Sharing Research Findings with School Districts:
Precision, Partnership, and Politics

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Summary from DRK-12 Program

Highlights three best practices for communicating research to school district stakeholders: strategic report formats, mutual partnerships, and an emphasis on positive outcomes from programmatic interventions.

Full Description on Cadre Website

It is essential to disseminate the outcomes of educational interventions not only to the research community but also to participating learning organizations such as school districts. Stakeholders such as boards of education, administrators and teachers should be considered key targets for dissemination, and the presentation of findings should be useable by each of these groups in informing decision-making and guiding professional practice.

The presentation of project outcomes to school district stakeholders goes beyond the typical considerations and presentation formats used when sharing results at professional meetings or in professional journals. In this collaborative session, participants will share their best practices in communication with school districts focused around three themes: precision, partnership, and politics.

Precision: Communicating with a largely non-research audience requires presentation formats that are "light" on background literature and methodological details and "heavy" on succinct results and recommendations/implications for decision-making and professional practice. To illustrate this concept, examples used in large, urban school districts such as presentations during board of education meetings and research briefs will be shared and critiqued.

Partnership: Projects have the best chance of communicating effectively with stakeholders when presentations are part of an ongoing and hands-on collaboration between researchers and practitioners. In particular, it is important to develop interventions and presentations by soliciting input from stakeholders that values the expertise they bring to the table rather than taking a position that they are not research savvy and must be "taught" how to consider research findings or even worse how to engage in professional practice. Examples of university-urban school district partnerships will highlight both successes and failures in achieving this delicate balance in the context of curriculum interventions.

Politics: Of course it is ideal when implemented programs operate as intended and produce documented, positive outcomes for teachers and students. It is far more common, however, for program implementation to be flawed and outcomes on teachers and students minimal (or even negative). In communicating such findings, care must be taken to minimize blame or to dismiss the intervention as ineffective. Rather, presentations should emphasize what worked and focus on recommendations that can improve outcomes in future efforts. Curriculum interventions with negative effects on student learning in the first year provide examples of how to find the silver lining in what might seem on the surface to be a failed effort.

In sum, the effective communication of research findings to school district stakeholders requires a focus on the development of presentation formats that emphasize what stakeholders most want to know and can use, strong collaborative relationships with stakeholders to create a context in which communications are most likely to be accepted, and a focus on the positive messages and practical recommendations implicated by the findings.

Welcome to the session

We hope to provide a space today where we can reflect on the critical task of sharing the findings of our projects with the school personnel we include in our research.

As educational researchers, we conduct studies in school districts all the time. We collect data and publish our findings in professional journals. Unfortunately, we rarely communicate the results of our research to district stakeholders in useful ways to help schools improve. It is essential to disseminate the outcomes of educational interventions not only to the research community but also to participating learning organizations such as school districts. Stakeholders such as boards of education, administrators and teachers should be considered key targets for dissemination, and the presentation of findings should be useable by each of these groups in informing decision-making and guiding professional practice.

The presentation of project outcomes to school district stakeholders goes beyond the typical considerations and presentation formats used when sharing results at professional meetings or in professional journals. In this collaborative session, we'll discuss best practices in the effective communication of research findings with school district stakeholders focused around three themes: precision, partnership, and politics.

Presenter Introduction

Before we get into these themes, however, let's take a few minutes to discuss who we are and how we came to be involved in educational research with the second largest school district in the nation, the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Adam Gamoran, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison—Principal Investigator of TPC project entitled *System-Wide Change: An Experimental Study of Teacher Development and Student Achievement in Elementary Science.* Director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, responsible for establishing collaborative relationship among university partners responsible for delivering the elementary science professional development intervention and LAUSD's Research and Planning Division, Chief Instructional Officer, and Elementary Science Team.

Kimberle Kelly, Ph.D., Los Angeles Unified School District, University of Wisconsin-Madison—Co-PI of *System-Wide Change* project. Served as key research interface of the university-district partnership in LAUSD's Research and Planning Division from 2002-2009. Managed the acquisition, confidentiality, and integrity of the qualitative and quantitative data secured from 80 district schools for the *System-Wide Change* project. The value of having a researcher situated within the district was crucial to the success and thoroughness of the research project in interpreting the outcomes for students, teachers, and schools.

Precision

Our first theme is precision, and we use this to refer to the fact that you have to craft specific formats for communication.

Let's reflect on this idea as a group using a structure that might be familiar to you: think, pair, share (TPS)...and I'll be using a timer to keep us faithful to our agenda.

Here's the think: I want you to reflect quietly on the following question for 2 minutes:

Precision

What are the key features of successful formats for communication with school district stakeholders?

Consider how you might create different/personalized formats for boards of education, school/district administrators, and classroom teachers.

Here's the pair: Now we are going to go around at our tables and share for 5 minutes, so you have to manage the time so each person gets to say something, someone will have to be prepared to scribe and share the highlights of your table conversation.

Here's the share: Now for 8 minutes we are going to hear what each table had to say, with the rule that you should be elaborating rather than repeating what other tables talked about. So the presenters have to be ready to adjust their report according to what they've already heard from other tables.

Ideas Charted from the TPS activity:

In sum...Precision

Key features of successful formats:
District has multiple stakeholders
Recognize existing goals, questions, missions of each audience
Use language of stakeholders
Choose a medium to fit the purpose, time available
Bullet points, graphs, other visuals
Executive summary
Do the groundwork, stay in continual contact
Think about who as well as how to communicate
Minimize lit review
Minimize technical detail but provide enough to know what was done
Use appendix for additional details if necessary
Concise, concise, concise: Succinct results
Clear conclusions
Create mechanisms of reflection

Additional thoughts from the presenter:

•consider the audience--each role group does different things, consider how the findings apply to them and what their available actions can be, don't write about things they have no control over, maybe different messages to different role groups, etc.

•consider the mechanism of reflection and communication--I think it's critical to promote reflection, so to the extent possible you create a context where you can promote reflection.

•minimize lit review--school district personnel don't really care about theory, they want to know did it work to improve teacher practice or student learning, and if not, how can we change it to make it do so?

•minimize methodological detail (appendix or a full report)--school district personnel don't really care about methodological details, put the info in, but relegate it to an appendix

•succinct results--our research brief format actually puts the results first in a concise box

•clear recommendations/implications for decision-making--what should they make of the results? how can they use them to improve future outcomes? this can also be focused on increasing efficiency and economy in terms of money, demand on personnel, etc.

To summarize our conversation about Precision: Communicating with a largely non-research audience requires presentation formats that are "light" on background literature and methodological details and "heavy" on succinct results and recommendations/implications for decision-making and professional practice.

We handed out a template for a research brief that was a deliverable from a writing group in LAUSD's Division of Research of Planning in August 2007. The writing group was charged with creating standards for more effective communication of research and evaluation results to district stakeholders.

Partnership

Let's do another think, pair, share. First, here's our think/reflection question for 2 minutes:

Partnership

What are key strategies for establishing effective partnerships between university and school district stakeholders?

Consider how to make the most of the expertise each stakeholder group brings to the table (avoid the "deficit" model).

Pair…5 minutes talking at tables
Here's the share: Now for 8 minutes we are going to hear from each table

In sum…Partnership

Key strategies for successful partnerships:
Find a key individual in the district to work with
Approach with an attitude that says you're here to help
Relationship is part of project infrastructure
Learn the hierarchy and avenues of communication
Involve district partner in grant proposal from the outset
Ideal relationship involves district actors coming to you with questions
Personal presence makes a huge difference
What is not working and how can we help?
What are you doing that's working and how can we support you?
Write it down - what challenge is being addressed,
what response is proposed, and how success wil be judged
Explicitly value the expertise of district actors - demonstrate through action

Additional thoughts from presenter:

•local research presence--my presence in the district facilitated all aspects of project completion...it provided us visibility, access, and a sense of "being on the same team" recruitment, data acquisition, etc. would have been virtually impossible without it.

•ongoing collaboration structures between researchers and administrative leaders of programmatic interventions at all phases of the research process--design and delivery of intervention, data collection, presentation of findings such as conference calls, debriefing meetings

•emphasis on developing awareness and communication across all stakeholder levels, often school districts and university partners do not communicate effectively across organizational layers/institutions

•explicitly value the expertise and input of each stakeholder group, the emotional reactions of stakeholders are key to their engagement/buy-in/loyalty

•something for them--be sure that all deliverables are vetted with all stakeholders and meet their needs, specifically illustrate that you are responsive to their research needs in project deliverables, even creating deliverables specifically for them if this is relevant, even throwing in some "free" consultation

To summarize our conversation about Partnership: Projects have the best chance of communicating effectively with stakeholders when presentations are part of an ongoing and hands-on collaboration between researchers and practitioners. In particular, it is important to develop interventions and presentations by soliciting input from stakeholders that values the expertise they bring to the table rather than taking the position that they are not research savvy and must be "taught" how to consider research findings or even worse how to engage in professional practice.

Politics

While we like to think of ourselves as objective researchers who are immune to political pressures when presenting our findings, I have grown to understand that in many respects that is an untenable position. We live in a very political society, and the goals and mechanisms of education are inherently political because they have implications for the health and well-being of children, the place of this country in a global economy, and include issues of ethics, equity, and citizen rights like freedom of speech.

So, let's think about this…

Politics

What practical and political concerns are tied to the presentation of research findings?

Consider an example of negative findings, in which the effects of an intervention were deleterious on student scores in year 1.

Let's just "share" this time as a whole group...

In sum...Politics

Key practical and political considerations around the communication of research findings:
Again, finding a key individual for a consistent relationship to weather storms
Be flexible
Stay in regular and continuous contact
Follow the right process in the right order
Maintain and enhance the trust relationship
Ftequent interction with district actors helps one anticipate issues
Emphasize continuous improvement: failure is fuel for improvement
Minimize blame
For an intervention that does not work, focus on why it does not work and what could be done the next time

Additional thoughts from the presenter:

•Emphasize the idea of a continuous improvement cycle, failure is the fuel for improvement and in some ways a desired occurrence, setting up a context in which failure can be ok.

•Minimize "blame" of particular role groups--failure should not be directed at particular persons, but instead focused on how processes and structures underlie the observed failures.

•Don't dismiss the intervention as ineffective, rather focus on what did work, don't forget about unintended outcomes, such as effects on leadership capacity.

•Focus on recommendations that can improve outcomes in future efforts and are attainable to turn "failure" into a recipe for success next time.

To summarize out conversation about Politics: Of course it is ideal when implemented programs operate as intended and produce documented, positive outcomes for teachers and students. It is far more common, however, for program implementation to be flawed and outcomes on teachers and students minimal (or even negative). In communicating such findings, care must be taken to minimize blame or dismissing the intervention as ineffective. Rather, presentations should emphasize what worked and focus on recommendations that can improve outcomes in future efforts. Finding the silver lining in what might seem on the surface to be a failed effort is as important as honestly reporting the failures that occur.

So in summary, the key learnings from today's session can be encapsulated in the following way:

Take Home Messages

Focus on strategic report formats that are personalized for stakeholder needs and assist them in reflective decision-making.

Establish mutual partnerships that create a hospitable environment for the dissemination and use of research findings.

Emphasize positive outcomes/recommendations from programmatic interventions, turning "failure" into a "recipe for future success."

Thanks for coming, I will stay for any questions now or you can contact me, my information is on the final slide.

To Find Out More

Please contact Kimberle Kelly
kakelly3@wisc.edu, akimkelly@gmail.com

Handouts

1. copy of powerpoint slides (incorporated into this narrative)
2. template for a research brief (follows this narrative)

The Research Brief

Created by the "Writing Group" of the Los Angeles Unified School District
Division of Research and Planning, August, 2007

The writing group was created and tasked in response to an ongoing conversation with district stakeholders about improving the readability and usefulness of research and evaluation reports produced by the Division of Research and Planning.

The deliverables of the writing group included a set of templates for formative and summative evaluation reports as well as short reports and research briefs.

What follows is s summary of the recommendations for a "Research Brief."

Please direct all correspondence regarding this research brief to akimkelly@gmail.com.

The Research Brief Defined

A research brief presents a summarized version of your report, highlights a specific component of a study, or provides summarized information on a particular topic.

Although a research brief includes most major elements of a full research report, the research brief is much shorter; usually 3-4 pages in length. Most importantly, the research brief is intended to identify the most important findings of your study, not <u>all</u> the findings in your report.

At the end of the day, the reader should be able to come away with the take home message you were trying to convey in the more lengthy report. This document is different from an Executive Summary because it does not have to reflect all the information contained within the full report.

The research brief is <u>not</u> a cut and paste or a disconnected version of the longer report but rather a very concise document that highlights the most relevant findings of the study. Here, you are very particular about the information you include because, unlike the big report, you don't have to discuss every aspect that went into the report.

An abstract, highlight of a major finding, or summary may be included. However, the major components include:

1. Introduction or Overview
2. Methods
3. Key Findings
4. Implications & conclusions

The writing style should be more aligned to that of the executive summary or formative feedback memo than to the text in the body of the full report. The trick is to find the balance between "research" and "brief."

Here are some stylistic guidelines to help in this endeavor:

- Avoid large blocks of text.
    - One and two sentence paragraphs are okay.
    - Four and five sentence paragraphs are bordering on too long.
    - Short sentences are good.
    - Bullet points are your friend.
    - Avoid the passive voice.

- Keep the technical and academic details to a minimum.
    - You can always refer the reader to the full report for more details.

- Use headings and subheadings liberally.
    - The headings should convey an idea (i.e., avoid headings like "Findings").
    - Try ***bold italics***, left justified, for headings.
    - Try *italics*, left justified, for subheadings.

    - Only use headings, or subheadings, if you have more than one (that goes for bullet points too).

- Pictures are worth a thousand words.
    - Use a table or figure to highlight the main point.
    - Like headings, table and figure titles should convey an idea (or better yet, a finding).
    - Each table and figure should <u>not</u> convey more than one or two points.
    - Each table and figure should stand alone.
    - Provide data source information and notes to help tables and figures stand alone.
    - Provide adequate labels on figures to help them stand alone.

Document Format

Section Headers:

Font size: 12
Font: Lucida Sans Unicode
Color: Dark blue and bolded
Underline: underlined half way across in dark blue (except 'Summary' section)
Sections of the Research Brief:

- Summary
- Overview
- Methods
- Key findings
- Conclusions

Subsection Headers (in Key Findings Section):

Font size: 10
Font: Lucida Sans Unicode
Color: black
Underline: No
Bold: Bold and Italicize

Body:

Font size: 10
Font: Lucida Sans Unicode
Line Spacing: 1.0 lines

Page Numbering:

Numeric: all pages should be numbered

Writing Conventions

Writing conventions include spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar. The writer should use conventions to enhance the readability of the paper. Pay attention to conventions; do not distract the reader with them. Do not leave them for the last revision or minimize their importance.

Here are some basics:

- Acronyms – Avoid excessive use of acronyms; the point is to be clear and not to save space.
- Abbreviations – Always define what you abbreviate. Avoid inconsistent abbreviations.
- Capitalization– Always capitalize days of the week, months, holidays, names of organizations, government agencies, ethnic groups, and academic degrees. A quick guide to other rules of capitalization:

  Local District Superintendent Richard Alonzo
  Yesterday, the local district superintendent spoke to staff.

  The class was last offered in Fall 2008.
  The class was last offered in the fall.

  We conducted a total of 12 interviews in Local District 1.
  We conducted one case study in each local district.
- Typographical Tricks – If you use italics or underlines to make your point clear, it is probably a bad sentence that does not make the point naturally.
- Commas – Avoid comma splice, just like this, I connected two sentences, now three.
- Semicolons, Colons– Use semicolons (;) to pause. Use colons (:) to indicate something to come or to separate the title from the subtitle of a book.
- Hyphens, Dashes– Here is a quick guide:
  - Use hyphens (a single -):
    - To join two or more words into a compound (e.g., do-it-yourself project)
    - In compound numbers from 21 to 99 and with fractions (e.g., thirty-eight, one-quarter, etc.)
    - With such prefixes as ex-, all-, self-, and pro- (e.g., self-help, all-star, etc.)
  - Use dashes (a double hyphen—like that):

        - To set off content, like commas (e.g., we should determine—before the semester ends—the cost of relocation)
        - Between an introductory list and the explanatory sentence that follows (e.g., calmness, confidence, and a strong resume—bring all of these to a job interview)
- Numbers – Use APA rules for numbers in reports. Here is a quick guide:
    - Use figures to express:
        - All numbers 10 and above (e.g., 10th-grade students, 15 years old, the remaining 10%, etc.)
        - All numbers below 10 that are grouped for comparison with numbers 10 and above (e.g.,2 of the 20 responses, in the 2nd and 11th grades…the 2nd-grade students, etc.)
        - Numbers that represent statistical or mathematical functions, fractional or decimal quantities, percentages, ratios, and percentiles and quartiles (e.g., 3 times as many, more than 5% of the sample, etc.)
    - Use words to express:
        - Numbers below 10 that do not represent precise measurements and that are grouped for comparison with numbers below 10 (e.g., eight items, four responses, nine words each, etc.).
        - Any number that begins a sentence, title, or text heading (or if possible reword the sentence to avoid beginning with a number.)
        - Common fractions

Date

Title of the Research Brief

Name of author and Degree

Summary

Identify the most important or salient finding of this study. Follow by including other key findings of the study:

- Use bullets for those additional key findings.
- One sentence statements of key findings.

Include how findings should be interpreted. Also, these last couple of sentences should mirror the findings section.

Overview

The overview section should include a brief general introduction about the current research related to your study (e.g., pros & cons) as this provides the reader with the context for your brief. That said, follow with how your study fits with what has already been done or introduce the purpose of your study. This section ends with identifying the main research questions of your study. Although your study may have addressed various questions, the brief should only include the most relevant and pertinent of those addressed in this brief.

Methods

This section includes about 1-2 paragraphs of straightforward information about the methodology used in your study. A general overview is key here and don't be afraid to use bullets to provide this information.

- Type of study: longitudinal, quasi-experimental, etc.
- Sample size: actual number of participants that comprised your sample
- Participants of the study: grades or ages, staff, where your data came from if it is from a secondary source, etc.
- When data collection took place: year and time in the academic calendar when data collection took place (if this applies)
- General information about the outcome variables: for example, if you used specific measures, what did those measures assess in general terms?
- General information about the independent variables: what are the key independent variables used in your analysis to answer the questions addressed in the brief? Identify the source of this information if you have multiple sources.

The specifics of the aspects identified above are unnecessary as that takes away from the "briefness" of your intended brief.

Key Findings

Highlight key findings relevant to the questions outlined in the brief.

Section headings should capture findings and should not be generic. Provide a short phrase that identifies a key finding as a sub-header in this section.

Example:

Students Reported High Level of Press For Academic Achievement	vs.	Press For Academic Achievement
Secondary Students Were Not Exposed To High Quality Instruction in ELA or Math in 2006-07	vs.	High Quality Instruction

A short descriptive paragraph or two should suffice for each major finding. The key to this section is to command the attention of the reader by limiting information to the main findings of your study.

Do not forget about visuals.

If appropriate, include a figure or table to highlight the main point you're trying to convey. Keep the visual as basic and straightforward as possible. See the following guidelines for helpful tips on incorporating tables and figures into your brief.

GUIDELINES FOR TABLES AND FIGURES

- Pictures are worth a thousand words:
  - Use tables and figures whenever possible.
  - Like headings, table and figure titles should convey an idea (or better yet, a finding).
  - Each table and figure should <u>not</u> convey more than one or two points.
  - Each table and figure should stand alone.
  - Provide data source information and notes to help tables and figures stand alone.
  - Provide adequate labels on figures to help them stand alone.
  - Don't forget to identify information in a table or figure as PRELIMINARY if appropriate.

- Tables or figures that are too complex to be included in the main body of a report may nevertheless be helpful for some readers. Moreover, the omission of such tables or figures may lead readers to erroneously conclude that the information is unavailable or was overlooked.

- In the first line, identify each table or figure with the word "TABLE" or "FIGURE," in all caps, followed by its number. Tables and figures should be numbered sequentially throughout the report or document. On the second line, include the main point of the table or figure followed by a solid line, as in the following:

FIGURE 1
Counselors discussed a variety of topics during school-site meetings

- Consider using Helvetica Compressed font in tables and figures. It is relatively easy to read, and is also narrower than many other fonts, allowing for more text to be included in a smaller amount of space.

- As a general rule, use Helvetica Compressed font in 10 pt for figures and tables, with the exception of notes and the words "TABLE X" or "FIGURE X," which should be in 8 pt font.

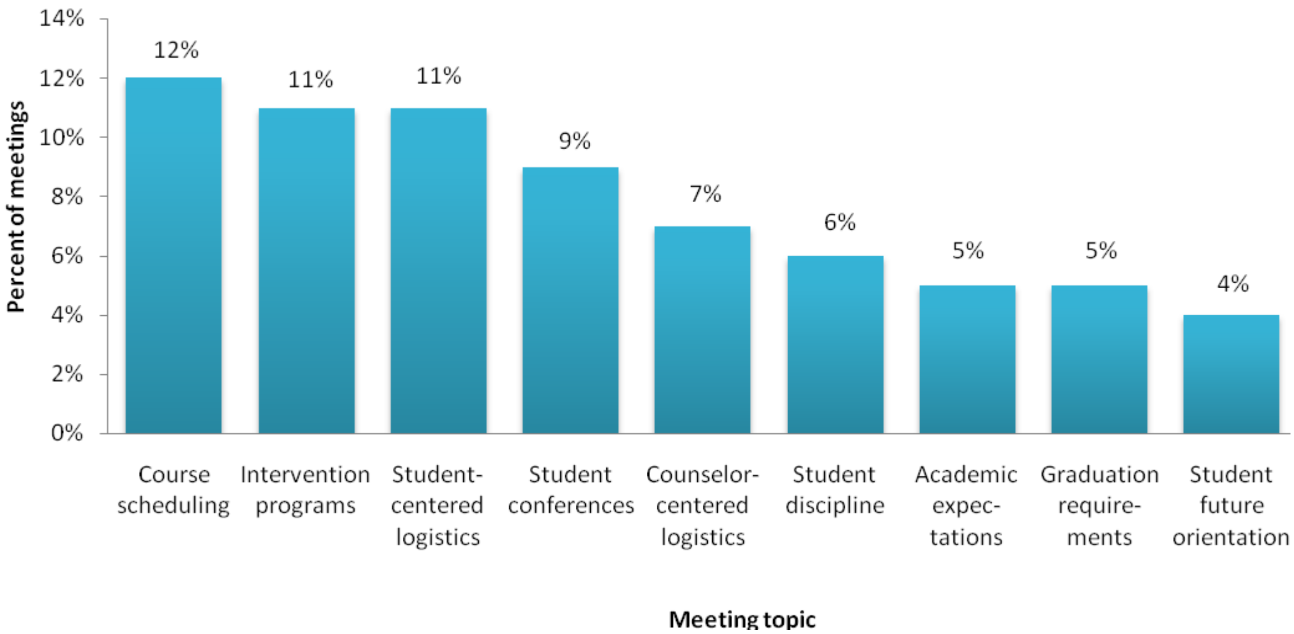
- Make each table or figure no more complex than necessary. For example, if you are including value labels for each point, ask yourself if you also need gridlines. In addition, consider eliminating tick marks on the axes if they are not needed to accurately convey the information in the table or figure.

- Unlike standard APA format for the 5th edition, consider using shading for table spanners, and bold for column headings.

- The following pages contain example tables and figures. For additional examples of tables and figures, please review the excel file located in the same folder as this Word document, and is entitled, "figure templates.xls."

FIGURE 1
Counselors discussed a variety of topics during school-site meetings

Percent of meetings by topic, for school-site counselor meetings observed during 2006-07



SOURCE: Observations of school-site counselor meetings (85 meetings = about 112 hrs), 2006-07.

TABLE 1

Clients more likely to find reports, briefs, and memos useful if they adhere to OSA template

	Memo adherence to OSA template			
Clients	**Overall**	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
All Clients (%)				
So not useful it hurts	30%	60%	40%	20%
Not very useful	50%	33%	40%	25%
Somewhat useful	15%	5%	15%	20%
Absolutely, positively useful	5%	2%	5%	35%
Elementary Program Staff (%)				
So not useful it hurts	30%	60%	40%	40%
Not very useful	50%	33%	40%	40%
Somewhat useful	15%	5%	15%	15%
Absolutely, positively useful	5%	2%	5%	5%
Secondary Program Staff (%)				
So not useful it hurts	30%	60%	40%	40%
Not very useful	50%	33%	40%	40%
Somewhat useful	15%	5%	15%	15%
Absolutely, positively useful	5%	2%	5%	5%
Other Program Staff (%)				
So not useful it hurts	30%	60%	40%	40%
Not very useful	50%	33%	40%	40%
Somewhat useful	15%	5%	15%	15%
Absolutely, positively useful	5%	2%	5%	5%

SOURCE: Completely Made-Up Statistics Database (CMUSD), OSA, LAUSD, July 2007.
NOTES: Based on preliminary analysis of fictitious in-house rating of non-existent OSA formative feedback memos and imaginary survey of past and current program staff (N=75, Elementary N=35, Secondary N=30, Other N=10).

Conclusion

Here you can state how your study findings relate to that of other studies. However, the most important aspect of this section is the take home message you want to convey to the reader. It is like the big red bow that nicely ties a gift wrapped package.

Ask yourself, 1) what do I want others to get from this work, and 2) what understanding should they come away with after reading this brief? In addition, although our work is done with the highest of standards and done as best as can be done, it is important to identify the limitations of the study. Our work is confounded by many variables and thus is not perfect, despite what we may think! You don't want others to run with your findings as the end-all as this may only serve their own agendas. Including the limitations of your study will help the reader understand the context in which the findings described here were found and therefore reminds the reader to interpret your findings thoughtfully and with care.

Last, recommendations should be included to bring your brief to full circle. Recommendations here highlight the key recommendations identified in the report and are limited to those that are relevant to the brief rather than all recommendations.

For more information regarding this study see the full report:
Last Name, First Name of Author(s). Title of report. Research and Planning No. # .
Available Online: research.lausd.net