

CEAC Update

Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity

Guiding Well-Informed Policy and Practice

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Assessment in Pennsylvania



-Shula Nedley,
Ph.D.

Assessment in Pennsylvania is taking a turn from the strictly mandated annual assessments to a system of assessments that include summative (end-of) assessments, benchmark (a little check-up) assessments and more classroom oriented,

content-focused assessments.

The **summative assessments** are the NCLB and other federal and state mandated assessments which include the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and its alternate (PASA) and modified (PSSA-M) versions,

the ACCESS for ELLs, NOCTI, and NAEP. The PSSA is an annual assessment in Reading and Math (grades 3-8 and 11), Science (grades 4, 8, and 11), and Writing (grades 5, 8, and 11). Only the PSSA Reading and PSSA Math results contribute to a school and district's AYP status.

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Evaluation Focus

Context and the Evaluator Perspective: Outside or Inside?

Evaluators often debate about the role or stance that an evaluator takes with clients.

Read more in
EVALUATION FOCUS, page 3.

2009 American Evaluation Association Conference: *Context and Evaluation*

The 2009 American Evaluation Association conference took place November in Orlando, FL. The theme of this year's conference was *Context and Evaluation*. This conference allowed us the opportunity to network with colleagues, attend professional development workshops, and share our experiences by presenting in four different sessions (for details about our sessions, see Recent Publications and Events, pg. 3).

In all of its varying forms, context plays an essential role in evaluation. We were able to share our experiences with applying a combination of evaluation methods to a num-

ber of different contexts.

Several CEAC staff members participated in an extended conversation about apprenticeship, expanding on the panel session we presented at AEA 2008.

We also had the opportunity to discuss the unique features of evaluation in the context of two of our projects, the Forum for Western Pennsylvania Superintendents and the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council's nationwide Literacy * AmeriCorps program. Regarding the Forum, we presented our experience and techniques we learned about GIS rendering and logic modeling as used to capture and develop the

emerging plan of the Forum.

For GPLC, we discussed how service-learning impacts community connectedness and commitment to service. We hope to expand upon these ideas in future publications and presentations.

Dr. Tananis, an AEA Learning Circle Fellow for 2008-2009, presented on her (and CEAC's) experience with the use of learning circles for professional development.

Overall, as every year, the AEA conference was a great opportunity for us to expand our skill sets, share our experiences, and build the foundations for future capacity-building collaborations.

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While NCLB mandates the administration of a science assessment, the law is silent on its use in determining AYP. The PSSA Writing assessment is state-mandated.

The ACCESS for ELLs is an English proficiency assessment administered annual in grades K-12 and is used for accountability of Title III programs. The NOCTI (National Occupational Competency Testing Institute) is administered to Career and Technical Education completers in their area of preparation, such as Automobile/Automotive Mechanics Technology/Technician and Electrical and Power Transmission Installers. The NAEP (National Assessment of Education Progress) is administered to a representative sample of schools in the state and across the nation. The subjects and grades assessed each year vary. The NAEP results are the basis of the "National Report Card."

Benchmark assessments mirror the content of the PSSA. Their purpose is to gauge performance or readiness for

success on the PSSA. The most frequently used benchmark assessments among Pennsylvania school districts are 4Sight, Acuity, and Performance Series.

Formative assessments are very brief assessments, administered very naturally during the course of instruction to gauge whether students understand the content being presented.

Within the past year, the PA Department of Education launched the [SAS \(Standards Aligned System\) website](#). The six components (or circles) of a Standards Aligned System are: Clear Standards, Fair Assessments, Curriculum Framework, Instruction, Materials and Resources, and Interventions. Over the past year, various content areas have been populated into this site.

On December 7, 2009, there will be a new launch of the website. The new site will be much more integrated in that teachers will be able to go into the system and search for a topic, such as fractions. And, if teachers want to know

what the standard actually states for fractions, they will then be able to see instructional resources for related to that topical content area.

Only a sampling of materials will be active on the site. Lesson plans will be built first, then educators will be encouraged to submit their own materials to the site. PDE will be providing training on the website throughout the Commonwealth in early 2010.

Affiliate Spotlight

Terry Schnur provides classroom observations for several CEAC projects. A retired math and science teacher, Terry has worked with the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh as a supervisor for math and science MATs and student teachers. Along with his CEAC observations, Terry also advises an educational partnership team that helps districts use PSSA and 4Sight testing data to drive instruction. In addition, he is a middle school math coach at a charter school in downtown Pittsburgh.

CEAC Welcomes New Professional Affiliates!

CEAC

Joining CEAC this fall are two new professional affiliates, **Dr. Shula Nedley** and **Dr. Jill Feldman**.

Shula Nedley, Ph.D. is currently the Director of [Dr. Shula Nedley, Consulting](#). Dr. Nedley served as Director of the Bureau of Assessment & Accountability with the Pennsylvania Department of Education for four years. At the PA Department of Education, Dr. Nedley was responsible for Pennsylvania's assessment systems (i.e., PSSA, PASA, ACCESS for ELLs) and Pennsylvania's accountability system, including reporting of assessment results to schools, districts,

and the public and reporting accountability results, such as AYP determinations. Prior to joining PDE in October 2005, Dr. Nedley was the Director of Data in Action, an independent consulting group that provided consulting in the areas of PSSA, local assessment planning, and data-driven decision making for comprehensive school improvement. Dr. Nedley holds both a masters and doctorate in Educational Research Methodology specializing in psychometrics and statistics. She spent 15 years with the Pittsburgh Public Schools, directing assessment, evaluation, and research activities. She also spent three years as an Assessment & Evaluation Consultant with CTB/McGraw-Hill.

Jill Feldman, Ph.D. is Director of Research and Evaluation for [Research for Better Schools \(RBS\)](#). Dr. Feldman is responsible for providing oversight and supervision of RBS internal and external evaluation projects. She has expertise in quantitative methods, instrument development, and developmental psychology. Dr. Feldman holds master's and doctorate degrees in educational psychology from Temple University.

Returning next issue: Ask CEAC! Send your evaluation and assessment questions to ceac@pitt.edu!

Evaluation Focus



Evaluators often debate about the role or stance that an evaluator takes with clients. Some would suggest that evaluators can

only serve a client well if they stand somewhat distant, as dispassionate observers. Others suggest that evaluators are of most use when they are more closely aligned, perhaps even immersed, in the project.

The debate centers on our philosophies of knowledge --- how we recognize and value what counts as knowledge. Some align with a more objective view of the world from an external source, others assign primary value to the lived experience, more of an insider viewpoint. Variations of this debate have flourished in academic and evaluation circles for many years and no doubt will continue for many more. The persistence of the issues across time speak to their importance. Clearly, both positions in the debate, and both of the perspectives

or viewpoints that evaluators can offer, have merit. Often internal and external evaluators, or program stakeholders and evaluators, work together to bring both the external objectivity and the internal experiential views to the table to better inform decision-making.

Recently, evaluation experts discussed this topic during part of a forum from the American Evaluation Association. John Mayne, an evaluator from Ottawa, Canada, offers, "One thing an evaluator ought to be passionate about is evidence: the need for robust evidence to inform decisions on and beliefs about interventions, including those one believes in."

Evidence is the basis for evaluative inquiry. Evaluation repeatedly poses the critical question: What evidence supports the contention made? The "rub," of course, is in what constitutes "evidence." Rather than a simple assumption, it may be important to realize that what counts as evidence for one person or

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group may not be as highly valued for another. Evaluators and clients/stakeholders must consider a further question: What evidence is valued and needed to assure use of the evaluation? The answer to this question may require multiple sources and types of evidence that can provide a credible foundation for discussion among varied stakeholders.

Qualified evaluators are equipped to navigate and guide these discussions and decisions, assuring that the best forms of evidence are explored to meet the needs of decision-makers and stakeholders. This is not tampering with the evidence or "cooking the data" --- it is the ethical responsibility of the evaluator to fully and accurately represent the actual data --- but making sure the appropriate data sources are tapped, and matching them with the needs of the decision circumstances (people and perspectives, timing, availability, burden to participants, cost, etc.) --- is a crucial and often overlooked part of evaluation planning.

Recent Publications and Events

November: CEAC staff participated in the American Evaluation Association's 2009 conference, presenting in four sessions.

Multipaper Session: Using a Longitudinal Mixed Method Approach to Evaluate a Professional Development Community: A Case Study of the Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents. Chair: Cynthia Tananis

- Tananis, C. Leveraging Resources Through Evaluation.
- Tananis, C. & Trahan, K. Organizational Evolution: Recognizing and Transferring Culture to Newcomers.
- Trahan, K., Ciminillo, C. & Tananis, C. The Role of Evaluation in Developing Program Theory: Using Retrospective Logic Modeling to Tell a Program's Story.
- Trahan, K. & Rodgers, J. Telling the Forum's Membership Story: Portraying Change Using the Basics of Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

Multipaper Session: Learning Evaluation Through Apprenticeship: A Continuing Conversation of Evaluation Practice and Theory from the Trenches. Chair: Cynthia Tananis

- Tananis, C. From the Evaluation Director Perspective.

- Ciminillo, C. From the Perspective of Full-Time Staff: The Project Manager.
- Trahan, K., Pelkowski, T., Wang, Y., & Price, R. From the Perspective of Graduate Students: Assistantship to Support Graduate Study - Many Roles, Many Pulls.

Paper: Trahan, K., Wang, Y., & Price, R. Exploring Community Volunteerism: Evaluating the Literacy AmeriCorps Program.

September: Two CEAC staff members presented their papers at conferences.

Price, R. (2009). Societal vs. Individual Investment in U.S. Higher Education: Smith, Schultz, and Student Loans. Panel member for Assessing Neo-Liberal Policies. 2009 Laurier Brantford Conference, Landscapes of Learning, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada (September 26, 2009).

Trahan, K. (2009). A Brief History of Presidential Education Policy: From Eisenhower to Obama. Panel member for Symposium: The Rise of the Education President. Organization of Educational Historians, 2009 Conference, Chicago, Illinois (September 19, 2009).

Who we are

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CEAC Up Close

CEAC welcomes Gail Yamnitzky! As CEAC's newest evaluator, Gail holds a Master's Degree, Principal's Certification and Superintendent's Letter of Eligibility from the University of Pittsburgh. Gail is currently on sabbatical from her position as Elementary Principal in the Plum Borough School District to complete her doctoral work in School Leadership. Gail's area of interest includes professional development for teachers of mathematics, specifically focusing on international models like Lesson Study.

Join the conversation @

ceac-pittsburgh.blogspot.com

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Guiding well-informed policy and practice.

The Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity (CEAC) addresses pressing evaluation and assessment needs by drawing on resources throughout the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education and the evaluation community at large. Through interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration, affiliates of CEAC work together to merge technical, evaluative, research design, statistical, and theoretical expertise to best address practical evaluation and assessment issues.

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