

STRAIGHT FUND

Evaluation, Monitoring and Technical Assistance Plan



January 2014

Background

Ohio's new \$250 million Straight A Fund is a competitive grant program to reward innovation in Ohio's school districts and schools. Grants are awarded to schools and districts testing innovative ideas and programs that better meet the unique learning needs of all of Ohio's boys and girls or lower operational costs so that more money can be directed to Ohio's classrooms.

The Ohio Department of Education issues Straight A Fund grants to school districts, educational service centers, community schools, STEM schools, college preparatory boarding schools, individual school buildings, and education consortia (which may represent a partnership among school districts, school buildings, community schools or STEM schools), institutions of higher education, and private entities partnering with a school or district to achieve one or more of the following goals:

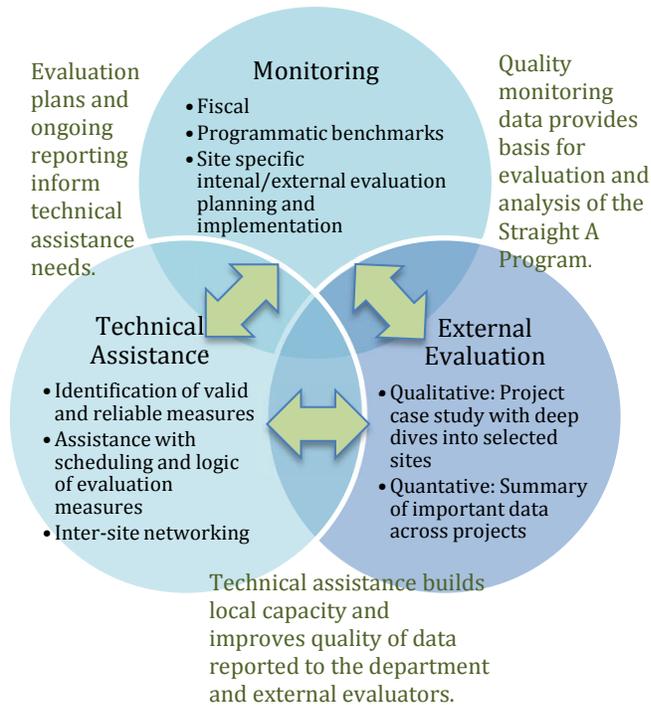
- Student achievement;
- Spending reduction in the five-year fiscal forecast; or
- Utilization of a greater share of resources in the classroom.

Since one of the purposes of the Straight A Fund is to identify and document best practices that can be shared and/or taken to scale based on demonstrated success, each grantee is required to conduct a local, site-specific evaluation which provides a "description of quantifiable results."

The purpose of this document is to demonstrate the interrelationships among the Straight A Fund plan evaluation design and its monitoring and technical assistance functions to grantees.



Relationships among Monitoring, Technical Assistance and External Evaluation



External Evaluation

Overview

The Straight A Fund external evaluation will implement a mixed-methods approach that incorporates **qualitative** and **quantitative** data from multiple sources and stakeholder groups across the state in order to provide representative, objective and empirical evidence about the overall effectiveness of the fund as well as to identify best practices for dissemination locally and nationally. Evaluation will center on the following research questions:

1. *Does the project meet the three stated funding goals: improved student achievement; reduction in cost; more dollars in the classroom?*
2. *What is the influence on districts/schools of a substantive innovation grant when paired with a requirement to sustain the project through reduction/reallocation of other resources?*
3. *Do the funded projects present the promise or reality of replication in order to more widely impact education across the state?*



The evaluation will be both formative (to provide an ongoing continuous feedback loop) and summative (provide information on outcomes) and will use multiple measures over multiple groups of respondents. Below is a brief description of the proposed major tasks and deliverables for the Straight A Fund external evaluation:

Quantitative (Summary of important data across projects)

- Collection and analysis of documentation data, including application responses and other project implementation materials from the Ohio Department of Education and individual grantees.
- Development of quantitative instruments, such as statewide surveys of key stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, parents, administrative staff, community members, board members, etc.).
- Collection of data – including statewide survey data as well as student achievement, fiscal and other outcome related data.
- Summary (meta-analysis) of outcome data for all grantees, including comparison groups where applicable.
- Develop a Straight A Fund evaluation database to house qualitative and quantitative data to be used for policy making and research.

Qualitative (Process/implementation study of Ohio Department of Education and selected sites)

- Collection and analysis of documentation data, including application responses and other project implementation materials from the Ohio Department of Education and individual grantees.
- Development of criteria for case studies of the projects.
- Qualitative analysis of state level legislation, policy and activities.
- Development of qualitative instruments, such as interview/focus group protocols for sampled state-level, district-level and school-level staff customized by type of grant (e.g. classroom-based activities, district initiatives, etc.).
- Conduct case studies, including site visits, interviews, focus groups and observations for selected sites with a variety of sets of project activities.
- Analyses of implementation data for sample sites, including comparison groups where applicable.

External Evaluation Considerations

Discussed below are a number of areas of uncertainty and variation in the grants that may affect the evaluation plan and design.

Wide variety in the Straight A projects funded

- The Straight A Project includes three overarching goals. Projects could address only one or a combination.



- Unlike some programs that focus on a specific content area, the Straight A Fund will fund innovations in a wide array of areas, for a diverse group of school children with a variety of outcomes.

Variety of evaluation/reporting requirements

- All projects are required to do a program evaluation. Some projects have internal evaluators while others have external evaluators. External and internal evaluators will be identified and available to the Straight A Project external evaluator.
- There is variability of local evaluators' qualifications and experience across grantees.
- All grantees will be required to submit requested data related to performance on the objectives of the grant and site-specific outcomes.

Technical Assistance

Two forms of technical assistance will be provided to grant projects. The Ohio Department of Education will provide assistance in understanding and meeting reporting requirements. An outside vendor will provide technical assistance specific to the evaluation process at the individual project level. Enhanced capacity for quality data emanating from the local evaluations will help to ensure a quality evaluation at the state level.

Outsourced Technical Assistance Specific to the Evaluation Process

Since the quality of the designs proposed and the qualifications and experience of the proposed local evaluators will drive the technical assistance, and the proposed designs and types of interventions proposed must drive the analysis plan, the contractor will review the funded applications in order to develop the project technical assistance and analysis plan.

Following review of the funded applications, the contractor will summarize their characteristics and assess the evaluation technical assistance needs and analytic possibilities for grantees. The contractor will address strengths and weaknesses and provide feedback to the local independent evaluators. The contractor also will include an analysis of interim results including key areas of practices and strategies. Included in the analysis will be suggestions for the type of information/data that will need to be collected to address the key evaluation questions above.

The Ohio Department of Education anticipates a need to assist projects in the selection of validated data collection tools and methods as well as clear identification of logic models by which to anticipate likely outcomes. Projects will also be encouraged to share measures and methods of evaluation in order to lay groundwork for long-term synergies, replication of successful strategies and ongoing learning communities. It will



be the role of the technical assistance evaluator to network all project managers and evaluators.

- Work with qualitative and quantitative evaluators on the specific data needs of the overall project in order to guide training needs for projects.
- Review evaluation plans as submitted during the application process to determine training needs and provide ad hoc assistance and individual review of evaluation plans to guide projects in finalizing their evaluation planning.
- Convene, train and network with principal evaluators of all projects on implementation benchmarks, quantitative and qualitative outcomes.
- Develop a communication vehicle (online discussion board, etc.) to foster interaction between projects, monitor use, provide moderation, etc.

Ohio Department of Education-provided Technical Assistance Specific to Fiscal and Program Monitoring

The department also will provide, through internal resources, both technical assistance in the compiling of some forms of data (particularly specific to fiscal monitoring and sustainability) and site visits for the review of data. The department will provide training, collection forms, rubrics, etc. to nine area fiscal coordinators who will perform these tasks. These coordinators and grantee staff members will be provided training in understanding the definition of fiscal sustainability as it pertains to this grant, use of five-year financial forecasting to demonstrate sustainability, as well as review of documents helpful in determining both fiscal and programmatic compliance.

Monitoring

The goals of monitoring are to ensure that project funds are responsibly spent in accordance with the parameters of the project; assist projects and the Ohio Department of Education in following progress and completion of process benchmarks and to guide the process of technical assistance through identification of areas of strengths, weaknesses and implementation barriers. It is anticipated that the intertwining of fiscal and program monitoring, building the capacity of internal and external Straight A program evaluators and external evaluation will provide meaningful data that will:

- Examine whether or not the Straight A program is meeting its goals; and
- Inform policy makers about funding and supporting educational innovation.



Fiscal Monitoring will initiate with a request for projects to review and finalize their budgets. Contacts will be made with districts to request the district teams have monthly meetings to review and update their grant time lines.

Scheduled site visits will review appropriate allocation of costs, ongoing consistency with project goals and objectives, any budgetary or programmatic updates or changes and compliance with district or organization fiscal policies. In the case of consortia grants, reimbursements of member organizations will also be reviewed.

The following cost areas will be examined for appropriate documentation:

- Staff employment;
- Professional development;
- Contract services;
- Administrative costs;
- Supply/materials purchases; and
- Equipment purchases.

Subsequent year (the Ohio Department of Education provides funding for only one year) monitoring will continue to gather fiscal information with regard to any carry-over expenses, but also to track the ability of projects to adhere to their long-term sustainability planning.

Programmatic Monitoring will focus initially on both implementation data (meeting timelines, benchmarks, etc.) and any early outcome data that may be available. As the project progresses, monitoring will focus more specifically on the reporting of site-specific outcomes in terms of the original project goals. This reporting will provide data for the department's overall project evaluation, looking specifically at questions of programmatic success in relation to the overall project goals (enhanced academic achievement, decreased cost and redirection of resources to the classroom).

Fiscal and programmatic monitoring components will work closely together in order to be able to examine the influence of fiscal sustainability planning on long-term programmatic planning and implementation.

