



Becoming an NRS Data Leader: Tips for the First 90 Days from State Data Leaders

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Being a data leader for the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) can be one of the most important, challenging, and interesting jobs. Yet as with many jobs, it may come with a sharp learning curve. To help orient new NRS data leaders to their role, the NRS project staff developed a checklist of tasks to complete over 3 months. The breakdown of tasks within the first 90 days includes learning about the responsibilities of an NRS data leader, assessing the data culture, identifying stakeholders, and setting professional and programmatic data goals and a related action plan.

In December 2021, the NRS project staff held a web event in which participants heard from two state adult education directors and a state NRS expert (see the list of panelists below) about their recommendations on what a new data leader can expect and plan to work on during the first 90 days in their role. At this event, the NRS project staff introduced the First 90 Days Checklist and explained where to find it and how to use it. This tip sheet summarizes the speakers' key points.

Panelists

Name	Title and Contact Information
Alex Harris	State Director for Adult Education , Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Preparation, Iowa Department of Education alex.harris@iowa.gov
Rosemary Matt	New York State (NYS) Director of Accountability , New York State Director of Accountability, Cayuga Community College rosemary.matt@cayuga-cc.edu
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What It Means to be a Data Leader and Relevance to Data Culture

A successful NRS data leader is defined by several qualities. NRS data leaders are knowledgeable about NRS policies, have technical expertise in NRS data collection and reporting, build and nurture a positive data culture, and provide program support for training on NRS policy and data use.

Creating a positive data culture is one of the most important tasks of an NRS data leader. In an environment that fosters a positive data culture, the three *Ps* of your program—*People, Processes, and Policy*—are all informed by data.

“Being a data leader means helping our local programs see the value of using the data for program improvement and when making decisions for the direction of the program, making sure training is available to the local programs on how to find the data they need and how to analyze their data.” — Nancy Olson

Panel Discussion Summary

What specific (data) resources did you find to be the most useful during your first 90 days, and how exactly did you use them?

Diminishing Returns—Stacked Venn Diagram. Alex specifically looked at eligible individuals, participants, post-testers, and those who made gains. He explained, *“Sometimes it’s not about getting more in the door if we aren’t making gains with the ones that are already in our programs 70–100 hours.”*

NYS Task Master. Rosemary and her team custom-designed the NRS Task Master, which provides clear direction to data staff by prioritizing the data management tools available in their management information system. Data staff use the NRS Task Master to identify the various data reports available in the system and the purpose of each report. The Task Master also provides a practical timeline for managing reports and next steps for troubleshooting potential errors.

NRS Reporting Site. Even before her first 90 days, Nancy looked at past performance for her state through the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education’s (OCTAE’s) NRS reporting site. She used performance report cards developed for each local program, and because she was not familiar with the state data system, she spent some time learning to navigate the system.

What specific areas of focus did you choose to evaluate/investigate during your first 90 days? How did you narrow it down to this? And what sort of data did you end up collecting, reviewing, and analyzing?

Access. Alex investigated who had access to these data and when/how frequently they were reviewing data. He knew he couldn’t be the only one looking at the data.

Compliance with NRS guidelines and NYS policy. Rosemary shared, *“Experience tells us that positioning the program well at the [outset] of the student’s experience makes for a solid foundation, both for the students and for the program as they progress toward student and program goals.”* New York state places a large emphasis on intake and requires every program to budget for case management staff. These staff become the key element in collecting and recording data to support student outcomes. They review attendance, assessment results, and class enrollment at the start of each program year.

Getting to know the local programs’ performance, enrollment, and other data. In addition to looking at overall performance, Nancy reviewed Table 4B and determined the post-testing rate for the state and for each local program.

What were some of the first things you noticed you wanted to do in your new role?

Validation and accuracy in state reporting. Alex mentioned that in addition to knowing who had access to the data, he wanted to make sure that there was a valid and trusted source of data, not only for end-of-year reporting but also for the information being shared with the state board of education and presented to local programs.

Bringing meaning to the data. Rosemary shared that “there was an awful lot of data going into the system ... but there seemed to be very little use for the data.” This led to a redesign of data reports that help staff dig through the data and highlight important elements that data managers and program managers find useful. It also helped program staff know how to input the data and review data to make it useful.

What were some near-term and long-term goals you set during your first 90 days?

Address timeliness of data. Alex was concerned about results not being available until a year after program performance, which does not provide enough time to take corrective action. He and his team addressed the need to have access to results in the hands of the decision makers within a more pertinent time frame.

Expand access and participation. In Iowa, correctional education data were not being reported as part of Adult Education and Literacy enrollment. Alex made adding correctional education reporting to the totals a goal for improvement.

Align data sources. Reporting in Iowa was done through three separate databases: the state NRS, high school completion reporting, and the community college data systems. Alex wanted to create a single data reporting system for all reporting.

Have a good understanding of why the required data elements provide useful information. Rosemary shared that a main goal was to get program staff to use data on the types of students they are serving to inform many aspects of programming. For example, data will suggest staffing and materials needed and community support referrals to make.

Improve Measurable Skills Gain (MSG) rates and grow the program using data. New York state was not meeting MSG targets. Rosemary and her team initially thought the root cause was a lack of instruction or appropriate materials. After further data analysis, they realized that New York’s MSG was low in part because students were not being post-tested before exiting their program. After New York set a 70% benchmark for post-testing students statewide, MSG increased significantly. The low MSG rate was not necessarily related to instruction but, rather, to post-testing, which improved after a policy change.

Meet the local program directors. With only seven adult education programs in the state of Nevada, Nancy felt it was essential to become acquainted with local program directors and to learn more about the program structure.

Use data to drive program improvement. Nancy specifically wanted to find out why the MSG, post-testing rate, and gains reflected in Table 4B were low.

What is something you wish you would have understood sooner about your new role?

Instructors disconnect with how their role matters in data reporting. Alex shared that while all instructors are critical to the success of a program, it is not clear to them how connected their work is to the data that are reported at the state level.

Not all staff members have the same level of interest in data. Rosemary noted that other staff, including program managers, do not share the same enthusiasm for analyzing data. This is due in part to a lack of understanding of the value of data.

First 90 Days Checklist Description

The [First 90 Days Checklist](#) will help state staff develop a strategic plan for the first 90 days in the NRS data leader role. The plan will reflect a review and assessment of several components of the state program. The checklist breaks down major tasks for each component into three manageable, 30-day increments:

- First 30 Days: Learn the Lay of the Land
- Second 30 Days: Assess Data Quality and Use in Your Program and Identify Goals
- Third 30 Days: Develop a Strategic Plan for Meeting the Identified Goals.

Using the checklist, an NRS data leader can:

- Clarify and describe the role of an NRS data leader.
- Set near-term and long-term goals for the role and program.
- Identify and assess processes and resources that will support data quality and use.
- Identify data strengths to position data teams and programs for success.
- Identify areas for improvement in data leadership for the data leader and state programs.

References

NRS Project Staff (2021). [Becoming an NRS Data Leader: Tips for the First 90 Days Web Event](#).