**Evaluation: Some Definitions of Terms**

**assessment:** An ongoing activity of measuring progress. Often the term is used in the context of education to mean gauging what someone has learned. Tests are a common form of assessment but other forms of measurement — such as notes from observations, and the quality of student papers and presentations as demonstrations of learning — are valid and appropriate.

**evaluation:** A process for gauging the quality, effectiveness, or results of a project or program. The term is often used interchangeably with *assessment,* but they are not the same. An evaluation should be rigorous and systemic. It may be based on an analysis of multiple assessments. If you think of these terms in the context of grade school, an assessment might be a weekly spelling test and an evaluation would be an analysis of a student’s strengths, weaknesses, patterns, and progress as a speller.

**formative evaluation:** A formative evaluation looks at a project’s policies and procedures, questioning whether that project is running smoothly and efficiently. Its audience often is intended to be an agency’s staff; a formative evaluation helps them improve their practices. Often a formative evaluation is enacted in the early stages of a program, testing and refining how the work is to be done.

**summative evaluation:** As is suggested by the word *sum,* a summative evaluation often is based on the collection and analysis of data and always focuses on the ultimate outcome or results of a project. Its meaning is similar to *impact evaluation.*

**impact evaluation:** An impact evaluation — sometimes called a summative or outcomes evaluation — asks not just what your project accomplished and whether it ran smoothly, but whether it affected change. It asks who was served and whether the work had value. If we were to look at the example of the student speller, an impact evaluation might analyze the advancing difficulty of words mastered and/or progress in the student’s writing and reading abilities. Did the student’s comprehension improve? If spelling ability is tested in classroom spelling bees, such an evaluation might also look at changes in a student’s public speaking ability and confidence.

**context evaluation:** A context evaluation takes place during the preliminary stages of a project and seeks to measure how well the project’s design suits the setting in which it will take place. The acronym *CIPP* sometimes is used for this kind of evaluation; it stands for *context, impact, process,* and *product.* Why spend time on such a complex inquiry before a project is fully launched? The point is to thoughtfully consider alternative approaches before it fully underway — potentially saving time and resources that might be wasted on an unsuccessful approach.

**antecedent evaluation:** An antecedent evaluation asks what factors in the environment affect the project’s implementation and results. For example, what if a large number of students transfer into the school where the project is taking place — changing the ratio of teachers to students in the classroom being studied? That contextual change might slow the student’s progress and self-confidence.