Handout 8: Develop/Update a State Monitoring Plan

The Value of Monitoring

Whenever we talk about accountability systems, someone eventually will mention one of the following refrains:

"What is counted becomes what counts."
"We treasure what we measure."

In designing local program monitoring, we want to explore and clarify what we treasure and find ways to measure it effectively so that we are indeed counting what counts. We look at performance results over time, we consider both process and progress indicators, we identify strengths and weaknesses, and we help programs make informed decisions for program improvement. Therefore, local program monitoring should be considered an interactive, ongoing process rather than a single event.

To monitor a program effectively, we need tools and strategies that are clear, and we need to include multiple stakeholders throughout the process. Regular monitoring reviews benefit local programs when we do the following:

- Keep local program staff focused on outcomes and processes;
- Identify issues of importance to staff and program participants;
- Increase staff involvement in the process;
- Provide data on accomplishments (positive outcomes and strong processes);
- Help refine data collection processes and products;
- Identify areas for program improvement;
- Provide information for decision making; and
- Allow for enhanced program accountability.

We must simultaneously recognize, however, that monitoring is not an easy task for the following reasons:

- It can be difficult for programs to recognize the link between outcomes and processes. (How can we demonstrate that program outcomes are really tied to what happened in the educational program?)
- It is difficult to develop criteria for assessing program effectiveness when some learner outcomes are not easily quantifiable. (How can we document the qualitative changes in learners' lives?)
- Programs and staff fear judgments in high-stakes environments. (How can performance-based funding, incentives, and sanctions be fully understood by stakeholders?)

Approaches to Monitoring

Accountability requires monitoring, documenting, and certifying the integrity of data that are gathered from local programs and then aggregated at the state level. For some states, these accountability measures have increased the monitoring burden in the midst of diminished state funding. However, states now have clearly defined accountability measures, concrete baseline performance data (2001–03), and the capacity to gather data electronically. In essence, states now have the opportunity to rethink their monitoring plans and strategies to take full advantage of the accountability systems currently in place.

One solution that states are adopting is to include both desk reviews and on-site reviews. An on-site review usually is a single event lasting 1 to 3 days, whereas a desk review is an ongoing process. National Reporting system (NRS) data allow monitoring of programs throughout the year through desk reviews instead of limiting local program monitoring to on-site reviews for a certain number or percentage of programs each year.

Desk Reviews

Desk reviews are especially useful for monitoring quantitative data. They provide a structured way to look at information that local programs already submit to the state office, such as proposals, performance measures, program improvement plans, schedules, staffing patterns, and budgets. State staff can design monitoring tools for reviewing and providing feedback on reports that programs submit regularly (e.g., monthly, quarterly, midterm, or annual reports). Without significantly increasing the workload for state staff, desk reviews can guide staff in monitoring program activities and progress. With desk reviews, staff communicate regularly with local programs regarding anticipated changes or needs for technical assistance.

The findings of desk reviews can be used to focus the more intensive on-site reviews. Table 1 offers other advantages and disadvantages of desk reviews for monitoring.

Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Desk Reviews

Advantages	Disadvantages
Data, reports, proposals, and plans usually are available in the state office.	Assumes that data are accurate and that reports and proposals reflect what is actually happening at the program level.
Reviews can be built into regular workloads over time.	Might not include voice/perspectives of multiple local staff members.
Data are often quantitative; they can be compared to previous years' data or to state standards.	Gives a static view of data and program process instead of dynamic interaction in context.
No travel required: no time out of the office and no travel expenses.	Lacks "team perspective" and opportunity for capacity building if not followed by an on-site review.

On-site Reviews

On-site reviews allow states to verify data and to look at the processes and qualitative information related to a local program. On-site reviews provide an opportunity for gathering more data and for elaborating on the initial findings of desk reviews. They allow for in-depth discussions with staff related to the program quality indicators and for meaningful interviews and observations with a variety of staff members, learners, and program partners. Equally critical in these times of accountability, on-site reviews allow monitoring teams to access files and documents to verify their clarity, integrity, and appropriateness. While on-site, team members look for recurring themes and patterns as they emerge from the document reviews, interviews, observations, and discussions related to the indicators of program quality and to program data. Table 2 shows some of the advantages and disadvantages of on-site reviews for monitoring local programs.

Table 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of On-site Reviews

Advantages	Disadvantages
Opportunity to look at process and program quality factors and to gather qualitative data. Teams can verify proposed plans and can check data quality.	Stress for local program and team to "look good."
Input from different perspectives (e.g., interviews and observations). Diverse team members can offer input.	Limited time frame for gathering information, interviewing, and observing. Setting up and training teams takes time.
Visibility in the field. Staff can explore options for improvement and provide technical assistance.	Requires time away from office.
Capacity building. Other team members learn new strategies and share their expertise.	Travel time and expenses.
Opportunity to acknowledge strengths, offer praise, and identify best practices in the field for program-to-program mentoring.	

Before starting on-site reviews, team members need to fully understand their roles and how to use the monitoring tools according to the criteria specified by the program quality indicators. For example, when observing a class or orientation session, monitors need to note, as objectively as possible, what happens based on the indicators. Their role during this observation is not to evaluate the teacher or presenter. Interviewers should use established protocols and probe gently to clarify, but not judge, the value of what is being said. Similarly, documents should be reviewed based on criteria described in the quality indicators. For example, when reviewing individual learning plans or professional development plans, reviewers look for evidence specified in the indicators.

Ways to Collect Data for Monitoring

Standard yet flexible monitoring tools can effectively guide staff and monitoring teams to look at both quantitative and qualitative data from a distance with desk reviews, and up close in person with on-site reviews. Table 3 provides an outline of the main strategies for collecting data for program monitoring: program self-reviews, document reviews, observations, and interviews.

Program Self-Review

Prior to a monitoring visit, local program staff can complete a program self-review (PSR) based on program standards or other indicators of program quality. Later, the results of the PSR can help guide the program improvement process or help focus an on-site review. The PSR might reveal specific strengths of a local program that can serve as models for other programs. Alternatively, the PSR might reveal indicators that require more discussion and observation during the on-site review. PSR findings are useful for helping to frame the written report. Depending on the size, dispersion, and diversity of the program, the PSR might be completed by a sampling or the entire local program staff.

Table 3. Data Collection Strategies for Monitoring

Methods	Who or What	How
Program Self-reviews	Staff	Review indicators of program quality
Document Reviews	• Learner records (forms, test scores, attendance, etc.) • Learning plans (goals and work plans) • Portfolios • Curricula/Materials • Recruitment materials • Promotional information • Referral information • Budget and financial reports	Conduct environmental scan: • Resource room • Postings and bulletin boards • Flyers/Brochures for pick-up Use quality indicators to review for completeness: • Learners' files, plans, etc. • Staff records, lesson plans • Meeting notes • Curricula and materials
Observations	• Classes • Intake and orientation • Learning lab • Meetings	• Take notes during observation. • Complete a checklist. • Tape or videorecord.

Methods	Who or What	How
Interviews	• Learners • Staff • Partners and community leaders • Nonparticipants	Conduct open-ended or structured interviews: • One on one • Focus groups or classes

Document Reviews and Environmental Scans

Many program documents can be reviewed from a distance. These include proposals, qualitative and quantitative data reports, and improvement plans. It is during on-site reviews, however, that the monitoring team can see whether the documents are available and are being used effectively. For example, if teachers are not using a curriculum, program staff need to explore why the curriculum is not being used and then create a plan to encourage curriculum use, offer professional development opportunities, or, if necessary, begin revising or developing new curricula.

One of the main goals of the on-site review is to verify the accuracy of program data. The review team should audit a random sample of student files to verify that the print information matches the information in the database. Local programs should include the following information in student files to allow a review of data quality:

- Student identification and demographic information;
- Attendance rates;
- Years of schooling and placement level at program entry;
- Initial learning goals;
- Specified pre- and post-testing student information; and
- Entry and updated records.

The review should compare these data with a printout of the same data from the program's database.

Observations

In education, observation is often the primary tool for teacher evaluation; thus, it may be overlooked when monitors think of data collection. For accountability purposes, states might consider observation in a way that is more akin to bird-watching: looking and listening in specific environments to identify certain features and behaviors. During an on-site review, monitors can observe interactions during meetings, at intake or orientation, in the hallways, in the computer lab, and in the classroom.

Skilled observers usually identify the activities or behavior they expect to see. For example, the program self-review might have cited strengths in using the curriculum to guide instruction for life skills. Observers will look and listen specifically for instruction based on learners' lives and for the integration of authentic materials. They listen and observe while suspending judgment. Some take notes whereas others record what happens. The text box on the next page provides a situation and a set of questions to guide an observer acting as a program monitor.

Observing With the Monitor's Eye

Imagine you are sitting in a room where 15 students are studying fractions and taking turns going to the board to solve problems from their textbooks. The instructor comments on each problem and asks students to identify where they might use fractions in daily life.

If you are looking for indicators of <u>instruction based on learner goals and needs</u>, you might want to note the following:

- ✓ How many students are actively participating? Are they attentive when others solve problems or speak?
- ✓ How are students reacting to the lesson? Do they show interest/boredom?
- ✓ How do students demonstrate understanding or confusion?
- ✓ Are students able to relate fractions to their lives?
- ✓ Is there student-to-student interaction (peers/small groups)?
- ✓ Do students initiate questions beyond the textbook and lesson?
- ✓ Is there a variety of teaching strategies and activities?

Immediately following observations, monitors might review their notes to identify the links among the (a) indicators of quality, (b) activities in the program plan, or (c) recent professional development workshops. Later, monitors might prepare bulleted notes for the on-site debriefing, which can be included in the written report to qualify or support the recommendations and commendations. Using notes from observations can help illustrate the data cited in the report.

Interviews

Interviews provide rich data about people's opinions, knowledge, and needs. Although interviews are time consuming, they can provide additional, firsthand information about what has been learned through the program self-review, document reviews, and observations. Interviews can help clarify information, explore ambiguous findings, or even provide contradictory information.

Who are the interviewers and the interviewees? Because on-site reviews strive to capture a great deal of information in a short period of time, it is essential to carefully select the interview questions for students, staff, and partners. Consider interviewing staff at various levels because administrative, instructional, and support staff might provide different perspectives on the various program components. Community partners or collaborators might have knowledge of learner needs that the adult education program staff might lack (e.g., a higher education partner might be able to provide information related to enrollment opportunities for advanced Automotive Service Excellence [ASE] students). A social service provider might know about childcare services for learners participating in adult education classes. Interviewing employment service providers can open doors for opportunities such as job training, additional classroom space, job referrals, or guest speakers on workplace readiness and interviewing.

Learners at different levels or in different program components (e.g., adult basic education [ABE], ASE, English as a second language [ESL], family literacy, corrections) might have different experiences within the program and might be more or less vocal. Native-born and foreign-born students reflect different cultural perspectives and experiences. As a result, their willingness to be candid might require different interviewing skills. When monitoring a program that serves a significant ESL population, the team might consider using bilingual interviewers, if possible.

How are interviews conducted? Depending on the available time and human resources for interviews, teams might conduct some interviews with individuals and others with small focus groups. Before beginning, consider how the interview information will be used and shared. Open-ended interviews may seem ideal for gathering a full range of perspectives, but they are more difficult to synthesize for debriefing and for preparing a final written report. Similarly, some monitoring team members may not be as comfortable conducting interviews as others. Many states have found it helpful to have a structured interview protocol to ensure consistency across team members and programs. Interviewers need to listen carefully and note what is said, recording direct quotes whenever possible. Quotes from students, teachers, or partnering agencies can help enliven the written report and illustrate the quantitative data findings.

Interview questions should reflect the aspects of program quality that affect the NRS measures. The data pyramids, as well as the state's program quality indicators, suggest the topics you might address. Sample questions for learner, staff, and partner interviews are provided below.

Learner Interviews

1. How did you hear about the program?
2. How has the program helped you reach your goals?
3. Have you been able to attend on a regular basis? Why or Why not?
4. Were there particular ways of providing instruction that helped you? Have you learned how to learn?
5. What do you tell other people about the program?

Staff Interviews

1. Is there a staff handbook? Are you aware of the program's mission, goals, policies, and procedures?
2. How do you address the different learning styles of adult learners? How do you work with multilevel groups?

3. Do you have a role in developing curriculum, testing, intake, and goal setting?
4. Do you receive paid time for preparation and professional development?
5. Have you engaged in peer-coaching activities or worked on projects in collaboration with other staff?

Partner Interviews

1. How would you describe your relationship with the adult education program?
2. What do you think are the most critical needs of adult learners in this community?
3. Do you have any ideas or suggestions for improving the exchange of information and referrals?
4. Do your clients participate in adult education classes? If not, what do you think are the barriers to participation?

States can maximize monitoring opportunities by developing a monitoring plan supported with standardized tools and strategies that can be used consistently. The strength of a state's monitoring plan will be evaluated by its ability to use qualitative and quantitative data to document a program's strengths and weaknesses and to prepare recommendations for program improvement.

Seven Steps for Developing a Monitoring Plan

Good monitoring requires careful planning if it is to be effective in identifying potential problems and promoting program improvement. The planning begins with getting support and buy-in from all stakeholders in the process, including local programs. The state also must decide on the scope of monitoring activities, given state policies and the resources it can devote to this important activity. At this point, you will want to consider the advantages and disadvantages of desk reviews and on-site monitoring. In most states, the number and frequency of on-site reviews will be limited by available resources. Following a monitoring review, an effective reporting and follow-up process will help ensure that local programs can indeed implement their program improvement plans. Table 4 outlines seven steps for effective monitoring, including guidelines and examples for each step.

Table 4. Steps and Guidelines for Monitoring Local Programs

Monitoring Steps	Implementation Guidelines	Examples
1. Identify state policy for monitoring. Gather support from those who have a stake in the results.	Provide clear, written guidelines to all levels of stakeholders on the scope of the monitoring activities (including process and timelines).	State plan should be open to the public and shared at all levels. State plans often specify the following: • Outcome measures • Frequency of evaluation
2. Specify the scope of work for monitoring.	Use quantitative and qualitative data for effective monitoring.	Quantitative = Look at outcome measurements Qualitative = Look for evidence using program quality indicators
3. Identify individuals to lead and to participate in monitoring activities.	Consider the unique program features when identifying who from the local program should be involved and who should be part of the monitoring team. Consider strength in diversity.	Local staff: practitioners, administrators, partners External team members: content specialists, other educators, and staff from partnering agencies
4. Identify resources available for monitoring local programs.	With competing demands for resources (staff, time, and money for monitoring), consider formalizing a two-stage monitoring approach.	Desk reviews look at program data from a distance. On-site reviews look at data in context to see firsthand how the process and operations lead to positive outcome measures.

Monitoring Steps	Implementation Guidelines	Examples
5. Determine the process for collecting data with clearly stated criteria for rating. Conduct monitoring activities.	Create and use standard tools for data collection and analysis. Monitors (state staff and team) need to fully understand the tools, their use, and the rating criteria.	Desk reviews can include data, proposals, plans, reports, and program self-review. On-site reviews can include discussion of self-review, observations, interviews, and a review of files and documents.
6. Report on the findings, including recommendations.	Conclude on-site monitoring visits with a verbal debriefing followed by a written report.	The report might include a short description of the monitoring activities with supporting: • Qualitative description • Quantitative information
7. Follow up on the results.	Given that the key purpose of monitoring is program improvement, follow-up is essential and should include an ongoing exchange between the state office and the local program.	Follow-up activities might include reviewing performance standards and program improvement, rewarding or sanctioning, and the beginning of technical assistance.

1. Gather support from those who have a stake in the monitoring results.

Effective monitoring requires buy-in among many stakeholders including learners, volunteers, teachers/tutors, counselors, support staff, coordinators, trainers, and local administrators, as well as the institutional leaders and agency partners. To include everyone requires a commitment of time and energy to reach consensus on what really counts and a renewed effort to include multiple measures that capture the richness of programs. When monitoring takes into consideration the interests and concerns of all stakeholders, there is a greater opportunity for full support during the monitoring process. Everyone needs to understand the process and how data will be collected and analyzed. Stakeholder support will be crucial later for acting on the results or recommendations included in the monitoring report.

2. Specify the scope of work for monitoring.

In times of performance-based funding, states need to evaluate local programs to identify the factors that lead to positive results and those that hinder attendance, learning, and progress. Prior to monitoring, everyone needs to fully understand the purpose and expected outcomes. Local programs need to know what the state will review and how they will measure a program's successes and limitations. The monitoring process needs to include a review of qualitative data as well as quantitative data.

3. Identify individuals to be involved.

States often use a team approach to local program monitoring so that different levels of staff and partners are involved in the process. When we view monitoring as a capacity-building opportunity, we contribute to statewide professional development efforts. In addition, we strengthen our program staff, our networks, and our partnerships. A variety of team members will contribute different perspectives to the process.

Local staff ultimately are responsible for the program's success. Local program staff benefit greatly by having a sense of ownership in the process from the planning stages to publication of the final report. Consider involving the following program staff:

- Administrator, supervisor, or director;
- Coordinators/specialists;
- Staff development team;
- Teachers, aides, and tutors;
- Intake/orientation staff and counselors;
- Data coordinator/data entry staff;
- Support staff;
- Learners (and learner advisory council members);
- Representatives from partner agencies (e.g., employment, social/health services, higher education); and
- Leaders from the host agency (e.g., superintendent, president, chief executive officer).

External monitoring teams lend fresh eyes and diverse perspectives and insights into the process. They might note different strengths and weaknesses of staff/student interactions during observations, they might probe learners and staff more deeply during interviews, and they might bring additional experiences to reviewing data, curricula, lessons, materials, and documents. Involving partners (or staff from collaborating agencies) is especially valuable when a local program serves a significant number of learners with special needs or offers a specific type of program (e.g., employment, workplace ESL, family literacy). In addition, the inclusion of staff from other programs is a direct way for the state to model peer mentoring and to foster resource exchange. For a minimal cost, monitoring provides a cross-training opportunity and can generate goodwill.

When the state office is small or understaffed, the state director might designate someone else to lead the monitoring team, for example, a content area leader for reading, mathematics, ESL, special needs, or learning disabilities. Alternatively, there might be a specialist in curriculum, assessment, alternative high schools, or family support. Based on the specific needs or profile of the program being reviewed, a monitoring team might include representatives from the following:

- Other local programs;
- Adult learning resource center or professional development centers;
- Corrections, community colleges and vocational technical programs; and
- Noneducation agencies, such as partners from the employment sector or human and social services.

4. Determine the resources available for monitoring local programs.

States are continually assessing priorities and resource availability. With the implementation of the NRS accountability measures, states have had an even greater responsibility to manage statewide data and to ensure that local programs are offering effective services, documenting progress, and reporting accurately.

With competing demands and dwindling resources (staff, time, and money for monitoring), many states are formalizing a two-pronged approach with desk reviews and on-site reviews to maximize data gathering while limiting the expenses traditionally associated with on-site visits. Desk reviews allow staff to use information that is regularly collected and reviewed on an ongoing basis without a significant increase in costs or workload. Costs of expensive, on-site reviews costs can be controlled in the following ways:

- Focusing the review on program-specific areas of concern;
- Keeping visits to 1 or 2 days; and
- Using local, partner, and neighboring staff on the monitoring team.

5. Determine the process for collecting data and rating criteria; conduct monitoring activities.

Monitoring activities should focus on both the outcomes and the indicators of program quality. The database can tell us who is being served, but it cannot tell us how they are being recruited or if those who are being served match local demographic needs. For example, a recruitment indicator might state, “Program successfully recruits the population in the community identified as needing literacy or ESL services.” To collect data that demonstrate *successful* recruitment, a desk review could include checking local census data and high school withdrawal rates to determine whether the program is reaching non-high school completers. The same sources can provide information related to the need for ESL classes in the community. On-site interviews with learners, staff, and partner agencies can reveal which recruitment strategies are most effective so that funds can be used judiciously. Monitors might also identify recruitment strategies that are not working for reasons such as dense print, poor translations, or inappropriate visuals, or merely because they are not getting into the right hands.

Likewise, the database can provide the number and percentage of learners who are being pre- and post-tested and the rates for those making educational gains. Yet, we also need to collect data on assessment, curriculum, and instruction to identify which strategies are promoting or hindering learner persistence and gain. The criteria specified in the indicators of program quality can help us design interview and observation questions such as the following:

- Are assessment policies being followed?
- How does assessment inform instruction?
- How are learners involved in goal setting and monitoring their progress?
- Is instruction relevant to individual needs, goals, and learning styles?
- How does instruction promote active learning?

Whether or not a local program will be part of an on-site review, many states ask programs to examine their data continually and to complete a program self-review periodically using the state's program quality indicators. By regularly using both the quantitative and qualitative data, staff can make informed decisions for ongoing operations and continuous improvement.

6. Report on the findings, including the recommendations.

Anyone who has ever participated in an evaluation knows how stressful it can be, both for the program being monitored and for the monitoring team. Keep in mind that the purpose is to improve, so every effort should be made to summarize objectively the most salient patterns that were observed, heard, and noted. An informal debriefing on-site allows the monitoring team and local program staff to discuss the findings and to clarify unknowns or discrepancies before a more formal written report is prepared. Initial recommendations can be shared verbally so that the local program staff can ask questions or request additional assistance.

Most states require a written report for on-site monitoring visits, which can include information from both the desk reviews and the on-site reviews. Writers might include a short description of the monitoring activities followed by a qualitative description of findings supported with quantitative information from the data. Anchoring findings to the program quality indicators reinforces the link between program processes and program outcomes. Whenever possible, provide concrete support for the findings by using data tables or charts intermixed with quotations from relevant interviews, citing documented evidence or even the frequency of strengths noted while on-site.

Preparing the written review in a timely manner also is important. For example, report recommendations will be more useful if they are presented in time for the local program to develop an improvement plan that can be submitted with their proposal. Finally, recommendations for program improvement should be based on objective data, should be realistic, and should be within the capacity of the program.

7. Follow up on the results.

Because monitoring is an ongoing process that leads to program improvement, follow-up is essential. In many states, local programs are required to respond to the monitoring report with a plan of action within 30, 60, or 90 days. Depending on the report findings and the state model for setting performance standards, the following options might be considered:

- Renegotiating performance standards;
- Reviewing the program improvement plan;
- Providing technical assistance;
- Offering incentives, if possible; and
- Sanctioning, if necessary.

If the primary goal is to foster improvement, make sure the program has the resources and commitment to implement its plan and to foster change. Some programs may need additional assistance in setting realistic objectives and measures. Other programs may need additional technical assistance through professional development, program-to-program coaching, or regular consultations, or by directing the program to necessary resources such as curriculum, teaching strategies for specific skills, grant writing, or research on any number of topics (e.g., persistence, language acquisition strategies, performance-based assessments, learning disabilities, or program outreach).