Program monitoring: The role of leadership in planning, assessment, and communication

Nolan Malone
Lauren Mark
Kirsten Miller
Wendy Kekahio
*Mid-continent Research for
Education and Learning*

Krishna Narayan
Island Innovation, LLC

This guide, one in a four-part series on logic models, examines three components of program monitoring—planning, assessment, and communication—and identifies key measures of successful leadership for each component.

As educators are increasingly called on to use data to inform improvement initiatives (and are being held accountable for doing so), there is a corresponding need for program leaders to monitor progress. Program monitoring—the systematic and continual observation and recording of key program aspects— can provide leaders with realistic assessments of progress and inform communications with staff and supporters. This reference guide examines three key components of program monitoring—planning, assessment, and communication—within the context of effective and efficient leadership.

This guide is one piece of a four-part Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Pacific series on logic models and program monitoring.[1] These guides provide a straightforward introduction to logic models for educators who are new to these concepts, and they may also serve as a refresher for educators who are already familiar with logic models and program monitoring. This guide serves as a supplemental resource to the Education Logic Model and the Program Outcomes, Measures, and Targets computer-based applications developed by REL Pacific administered by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning and available at http://relpacific.mcrel.org. The applications are interactive tools designed to lead educators through the process of developing logic models and using program monitoring tools.

Planning

Education programs are complex. They involve resources, time, and expertise from a multitude of stakeholders and often require clear and detailed communication on program results. When planning a program, it is important to clearly define goals and objectives, document required resources and activities, and articulate expected outcomes. Guiding teams through this process and assessing the cohesiveness

of the plan help accomplish the program's intended outcomes. For more information on these processes, refer to the REL Pacific guides on logic models (Kekahio, Cicchinelli, Lawton, & Brandon, 2014; Lawton, Brandon, Cicchinelli, & Kekahio, 2014) and program monitoring (Malone, Mark, & Narayan, 2014).

The planning process serves as the foundation for continuous monitoring and breaks down the entire program into smaller parts that are easier to articulate and comprehend. Strong leadership during the planning process can help ensure that limited resources are used effectively, that all components of a program leverage and complement one another, that work does not need to be discarded or redone, and that the results of the program are achieved.

The key measure of successful leadership during program planning is the ability for everyone involved in the program to clearly articulate milestones, expected outcomes, schedules, activities, and resource requirements.

Assessment

Program assessment uses the data gathered through program monitoring to appraise whether a program is on track to meet its expected outcomes. Continuous assessment and evaluation of a program's outcomes involve knowing where the program started from (baseline), where similar programs are (benchmarks), where the program is (actual progress), and where the program eventually wants to be (targets) and then realistically deciding whether the program is on the right path (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2010).

The program assessment process begins by deciding what is being measured (for example, grades, grade point average, or test scores) and the scale of that measure (for example, four-point scale, percentage, or percentile). Once measures are established, it is necessary to document benchmarks, baselines, and targets for each measure. Benchmarks, baselines, and targets allow comparisons of actual progress to prior performance, the performance of similar programs, and desired levels of performance. As part of the assessment process, program progress should be regularly updated, depending on the availability of new data.

It is necessary for a leader to assess where a program is in relation to its expected outcomes in order to continuously improve implementation. Additionally, a leader may enable program staff to track specific indicators and measures on their own to promote accountability. Assessing progress toward outcomes throughout program implementation, rather than at the end of the program, allows a leader to have the information necessary to make programmatic decisions. An effective leader recognizes the implications that any changes may have for all those involved in a program and thus carefully monitors that program's progress (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

The key measure of leadership during program assessment is the leader's ability to cite or retrieve data on progress toward outcomes at any given moment during the life of the program.

Communication

While it is important to track and assess program success, it is also vital to appropriately communicate with others about the progress being observed. Program progress and results can be shared internally with staff and other interested stakeholders, including outside groups, teams, and other programs within the school, district, or state.

Once an assessment is made, communication of program progress is necessary. Communication can occur through meetings, reports, management dashboards, or many other forms of relevant media. Communicating the status of a program is not always easy, so devising a communication strategy should begin early in the program planning process.

Like a car dashboard that displays the status of key systems, a program dashboard visually provides key information that conveys whether the program is on track, identifies areas needing improvement, and signals achievement of intended outcomes (figure 1). Program dashboards provide a way for program leaders to quickly determine actual program progress and to communicate that progress to stakeholders (such as staff, participants, community members, or funders). The term "dashboard" is used fairly frequently in business management situations, but it is relatively new in education settings. The idea is simple, a dashboard:

- Provides leaders information on a program in a very simple and quick way.
- Is intended to not overload the decisionmaker with too many unrelated details.
- Offers leaders further details on areas of interest or concern.

The ability to quickly "drill down" on an outcome and its related indicators within a program dashboard is a valuable leadership tool. Providing a program's team, stakeholders, or community the same information, including the underlying details of the program, is a powerful way to communicate. Dashboards allow groups to share one common set of data and one consistent methodology to assess those data, as well as visual representations of program progress. Such communication ensures successful program functioning, while helping prepare future education program managers.

Figure 1 provides an example of a program dashboard that can be created using REL Pacific's Program Outcomes, Measures, and Targets application. The dashboard visually displays a program's progress toward meeting short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes. A program leader can quickly determine which outcomes are being met (displayed in green), which are on track to being met (displayed in yellow), and which outcomes need further attention (displayed in red).

From a leadership perspective, sharing data and getting external perspectives are important. The ability to analyze raw data and share the results in reports or presentations increases visibility and enhances

Figure 1. Example of a program dashboard that can be created using REL Pacific's Program Outcomes, Measures, and Targets application
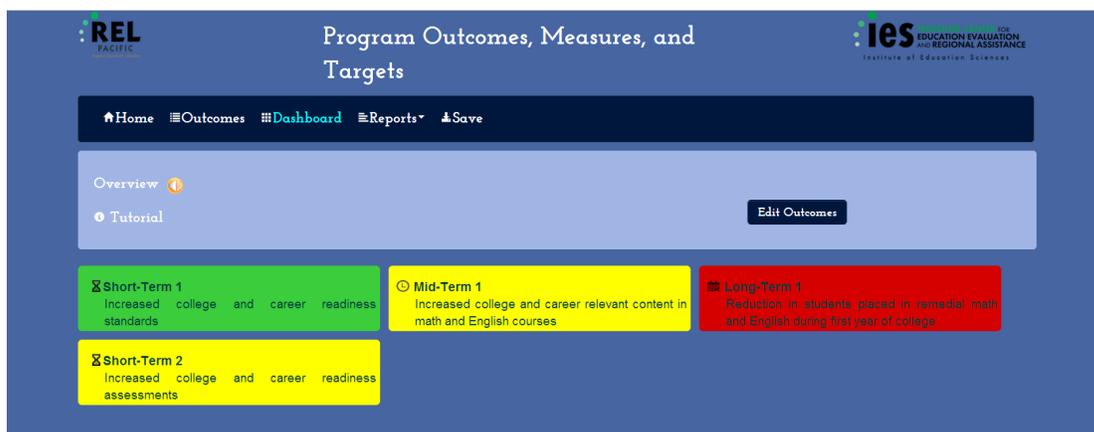
Source: Authors.

communication and team accountability for results. Ultimately, coordinated planning, program execution, assessment, and communication keep stakeholders excited, informed, and engaged in the program.

The key measure of leadership in program communication is the ability of stakeholders to access or cite data on progress toward outcomes during the life of the program.

Next steps

A strong leader fosters team cohesion, demands accountability, and clearly defines goals and outcomes. Proper program planning, monitoring, and consistent and effective communication can inspire stakeholders and communities alike to help ensure the success of an education program. Project management and program monitoring tools can provide assistance in the component areas discussed in this report, but program success ultimately depends on strong leadership that ensures that each element is executed in a timely, efficient, and effective manner.

Note

1. The REL Pacific reference guide series includes publications on designing and using logic models, the role of logic models in program evaluations, and the relationship among program outcomes, measures, and targets.

References

Kekahio, W., Cicchinelli, L., Lawton, B., & Brandon, P. R. (2014). *Logic models: A tool for effective program planning, collaboration, and monitoring* (REL 2014–025). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544779

Lawton, B., Brandon, P. R., Cicchinelli, L., & Kekahio, W. (2014). *Logic models: A tool for designing and monitoring program evaluations* (REL 2014–007). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544752

Malone, N., Mark, L., & Narayan, K. (2014). *Understanding program monitoring: The relationships among outcomes, indicators, measures, and targets* (REL 2014–011). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544758

Pinto, J. K. (2012). *Project management: Achieving competitive advantage*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Project Management Institute, Inc. (2012). *PMI Lexicon of Project Management Terms–Version 2.0*. Retrieved October 15, 2013, from www.pmi.org/PMBOK-Guide-and-Standards/~/media/Registered/PMI_Lexicon_Final.ashx

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. (2010). The program manager's guide to evaluation. Washington, DC. Retrieved October 15, 2013, from www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/program_managers_guide_to_eval2010.pdf

Waters, J. T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. A. (2003). *Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement.* Aurora, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED481972

Malone, N., Mark, L., Miller, K., Kekahio, W., & Narayan, K. (2014). *Program monitoring: The role of leadership in planning, assessment, and communication.* (REL 2014–034). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.