

Audio Podcast Script
Formative Evaluation: Using Educator Reactions
Tony Milanowski

Interviewer: This is Cortney Rowland with the Center for Educator Compensation Reform and I'm joined now by Anthony Milanowski with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Tony is one of the Technical Assistance providers for CECR. Welcome Tony.

Tony: Thank you Courtney.

Interviewer: Tony, you just finished presenting your session on Formative Evaluation and Using Educator Reactions to inform program implementation. Why is it so critical for program staff who are implementing an alternative compensation system to be concerned with educator reactions?

Tony: Well, we think that teacher perceptions and beliefs about the program are critical at many points in the implementation process, and important to the program's long-term survival.

First, we know that performance pay systems can't be sustained in the face of persistent negative reactions. If people really don't like the program, they'll find a way to help it die.

We also know that our "theories of action"—our mechanisms that connect performance pay with improved student achievement—depend on educator perceptions, cognitions and beliefs. For example, in order for performance pay to work, educators need to understand what is being rewarded. They also need to value the reward, and they need to believe that their efforts can lead to receiving the award.

And finally, perceptions of program implementation are very important as fidelity indicators. If you want to know how well the program is working, it's a really good idea to ask the people the program is targeted to, so one key group to ask is, of course, the educators that are part of the incentive program.

Interviewer: Tony, in the Formative Evaluation session you suggest three activities to improve the chances to sustain an alternative compensation program. Can you explain those?

Tony: We talked about three different ways of using perceptions to improve the chances of program success.

The first one we talked about was assessing the reactions and opinions in a pilot or planning year to find out what kinds of problems the full implementation is likely to have. This kind of a situation, this kind of a process, can surface lots of potential issues. For example, in one of the programs that we researched we found that educators didn't think one of the performance measures that was going to be used was very credible. When the program administrators heard

this and found this out, they were able to redesign that indicator before the full program was implemented, thus probably saving themselves a lot of grief later.

Secondly, if you do regular surveys, aimed at getting a broad assessment of how the program is doing with the people it is aimed and influencing, you're going to again be taking the pulse of the program and see how well it's playing out. These surveys should regularly assess key perceptions related to educator support, such as whether educators understand how the program works and perceive it to be fair.

Third, it's probably important to do periodic focus groups with small samples of affected educators. Not only does this give program administrators insights into how those affected view the program, but it can also surface misunderstandings and unintended consequences.

Interviewer: Finally, what are some reactions from teachers that suggest they are motivated by a performance pay program?

Tony:

That's a good question, Courtney. Pay for performance programs are designed to motivate educators to do things that will increase student achievement. Assessing educator reactions is one way of finding out if they are actually motivated by these programs. For example, if the goal is to motivate teachers to focus on changing instruction to improve student learning, you'd want to hear the teachers say that they have focused their efforts on student achievement goals due to the incentive, and that the incentive motivates them to do something different in their classrooms. Or, if the goal is to motivate better teachers to stay and poorer teachers to leave, you'd like to hear that rewarded teachers say they are more likely to stay in their schools because of that incentive, and that teachers who did not receive the incentive say they are more dissatisfied and are more likely to leave than those who did receive the reward.

Interviewer: Thanks so much to our guest, Tony Milanowski. You can find the complete PowerPoint presentation from Tony's session "Formative Evaluation: Using Educator Reactions" on the CECR website under the Events section. Select the 2009 Annual Grantee Meeting.

This is Cortney Rowland for CECR.