



## **Research Spotlight: Get Started!—Resources on Using Evaluation for Continuous Improvement**

**Harvard Family Research Project**

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**For questions or comments about this paper,  
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## Introduction

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Having the right information available at the right time goes a long way toward helping organizations improve their program performance and meet their goals. Continuous improvement denotes a shift from thinking about evaluation as a one-time effort to assess the effectiveness of a completed program to treating evaluation as a continuous learning process that provides programs data to show whether and how they are delivering value to their community over time.<sup>1</sup> Continuous improvement efforts help answer questions such as, *What do I need to know about my organization?*, *What types of data can guide my organization's direction?*, and *How does my staff know if we are making progress?*

Many organizations that serve children and families, however, lack familiarity with evaluation methods and/or do not understand how to integrate continuous improvement efforts into their day-to-day operations. This resource guide offers practitioners frameworks and tools to help them get started. It is meant to inspire practitioners to become smart producers and consumers of data.

This resource was created based on information contained in journal and report abstracts; inclusion does not equate with endorsement of the reports and/or articles. We welcome your suggestions for additional materials and reasons for choosing them. Contact us at [fine@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:fine@gse.harvard.edu).

## About Harvard Family Research Project

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Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is a leading national organization whose purpose is to shape 21st-century education by connecting the critical areas of student learning. Our focus is on anywhere, anytime learning approaches that extend from early childhood through college and connect families, schools, out-of-school time programs, and digital media. We build strategic partnerships with policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders to generate new thinking, stimulate innovation, and promote continuous improvement in education policy, practice, and evaluation. Our research and tools provide timely, relevant, and practical information for decision making. Addressing issues of access and equity in children's learning and identifying meaningful, effective family engagement practices that reinforce success for all children are central to our work.

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<sup>1</sup> Weiss, H. (2002). From the director's desk. *The Evaluation Exchange*, VIII(2), 1.  
<http://hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/evaluation-for-continuous-improvement/from-the-director-s-desk>

## Defining Continuous Improvement

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Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University (CDC). (2013, May 14). **Building adult capacities to improve child outcomes: A theory of change** [Video File]. Retrieved from [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/multimedia/videos/theory\\_of\\_change/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/multimedia/videos/theory_of_change/)

Why develop a theory of change—and how do you develop one? This CDC video offers a visual illustration of a theory of change from the [Frontiers of Innovation](#), a community of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working toward achieving breakthrough outcomes for vulnerable children and families. The video focuses on the need to strengthen the capacities of parents and other caregivers who surround a child to help them develop the competencies, practices, and mindsets that will allow children to grow and thrive. It suggests strengthening adult capacity through active skill building and creating systems for the continuous improvement at community and policy levels.

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., & Grunow, A. (2011). *Getting ideas into action: Building networked improvement communities in education*. Stanford, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Retrieved from [http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/sites/default/files/bryk-gomez\\_building-nics-education.pdf](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/sites/default/files/bryk-gomez_building-nics-education.pdf)

Society is demanding that educational institutions provide greater learning for more students and do so more efficiently than they have in the past. The authors of this article introduce the idea of a networked improvement community that creates purposeful collective action to solve complex educational problems. Scholars and practitioners who form this community engage with each other in an improvement cycle that consists of four steps: plan, do, study, and act.

Lopez, E.M. (Ed.). (2002). **Evaluation for continuous improvement**. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 8(2). Retrieved from <http://hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/evaluation-for-continuous-improvement>

A pioneering exploration of the use of evaluation for continuous improvement, this issue of *The Evaluation Exchange* offers advice from well-known experts and provides concrete examples of communicating and using evaluation findings to guide decision making and program improvement.

## Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement

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Harvard Family Research Project. (2013, September 17). **Creating a culture of continuous improvement**. *FINE Newsletter*, 5(3). Retrieved from <http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/fine-family-involvement-network-of-educators/fine-newsletter-archive/september-fine-newsletter-creating-a-culture-of-continuous-improvement>

The idea of continuous improvement is explored in a specific arena of practice in this issue of the *FINE Newsletter*: family engagement in children’s learning and development. The issue looks at the value of using data for continuous program improvement as schools, early childhood education programs, and youth-and family-serving organizations seek to understand whether their family

engagement strategies are achieving desired outcomes. It stresses the importance of cultivating a culture of inquiry and using data to identify an organization's strengths as well as areas for improvement.

**U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Offices of Planning, Research & Evaluation. (2012).** *Advisory committee on Head Start research and evaluation final report.* Retrieved from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/eval\\_final.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/eval_final.pdf)

This report details the findings of the advisory committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation and outlines the Committee's vision for Head Start and recommendations for achieving that vision.

**Education Week. (2011, April 5).** *Aimee Guidera on data development [Video file].* Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3M04YH4X\\_cU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3M04YH4X_cU)

In this 4-minute video, Aimee Guidera, executive director of the Data Quality Campaign, shares her approach to data for decision making. In contrast to a hammer that drives compliance, she likens data to a flashlight that illuminates pathways to action. Guidera stresses that data should be a tool for continuous improvement.

**Child Trends. (2010).** *Quality rating and improvement systems for early care and education. Early Childhood Highlights. 1(1).* Retrieved from [http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Child\\_Trends-2010\\_05\\_10\\_HL\\_QRIS.pdf?utm\\_source=Child+Trends+5%253A+5+Ways+to+Improve+the+Quality+of+Early+Care+and+Education&utm\\_campaign=5+ways+improve+early+care+and+ed&utm\\_medium=archive](http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Child_Trends-2010_05_10_HL_QRIS.pdf?utm_source=Child+Trends+5%253A+5+Ways+to+Improve+the+Quality+of+Early+Care+and+Education&utm_campaign=5+ways+improve+early+care+and+ed&utm_medium=archive)

Children's development can be significantly impacted by the quality of the care and education programs they receive, especially for those who are at risk for school difficulties. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) help assess and improve these programs and also provide parents information on the programs their children are enrolled in. This article discusses the research behind QRIS and highlights key considerations in developing them.

## Tackling Measurement Issues

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**Child Trends. (2013, December 17).** *Why it's worth taking the leap toward performance management [Web log post].* Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/why-its-worth-taking-the-leap-toward-performance-management/>

This blog post highlights the importance of using data to identify successes, problems, and potential improvements in an organization, an approach is known as "Performance Management." The post also looks at the three major phases in successful performance management: Performance Planning with Stakeholders, Performance Measurement, and Performance Management.

**Center for Advanced Study on Teaching and Learning (CASTL). (2013, August 19). Using Measurement as Leverage Between Developmental Research and Educational Practice, Guest Lecture by John Easton. [Video File]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXqZxi-RtM8>**

John Easton, Director of the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) at the U.S. Department of Education, explores the importance of good measurement in this lecture at the University of Virginia and examines the value of collaboration between educational partners and researchers in order to make the most of using these measures.

**Park, S., Hironaka, S., Carver, P., & Nordstrum, L. (2013). *Continuous improvement in education*. Stanford, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Retrieved from <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/newsroom/press-releases/continuous-improvement>**

This white paper by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching offers examples of how a continuous quality improvement methodology is being applied in education. The examples feature three types of organizations engaged in continuous improvement: those focused on instructional improvement at the classroom level; those oriented toward system-wide improvement; and those addressing collective impact. Six common themes characterize these organizations: leadership and strategy, communication and engagement, organizational infrastructure, methodology, data collection and analysis, and capacity building.

**Easton, J. (2010, February). *Five Big Ideas of IES*. Speech at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Conference, Atlanta, GA. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/director/pdf/easton022010.pdf>**

In this speech, John Easton, Director of the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) at the U.S. department of Education, highlights five “big ideas” on how IES plans to support educational research that will lead to improvement in students’ science outcomes: Make our research more relevant and useable; enhance this relevance and usability by shifting from a model of “dissemination” to a model of “facilitation”; create stronger links across research, development, and innovation; build the capacity of states and school districts to use their longitudinal data systems, conduct research, and evaluate their programs; and develop a greater understanding of schools as learning organizations. He provides examples of ways these will be implemented.

**National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) (2013). *Measuring what matters: Using data to support family progress*. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/measuring-what-matters.pdf>**

How can Early Head Start and Head Start (EHS/HS) programs use data to help families provide a supportive environment for children? How can these programs measure a family’s progress toward reaching their goals? How are these programs making a difference in the lives of parents and children? This article describes ways that HS/EHS staff can address these and other questions related to use of family-related data by taking two approaches to data collection, analysis, and use. One approach is based on a set of guiding principles to help programs use data in ways that are *Responsible, Respectful, Relevant, and Relationship-based*. The other provides a cycle of data activities designed to promote continuous learning and improvement.

Friese, S., King, C., & Tout, K. (2013). *INQUIRE data toolkit*. (OPRE Report # 2013-58). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The INQUIRE (Initiatives Research and Evaluation Consortium) Data Toolkit provides tools to support effective data collection and continuous program improvement for early care professionals. The toolkit has two main components created to facilitate uniform data collection across early care programs in different states. The first component is a linkages guide that includes key questions such as, *What are the characteristics of children ages birth to 12 years old in the state who are enrolled in an early care and education programs?*, and presents guidance on how to collect data related to each of the questions. The second component of the toolkit is a dictionary of common elements that programs are interested in measuring, such as parent satisfaction.

## Building a Continuous Improvement Process

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The National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations (NCPMFO). (2013). *Data in Head Start and Early Head Start: Interactive learning module*. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/center/data/guide/guide.html>

This interactive module is designed to help Head Start and Early Head Start programs create an organizational culture that embraces the use of data to drive decisions. It includes an introduction and five interactive activities: 1) *Plan to Succeed*—introduces the planning cycle through a case study example build around attendance, 2) *Get People on Board*—looks at how to help people, from staff members to Policy Council members, become data users, 3) *Dig Into Data*—presents four scenarios in which you have to dig deeper into data to address a problem, 4) *Share and Share Alike*—shows how the same type of data can be shared most effectively with different audiences, and 5) *Celebrate Good Times (Come ON!)*—shows how everybody plays a role in reaching program goals.

The National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations (NCPMFO). (n.d.). *The Program planning cycle*. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/center/data/planning-cycle.pdf>

This graphic represents the planning model used in Head Start and Early Head Start programs and describes the following steps in the planning cycle: 1) evaluate progress through a self-assessment; 2) conduct a community assessment; 3) decide on goals—communicate goals to stakeholders; 4) develop a plan of action and a budget that reflect goals; 5) implement a plan of action; 6) evaluate progress through ongoing monitoring; and 7) continually respond with mid-course corrections. Many of the steps occur repeatedly throughout the cycle.

**Data Wise. (2014). *Data Wise: Supporting Educators in Using Data to Improve Learning and Teaching*. Retrieved from <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=datawise>**

Based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and in partnership with principals and teachers around the world, the Data Wise Project introduces a *step-by-step improvement process* and *ACE Habits of Mind*, two approaches that support successful collaboration and teamwork toward school improvement. The *process* includes 8 steps: organize for collaborative work; build assessment literacy; create data overview; dig into student data; examine instruction; develop action plan; plan to assess progress; and act and assess. The 3 *Habits of Mind* are a shared *commitment to Action*, *intentional Collaboration*, and a *relentless focus on Evidence* (ACE)—representing a disciplined way of working and thinking in teams. The article also includes a video featuring teachers and principals discussing what the habits look like in practice and how they support improved learning and teaching.