

Interviewer: So our new guest is Doctor Megan Edwards. She's a faculty member at Antioch University and is actually an evaluator for Safe Schools/Healthy Students in New Hampshire. Thanks for being here to answer a couple of our questions, Megan.

Doctor Edwards: Thank you for having me.

Interviewer: So let me ask you, Megan; one thing that we know is really important about evaluating school-based programs is making sure that the data that you're collecting can actually be used by people doing the work, and especially those people who are making decisions. So could you share with our listeners some strategies that have been successful in New Hampshire, in your experience, to kind of communicate those evaluation results to, whether it be school administrators, faculty, or staff.

Doctor Edwards: In general, one thing that our group really tries to focus on is really trying to use what ... Our framework, really, being a utilization focused sort of evaluation framework. And we ask ourselves that same question every time we start a new evaluation, and often many times throughout the evaluation efforts over the years of our project.

So one thing that we've done quite a bit with the Safe Schools/Healthy Students project with our stakeholders is, really early on in our process with folks, we tried to work with folks too. For us to step back a bit from, I guess what you would call more sort of work plan monitoring and output monitoring, because there's just such a massive array of activities, interventions that are going on throughout the Safe Schools effort, and it's a lot to try to capture. And we really sort of asked stakeholders, and ourselves together collaboratively, what is gonna be most useful to you.

And one of the things that we've really focused on throughout all of our projects, but have really taken time in Safe Schools to really try and highlight, is really dialing into what are the most meaningful indicators that we, in working with stakeholders, have sort of come to realize have the most impact through conversations with them. And then how do we translate all these numbers, all this data, into really clear, really crisp, and really ... The word I want to use is digestible visuals and [inaudible 00:02:26].

So we really have focused our work in on creating really clean, to the extent we can with all the numbers, sort of data visualization dashboards, where we try and just make the numbers sort of speak for themselves. And so, not everyone involved in all these projects are data geeks like we are as evaluators, and we try to ask ourselves, sort of almost like a newspaper headline, "What's the most important, most meaningful piece that they could take away from this?" And we just sort of take a lot of the other noise away from it. So I think a lot of folks are used to, with big projects like this, having to track, "Here are all the different

meetings we had and everyone who attended;" that's all really important information, I think, for tracking people's hard work. We've moved away from that, and moved away from an emphasis on that.

So the use of the visuals, we've tried to just get really creative with those. We've had requests, a lot of local requests, from districts that we work with, for things that are really specific to what their stakeholders need. So an example that comes to mind is, one manager in a school district we work with, for instance, had to present to a lot of school board meetings and needed really specific types of visuals and information based on the data to present back to the school board, to sort of show where the work was going. And we actually have created really ... Just accessible infographics. We've moved in the direction of doing a lot of infographic type of work with folks; things like presenting climate survey results in an infographic that can be distributed electronically to families in school newsletters, and things like that.

So that's a really big-

Interviewer: That's so helpful.

Doctor Edwards: Yeah, just simple, clean data visualization. And the other thing I would just add is before we sent anything out, especially if it's a sort of larger level report, something you'd actually call an actual report, we always meet with our stakeholders with our analysis done, and say, "Here's what we found, here's some visuals. What do you make of this and how does your work help explain these numbers? Tell us what was going on. Tell us how you make sense of these numbers and this data visualization, and help us tell this story."

So, you know, doing that sort of utilization, kinda collaborative focused evaluation where we ask people before we just make recommendations, or come to conclusions, is really the stakeholder input along the way. So those are some general strategies that we really try to use quite a bit.

Interviewer: That's really helpful. Thank you so much! And also for that last piece, which is just such an important part of the process, is really bringing those reports to the stakeholders before they're actually disseminated and shared. It sounds like you're working so closely with the school districts, and even with the individual building staff on that. And I love that utilization focused evaluation framework; I think that's good for everyone to keep in mind.

Could you give us an example? You mentioned that they're interested in some specific indicators. Are there a couple indicators that come to mind that, you know, your stakeholders often request that they have dashboards on?

Doctor Edwards: Yeah. Let me think. So one that comes to mind that folks really gravitated towards when we first presented it, and one thing that we chose to highlight, just because we thought it was cool, was the instructional time gained in school

setting due to a reduction in office discipline referrals over time. So when you see ... And this is a district where discipline referrals plummeted quite dramatically as they started to implement their multi-tiered system of support with fidelity. And it was really dramatic, and we wanted to highlight that.

So we sort of picked them as a case study and I presented some data visualization on just showing how much more instructional time had been regained over time. It's a bit of a crude construct, because you have to make a lot of approximations of how much time it takes to process a discipline referral, and how much time the kid is out of the classroom, and ... You really have to approximate. But it's a really nice sort of proxy for return on investment type analysis that are hard to do when you just don't know exactly where all the money's being spent, and it's hard to get that discrete.

So I presented those and other districts really, really gravitated towards that. So we've had a lot of requests for district level instructional time regained, because it's one way to really show stakeholders at a higher level, look at what we're actually doing; look at-

Interviewer: Awesome.

Doctor Edwards: Yeah, look how much time we're keeping kids in the classroom because of the way we're doing things differently.

So that's one. The other one really has been around school climate. And as I said before, creating really accessible infographics for families, for community members, about what's going on with school climate. So that's one people have been really valuing, I think.

Interviewer: Two wonderful examples that no doubt generalize to many other schools in districts in the country. So thank you for those.

So we have a couple minutes left and in that time, I just want to ask you about, anything particularly innovative that you think is going on in your local evaluation in New Hampshire that you could kind of give us some behind-the-scenes information about? Something new or innovative that's happening there.

Doctor Edwards: Sure. New and innovative. So I think one thing that might be unique, at least, [inaudible 00:08:21] maybe not in general unique, but that we've had to grapple with, is we actually came in mid-stream in the Safe Schools project as evaluators. And the project had already been up and running for at least a year, if not closer to two, year and a half, when we came on. So we had a lot of background learning to do, and really had to get up to speed quickly with what was going on.

One of the things that we did, and it's probably because a good proportion of our staff at our center are actually trained as psychologists, including myself, and so we're used to being really interpersonal and relational in our work. And we really asked ourselves, like "Let's listen to these folks and let's listen to what they need; how's it been going for them so far?" And how can we bring some added value and try and figure out, what's the underlying need for evaluation.

And that wasn't easy, I would say, just because they all knew each other and had been, you know, already absorbed in their work. So we just kinda stepped back and listened, and one of the things that we heard was that they were feeling like there was a lot of time spent crunching numbers, reporting numbers, collecting data; and that their story of all the work they were doing wasn't always being told through those numbers. And they really were looking for a venue to highlight, "Here's actually what's happening in these schools," and with these kids, and families, and community members.

So one thing we did is, you know, it wasn't originally in our contract, in our budget, but we developed a qualitative study with all of our school districts that blended somewhat newer qualitative techniques, the most significant change technique, and we sort of blended an approach that also included some techniques from outcome harvesting to enrich the stories we heard from stakeholders. And we did a whole qualitative piece where we talked with folks and then just really created a story around the numbers, so it wasn't just a bunch of data visualizations; it wasn't just here's how many ... You know, here's just what's happening with office discipline referrals, but tell us the story behind all the work you're doing to make that happen.

Our stakeholders were, I think, really grateful for that, and grateful to have something for them to share with their broader array of stakeholders. And one of the reasons I think it was innovative is just because it was sort of on the spot and unexpected, and I actually have heard other grantees in related projects say, "Wow." I've heard reports like, "Wow, your evaluators did that for you?" (laughter) That really stuck out to me, that our job is to be responsive to stakeholders and not just tell, you know, a rosy story, but tell the real story beyond just numbers and give the numbers a context. So that's been really fun, and fun to see that succeed.

Interviewer: That is wonderful. Well thank you so much for being with us today, and for giving us a little bit of the inside scoop on the real story of evaluation in New Hampshire. And I'm sure, to our listeners, your utilization focused evaluation framework approach will be very useful for them to hear about. So thanks for joining us today, Megan.

Doctor Edwards: Absolutely. Thank you.