

## Desk Monitoring

Desk monitoring is an effective and efficient way to assist states in meeting their monitoring needs. It provides an approach to reviewing and tracking program performance by using quantitative data that serves as a supplement to on-site monitoring.

Local programs provide data regularly (e.g., monthly, quarterly) to the state office where state staff can review them to guide program review activities, inform technical assistance plans, and promote program improvement. Desk monitoring relies primarily on data that programs already collect and report. It is inexpensive to implement and, once established, requires little additional burden to local programs.

Based on research and ideas from state and local program staff, the NRS project team has created this list of desk monitoring tips.

## Planning and Development

Introducing a desk monitoring process is often a significant change for local programs. It requires an approach to planning and development that includes integrating it into overall monitoring and administrative procedures, collaborating with local program staff, field testing, and training.

- ◆ **Build components of desk review into your overall administrative system.** Fit the elements of desk monitoring into on-site reviews, grant applications, and monitoring.
- ◆ **Start an accountability task force.** This group will help plan your measures and approach and should include state and field representatives.
- ◆ **Have a plan for using every piece of information requested.** Programs will become frustrated if no one uses the data they collect, undermining confidence in the value of desk monitoring.
- ◆ **Produce templates and draft reports.** Produce the graphs you will use before finalizing your system. Be sure that you can run the reports you want (e.g., statewide comparisons of programs).
- ◆ **Pilot test.** Try out the desk monitoring approach for a year or longer without tying it to rewards or sanctions. Give and get feedback to programs and refine based on this experience.
- ◆ **Conduct ongoing training for local staff.** Do not assume that access to data and reports guarantees use of the information. Provide examples of reports and walk through them with staff. This makes a big difference in whether they will use the data.

## Implementation

Implementing a well-planned desk monitoring process requires sufficient resources, including staff and time to review data and work with programs, a data system that allows state and local staff easy and timely access to data and reports, and acceptance that the system improves the monitoring process.

- ◆ **Understand that implementation takes three years or more.** It will take time to get quality data and to work out the kinks.
- ◆ **Give feedback to the data providers within six months of receiving the data.** Ideally, provide feedback even earlier, but no later than before reporting the following year's data.
- ◆ **Give extra points for serving those hardest to serve.** To avoid encouraging programs to only serve students who are most likely to show gains, give more weight to gains of more challenged students.
- ◆ **Continue to refine.** Every year give opportunities for feedback.
- ◆ **Assign state staff to focus on monitoring programs.** Assign at least one staff person the job of desk monitoring including reviewing data and working with programs.
- ◆ **Use a real-time web-based system data system that can be accessed across the state.** States with real-time systems report increased use at the program and state levels to look at

progress. States can also learn a great deal about timeliness of data entry and be alerted to questionable practices.

- ◆ **Ensure that program directors have the ability to run their own reports.** Ask them what they would like to be able to generate.
- ◆ **Provide comparisons or the ability to choose comparisons.** System users at all levels should be able to compare their data against benchmarks, such as state averages or standards. Also include ways for programs to compare their performance with other programs or to compare classes within programs.
- ◆ **Err toward simplicity.** The more complex your system, the greater challenge you will have to get local buy-in.
- ◆ **Watch out for unintended effects.** Programs may try to improve performance in ways that undermine program improvement. For example, by reducing the number of students setting a goal.

## Use and Results

When used effectively, desk monitoring provides an objective basis for identifying high- and low-performing programs, a basis for rewarding and sanctioning programs on the basis of performance, and a way to identify technical assistance needs.

- ◆ **Identify highest and lowest performing programs, based on the rubric.** Assess the validity of these rankings by using other knowledge of the program to identify possible data quality issues and assess how well the rubric works.
- ◆ **Resolve data quality issues.** Desk monitoring may reveal data quality issues arising from a

lack of compliance with state or NRS policy, data entry problems, or inadequate training.

- ◆ **Provide rewards for good performance.** States can provide extra funding or no monitoring site visit for highperforming programs.
- ◆ **Sanction low-performing programs.** States can require low-performing programs to develop a program improvement plan, give them additional on-site or peer-mentor visits, and de-fund programs that do not improve after a set time period.
- ◆ **Provide motivators other than money.** Simple recognition (e.g., labeling programs as “exemplary”) and certificates can motivate programs to do well. Reward sites for exceeding national averages or some other threshold for the first time. Identifying programs as peer trainers can be an excellent reward.
- ◆ **Help local programs use the data.** Teach programs how to use data. For example, show them how to use their own data to develop report cards. (See the Report Card Training at <http://www.nrsweb.org/trainings/events/2007/ReportCardTraining.aspx> on the *NRSWeb*.)
- ◆ **Have a strategy to determine which programs get technical assistance.** Strategies include setting a minimum score on the rubric, focusing on areas important to state policy concern (e.g., educational gain, postsecondary transition), or using measures that most affect overall state performance.
- ◆ **Use the system to determine technical assistance needs.** Use the data from desk monitoring to see what issues come up year after year or affect most programs.

## Additional Resources

For more information and hands-on materials on desk monitoring, visit the *NRSWeb* site at [www.nrsweb.org/trainings/trainings.aspx](http://www.nrsweb.org/trainings/trainings.aspx) and look for the 2007 Desk Monitoring and the 2006 Data Detective events.



The **National Reporting System (NRS)** is the accountability system for the federally funded, state-administered adult education program. It addresses the accountability requirements of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA-P.L. 105-220).

*NRS Tips* is a quick reference tool for state staff, program directors, and adult education teachers. *NRS Tips* are written and produced by the staff at the **American Institutes for Research (AIR)**, a nonprofit research and policy organization (see <http://www.air.org>), under contract with the **Division of Adult Educational and Literacy (DAEL)** of the **U.S. Department of Education**.

Visit <http://www.nrsweb.org> for more information. Do you have an idea for *NRS Tips*? Send it to [nrs@air.org](mailto:nrs@air.org).