

All Together Now: How Challenges Became Opportunities While Implementing & Evaluating an Accountability System in an Education Nonprofit Network

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OVERVIEW

During the previous 6 years, Communities In Schools (CIS), an education nonprofit with nearly 200 affiliates across the United States, created a Total Quality System (TQS) of standards to achieve uniform quality in business practice and program implementation across the CIS network. To ensure that all affiliates were adhering to these standards, the CIS national office began conducting accreditation reviews of affiliates. Researchers at the national office used qualitative analysis of interview data collected during reviews to discover network trends and evaluate the impact of TQS.

Accreditation review teams interviewed executive directors, staff, and board members from local CIS affiliates, partners of local affiliates, and principals, students, and site coordinators at the school sites that local CIS affiliates serve. Data collection started in the spring of 2011 and continued throughout the 2011 calendar year. Researchers then refined their collection processes and updated protocols for the 2012 calendar year.

Initial findings focused on the benefits and challenges that local affiliates experienced during the accreditation process. **Challenges** discussed during the interviews included economic challenges (particularly for 2011 affiliates), time to prepare for the accreditation review, and using the CIS data management system. Affiliates accredited in 2012 mentioned the pressure and stress of implementing TQS as well as a desire for their colleagues at the state and national level to recognize the importance of context, such as affiliate size and the local community. **Benefits** of the accreditation process included increased accountability and unification of the affiliate board and staff. The 2012 affiliates also mentioned increased visibility for their affiliate as part of the process, and site coordinators and staff members in particular mentioned the benefit of learning about the broader CIS model and reflecting on that.

FROM ACCREDITATION TO EVALUATION

Although members of the Research, Evaluation, and Innovation (REI) team at the CIS national office initially viewed the accreditation process as a measure of quality control for individual CIS affiliates, it became clear during the course of TQS accreditation reviews that this was an opportunity for broader evaluation of TQS and the impact of the accreditation process.

Nonprofits operate in a **dynamic environment**, and this transition required careful thinking, quick and informed decision-making, and enhanced organizational structures. REI team members purchased NVivo software to analyze the hundreds of interviews that were being collected during accreditation reviews. REI team members also made templates to document interview notes, purchased recorders, and put procedures in place to quickly upload and analyze interview data. They began a yearly process of analysis

that occurred in early spring and summer, when fewer accreditation reviews occurred. As part of this analysis, REI team members wrote findings in a larger report, crafted several one-pagers describing the study for stakeholders at each affiliate, and presented findings to national and state office staff members who prepared affiliates for review.

ENCOURAGING USE IN A DIFFUSE NETWORK

One of the most pressing challenges that the REI team faced was to foster use of the study's findings. The CIS national network consists of the national office, several state offices, and nearly 200 local affiliates. All of these offices are their own separate 501(c)(3)s, with their own board, but they function as a larger network.

Fostering buy-in for both the accreditation process as well as the use of findings has been a consistent challenge for the CIS network. Many of our practitioners are so pressed for resources that they are legitimately concerned about taking time away from the mission of their organizations by preparing for accreditation and evaluation. Similarly, in a network that serves over 1.25 million children each year, there are only five full-time national office staff and a handful of people at state offices and local affiliates that work in research. Developing **capacity** to create internal evaluation materials, analyze data, and encourage evaluation use throughout the network has therefore been a challenge. Finally, as with many nonprofits, CIS was founded on a culture of positive energy, not necessarily a culture that based every action on proven research. In an organization with such a rich **history** of fostering relationships over evidence, moving towards the implementation and analysis of a standards-based model has proven difficult.

SOLUTIONS – MOVING FORWARD

Though there have been challenges in encouraging evaluation participation and use in the CIS network, the REI team at the CIS national office has found several tools to be useful during the past few years.

First off, the national office plays a unique role in that it is both the leader in the TQS accreditation process, the evaluator of local affiliates and state offices against TQS standards, and a frequent provider of funding to state and affiliate offices. The funding has served as an **incentive** for affiliates to participate in the accreditation process, including the interviews and data collection that are used for broader evaluation purposes. Similarly, as staff members from affiliates who have gone through the process begin to discuss the benefits of accreditation with their colleagues from unaccredited affiliates, the incentive to participate in the accreditation process increases. Emphasizing the benefits of accreditation and addressing issues discovered during the accreditation process has helped the national office to build momentum towards full network accreditation.

Though capacity is frequently an issue in

nonprofit organizations, the CIS national office has increased capacity to analyze and evaluate data by hiring graduate-school interns through a federal work study program. While the interns are able to experience working in a professional evaluation environment, the CIS national office gains valuable assistance in analyzing and reporting data in a timely manner. Additionally, the CIS national office has frequently requested assistance from **workgroups** across the network, which are composed of people who have a vested interest in quality evaluation work. For example, the REI team has asked the people who prepare the affiliates for their accreditation reviews to assist in forming appropriate interview questions. This not only increases the capacity of the evaluation team, it also allows individuals not directly involved in the evaluation and analysis to feel more buy-in to the evaluative process.

Similarly, the REI team has increasingly used **Yammer**, a social media platform designed specifically for the thousands of individuals employed by CIS offices across the country. The team has used Yammer to promote not only internal evaluation work, but research and evaluation as a broader concept. REI team members have created Yammer subgroups that focus on different topics related to data collection and evaluation, so that individuals with common interests can post to these subgroups and receive relevant updates. When an individual from an affiliate posts a wants to know about a broader topic, members of the REI team are able to perform queries of the accreditation review data using **NVivo** software. For example, an affiliate recently asked which affiliates are using pregnancy prevention programs, REI team members were able to conduct a query in NVivo and demonstrated the utility of data collection in real time.

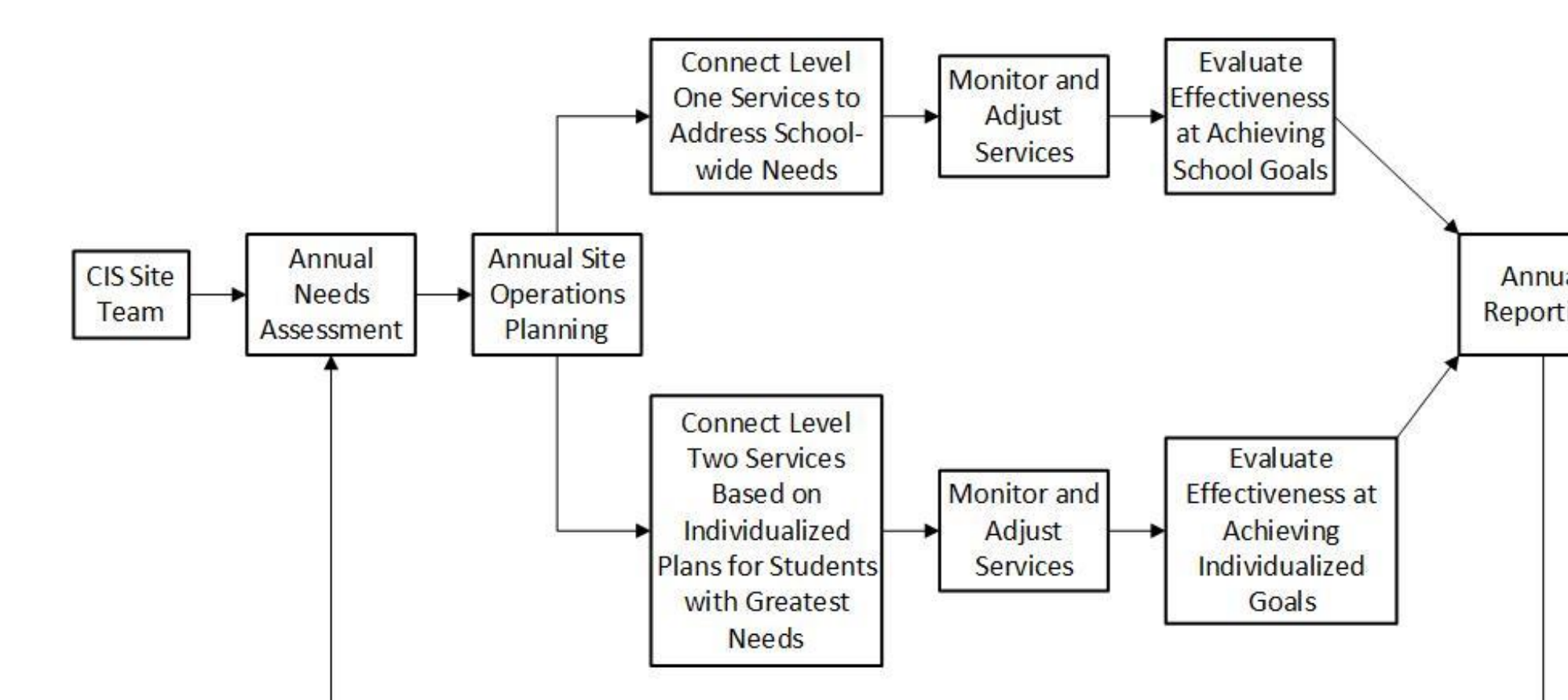
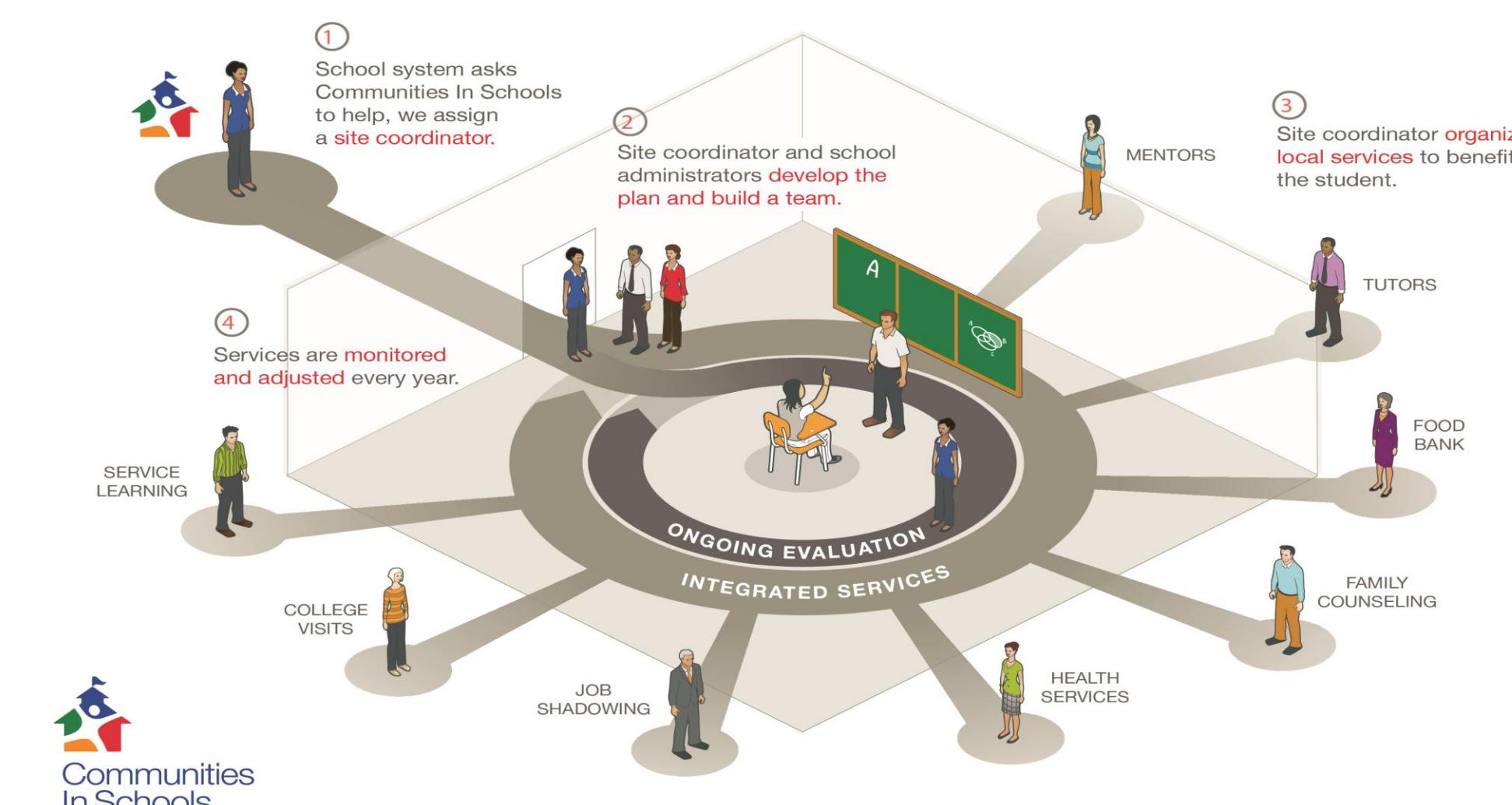
When possible, REI team members **foster peer-to-peer learning** by convening groups to discuss evaluation results. This can be as simple as scheduling regular meetings with other departments within the national office to discuss preliminary findings, or as complex as organizing larger events with stakeholders from across the United States to discuss the broader impact of evaluation results. It is during these meetings that evaluators at the national office embrace their multifaceted roles as educators, consultants, advocates, and supporters of organizational learning (Volkov, 2011). REI team members are constantly challenging the idea that evaluation is punitive by seeking input and participation through all steps of the evaluation process. REI team members ask local practitioners, whose ideas contributed to interview data, to present their stories via webinar to the CIS network. These stories demonstrate the findings of the evaluation and research process and make the material more approachable for a broader audience.

Works Cited

Volkov, B. B. (2011). Beyond Being an Evaluator: The Multiplicity of Roles of the Internal Evaluator. (B. B. Volkov, & M. E. Baron, Eds.) *Internal evaluation in the 21st century. New Directions for Evaluation*, 132, 25-42.

The CIS Models of Integrated Student Services

Creating a Community of Support



Challenge	Solution
Dynamic nonprofit environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use software to ease analysis Create accessible toolkits and one-pagers to display results
Little buy-in for evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create incentives Highlight achievements of early adopters
Limited capacity to conduct evaluations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use interns Seek the input of workgroups
History of not traditionally using data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster peer-to-peer learning opportunities Encourage evaluation participants to lead webinars

CONCLUSION

Though the REI team is continuously looking to improve evaluation use throughout the CIS network, challenges experienced during the past several years have given evaluators at the CIS national office the opportunity to grow with the CIS national network. By creating incentives, utilizing appropriate tools, and fostering opportunities for mutual learning and growth, the REI team has made major strides in fostering organizational learning in the complicated environment of a networked nonprofit.