

## **The goal of safe, drug free schools gets caught in a measurement trap**

“We’re going to eliminate the programs that don’t work.”

How many times have you heard politicians utter that Utopian promise?

There’s even a White House web site that purports to list the programs that don’t work. It’s called ExpectMore.gov. It should be ExpectToBeConfused.gov.

How do you determine the effectiveness, for example, of a \$295 million federal program that is distributed to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the six territories? And then passed along to 16,000 school districts.

Until now, the Office of Management and Budget has used the Program Assessment Rating Tool, called PART, to attempt this Rubik’s Cube of measurement. Once a program has been PARTed (actual Washington parlance), it is assigned an assessment.

If you think the assessment is a binary “works/doesn’t work” scale you probably have spent little time in a federal bureaucracy.

PARTing, the intransitive verb form of to PART, starts off simple enough: programs are either “performing” or “not performing.” Then it gets tricky.

Performing programs can be further rated either “effective,” “moderately effective,” or “adequate.”

Not performing programs can be “ineffective” or “results not demonstrated.”

According to OMB, “A rating of Results Not Demonstrated (RND) indicates that a program has not been able to develop acceptable performance goals or collect data to determine whether it is performing.”

The dilemma is this: If something is adequate is it worth keeping?

“How’s that heart surgeon of yours?”

“Oh, he’s adequate.”

Hmmm.

On the other hand, if results have not been demonstrated the program might be adequate, moderately effective, or even effective.

Applying some real world experience to PARTing, let's say your local fire department gets PARTed. And let's say the PART assessment comes back Results Not Demonstrated.

Do you eliminate the fire department because the firemen spent time saving your house instead of developing acceptable performance goals?

As might be suspected, the \$295 million federal program mentioned at the beginning of this discourse is a real federal program that's on the chopping block.

It's called the State Grants portion of the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act. The program's mission is essential, like the fire department, or the heart surgeon.

Safe and Drug Free Schools ensures that almost every school district in America has someone who is responsible for students being safe from bullies, gangs and shooters and being aware of the consequences of illegal drug use. It serves 37 million students.

However, the PART system assigned the Safe and Drug Free Schools program the ambiguous Results Not Demonstrated assessment.

Never mind that PART gave 47% of all programs at the U.S. Department of Education the same assessment. Somehow the Safe and Drug Free Schools program was targeted for elimination while many other programs were not.

Congress is now considering its fate. Groups like the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of American are flooding Capitol Hill with letters demanding the program be saved.

They may have an ally in OMB Director Peter Orszag who recently announced, "I have said before, and I'll say again, I think the PART system was well-intentioned, but was flawed both in terms of implementation and in terms of design."

In other words, the Obama administration just PARTed PART, and it flunked.

In the meantime, the possibility lingers that a program as critical as Safe and Drug Free Schools will get the boot, the victim of an ill-conceived PARTing.

Apparently what doesn't work is figuring out what doesn't work.

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Tell Congress to save the Safe and Drug Free Schools program:  
<http://capwiz.com/cadca/issues/alert/?alertid=13325421&type=CO>