typically focused on documenting past accomplishments; a retrospective orientation is often important to funders or board members who see evaluation primarily as a way for organizations to demonstrate accountability. For Chalkboard, both retrospective and prospective evaluation approaches were employed. Through the retrospective approaches, the board and FBO partner foundation trustees sought evidence of what the organization had accomplished in the past two to three years in order to determine the merit and worth of Chalkboard's actions. Accountability is perhaps the most traditionally understood purpose for evaluation, though prospective approaches that support real-time learning can be especially useful for organizations operating in the policy environment.

The desire to use evaluation for both accountability and real-time learning can sometimes compete; it can be a challenge for evaluators to address both of these elements. For Chalkboard, prospective evaluation was a new approach; staff and board members saw the potential for valuable learning, though the concurrent retrospective evaluation may have increased Chalkboard's initial receptivity to trying out prospective methods. While Chalkboard's retrospective evaluation did help illuminate accomplishments, staff and board viewed the prospective evaluation as enormously useful, and have plans to continue to implement prospective tools in the future in order to support and guide their civic engagement and advocacy work. In the future, Chalkboard may choose to undertake further retrospective evaluation to document outcomes during particular time periods, though implementation of both retrospective and prospective methods demonstrated for Chalkboard that evaluation to support strategic learning can be of equal or greater value as evaluation to demonstrate accountability. Board members noted that the retrospective evaluation findings were important, but that "the prospective evaluation and tools were particularly useful; it helped us identify current organizational strategy issues needing to be examined and addressed."

2. In a rapidly shifting political environment, flexibility is key. Civic engagement and advocacy efforts often occur in rapidly changing political environments. Consequently, evaluation of civic engagement and advocacy necessitates a fluid, dynamic design that may evolve as the work itself takes shape and adapts to changes in context and the political environment. Prospective evaluation approaches, which address broader questions related to context and effectiveness of strategies, can be particularly useful during times of uncertainty or change. For evaluation to be meaningful and useful in this realm, it must strive to be as nimble as advocates must be in their day-to-day work. Exactly which methodology, timing, and samples will be applied are determined based on how the work itself is unfolding. To generate meaningful data, certain aspects of the evaluation—including identification of evaluation questions, sampling strategies, and sequencing of data collection—need to be flexible and not static in response to evolving needs or emerging questions. Prospective evaluation methods, which are largely qualitative, nicely lend themselves to adaptation. To ensure that evaluation is useful and responsive, evaluators must be tuned in to the context and environment. In the case of the Chalkboard evaluation, evaluators developed the Policymaker Rating Tool rating categories based on both findings from the Internal Reflection and close consultation with Chalkboard staff and consultants. In addition, evaluators made adjustments to the bellwether and pulse interview samples and refined protocols in response to ongoing developments in the political context as well as findings from the retrospective data collection effort.

3. Articulation of a theory of change (via an outcome map) proved to be a useful frame for the prospective evaluation. For Chalkboard, both the collaborative process of creating an outcome map, and the map itself, formed the prospective evaluation's cornerstone. The inclusive, iterative development process provided opportunities to build stakeholder consensus and develop collective agreements about strategic direction, opportunities, and barriers. The outcome map product offered a clear description and facilitated a common understanding of outcome areas and indicators of progress. Once developed and adopted, both staff and board had a collective feeling of agreement and ownership. This in turn provided credence to the prospective evaluation findings, which were generally presented in the context of identified outcome areas. Finally, engaging in this collaborative effort at the evaluation's outset helped the evaluation team better understand the work as a whole and the political context surrounding Chalkboard's efforts.

Near the evaluation period's end, the Chalkboard president noted that it might prove useful to revisit the outcome map in the near future. The need to revisit strategies and near-term outcomes seems highly appropriate for theories of change of advocacy efforts—especially for efforts operating in fluctuating political environments. There are no hard and fast rules about how frequently to revisit or adjust outcome maps, but a good practice is to review the outcome map on a regular basis, such as semi-annually. Both those implementing and those evaluating civic engagement efforts should participate in outcome map reviews to ensure there is ongoing agreement about strategic direction, outcome priorities, and relevant evaluation questions.

4. Strong prospective evaluation is likely to include both tools that staff can use, and evaluation strategies that must be implemented by a third party evaluator. Few advocacy organizations have the capacity (or the need) to engage external evaluation consultants over the long term. A prospective evaluation design can be most useful when it combines data that is best gathered by a third party with data that can be collected by staff or internal teams. By implication, tools implemented by internal staff need to match with organizational resources. In the case of Chalkboard, the evaluation team carried out activities such as confidential key informant interviews, which, by definition, must be must be conducted by a third party. The evaluation team also deliberately supported the client's internal evaluation capacity by working with staff on the development of the Policymaker Rating Tool and modeling its use. Program staff in the future, likely without external facilitation, can implement the tool again. Similarly, the Alliance Tracking Tool, which documents measurable progress on strengthening allies and champions, was co-developed by the evaluation team and Chalkboard staff, but was designed for implementation by Chalkboard.

As a caution, although tools can be designed for internal use, there must be organizational capacity to implement them. By facilitating or modeling initial implementation of a tool, evaluators not only support clients' capacity to implement, they also help to demonstrate the tools' utility, and both of these factors influence clients' ongoing evaluation efforts. Even with evaluators' support, evaluation capacity may be an issue for many advocacy organizations that typically operate on tight budgets and within fast timeframes. This raises questions about the ongoing need for external support, although evaluation support can take different forms. In a prospective evaluation, a short engagement with an external evaluator can add value by helping clients to answer an immediate question or implement a particular tool. At other times, an external evaluator may be engaged to design, implement, or oversee a longer-term evaluation effort.

5. For organizations implementing civic engagement and advocacy, willingness to engage closely with the evaluation is important. The success of the prospective evaluation process relies on a close partnership between client and evaluator. Beyond that, however, the nature and pace of prospective evaluation can require considerable time and effort for organizations. This may pose a particular challenge as evaluation likely takes place during times when the organization is deeply engaged in its own advocacy and civic engagement work. Yet, it is necessary for the client to keep evaluators apprised of changing organizational needs or changes in the environment in order to ensure that prospective data and findings are relevant. At a minimum, a client organization should expect to engage in regular and close communication with evaluators, review data collection tools, and identify and facilitate access to key informants. In the case of Chalkboard, the evaluation design benefitted from deep staff involvement which began at the outset with

the outcome map development process, and continued with staff's careful review of prospective tool drafts to ensure that each was likely to capture highly relevant data. Chalkboard's president and project director were also closely involved in identification of those who participated in the Internal Reflection, those who served as raters in the Policymaker Rating process, and those who were included in the bellwether and pulse interview samples.

During the Chalkboard evaluation period, client-evaluator communications were characterized by regular hour-long phone calls during the tool development and implementation phases, as well as back-and-forth emails to address emergent questions or confirm necessary adjustments. In addition, Chalkboard staff provided quick turnaround when reviewing findings summaries and proposed meeting agendas. All of these aspects of communication helped make the work optimally relevant and useful. Although this process required an investment of time, the client felt the process was efficient and that communication time was well spent. Its advice to other organizations is to be aware upfront that the process will require an investment of staff time and to consider in advance how to fold it into existing workloads.

Despite Chalkboard staff's appetite for deep engagement with evaluation, the evaluation team faced some challenges in engaging key informants. Like clients, key informants are busy and making time for an interview may not be a top priority for them. Those most likely to make time may be those with the closest relationships to the client, or those with similar perspectives. This is not ideal because it introduces potential for bias, and because extremely valuable information can often be obtained via interviews with those outside of a client's inner circle. To mitigate potentially one-sided interview findings and ensure a broad perspective, the evaluation team asked the client to further develop sample lists and encourage participation among key interviewees. In the future, it may be helpful to invest time in upfront communications with those who are identified as key informants in order to explain the purpose and expectations for interviews and to offer thanks in advance. Evaluators also encountered some "interview fatigue" among key informants who had participated in previous data collection efforts. This has implications for prospective evaluation going forward; "interview fatigue" may make it difficult to investigate changes over time by repeating interviews with key informants. A way to address this challenge is to consider a panel study design, where a group of identified key informants agree to participate in a certain number of interviews over a specified period of time.

6. Timely reporting and useful data summary formats are important. In contrast to a more traditional evaluation where all findings might be reported at the conclusion of a project, the goal of prospective evaluation in an advocacy environment is to provide as close to real-time feedback as possible so that findings can be put to immediate use. In this case, confidential memos summarizing findings were submitted within a few days after data collection, discussed with lead staff by phone, and revised as needed. Findings from data collected over time, such as the bellwether and pulse interviews, were shared both midstream and at their conclusion.

Prospective tools are designed to yield discrete pieces of data that can be reported in small chunks; lengthy reports are less useful in the advocacy and policy environment. The Chalkboard evaluation experience showed that prospective data collection tools were well matched with a real-time orientation; findings

were accessible and geared to informing near-term decisions. Evaluators did experience some challenges with reporting prospective findings. Because each prospective tool was designed to explore a discrete set of questions, the data and findings associated with each tool, in contrast to a complete retrospective evaluation report, were not necessarily intended to tell a complete story. This is important to bear in mind, especially if implementation of a particular tool or method reveals findings that are somewhat unexpected or unfavorable. For example, in this case the evaluation captured some point-in-time perspectives of certain key influencers regarding Chalkboard's work. While this feedback was ultimately useful, it also needed to be carefully contextualized and appropriately presented to staff and board to make clear that the findings represented selected voices and limited understandings of the organization's overall work so as not to elicit inappropriately reactive responses.

Finally, evaluation findings related to civic engagement and advocacy work can be politically sensitive. When reporting and presenting data, evaluators must consider appropriate, secure communication strategies. It is also important to clarify in advance with the client both what and how findings will be shared with internal or external audiences.

7. Learning Circles provided an excellent opportunity to apply data to decision making. Each of the two Learning Circles provided a valuable opportunity for mall work group (made up of Chalkboard staff and board members) to consider the implications of evaluation findings for near-term decision making. During the evaluation's relatively short time period, dramatic changes occurred in the political environment. In this context, data were intended to be one of many sources of information to help generate knowledge and meaning. At the time of the first Learning Circle, which occurred about mid-way through the data collection process, the project's president commented that the group was "startled to see how much had changed" in the environment, and how much these changes affected strategic considerations around project direction. Reflecting on how data helped inform strategic considerations, a member of the evaluation work group commented, "We gained the perspective of others, how they see us, what they value and don't value." Another commented that data and findings "helped to surface key strategic issues." Chalkboard's president described the opportunity for staff and key board members to chew on findings in the context of the changing political environment as "a pivotal experience."

The Learning Circles, facilitated by the evaluation team, provided a forum for what the project's president termed "authentic conversation" about Chalkboard's evolving "role of value." These conversations crystallized the group's thinking and helped its members to jointly frame decision points and a set of strategic considerations to take to the full board. A board member felt that the opportunity for the work group to reflect and develop shared understanding during the Learning Circles led Chalkboard to "be more bold and adventuresome in planning the future."

8. To foster strategic learning, the evaluator inhabits a unique role. The purpose of a prospective evaluation is to carefully investigate the effectiveness of strategies, document relevant contextual factors, and elicit understanding regarding necessary programmatic or strategic adjustments. By providing timely, digestible data so that clients can rapidly consider and apply findings, prospective evaluation adds real-time value for strategic decision making.

Lifting up evaluation data to clarify and guide decision making is an important part of the strategic learning process. Strategic learning may be defined as "using evaluation to help organizations or groups learn in real time and adapt their strategies to the changing circumstances around them."[18] In the case of Chalkboard, the evaluation fit that description by contributing data to real-time learning processes. Strategic learning calls for new understandings of the evaluators' role, as well as how evaluators and clients work together. To maximize the role of evaluation data in strategy decisions, evaluators must be able to offer guidance and expertise with regard to evaluation design and data collection. In addition, evaluators need to be perpetually nimble, responsive, and highly competent as facilitators and coaches.[19]

As noted throughout this case example, in a strategic learning environment, the evaluator is not a distant or disconnected external actor. Instead, the evaluator needs to maintain a high level of engagement and close contact with the client in order to be effective. For example, the development and implementation of useful prospective measurement tools is likely to involve significantly more client input than might occur in a more traditional evaluation. Ongoing close contact ensures that the evaluator is aware of the clients' changing circumstances and is able to adapt the evaluation design as needed. As was the case with Chalkboard, evaluators and clients may also work together to understand data and findings, and determine how they relate to strategic questions. For clients, evaluation for strategic learning requires a willingness to engage openly and deeply with the evaluator as a thought partner.

Evaluators working in this arena are likely to straddle some traditional evaluation boundaries. For example, to facilitate the strategic learning process, an evaluator may act as an objective, neutral provider of data. The evaluator serves as a thought partner to clients by teasing strategic questions out of that data and facilitating discussion. Being perceived as a member of the team, the evaluator may occasionally be asked to go beyond their role as data provider or facilitator to be a strategy consultant or advisor, i.e., to make recommendations regarding a client's strategic decisions. Evaluators will undoubtedly need to negotiate this kind of request thoughtfully, clarifying both their own stake in client decisions and where the comfortable "boundary lines" are with regard to their own evaluation practice.

18 See: Coffman, J. & Beer T. (2011) Evaluation to Support Strategic Learning: Principles and Practices. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation. Available at: www.evaluationinnovation.org

19 These skills were addressed in a session at the 2010 American Evaluation Association annual conference, chaired by ORS ("The Intersection of Strategy and Evaluation: What are We Learning." November 10, 2010). Relevant skills noted by presenters included the ability to understand the interconnections of strategies and approaches; be creative in how to push boundaries; work across boundaries of evaluation; be nimble, flexible, responsive; have a utilization focus/practical lens; know—and be able to assert--when enough data is enough. Other insights included: the evaluator role is to facilitate continuous improvement, but also to conduct a summative evaluation; and that in these situations, evaluation experience trumps content knowledge, although some firms also contract for advisors with content knowledge.

Conclusion

The Chalkboard evaluation provided an opportunity to test drive several new approaches and measurement techniques. The prospective methods and tools proved to be useful and, importantly, adaptable. Further trialing may yield refinements to the tools or implementation methods, but given the need for flexibility in advocacy evaluation, it is unlikely that useful prospective tools will ever be "off the shelf" materials.

Because it combines an adaptive orientation with rapid-response feedback and interpretation, the prospective approach proved well suited to support enhanced policy change work; in particular, to inform just-in-time strategic decision making. The prospective evaluation of the Chalkboard Project's civic engagement efforts was an opportunity to lift up evaluative thinking in ways that fostered strategic learning. A board member who participated on the evaluation work group noted that data and real-time reflection and discussion "helped sharpen and guide our major focus." Work group members commented that they saw a place for ongoing evaluation efforts to help Chalkboard understand progress and guide its decisions.

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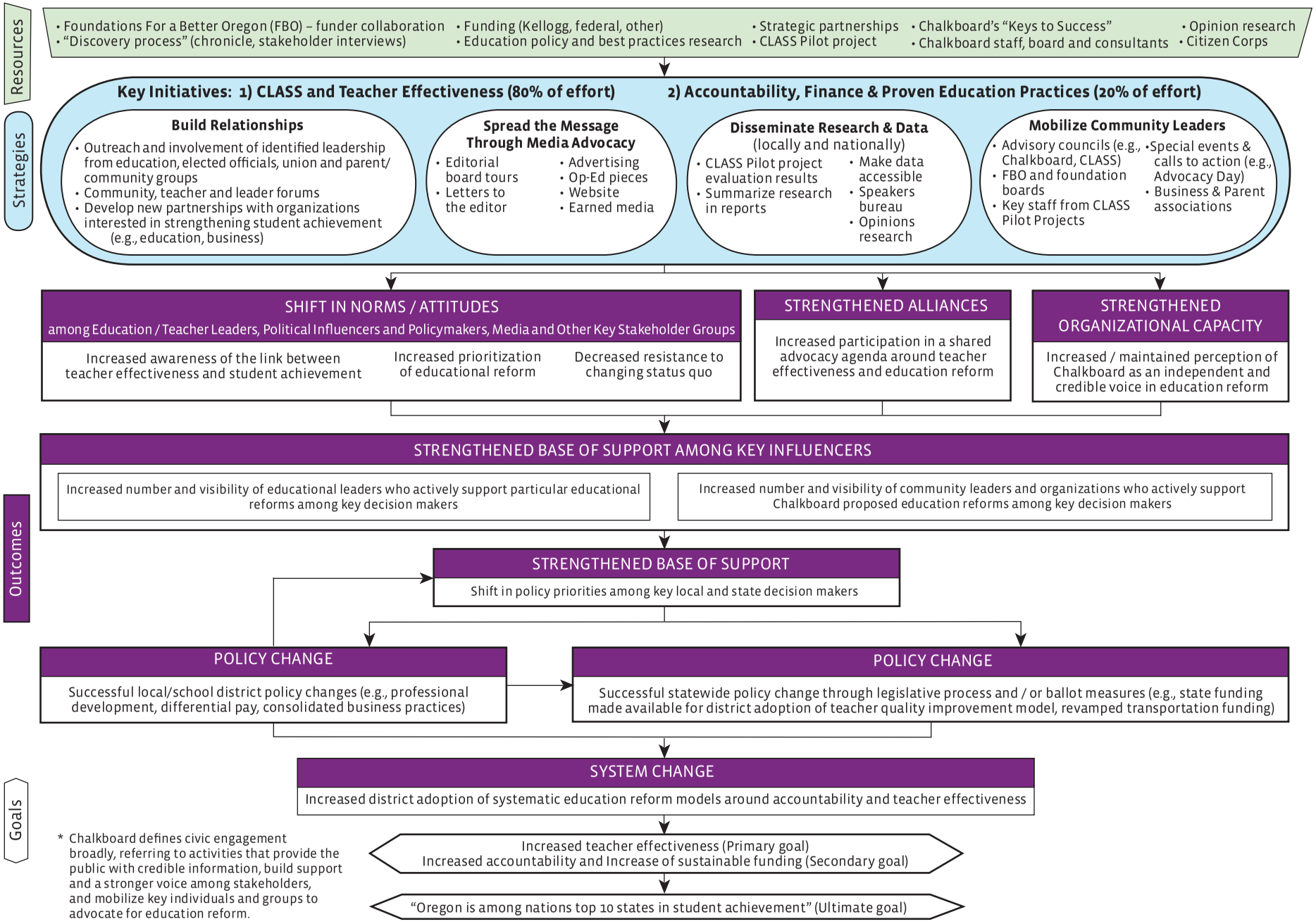
THE CHALKBOARD PROJECT: 2010-2013 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT* FOR EDUCATION REFORM – PROSPECTIVE OUTCOME MAP



* Chalkboard defines civic engagement broadly, referring to activities that provide the public with credible information, build support and a stronger voice among stakeholders, and mobilize key individuals and groups to advocate for education reform.

Appendix B

PROSPECTIVE DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGIES USED DURING THE CHALKBOARD PROJECT EVALUATION	
Methodologies	**Notes**
Internal Reflection *Approach:* Facilitated reflection sessions with key Chalkboard staff members, lobbyists, and other close-in advisors to guide discussion around a set of questions.	Based on an advocacy evaluation tool piloted in other settings, reflections are focused discussions with key staff and stakeholders and facilitated by evaluators to assess outcomes along the way and to encourage more formalized group reflection and learning. This method has been found to be useful for evaluation in the policy and advocacy arena—it does not require extensive documentation by staff and supports reflection that can inform strong advocacy. In the future, it may be useful to consider some individual interviews to evoke greater openness and candidness among all stakeholders.
Bellwether Interviews *Approach:* A sample of potential interviewees was selected in consultation with Chalkboard staff. The evaluation team conducted interviews. Interviews can be repeated over time.	Bellwethers are people whose positions require that they are politically informed and they track a broad range of policy issues. The intent of interviews was to provide an independent view of where Chalkboard's issues are on the policy agenda, whether there is political will to move ahead with these issues, and whether Chalkboard messaging is getting through. Bellwether data were useful, but did not provide many new insights for Chalkboard since the organization was already attuned to the policy landscape.
"Pulse" Interviews *Approach:* Evaluators selected interviewees from a list of individuals provided by Chalkboard. To encourage candidness, interviews were confidential; evaluators did not disclose the final list of pulse interviewees, and data summaries were designed to ensure interviewee confidentiality.	Interviews provided perspectives on perceptions of Chalkboard in general. They captured how external stakeholders saw Chalkboard, including its credibility, degree of alignment with stakeholders, and effectiveness of strategies.
Policymaker Ratings *Approach:* Evaluators facilitated a rating session with Chalkboard and key-partner lobbyists. Lobbyists rated all Oregon state legislators in each of four categories regarding Chalkboard initiatives: demonstrated interest; inclination to promote the issues with others; level of influence; and confidence of the rating team in the accuracy of the assessment. Ratings reflected consensus among the group of raters.	Ratings provided a snapshot of political will and degree of legislative support for Chalkboard initiatives. Initial ratings can serve as a baseline if the tool is implemented more than once.
Alliance/Champion Tracking *Approach:* Alliance Tracking will completed in an ad hoc manner; after meetings with key partners/allies, Chalkboard staff will notes and observations using a template.	Captured Chalkboard's relationships with partner organizations and allies. Dual purpose: (1) to help build and share institutional knowledge regarding allies/partner organizations, and (2) to help track changes in collaboration, depth of relationship, and degree of shared agenda. The information captured can be used to inform Chalkboard's strategy and maintain a record regarding progress or changes in relationships with key partners and allies. While staff see the tool as useful, perceived time requirements for its use may be a barrier to implementation.