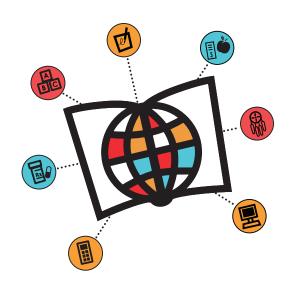# Family Literacy Standards

Saskatchewan
Literacy Network

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Background

What is Family Literacy?

In 1983, Denny Taylor explored the social context of the home as a key factor in the literacy development of young children. She coined the term 'family literacy'.

"No single narrow definition of family literacy can do justice to the richness and complexity of families, and the multiple literacies, including often unrecognized local literacies, that are part of their everyday lives" (Taylor, 1997, p. 4).

Today, family literacy encompasses much more than just encouraging parents or caregivers to strengthen children's reading skills. Programs involve "parents, children, and extended family members and the ways in which they support and use literacy in their homes and in their communities" (Thomas, Shively, & Wilson, 2009, p. 8). Every family applies literacy practices even if adults do not use print often. In each of the following examples, we see family members involved in everyday activities that directly enhance literacy and essential skills:

- A small business owner teaching his niece to use accounting software.
- A grandmother telling stories to her grandchildren.
- An older brother pointing out street signs to a younger sibling.
- A daughter translating for parents who do not speak English.
- A neighbour helping a new mother by singing lullabies to the baby.
- A grandson helping his grandfather conduct research on the Internet.

The shared social experience between adults and children in family literacy programs means that the focus of literacy learning is not just on the child. Ideally, family literacy programs seek to improve the literacy of both parent or caregiver and child.

Who Benefits from Family Literacy Programs? The Supporting Research

Adults Benefit

Effective family literacy programs give adults opportunities to improve the skills they use at home, at work and in the community. A study of the Learning Together program in Edmonton, Alberta showed that parents used a variety of literacy activities in the home after the program ended. Parents also felt more engaged in and responsive to their children's literacy development. Seventy-five percent of parents who attended the program requested additional programs to support their children's success at school (Phillips, Hayden, & Norris, 2006, p. 124-125).

Research indicates that family literacy programs also strengthen essential skills, those skills needed for success in the workforce. According to the Northwest Territories Literacy Council, program participation may result in:

- greater independence,
- increased self-respect,
- effective problem solving and communication,
- better overall health and well-being,
- higher learning and earning potential,
- an increased ability to use technology,
- and capacity to adapt to change. (n.d., p. 1)

Children Benefit

Family literacy allows parents, caregivers and children to develop skills together and build nurturing, positive relationships. It also supports healthy brain development. As the Early Years Study 3 by McCain, Mustard and McCuaig states:

> Children begin life ready for relationships that drive early brain development. An infant is primed to be interested in faces and initiate non-verbal communication with others. Primary caregivers mediate experiences that encourage the baby's brain to become highly attuned to the quality of those early experiences. The ability of children to regulate their own emotions, behaviours and attention increases over time with maturation, experience and responsive relationships. (2011, p. 36)

Children's literacy development begins at home. There is a strong link between experiences in the home and later literacy achievement. Another recognizable link is a direct correlation between the parents' education and their children's school readiness (Phillips et al., 2006, p. 123-124).

Family literacy programs offer strategies to support home-based literacy growth. The Learning Together program continued to have a positive influence in follow-up years, particularly for those children who scored lowest in emergent literacy pretests (Phillips et al., 2006, p. 123-124).

Communities Benefit

Communities feel many positive impacts from family literacy programs. Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (2012) states that engaged and educated citizens are better prepared to:

- practice healthy lifestyles,
- improve economic security,
- actively contribute to their communities, and
- build success from one generation to the next (Citizenship & Families Fact Sheets).

Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (2012) also states that, "Every dollar spent on family and intergenerational literacy programs does 'double duty' supporting both early childhood development and adult basic education" (Families Fact Sheet).

Why Use Family Literacy Standards?

Family literacy standards are the base for program consistency, credibility, and professionalism. The original Saskatchewan Family Literacy Standards document was developed and refined over a two-year period. The resulting standards encouraged critical reflection. Building on that good work, the assessment tool included in this document will help you to develop, improve and sustain quality family literacy programs.

Family literacy programs have a range of organizational capacities. Some agencies have one staff while others have numerous staff and a long history of providing service. Some programs operate in partnership with health, education, or libraries, while others stand alone.

Focus on those standards which are relevant and realistic for your own organizational needs. Some standards may be of more interest to a program facilitator, while others may be more relevant to program administrators.

Although organizations are as diverse as the communities they serve, the Family Literacy Standards are rooted in our collective understanding of what it means to be effective in family literacy practice.

Family Literacy Standards

1. Philosophy

Your program's family literacy philosophy is the basis for decision-making. Quality programs respond to community literacy needs using a strengths-based approach where each community and individual's experience, knowledge and skills strengthens the capacity of the program. Literacy practitioners honour this expertise by integrating it in program development, administration and delivery.

"Efforts to identify reality should focus on individuals and communities and the unique approaches they take to construct a worldview" (Armstrong, 2003, p.111).

2. Community Partnerships and Collaboration

Work together with local, provincial and national organizations to establish referrals, and share resources and program content. Engage your connections through all program stages: needs assessment, program development, participant and staff support. Regularly renew your relationships in order to sustain and exchange relevant support.

3. Funding

Ensure that you have adequate project funding in place through all phases of programming: development, delivery and evaluation.

4. Staffing and Volunteers

Recruit qualified, well-trained volunteers and staff. Training and professional development is a priority.

5. Safety and Liability

Provide a safe environment for families, staff and volunteers to work and learn. Ensure you have appropriate insurance to protect individuals and organizations from the risk that they may be held legally responsible for injury or negligence.

6. Program Content and Materials

Respond to the literacy needs, interests and goals of your participants. Carefully choose content and activities which are age and gender appropriate, and which are culturally sensitive. Understand and apply current theories about family literacy.

7. Participant Recruitment and Support

Be highly visible in your community. Use personal contact as an effective way of recruiting participants. Your program will attract learners by providing support and referring families to community services that best meet their needs.

8. Access

The location of your program should be safe, accessible, and welcoming. If you can, provide childcare or transportation for participants who may find it challenging to attend your programs otherwise. You may also want to stagger your programs at different times of the day to accommodate your participants' various schedules.

9. Program Facilitation

Foster skills appropriate for the literacy development of both children and adults. Your programs should be learner-centred, recognizing that participants are the experts in their own lives, families and culture. Effective program facilitators work hard to promote diversity, where everyone's expertise and experience is honoured.

10. Learner Assessment

Use a variety of flexible, learner-centred methods to assess progress. When participants enter the program, help them to identify their skills, areas of interest and the personal goals they wish to complete. Monitor progress towards goals and assess learning outcomes after learners complete the program.

11. Program Evaluation

Continually evaluate how well your program is meeting its goals. This information directs future planning and keeps you accountable. Be sure to choose evaluation processes that match the capacity of your organization and the community you serve.

Family Literacy Standards Checklist

Introduction

This support tool will help you plan, develop, assess, and improve your programs. Each person and program will use these standards differently. Ideally, all stakeholders will participate in completing the checklists. Stakeholders could include board members, program planners, funders, facilitators, learner representatives, community members, etc. This sharing of perspectives can:

- raise awareness of effective literacy practices needed for quality programs.
- guide program development.
- serve as a framework for grant writing.
- support practitioners.
- train or orient new staff.
- provide an accountability framework that identifies strengths and areas for further improvement.
- become a reflective exercise as part of regular professional development.

Most of the 11 standards have an administration or programming focus, with some overlap between the two sections. However, why we make program decisions directs both administrators and practitioners alike. For this reason, discuss the first standard Philosophy, before all other standards.

Completing the Checklist

In this guide, each standard concludes with a For Reflection box. Regular reflection will help you think carefully about how the family literacy standards apply to your program. You may want to complete the checklists in the following way:

1. Read and discuss each of the standards with colleagues, if practical.
2. Examine key elements that support each standard.
3. Check the boxes that best describe your program.
4. Discuss For **Reflection** for each standard.
5. Create an action plan based on your results. Your plan may include:
   a. discussing one standard per staff meeting as a regular strategy to review, plan and document progress.
   b. developing a community working group to review family literacy practices in your area.
   c. sharing the standards document with your board as a tool for strategic planning.

You may choose to address as many standards as you like within your timelines. Remember to celebrate your progress and be realistic given your unique situation.

1. Philosophy

Your program's family literacy philosophy is the basis for decision-making. Quality programs respond to community literacy needs using a strengths-based approach where each community and individual's experience, knowledge and skills strengthens the capacity of the program. Literacy practitioners honour this expertise by integrating it in program development, administration and delivery.

"Efforts to identify reality should focus on individuals and communities and the unique approaches they take to construct a worldview" (Armstrong, 2003, p.111).

	yes	no	n/a
You communicate your program's vision and mission statement to all stakeholders (participants, funders, staff, community)	○	○	○
Your program goals connect directly to your vision and mission.	○	○	○
You regularly review your program vision to ensure that it accurately reflects participant and community goals	○	○	○
You use strengths-based language in all aspects of your program. For example, one strengths-based message is, "Communities know best how to serve their needs".	○	○	○
You validate the diversity of families	○	○	○

Considering the following factors when planning programs:

- Gender (Do your activities have a balance of perspectives and avoid stereotypes?)

- Family background, language, and values (Do you seek to understand and acknowledge the values and customs of each family? Do you honour the words that families use to describe themselves?)

- Culture (Do you encourage program participants to use or learn their family's first language?)

- Regional background (rural/remote, urban)

- Learning styles

- Disabilities

- Personality styles

- School experiences (Are you sensitive to participants' perspectives and attitudes about learning?)
- Familiarity with print and literacy levels (Do you use clear language in written and spoken communication?)

For Reflection…

Will the preceding checklist results lead you to change, uphold, or create a new philosophy for your program or agency?

Share some specific examples of how your program applies a strength-based approach.

Administration

2. Community Partnership and Collaboration

Work together with local, provincial and national organizations to establish referrals, and share resources and program content. Engage your connections through all program stages: needs assessment, program development, participant and staff support. Regularly renew your relationships in order to sustain and exchange relevant support.

	yes	no	n/a
Your program reflects the needs of your community:..................	◯	◯	◯

- You identify community needs by consulting community groups.
- You use asset-mapping tools to identify community needs.

	yes	no	n/a
You use the skills and expertise of community members or groups in the planning, delivery and evaluation of programming. For example, you consult with elders, cultural organizations, social service agencies, employers, educators, etc.	◯	◯	◯
You make and receive referrals and are linked to other literacy organizations through regular networking and memberships	◯	◯	◯
You have strong and effective relationships established with other community organizations and agencies:.......................	◯	◯	◯

- You collaborate in joint planning of events and projects.
- You have formal and informal partnership agreements that outline roles and responsibilities.
- You regularly share information with other organizations to avoid duplication of services.
- You have reporting procedures in place and follow through with them.
- You acknowledge your partners and show your appreciation for them.

For Reflection…

What does accountability mean to you in the work that you do with partners?

Are you sharing what you do well?

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3. Funding

Ensure that you have adequate project funding in place through all phases of programming: development, delivery and evaluation.

	yes	no	n/a
You have an up-to-date list of local, provincial, and national funding sources. (Refer to Saskatchewan Literacy Network website for funding sources document)	◯	◯	◯
Your funding sources complement and support your vision and mission	◯	◯	◯
You complete funding applications accurately and submit them in a timely manner	◯	◯	◯
You cost-share with other community agencies to make the best use of available resources through in-kind or other contributions	◯	◯	◯
You have detailed budgets that cover all aspects of your programs	◯	◯	◯

Consider:

- Research and needs assessment
- Program development, delivery, and evaluation
- Human resources (including recruitment, training, and ongoing support)
- Facilities, materials, and other resources (such as technology tools, childcare, transportation, etc)

	yes	no	n/a
You regularly assess and update your budget	◯	◯	◯
You network with other literacy organizations and government to discuss the challenges of sustainable funding	◯	◯	◯
You explore innovative ways to obtain and share funding information, such as using social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter	◯	◯	◯

For Reflection…

Are there local, provincial or national funding partnerships you have not yet explored?

What long-term funding strategy is possible for your organization within the next five years?

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4. Staffing and Volunteers

Recruit qualified, well-trained volunteers and staff. Training and professional development is a priority.

yes no n/a

Recruitment and Screening

You have job descriptions for all program staff, including
volunteers, paid staff and board members, if applicable . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

You recruit staff and volunteers from the community, including
former program participants as appropriate. . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

Your staff and volunteers have a combination of skills, knowledge
and attitudes required for working with both adults and children:. . . . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯
   • They know and use adult learning principles.
   • They understand child developmental and emergent
     literacy stages.
   • They recognize parents and caregivers as a first and most
     important teacher of their children.
   • They understand the factors that affect learning for both
     adults and children.
   • They know the Saskatchewan Literacy Benchmarks
     and Essential Skills and can integrate them within
     program content.

Your staff and volunteers have strong program planning and
administrative skills: . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯
   • They consider teaching and learning styles when planning.
   • They create and use authentic materials and resources.
   • They critically reflect on their own practices.
   • They communicate effectively orally and in writing.
   • They meet deadlines.
   • They stay within budget guidelines.

Your pay is competitive and fair . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

Training and Support

You provide training and experience in family literacy practice. Your staff and volunteers participate in the Introduction to Family Literacy Certificate course as a pre-requisite for entering the field ...... ○ ○ ○

You provide networking and professional development opportunities to your staff and volunteers as budgets permit .... ○ ○ ○

You encourage staff and volunteers to keep up-to-date professionally through a variety of means, such as access to online journals, research publications, Twitter, Facebook, etc. .... ○ ○ ○

You provide staff and volunteers with the support and materials necessary to excel in their positions. .... ○ ○ ○

Communication and Feedback

You provide constructive, ongoing evaluation to staff and volunteers on a regular basis .... ○ ○ ○

You recognize staff and volunteer contributions in appropriate and meaningful ways .... ○ ○ ○

For Reflection…

What are some significant challenges in staffing family literacy programs?

What can you do to overcome these challenges within your own organization?

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5. Safety and Liability

Provide a safe environment for families, staff and volunteers to work and learn. Ensure you have appropriate insurance to protect individuals and organizations from the risk that they may be held legally responsible for injury or negligence.

	yes	no	n/a
You have a thorough screening process to ensure staff and volunteers are suitable for the work they will be doing. You follow up-to-date procedures for working with vulnerable populations and for criminal records checks.	○	○	○
You follow the appropriate Occupational Health and Safety regulations	○	○	○
Your insurance covers off-site programs	○	○	○
You have a confidentiality policy in place and do not release personal details of participants	○	○	○
Your participants and staff are aware of and follow your confidentiality policy	○	○	○
You follow emergency procedures by keeping fire exits clear and respecting room capacity limits.	○	○	○
The toys and equipment you use are suitable for the children in your programs	○	○	○
Your staff and volunteers have first aid certification	○	○	○
Your staff and volunteers have adequate insurance and equipment, like car seats, if transporting families	○	○	○
You review your liability procedures before confirming your program location.	○	○	○

For Reflection…

Do you have any liability concerns considering the safety of families or protecting your organization?

What action can you take to address these concerns?

Program Planning

6. Program Content and Materials

Respond to the literacy needs, interests and goals of your participants. Carefully choose content and activities which are age and gender appropriate, and which are culturally sensitive. Understand and apply current theories about family literacy.

	yes	no	n/a
Your program involves all components of family literacy: child learning, adult learning, intergenerational learning, and strengthening parenting skills	◯	◯	◯

- Do your activities encourage parents and caregivers to interact with children?

- Do you provide opportunities for participants to talk to each other and develop support networks?

- Do you provide families with current information based on their interests, such as stages of child development, parenting, health, or nutrition?

Your materials and activities reflect the areas of interest of your families	◯	◯	◯

- Can your activities be modified to suit unique groups by inviting input from the participants?

- Are your program plans flexible?

- Are your topics and materials current?

- Are your materials age and gender appropriate?

Your materials accommodate various literacy levels	◯	◯	◯

- Do you incorporate Saskatchewan Literacy Benchmarks and Essential Skills within the adult component of your program? (See Saskatchewan Literacy Network for information and resources.)

- Do you use materials in clear language?

You use materials which accommodate various learning styles, such as print, audio, or video	◯	◯	◯

You conduct some learning activities outside the program location
in the context and culture of the community .... ◯ ◯ ◯

> **For Reflection...**
>
> How are you ensuring that your content is authentic, relevant and valid in meeting participant goals?
>
> In your experience, how have program themes and topics changed over time in your community and in the family literacy field?

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7. Participant Recruitment and Support

Be highly visible in your community. Use personal contact as an effective way of recruiting participants. Your program will attract learners by providing support and referring families to community services that best meet their needs.

	yes	no	n/a
You use previous families' and volunteers' positive experience in your program as part of your recruitment strategy	◯	◯	◯
You promote your program in a variety of ways in the community	◯	◯	◯

Consider:

- Personal contact
- Social media – Facebook and Twitter
- Websites and email
- Community organizations – school newsletters, churches, bingo hall, RCMP office, etc.
- Word of mouth
- Key contacts – Elders, social service workers, etc.

	yes	no	n/a
You have good relationships with referral agencies	◯	◯	◯
You personally contact participants to encourage them to attend and to offer support	◯	◯	◯
You actively recruit different cultures, genders, races, and special needs into your programs	◯	◯	◯
Your facilitators are familiar with local support services such as counseling, childcare, and medical offices and they know not to counsel families, but to refer them to these organizations.	◯	◯	◯
Your staff share support information with families as needed	◯	◯	◯
When you work with families, you are sensitive to their needs, such as schedules, emotional needs, competing priorities, etc.	◯	◯	◯

For Reflection…

What are some of the most successful recruitment methods in your community?

What are the most effective ways of recruiting people from the following perspectives: rural/remote, urban, low literacy learners, Aboriginal and Newcomers?

8. Access

The location of your program should be safe, accessible, and welcoming. If you can, provide childcare or transportation for participants who may find it challenging to attend your programs otherwise. You may also want to stagger your programs at different times of the day to accommodate your participants' various schedules.

<div align="right">

yes no n/a

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Location

Your programs are offered at times that are convenient for families. Consider naptimes, community sports and leisure schedules, work schedules of participants, community events, when choosing program times . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

You choose program locations to ensure the comfort of all families. For example, consider diverse learning or cultural needs and backgrounds when choosing a church or school space. . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

You have parking available at or near your location . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

Your location is accessible to people with physical disabilities . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

There is suitable transportation available: . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯
- You provide transportation to your program as appropriate, such as providing bus tickets or taxi slips.
- Your location is easy to get to by public transportation.

Your location is family friendly. . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯
For consideration:
- You have a baby change room.
- You have clearly marked washrooms.
- Your decorations are bright and welcoming.
- You have comfortable seating for adults and children.
- Your play area has developmentally appropriate equipment and toys.

Childcare

You provide free childcare . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

Your paid or volunteer childcare staff are qualified and trained
in family literacy . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

Other

You provide nutritious snacks that reflect the needs and cultures
of your families . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

For Reflection...

Other than what is mentioned above, how do you reduce challenges that might prevent families from attending programs?

What other challenges do families have in attending your programs that you have not addressed at this time?

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Program Delivery

9. Program Facilitation

Foster skills appropriate for the literacy development of both children and adults. Your programs should be learner-centred, recognizing that participants are the experts in their own lives, families and culture. Effective program facilitators work hard to promote diversity, where everyone's expertise and experience is honoured.

	yes	no	n/a
Staff is responsive and learner-centred in their approach	◯	◯	◯
Your staff know the difference between teaching and facilitating	◯	◯	◯
Your facilitators create trust:	◯	◯	◯

- They model respectful language.
- They create positive group dynamics.
- They build relationships with participants.

	yes	no	n/a
Your facilitators regularly reflect on their own practice:	◯	◯	◯

- They examine their attitudes and practices within the program.
- They analyze how the participants responded to the program.
- They improve things that need changing.
- They acknowledge and build on their own strengths.

	yes	no	n/a
Your staff communicate effectively:	◯	◯	◯

- They use clear language.
- They ask open-ended and broad questions appropriately.
- They give and receive effective feedback.
- They use appropriate conflict resolution techniques.

	yes	no	n/a
Your staff can motivate participants	◯	◯	◯

Your staff practices cultural competency: . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

- They encourage participants to share their cultural knowledge and skills.

- They include local culture and history in the program.

- They include traditional knowledge-keepers in programs, such as elders and artists, etc.

- They participate in cross-cultural training.

Your staff keep up-to-date records and complete reports on time . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

For Reflection...

What are the most important qualities for staff to possess when working with families?

How will you address some of the biggest challenges in facilitating family literacy programs?

Assessment and Evaluation

10. Learner Assessment

Use a variety of flexible, learner-centred methods to assess progress. When participants enter the program, help them to identify their skills, areas of interest and the personal goals they wish to complete. Monitor progress towards goals and assess learning outcomes after learners complete the program.

	yes	no	n/a
Initial Assessment			
Your assessment process focuses on participant goals.	◯	◯	◯
Your assessment process is realistic given your capacity and resources.	◯	◯	◯
You adapt assessment processes as needed to be more effective	◯	◯	◯
You identify the learning needs of your participants through an initial interview or registration procedure	◯	◯	◯
You involve participants in assessing their own needs	◯	◯	◯
Ongoing Assessment			
You use ongoing assessment to adapt your program in response to changing needs	◯	◯	◯
You keep assessment results confidential. You do not share participant information with other service agencies or community members without permission	◯	◯	◯
Final Assessment			
You use a variety of assessment methods, both traditional and non-traditional	◯	◯	◯
You build in enough time to collect feedback from participants, such as group brainstorm sessions or focus groups facilitated by non-biased outsiders	◯	◯	◯

Your assessment results show how specific examples of change are connected to desired outcomes . . . . ○ ○ ○

Some examples are:

- Increased involvement in community activities: "We joined the library as a result of attending this program."

- Improved relationship between home and school: "After discussing a problem with his son's teacher in our parent group, a father called the teacher and set up an appointment to discuss his concerns."

- Higher self-esteem: One parent reported, "I feel more confident asking questions at my bank now."

- More effective parenting practices: A journal entry from a parent stated, "My child is holding the scissors correctly today and her face lit up when I encouraged her!"

For Reflection...

In your experience, what assessment strategies are most valuable?

How might you change your assessment procedures to save time and still effectively assess participants in your program?

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11. Program Evaluation

Continually evaluate how well your program meets its goals. This information directs future planning and keeps you accountable. Be sure to choose evaluation processes that match the capacity of your organization and the community you serve.

	yes	no	n/a
You regularly and systematically evaluate your program	○	○	○
Your program is based on identified outcomes.	○	○	○
You consider literacy levels when collecting information:	○	○	○

    • You use clear language consistently on evaluation forms.

You only collect data that is relevant and related to program goals or specific funder or demographic requirements	○	○	○
You follow ethical guidelines when collecting information	○	○	○

    • You only collect necessary information.

You use a variety of evaluation tools, both traditional and non-traditional, qualitative and quantitative:	○	○	○

Evaluation tools include:

    • Questionnaires and surveys

    • Observation

    • Document review

    • Interviews – formal and informal

    • Focus group

    • Logs and journals

    • Surveys

    • Photos and videos

    • Tests

    • Testimonials

You analyze why goals and targets were not met, such as why people dropped out	○	○	○

Your reports clearly identify your outcomes, specific indicators, or target goals. Your report shows how well you met your intended outcomes. . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

You explain your evaluation terminology (such as outcomes, goals, outputs, inputs) to all stakeholders. . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

You use evaluation feedback to write recommendations for changes to future programs. . . . . ◯ ◯ ◯

For Reflection…

What is most important in evaluation?

How can you lessen the challenges of collecting evaluation data?

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