



Step 8: Making sense of your data.

This section offers guidance for those just starting out in evaluation. No special training is necessary, but if your evaluation is complex you may want to consider partnering with another agency or a university to help with the analysis.

8a. Organize your data in a format that is easy for you to use.

Regardless of the types of data you have collected, you will need to arrange the data to look for patterns, pull out sections to look at more closely, and, in some cases, link data from different sources together. Be sure to allow sufficient time to enter data from written surveys and to double check data against original files to ensure accuracy. It might be helpful to find someone who can use Microsoft EXCEL or ACCESS to input data and to create readable reports.

Don't get lost in your data. There are many resources available to help you look at your data and use it for 'data-driven decision-making.' Two easy-to-read resources are:

- [Data Wise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning](#), edited by Kathryn Parker Boudett, Elizabeth A. City, and Richard J. Murnane (2005), published by the Harvard Education Press.
- [Statistics Made Simple for School Leaders](#), by Susan Rovezzi Carroll and David J. Carroll (2002), published by Rowman & Littlefield Education.

8b. Focus on what is important about your data.

As you look at your findings, think back to your chosen results and the indicators you used to measure success. Ask yourself what your data are telling you: Are there any surprises? Do the findings make sense? Do I need more information to explain what I'm seeing? How can I use this moving forward?

Limits and Opportunities in Data Analysis

Can I say my programs caused this change?

Even with a defined set of evaluation questions and the right data to answer them, you should not expect to be able to say with certainty that your community school's activities *caused* the changes you observe. Programs are correlated with successful results, and there may be much anecdotal evidence from participant and stakeholders that the programs are having the desired effect.

Strengthening your findings with multiple data sets or perspectives

It can be useful to look at the same indicator from different perspectives or using different sources of information. For example, Table B provides three different methods for collecting data on the indicator: schools are open to community. If you collect surveys from students and teachers and hold a focus group for community members, you can compare the findings. If the findings from all three sources of information are consistent, you can say with more certainty that your findings are accurate. Otherwise, you might examine your data collection procedures or identify new evaluation questions to help explain the different perspectives gathered.