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Good reasons for ignoring good evaluation: The case of the drug abuse resistance education (D.A.R.E.) program

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Abstract

D.A.R.E. is the most popular school-based drug abuse prevention program in the U.S., but evaluations have found that positive effects on students' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (often observed right after the program) fade away over time. By late adolescence students exposed and not exposed to the program are indistinguishable.

Some school districts ignore the evidence and continue to offer D.A.R.E. In our study of 16 school districts, we found two persuasive reasons: (1) Evaluations generally measure drug use as the main outcome, but school officials are skeptical that any low-input short-term program like D.A.R.E. can change adolescents' drug-taking behavior. (2) Evaluations often do not often report relationships between cops and kids. Improvement in these relationships is a main reason for many districts' continued implementation of D.A.R.E. Districts also mention other understandable although more problematic rationales for keeping D.A.R.E.

Keywords: Evaluation impact; Knowledge utilization; Prevention; Substance abuse; Education; D.A.R.E.

1. Introduction

When evaluations are conducted according to scientific canons, evaluators assume that people should pay attention (e.g. House, 1980; Patton, 1997; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Rossi & Freeman, 1993). When decision makers do not listen to the evidence provided by good evaluations of programs, evaluators assume that they are deficient in something. Perhaps the fault is lack of attention: they did not hear the results. Perhaps the fault is lack of understanding: they did not grasp the message. Or most likely, the fault is purposeful avoidance: an over commitment to their program coupled with unwillingness to hear contrary news (Cohen, 1979; House, 1993; Lindblom, 1990; Lindblom & Majone, 1988; Reimers & McGinn, 1997). When policy makers do the exact opposite of what the evaluation suggests, such as cling to a program that evaluation has repeatedly found wanting, their sins appear magnified. Yet it is possible that under some circumstances, they have good reasons for doing so.

The counter-intuitive message of this paper is that there may be cases when ignoring evaluation evidence makes sense. This unexpected conclusion emerged from a study of the influence of evaluations of the D.A.R.E. program on school district decisions about which drug abuse prevention program to run in their schools. This study, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, centered on districts' responses to evaluation findings and the competing influence of other factors on their decisions.

By all accounts, D.A.R.E. is the most popular school-based substance abuse prevention program in the United States. Statistics provided by D.A.R.E. America show the program, developed in 1983 by the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles Unified School District, was being used by more than 80% of school districts in America by 2001.[1] In 2001, George W. Bush became the third sitting President to issue a Proclamation for a National Day for D.A.R.E., and 2003 was the 13th consecutive year such a proclamation was signed.[2]

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[1] D.A.R.E. is also now used by at least one school district in over 40 other nations (D.A.R.E. America website at www.dare-america.org).

[2] D.A.R.E. is also recognized in the popular culture; for example, the football movie 'Any Given Sunday' had a scene showing the team owner giving a check for $200,000 to the local D.A.R.E. program.

However, ask anyone you meet on the street what he or she knows about D.A.R.E. and they will likely tell you that it does not work. Evaluation evidence, showing that D.A.R.E. is not effective in preventing adolescent drug use, has been widely covered in the news media and popular press. The D.A.R.E. program has been evaluated many times across a variety of contexts. Evaluations have included a number of long-term randomized experiments with large samples and long follow-up periods. These studies report consistent findings: no statistically significant effect for D.A.R.E. on self-reported drug use.

In 2000 we began the Study on Decisions in Education: The Case of D.A.R.E. We wanted to find out what influenced the decisions that school districts made about drug abuse prevention and specifically about whether or not to implement the D.A.R.E. program. What role did evaluation evidence play? We found that the evaluation evidence, through a variety of channels, did influence decision making about the D.A.R.E. program in the majority of districts we studied. However, a handful of districts were dismissive and wary of evaluation evidence. Despite the bad press D.A.R.E. received, they were determined to continue the program. In this paper we discuss their reasons.

We found that individuals in these districts were dismissive of evaluation evidence for several reasons. First, they had never expected D.A.R.E. alone to prevent adolescent drug use; therefore the news that it did not was no surprise. Second, they believed that evaluators 'missed the boat,' focusing their studies on the wrong outcome measures. The most valuable outcome of D.A.R.E., according to these respondents, is the relationships it fosters among police, families and schools. Yet most evaluation studies neglect that outcome. Finally, decision makers valued their personal experience with the program as more convincing than scientific evidence. They believed that their program was unique and their D.A.R.E. officer exceptional. Some of this might sound like ex post-rationalization; nevertheless, several important lessons for evaluators can be drawn from the case of D.A.R.E.

2. Background and research context

2.1. The D.A.R.E. program and evaluation evidence

D.A.R.E. was developed in Los Angeles in 1983 to bring police officers into elementary school classrooms (usually 5th or 6th grade) for about an hour a week for one semester. The officers provide information about drugs and the consequences of their use, and they teach means for resisting peer pressure to use drugs, concepts of self-confidence, and decision making skills. D.A.R.E. was embraced by school districts around the country. When we began the study, most school districts were implementing the D.A.R.E. program in one form or another, and most still do. Although no reliable data exist on numbers of districts, D.A.R.E. America reports that 70–80% of school districts run the program.[3]

However, a growing body of evaluative evidence has shown that the D.A.R.E. program is ineffective in preventing drug use among adolescents. In the early 1990s, the National Institute of Justice funded an influential meta-analysis of recent, rigorous evaluations (Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 1994). The researchers found minimal effects for D.A.R.E. in preventing adolescent drug use (Ennett et al., 1994). The authors concluded, 'D.A.R.E.'s limited influence on adolescent drug use behavior contrasts with the program's popularity and prevalence' (Ennett et al., 1994: 1399).

Subsequent studies reported similar findings: although several studies showed positive effects on knowledge and attitudes, they did not show statistically significant effects for D.A.R.E. on self-reported drug use. Such was the case with the randomized experiments conducted in Illinois (Rosenbaum, Gordon, & Hanson, 1998), Colorado (Dukes, Stein, & Ullman, 1997) and Kentucky (Clayton, Cattarello, Anne, & Bryan, 1996). In the latter three cases, the evaluations were conducted by well-known investigators with considerable experience conducting evaluations of drug prevention programs. Another well-known investigator, Denise Gottfredson, conducted a comprehensive review of school-based programs designed to reduce delinquency or drug use. She concludes, 'Evaluations show that as it is most commonly implemented, D.A.R.E. does not reduce substance abuse appreciably' (1997:16).

The evidence that students exposed to D.A.R.E. fared no better than students without D.A.R.E. was widely disseminated. Interviews with evaluators aired on the CBS and ABC nightly news. Study results appeared in scores of national and local newspapers including the New York Times and the Boston Globe, and in weekly periodicals such as The Chronicle of Higher Education and US News and World Report. The dissemination was so widespread that by 2000, even people without any connection to education or health care, without children in the schools, knew the gist of the evaluation findings. D.A.R.E. America claimed that the majority of school districts continued to use their program, despite the negative evaluation results.

This apparent contradiction seemed a strategic opportunity for understanding the considerations driving school decision making. If decision makers were not attending to good evidence, what was going on? Why were school districts seemingly unreceptive to the increasingly clear evidence that students exposed to D.A.R.E. in the 5th or 6th grades were no more likely than other students to stay clear of drugs as teenagers?

[3] Cited on D.A.R.E. America website at www.dare-america.org.