Caitlin Howley Discusses Evaluating Technical Assistance

Early in January we interviewed Caitlin Howley, Director of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center, about what we can learn from evaluation of technical assistance. Here are excerpts from that interview.

Interviewer: Today, we are speaking with Caitlin Howley, director of the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center and our topic is evaluation of technical assistance. Why is it worthwhile for us to evaluate the technical assistance that we provide to our clients?

Caitlin Howley: I think that's a great question to ask because a lot of times folks feel as though their budgets are already constrained and why would they devote additional resources to evaluation. So I think it is a really pertinent question generally, but in particular for clients as well who are pondering whether or not to engage an evaluator.

I think there are three major reasons for conducting evaluation of technical assistance. The first has to do with improvement—to learn better how to do what it is that we do. So development and formative evaluation really help us understand how we could improve our services and the processes and tools that we use to assist clients.

The second big reason for evaluating technical assistance is to document/investigate whether our assistance is actually helping clients—asking questions about whether we're helping them achieve what it is they want to achieve, whether they're gaining the knowledge/skills/capacities that they require to do their work or achieve their goals.

And a third reason to conduct evaluation of technical assistance is to contribute to what is really a very scant empirical literature on technical assistance. The federal government depends on technical assistance as a key venue for supporting school reform and school improvement and a lot of different kinds of support services fall under the aegis of technical assistance, but there is very little careful documentation of what goes on during technical assistance and relatively little guidance, therefore, about how to move through the process of providing services that really help clients achieve what they need to achieve.

Interviewer: The second purpose you mentioned—documenting, investigating, helping clients achieve what they want—one of the challenges is that clients are going to be after all kinds of different goals for what they hope to achieve through technical assistance?

Caitlin Howley: That's absolutely true and one of the arts that technical assistance providers bring to each engagement with a client is their ability to help clients focus in on something that is clearer, more achievable, more closely tied to their overall goals. You know, in some ways beginning a project, a technical assistance project, is the most important phase of that technical assistance project because that's where the boundaries are defined, that's where the scope is defined, that's where the shared values and norms are defined for the work that we do together with clients. It's a critical piece of the process and that's where rapport gets built as well, so that you can talk honestly and critically about the issues at hand. …

Interviewer: Are there examples of approaches to evaluation of technical assistance that you'd want to point to?

Caitlin Howley: The center I direct, the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center [ARCC], its mission is to provide technical assistance that builds the capacity of state education agencies to undertake a wide array of programming—school improvement, and support for teachers, and college- and career-readiness standards, etc. And one of the things that is happening in the ARCC in terms of evaluation is that we have traditionally developed some measures of specific state department of education capacities, whether they were human capacities (like knowledge and skill), organizational and structural (having to do with relationships among units and also policies and procedures, those sorts of things that exist regardless of the specific people who are in place to implement them), and we're now thinking more about political capacity (the ability of state departments of education to form coalitions with stakeholders, to advocate for particular policies or programs that they think are important to education and their states). That's traditionally what we've done via data collection methods like surveys and phone interviews. And we're moving now more towards also documenting policy, program, and practice outcomes that result from client actions that were in turn supported by ARCC technical assistance. So it's more about following the through-line. Here is what the state department of education said it needed to achieve, here is how the ARCC helped, then the state department of education did X with a result of Y. So in some ways it's a mash-up of measuring capacities as best as we can and then telling the story in a way that a case study might. And in fact, we for several years did case studies. There were some challenges there partly because it is difficult to tell a story that takes place over five years. It's also difficult to tell a story when the technical assistance must shift as client priorities change or new leadership emerges, etc. But I think there is a lot of value in an evaluation of technical assistance, telling the story of that through-line from technical assistance engagements all the way through to more diffuse impacts in the department and out in the state.

Interviewer: What you're saying does help me see your choices about what data to collect are critical in terms of trying to produce an evaluation that actually does provide you and the client with some worthwhile understanding of what has gone on.

Caitlin Howley: Yes, and it's also important then to, early on, find in collaboration with the client what the goals are. What is the purpose of this technical assistance project and what would it be most meaningful to try to document or measure during this evaluation?

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