



National Reporting System
for Adult Education

A Project of the U.S. Department of Education

The Quick Guide to the NRS: A Primer with Questions and Answers

The foundation of quality data is a thorough understanding of the basic requirements of the NRS measures and methods. The NRS *Implementation Guidelines* is the definitive source of this information and is available in text and online versions at NRSWeb.org. That document however, well over 100 pages, does not lend it self to quick reading and interpretation for many state or local staff. This chapter meets the need for a succinct summary of the basics of the NRS. After providing a general overview of the history, measures, methods and reporting requirements, we elaborate on the main and finer points of the NRS using a question and answer format. The questions include actual ones posed by state and local staff to OVAE and NRS project staff over the years.

Overview

The NRS is the state accountability system for the federally funded adult education program. It defines the descriptive, participation and outcome measures that each state must report on adult education students, specifies the methods states are to use to collect these measures and establishes reporting procedures. States report NRS data annually to the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), U.S. Department of Education using data tables that contain aggregated state totals. The data provide a picture of adult education students that OVAE uses to report about the program to the Congress, other Federal agencies, the States and the general public. OVAE also uses data to set state performance levels and incentive awards.

History

The NRS began in the mid-1990s, a time when the U.S. Congress mandated that all Federal programs and agencies demonstrate the extent to which they meet their legislative goals and have an impact on their client populations. At the state level, state directors of adult education also expressed a strong interest to OVAE to develop a Federal accountability system to demonstrate the purpose and impact of adult education. To this end, the Division of Adult Education and Literacy within OVAE devoted its March 1996 national meeting of state directors of adult education to developing a framework for program accountability. The decisions made at this and subsequent meetings established the blueprint for the NRS.

The NRS received a legislative mandate in August 1998, with the passage of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act within the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

This Act established accountability requirements, including that states develop outcome-based performance standards for adult education programs, as one means of determining program effectiveness. OVAE designed the NRS through two support projects and the NRS went into effect in July 2000.

Measures

Outcome measures are the core of the NRS and include educational gain, obtaining a secondary school credential, obtaining employment, retained employment and entry into postsecondary education or training. These outcomes reflect the goals of the adult education program embodied in WIA: to improve English literacy and language skills necessary for self-sufficiency, to assist in completion of a secondary school education and to place students into employment and postsecondary education programs.

Educational Gain

Educational gain within the NRS is defined through advancement of students through 12 educational functioning levels, four levels for adult basic education (ABE), two levels for adult secondary education (ASE) and six levels for English as a second language (ESL). The levels for ABE are beginning literacy, beginning basic education, low and high intermediate basic education. For ASE, the levels are low and high adult secondary education. Each ABE and ASE level has a description of basic reading, writing, numeracy, and functional and workplace skills that can be expected from a person functioning at that level.

The six ESL levels are beginning literacy, low beginning ESL, high beginning ESL, low and high intermediate ESL, and advanced ESL. The ESL levels describe speaking and listening skills and basic reading, writing, and functional workplace skills that can be expected from a person functioning at that level. The skill descriptors illustrate the types of skills students entering that level are likely to have and are not a complete or comprehensive delineation of all of the skills at that level. Programs measure level completion and advancement by assessing students with a standardized pre- and posttest. Appendix A includes a complete listing of the educational functioning levels and descriptors.

Follow-up Measures

We call obtaining a secondary school credential, obtaining employment, retained employment and entry into postsecondary education or training follow-up measures because programs collect them after the student has exited the program. Follow-up measures apply *only* to students who have a goal, set at program intake, of achieving these outcomes. For example, the entered employment measure only applies to students who have the goal of getting a job, while the receipt of a secondary school credential measure only applies to learners who want to attain this outcome. After the student exits the program, staff must follow-up with the student to collect information on whether student achieved the follow-up outcome, either by a survey of students or through an electronic data matching method.

Other Required Measures

The NRS includes required descriptive measures, which are student *demographics*, student *status* in several areas, and *goals* for attending. These measures allow for a description and understanding of who attends adult education programs and for what reasons. The demographic measures include ethnicity, age, and gender. The status measures include employment status and whether the student has a disability or is on public assistance. The NRS requires collection of student goals for attending the program, used to compute the proportion of students who achieve the follow-up measures.

There are two *participation* measures—contact hours and program enrollment type—collected for both descriptive and analytic purposes. These measures record the amount of instruction that students receive and the number of students who attend in areas such as correctional programs, family literacy and workplace literacy.

Secondary, Optional Measures

The NRS also includes secondary measures, which are optional. States are not required to collect or report them and OVAE does not use them in evaluating state performance. The NRS includes these measures because several states and other stakeholders believed these measures were important to reflect the goals and purposes of adult education.

There are secondary student status measures of low income, displaced homemaker, single parent status and a measure to identify learning-disabled adults. The secondary outcome measures include: whether the student's public assistance grant is reduced or eliminated due to employment; measures of citizenship, voting, and community involvement; and family literacy measures, including involvement in children's literacy activities and education.

Another optional measure for national reporting is whether a student completed a work-based project learner activity. Work-based project learners is a state-designated program for students enrolled in a class with 30 hours or less of scheduled instruction with a goal of teaching specific workplace-related literacy skills.

Methods for Collecting Measures

The NRS has rigorous requirements for administering assessments for the purpose of measuring and reporting educational gain. Likewise there are methodological requirements for collecting employment measures and the other follow-up measures. Program staff collects the demographic, status and participation measures directly from students at intake and during enrollment.

Assessment

To measure educational gain for NRS reporting, local programs must pre- and posttest students using a standardized assessment that is approved for this purpose by

OVAE. To ensure standardization among local programs, OVAE requires states to have a written state assessment policy that identifies (1) the tests to be used to measure educational gain for both ABE/ASE and ESL students, (2) when pre- and posttests are to be administered, and (3) how test scores are to be tied to the NRS educational functioning levels for initial placement and for reporting student advancement across levels. States may select the assessments to be used within the states from among approved assessments and specify pre- and posttest times in accordance with test publishers' requirements. Appendix A includes the OVAE approved assessments with the educational functioning levels and descriptors.

Employment and Follow-up Measures

The NRS allows two methodologies for collecting follow-up measures: a local program survey or data matching. States can determine which method or combination of methods to use. Programs collect follow-up measures only after students have exited the program. An exited student is one who has completed instruction or has not attended for 90 consecutive days and is not scheduled for further instruction.

With the survey method, local programs identify exited students who had one of the follow-up goals (e.g., obtain employment, pass the GED tests) and then contact each student to determine whether the student achieved this outcome. Programs usually conduct telephone surveys to get this information. Data matching is a procedure performed at the state level by collecting from local programs individual records of students with the follow-up goals who exited. These records are matched through Social Security numbers with other state databases (e.g., unemployment insurance, GED testing) to determine whether the student achieved the outcome.

There are time limits, tied to calendar quarters after the student exits, for collecting the two employment measures. Students who had a goal of obtaining a job must be employed in the *first calendar quarter* after they leave the program to be counted as entering employment. Retained employment is measured in the *third calendar quarter* after exit on students who had a goal of employment and who obtained a job in the first quarter. There are no time periods tied to the other follow-up measures and they may be collected at any time from exit until the end of the state reporting period. Exhibit 1.1 summarizes the times at which data are to be collected and the student population to which each follow-up outcome measure applies.

Data Systems and Reporting

To meet NRS requirements, local programs must use an individual student record system to enter NRS data. The software for this system should have a relational database structure, whereby information on individual students can be related to other variables in the database and data can be aggregated and analyzed for specific subgroups. The software also must be capable of aggregating data to produce the required Federal reporting tables, or the data must be able to be imported into other software that produces the Federal tables. The NRS does not require any specific software product or system beyond these requirements.

Exhibit 1.1 Student Population and Collection Time for Follow-up Measures

Outcome Measure	Student Population To Include	Time Period To Collect Measures
<i>Entered employment</i>	<i>Learners unemployed at entry with employment goal</i>	<i>First quarter after exit quarter</i>
<i>Retained employment</i>	<i>Learners unemployed at entry with employment goal who obtain a job during first quarter after exit; and learners employed at entry with a goal of retained or improved employment</i>	<i>Third quarter after exit quarter</i>
<i>Placement in postsecondary education or training</i>	<i>Learners with a goal of entering postsecondary education or other training</i>	<i>Any time to the end of the reporting period (December 31)</i>
<i>Receipt of secondary diploma or G.E.D.</i>	<i>Learners with a goal of obtaining a secondary diploma or G.E.D. certificate</i>	<i>Any time to the end of the reporting period (December 31)</i>

States report annually all NRS measures to OVAE using reporting tables that included aggregated student data from local programs. There are 10 required tables and 7 optional tables, reported through an OVAE web site dedicated for this purpose. Reports are due by December 31st and cover the program period July 1 – June 30. States report the employment measures on different time periods, as explained in the *NRS Implementation Guidelines*.

NRS Quick Guide: Questions and Answers

This section provides additional information about the NRS using a question and answer format, organized to clarify requirements for educational gain, follow-up measures, other measures and data systems.

Educational Gain

1. Does the NRS require specific assessments or tests?

States are required to have their local programs use a standardized assessment approved by OVAE for placement into NRS educational functioning levels and measuring educational gain. However, states may select the approved assessments most appropriate for their instructional approach. OVAE requires states to have an approved assessment policy that specifies the assessments local programs are using, pre- and posttesting policies, training provided to local test administrators and other pertinent information.

2. How does OVAE approve tests for use in the NRS?

OVAE implemented in 2008 an annual assessment review process whereby test publishers requesting NRS approval submit technical information on the test to OVAE. An independent review panel consisting of assessment experts reviews this

information, which includes whether the test was developed to measure literacy and language skills reflected in the educational functioning level descriptors, has parallel alternate forms appropriate for pre- and posttesting, and was developed for use on adult education students. The panel makes a recommendation about approval to OVAE, which makes the final decision.

3. Does the NRS require that I assess students in all of the skills areas described for the educational functioning levels?

The NRS educational functioning levels describe skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening, numeracy, functional and workplace areas. Unless precluded by state policy, local programs should assess students in areas on which instruction will be provided. The NRS does not require that all skills areas be assessed. However, local programs should consult state policy for specific requirements in their states.

4. If assessment reveals that a student is in different educational functioning levels in different skill areas (e.g., lower in math than in reading) at what level should a program place the student?

NRS requires that programs place students at the lowest educational function area assessed. Level completion or advancement should also be determined by posttesting at this lowest level. For example, if a student places lower in math than reading, the student should be placed at the level determined by the math test core and level completion or advancement is determined by the posttest in math.

5. Can my state use different or additional educational functioning levels?

To measure educational learning gains, the NRS requires states to report on student entry, completion and advancement within the educational functioning levels as determined by NRS-approved standardized tests. However, states may use additional educational levels, as long as these additional levels can be combined into the NRS levels.

Can the successful completion of the official GED test be used to validate level completion of an educational functioning level?

Successful completion of the GED test cannot be used to validate educational gain and subsequent level completion because these tests are credentialing tests, not explicitly tied to NRS levels. However, because the high adult secondary education level is not part of the performance system (i.e., States do not submit a performance target for high ASE, and OVAE does not report State or national data on the completion rates of high ASE), students' completion of high adult secondary education *only* may be validated by their successful completion of the GED, based on State score requirements for earning the GED credential. The ultimate decision to use successful passage of the GED test to validate completion of the high adult secondary education level is a State decision.

If a State correlates the educational functioning level descriptors to the test objectives of standardized community college entrance exams, such as Compass, Acuplacer, TOEFL or Asset, can those tests be used to determine initial placement and/or level completion?

No. At a minimum, it must be established that these tests, or any such tests, have been designed to measure educational gain; the content or skills being measured by the tests are consistent with the NRS and appropriate for State use; and the tests have multiple forms that can generate valid pre- and posttest comparisons. In addition, the test publishers must cross-walk the tests to the NRS levels.

In the absence of a posttest score, can another assessment be used to document completion of functioning levels if the learner's score is high enough?

No. Educational gain is determined by posttesting on a different, but equivalent, form of the same test used for initial placement. Using one test for the pretest and another test for the posttest does not produce a valid measure of educational gain. It is essential to follow standard assessment protocols to ensure valid test results (e.g., the test content is appropriate; there are multiple versions or forms of the test for pre- and posttesting; and the pre- and posttests are conducted under like conditions).

Follow-up Measures

1. Do I have to set follow-up goals for every student?

No, programs should assign the follow-up goals related to employment, secondary credential attainment, or entry into postsecondary education and training only to students who want to achieve these outcomes as a result of participating in adult education instruction. Programs should use a goal setting process that allows identification of goals for students related to their needs, abilities, and the type of instruction that will be provided. Once any of the follow-up goals are set, however, programs must follow-up with students after they exit the program to determine whether they have achieved the goal. Conversely, if these goals are not set for the student, then his or her achievement of the outcomes cannot be counted in the NRS.

2. Why are time periods tied to the employment outcomes?

A Federal agency, the Office of Management and Budget, requires programs to use common measure definitions when reporting the same outcomes. We use the same definitions for entered and retained employment as used by workforce programs funded under Title I of WIA. For NRS reporting, programs measure whether students who enter with a goal of getting a job are employed in the first calendar quarter after they exit that program. For students that are employed at that time, programs must measure retained employment, determined by whether the student is employed two calendar quarters later (third quarter after exit). Title I programs collect additional employment measures, which the NRS does not require.

3. What if a student with an employment goal gets a job while enrolled? How do we report that?

If a student has a goal of employment and gets a job while enrolled, the program can count it as an entered employment outcome but only after the student exits from the program. Once the student exits, the program must verify the student has a job during the first quarter after exiting the program.

4. What if a student already has a job but has a goal to improve employment. How do we measure that?

In the NRS, a goal of improved employment is treated the same as retained employment. Programs should set the goal of retained employment for these students and then measure whether the student is employed in the third quarter after exit. If so, the outcome is counted as retained employment.

5. Are there required time periods for collecting the other follow-up measures of obtaining a secondary credential or entry into postsecondary education?

No. Once the student exits, achievement of these outcomes at any time can be collected and reported up to the end of the reporting period, December 31, for the program year in which the student attended.

Is there any way to report follow-up outcomes for students after the report has been submitted? For example, students may not complete the GED test until after the annual report is submitted on December 31st.

Table 13 of the annual performance report was adopted specifically to report core outcomes achieved but not reported in the previous year's report. Table 13 also shows that States can report on core outcomes achieved by students who had not previously established the outcome as a goal. In addition, a State may submit a revision to its annual report at any time. Certain milestones, however, such as confirmation of incentive awards; the report to Congress; and submission of the annual performance report to Congress, that once passed, cannot be revisited or changed to reflect revised data submissions.

6. What if a student with an employment goal does not get a job in the first quarter after exit? Do we collect information about employment for the employment retention measure?

If a student is not employed in the first quarter after program exit, the retained employment measure is not collected for that student. Only students with an employment goal who are employed in the first post-exit quarter are included for the retained employment measure.

Other Measures

1. Why are there optional measures and tables in the NRS?

WIA mandated the required NRS measures. However, during the development of the NRS, some stakeholders thought it was important to capture other possible outcomes of participation in adult education. OVAE included these other measures on an optional basis to allow states to report and collect these data. In addition, there are optional reporting tables that allow states to report data for student subpopulations or program areas. Periodically, OVAE evaluates whether to continue using the tables or make the mandatory based on the usefulness of the information to OVAE and the state directors of adult education.

2. What is the difference between work-based project learners and workplace literacy students in the NRS?

Work-based project learners are enrolled in a state-designated program that has a goal of achieving specific workplace-related literacy skills and is limited to 12-30 total instructional hours. *Workplace literacy* programs are designed to improve the productivity of learners through improvement of basic literacy, adult secondary and English language skills needed in the workplace. There is no instructional time limit on these programs. Programs do not collect the core outcome measures on students designated as work-based project learners, and these learners are counted separately in NRS tables. This measure is included in the NRS to allow States and programs to serve learners with a short-term learning need without having a detrimental effect on performance of the core outcome measures.

Do we have to follow the 12–30-hour framework for work-based project learners?

Yes, the 12–30-hour rule is a basic requirement for the work-based project learner program and cannot be altered.

3. Can my state collect other measures and use other categories for measure, such as for race and ethnicity?

Yes, states may have local programs collect and report on any additional measures desired, as long as the required NRS measures are also collected. Additional coding categories for measures (such as for ethnicity) may also be collected, as long as the additional coding categories can be combined into NRS coding categories.

What is the definition of “contact or attendance hours”?

Contact or attendance hours, for NRS reporting purposes, are hours of instruction or instructional activity the learner receives from the program. Instructional activity includes any program-sponsored activity designed to promote student learning in the program curriculum, such as classroom instruction, assessment, tutoring, or participation in a learning lab. (Note: Time spent on assessment can be counted only if the assessment is designed to inform placement decisions, assess progress, or inform instruction. Time used to take the GED test, for example, cannot be counted as instructional activity.)

Data Systems

1. What kind of database do I need to meet NRS requirements?

Local programs must use an individual student record system organized as a relational database. This database must allow disaggregation by subpopulations of students (e.g., age, race, sex), by program and site and must be capable of producing data for the Federal reporting tables. The database must also allow for identification of individual students by goal and exit date for follow-up.

2. Does the NRS require a specific type of database software?

States and local programs may use any software, as long as it meets the requirements listed above (e.g., produces a relational database, can disaggregate data, includes the NRS measures and coding categories, and can produce the Federal reporting tables). More information about data systems that states are using may be found at http://www.nrsweb.org/NRSwork/data_systems.aspx.