Looking For, And Learning From, Community Literacy Outcomes

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This article provides suggestions for community coalitions and other literacy service providers for implementing a performance management process that would be useful for helping coalitions and service providers to improve their efforts. It provides initial suggestions as to: the roles community coalitions might undertake in community literacy performance management; the outcome indicators that might be used to track progress; steps for selecting the indicators relevant to individual communities; handling some of the key implementation challenges; and the basic ways in which the performance information can be used. The article is based on the National Institute for literacy forthcoming guide to performance management for community literacy organizations.

In the past several years, governments, foundations, and other donors have begun asking, if not requiring, service providers to provide information on the results, the outcomes, of public or private funding. A major focus today in literacy, as well as most other service areas, has been on *accountability* for results. This objective is understandable. However, the authors believe that another important purpose, if not the most important purpose, of outcome information is to improve services and, thus, their outcomes for citizens. This is often called "performance management" or "managing for results." Fortunately, both purposes can be accomplished simultaneously. However, the information needed for managing service outcomes is likely to be considerably more detailed and less global than that needed for accountability.

The primary focus of this article is performance improvement, particularly what community literacy coalitions and their literacy improvement partners might do to obtain better information on the outcomes of their work, and then use it for improving services. But most recommendations also will help achieve greater accountability. This article draws heavily from "Guide to Performance Management for Community Literacy Coalitions" (in publication) prepared by the authors for the National Institute for Literacy.

We first suggest a number of key performance management roles for literacy coalitions. These roles apply whether the coalition is led by a private or public organization. Then we discuss the selection of outcome indicators and how data might be obtained for the indicators. We then discuss some key issues in implementation of the outcome management process. Finally, we all too briefly identify a number of the more specific uses of outcome information.

What Roles are Appropriate for Community Coalitions?

Overall, the role for literacy coalitions in performance management is to encourage and help partners and other literacy programs to track literacy outcomes and then use that information to improve their services so they become more effective in improving literacy.

Following is a set of roles a community literacy coalition can play in performance measurement and performance management. All coalitions may not be able to, or want to, take on all the roles suggested. Also, some coalitions might be able to perform particular roles themselves, while others might arrange for other entities to perform particular roles.

- Work with the literacy coalition's partners to select a core set of community outcome indicators. Encourage the inclusion of indicators that are similar to those used elsewhere in the country so comparisons can be made and "best practices" can be identified.
- Provide needed training and technical assistance in performance measurement and performance management to service programs in the community.
- Provide support for outcome data collection for service providers, for example for administration of questionnaires, such as by mail, phone, and/or in-person. Another example: arrange with your state government to regularly provide each of your community's adult education programs with the number of students who received their GED (for those students for whom obtaining a GED was a goal). This will enable individual adult education programs to obtain GED feedback and, if the counts are aggregated across programs, will provide the coalition with valuable information as to community progress. Another example: Provide help in evaluating and selecting the software system to collect the data.
- Provide support for analysis of the performance information, such as arranging for the receipt of questionnaires, their tabulation and basic analysis, and, perhaps, help in preparing programs' reports on the findings.
- Identify the needs of literacy programs for training (professional development) and technical assistance. The outcome information obtained should provide highly useful information in identifying needs.
- Use the findings to help attract literacy-improvement funding.
- Establish a process for identifying and disseminating successful best practices in the community. Outcome information should be a major part of the criteria used to identify candidate successful practices.
- Sponsor, along with community partners, annual recognition awards to programs in the community that had achieved high levels of outcomes that year and those programs whose outcomes had improved substantially.

- Prepare regular annual reports to the community on the community's literacy condition (such as annual "State of Literacy in Our Community" or "How Are We Doing: Literacy in our Community" reports).
- Bring literacy providers together to jointly seek funding for, and to collaborate on, data collection and reporting.

What Outcomes Should be Tracked and How?

Literacy coalitions provide a wide variety of services. For each major activity the coalition should consider tracking key outcomes. Below is one categorization of the services that appear typical of those undertaken by coalitions. Not all coalitions undertake all of these ten services. The first four services listed below are direct literacy improvement services. Each of these services might be provided by the coalition itself or by literacy-service providers in the community. These services are categorized by type of client. (These categories are intended to include specialized types of literacy services, such as health, financial, or computer literacy, not specifically addressed in this article). The last six services are support services, ones provided by coalitions to partner organizations and the community as a whole.

- Delivering adult literacy programs.
- Delivering pre-school programs.
- Delivering programs for school-age youth.
- Delivering workforce literacy programs.
- Providing information to the public on learning opportunities.
- Providing professional development activities for literacy service providers.
- Recruiting teachers/volunteers.
- Disseminating information on best/successful practices
- Coordinating literacy activities among funders, sponsors, and service providers
- Tracking and reporting progress in improving literacy to the community

How can the outcome indicators for these services be chosen?

Here are suggested steps for selecting them:

- Convene your literacy-building partners to participate in the selection process. Include representatives of donors and direct service providers. (The latter are likely to have to perform much of the data collection work.) Their input will help ensure that the outcome performance measurement process is practical.
- A community has many different ways to try to meet its literacy needs. Support may come from the school system, government, community non-government organizations, other citizen groups, and parents. Preferably, representatives from all such groups will

participate in selecting outcomes to be tracked.

- This participation will likely considerably increase the acceptability of the later implementation process. It will make it more likely that your partners will provide the needed data and then use the information generated to improve their services.
- Start by obtaining agreement on an overall mission (vision/objective) statement for literacy in the community. This statement should focus on results and identify who the customers are in your community.
- Form a working group to draft the set of outcomes, outcome indicators, and data sources for each indicator. Include both "intermediate" and "end" outcomes (See Exhibit 1 for definitions). Separate working groups are likely to be needed for each major program category such as pre-school, school-age, adult, and workforce literacy.
- Obtain consensus from your literacy partners on the outcomes and outcome indicators needed.

Exhibit 1

Some Basic Performance Indicator Definitions

Inputs:	These indicate the amount of resources applied, i.e. the amount of funds or number of employees. When related to output or outcome information, the combined information can provide indicators of efficiency/productivity.
Outputs:	These measure the quantity of work activity completed, such as number of classes held or number of teachers trained. Outputs are expected to lead to desired outcomes, but by themselves do not tell anything about the outcomes.
Intermediate Outcomes:	These measure changes in client attitudes, behavior, condition, etc., changes that literacy programs seek to improve and are expected to lead to the end outcomes, but are not themselves "ends." Examples are the extent to which parents provided learning help to their children and the extent to which adults who need literacy help are aware of, and enroll in, the literacy assistance programs in the community. Also included here are characteristics relating to the quality of the service provided to clients, such as the service's accessibility and timeliness.
End Outcomes:	These measure the results ultimately sought, particularly improved literacy and improved earnings.

You don't need to start from scratch. For example:

- Consider indicators already being collected in your community, including those collected by individual literacy programs.
- Check the Internet to identify what has been done in other communities or in research efforts. Adapt these ideas to the needs in your own community.
- Use "outcome sequence charts," also called "logic models," or "results chains," to help identify outcomes and outcome indicators. These can be very useful for identifying needed indicators and also for training staffs in outcome management. See the Guide for more detail.
- Consider the candidate indicators identified in the Guide and the examples in Exhibit 2.
- Select the draft set of outcome indicators only after a reasonably practical data collection procedure has been identified.
- Disseminate the draft plan to all partners for their comments and suggestions. Make appropriate changes based on those comments and suggestions.
- Seek agreement among the literacy partners on what core outcome tracking should be done and the respective roles of each partner. The literacy coalition should focus on these core indicators to compile a comprehensive picture of literacy in the community.

Note: These agreements need to identify only the core outcome indicators to be collected. The agreements should encourage each program to also track any other indicators it believes would be useful for managing its program.

- Provide assistance to those responsible for data collection and use of the data.
- Look for successful ("best") practices based on those programs with unusually high outcomes. Disseminate information on those practices to other programs.
- Use the outcome information to identify weak performers to whom the coalition would offer technical assistance and training.

Note: Comparative information can be threatening to individual programs. However, the reason for weak performances may be lack of resources (or other factors outside the control of the individual programs). Sometimes outcome data can help programs with weak outcomes make their case for more funding.

Examples of outcome information that coalitions might track.

The Guide identifies 55 candidate outcome indicators and briefly discusses possible data collection procedures for them. Exhibit 2 provides examples of the indicators. Most coalitions are likely to want to start small with a selection of such indicators, ones relevant to the particular services the coalition provides. In this article, we only have time to discuss briefly a few outcome indicators.

Overall community literacy

An important role for literacy coalitions is that of reporting to the community on the level of overall community literacy, such as by issuing an annual or biennial "State of Literacy in our Community" report. To the extent possible, the report would cover all four client groups (such as adults, pre-school, school-age youth, and workforce adults), identifying literacy progress for each group. As literacy coalitions that have attempted this will undoubtedly point out, this is not an easy task.

Major sources for this information in the past have been the decennial census (one of the few sources that provide data applicable to a coalition's particular geographical area), the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, and National Assessment of Educational Progress (neither of which have provided data at the community level). Unfortunately, these have been periodic and do not provide sufficiently timely data for tracking community literacy progress.

Fortunately, the U.S. Bureau of Census has begun conducting an annual survey, the American Community Survey. The survey covers the same literacy related items as the decennial census. The sample is very large, providing data annually for communities with 65,000 people or more.

However, as with the decennial census these surveys do not directly ask most respondents about their literacy levels. Information is provided on the number of years of schooling, number of persons who speak a language other than English at home and do not speak English well at all, and whether the person was born in the United States, and if not, what year they came to live in the United States. These provide proxies for literacy. While such information is not entirely satisfactory, it is better than what has been available in the past and much better than nothing.

The preferable option is for a community to conduct its own household survey. This can be costly. A much less expensive approach, and considerably more practical, is to add questions to any existing community surveys. Fortunately, increasing numbers of communities are conducting regular surveys that contain feedback from citizens on a variety of public services and issues.

We suspect that a community survey option may be surprisingly practical for many communities if one or more of the following situations apply:

- The community already undertakes regular citizen surveys. Only a few questions would need to be added to obtain basic information on literacy levels.
- Businesses and community foundations in the community are willing to fund such a survey. Only random samples of the community's population need to be surveyed to obtain reasonable valid information. Even a sample as small as 500 households in the community may be quite adequate for providing at least roughly right information. Coalitions with large populations would likely feel more comfortable with samples of about 1,000.

Such surveys might be conducted for about $25,000-$50,000. These surveys might be undertaken perhaps every other year, rather than every year. The surveys might oversample those neighborhoods in the community expected to have substantial numbers of persons with literacy problems, rather than randomly covering all households in the community. In essence, this leads to obtaining data on such a basic outcome indicator as the "number and percent of adults and children in the community who have considerable literacy problems." If the sample is drawn so as to be reasonably representative of the community's population, the findings should provide reasonable estimates of the number of persons with literacy problems in the community.

The survey should also ask respondents to identify the literacy services they believe they need. It should seek information on demographic characteristics. Then the performance data can be broken out by those demographic groups, such as race/ethnicity and major geographical sections of the community in which the respondents reside.

In summary, bringing to the community's attention the extent of literacy, or rather illiteracy, in the community and tracking progress over time, can be a major role of any community coalition. The success of the coalition in bringing about support for literacy improvement and in helping improve literacy can likely be helped considerably by obtaining and disseminating such information throughout the community.

Outcome indicators for coalition "support" services. It is very difficult, and usually impractical, for a coalition to link any of its support roles (such as providing information to the public on learning opportunities and helping literacy improvement organizations by providing professional development or recruiting teachers) to literacy end outcomes. However, a number of important intermediate outcomes of a coalition's efforts can be measured and tracked. Feedback from a coalition's own direct customers can be a major source of information for many, if not all, of its supporting roles. Obtaining such feedback and tracking progress in these roles can likely be done in a quite practical way.

Outcome indicators 17-25 in Exhibit 2 illustrate the information that can be tracked. The sources of the information can be systematic surveys. If the surveys are done carefully, the coalition can obtain feedback in the same survey on such issues as unmet needs for particular assistance, as well as feedback on the quality and extent of past assistance that each organization received from the coalition. The findings from such surveys should be used by your coalition primarily to improve its future services, rather than for "accountability" purposes. The same questionnaire can likely be used to obtain feedback on most,

if not all, of the coalition's support service roles. The sample questionnaire provided in the Guide includes questions for five coalition support roles. It would provide data for many of the outcome indicators likely to be needed.

The questionnaire can be quite short, requiring little burden on respondents. The questionnaire should also ask respondents to identify their reasons for service ratings that were less than satisfactory. The final question should ask respondents for their suggestions for improving the coalition's services in the future. (The Guide provides an example of what such a questionnaire might look like.)

Some Central Performance Management Issues

This final section discusses issues likely to be asked by a coalition wanting to implement, or improve on, a performance management system.

How often should the measurements be undertaken?

Most outcomes should be measured and reported at least annually. For indicators that may be particularly expensive to collect or those whose outcome values are not likely to change frequently, every other year might be sufficient, such as some overall community literacy rates. Individual literacy improvement programs in the community are likely to need more frequent data, such as semi-annual, or even quarterly, reports to provide more timely information for their own use.

Does the coalition need to collect data on all of these outcome indicators?

No. It is often best to start with outcome information already being collected, identify major gaps, and initially focus on those gaps. As suggested above, seek consensus from the literacy community as to which measurement improvements are most important and should be addressed first, and on the pace of expansion of data collection.

Is coverage of all literacy service providers needed?

No, this is not possible nor is it essential. The data for some indicators will need to come from direct service providers such as the adult education programs in the community, or school systems for literacy levels in school age children. For the various coalition supporting roles, the data will need to come from those organizations to which the literacy coalition has provided service during the year, such as professional development or technical assistance for training. It is not at all likely to be possible to obtain feedback from all literacy service providers. All service providers should be invited, and

encouraged, to participate. Inevitably, however, some will be too small to want to provide information and others will not be able to, or want to, provide such information, fearing that the work to collect and report the information takes too much time away from already very busy schedules.

Can comparisons be made with other coalitions?

To the extent that coalitions meet with other coalitions and other related professional organizations to exchange information, similar outcome indicators will likely begin to be adopted. In the short run this is not likely to be a very effective process. Over the long run, however, it is likely that if many coalitions undertake substantial outcome measurement, they may want to learn what levels of outcome other communities are achieving and why. A national organization might take on the job of collecting similar outcome data from across the country and reporting the comparisons—as is happening for many other public services. As appears to be the case in other public services, public and private organizations (such as the federal government and foundations) are likely to want comparative information, taking whatever they can get that seems at least reasonably comparable.

How accurate does the information have to be?

One of the big mistakes in outcome measurement in the United States (and elsewhere in the world) has been to push for jumping from little or no outcome information to requiring high levels of precision, even though obtaining such high levels would be very costly if not completely impractical. The view of this article is that it is better to be roughly right than precisely ignorant.

How much time is it likely to take?

The process described here can be expected to require no less than two years to fully implement core activities. The time required to yield improved community literacy outcomes is difficult to say. On one hand, a coalition might be able to achieve some early small scale improvements. For example, the coalition might be able to provide convincing evidence of the need for more instructors. Then, with that evidence, they may obtain funds to increase the number of instructors, thus leading to more students receiving literacy help. This may then lead to some of those helped showing early evidence of real gains in literacy. On the other hand, to show substantial improvement in the aggregate community literacy rates is likely to be a formidable task and take many years, especially given the highly limited resources available to coalitions.

The Big Challenge: Using the Data to Get Better Results

The key issue for literacy coalitions is whether they will actually use the outcome information to improve literacy in their communities. If not, of course, the effort and cost to provide the information will be wasted.

Unfortunately, for most public services, few managers have become familiar with the many uses of such information, other than to use it to satisfy the requests of funders. Exhibit 3 provides a set of uses for outcome information. Some of these have already been noted in this article.

Basic uses include:

- Help in identifying literacy improvement areas and organizations for which training and technical assistance is needed.
- Help in identifying where the major literacy needs exist in the community (both in terms of location in the community and demographic characteristics).
- Provide a basis for recognizing and providing recognition awards to programs, staffs, and volunteers for successful outcomes.
- Provide a basis for identifying, from the outcome information, what appears to be working well and to disseminate such "best practices" throughout the community.
- Help in motivating the community to address literacy problems in the community.
- Provide evidence for securing funding targeted to specific identi-fied needs.

Ultimately, the purpose of tracking outcomes is for the community literacy partners to learn how to improve literacy in the community.

Exhibit 2

Examples of Literacy Outcome Indicators[1]

Overall Community Literacy Condition

1. Number and percent of adults that have completed less than "X" years of school.
2. Number and percent of persons that speak a language other than English at home and do not speak English well or at all.
3. Number and percent of pre-school children screened whose measured literacy level indicated that: (a) they were in need of additional help; or (b) they required intensive assistance.
4. Number and percent of tested school children whose measured literacy level indicated that they: (a) were at or above grade level; (b) were in need of some additional help; or (c) required intensive instruction.

Adult Literacy Programs

5. Number and percent of learners that complete or advance one or more educational functioning levels from the starting level measured on entry into the program.
6. Number and percent of adults who obtain their GED or graduate from high school within, say, 12 months after completing the adult education program.
7. Number and percent of participants in the adult education program who reported that the service provided to them was either excellent or good (not fair or poor) as to its: (a) convenience of location and time; (b) quality of the instruction (considering both the teacher and teaching materials); and its (c) helpfulness in improving literacy.

Pre-school Literacy Programs

8. Number and percent of pre-school children served by the program who subsequently entered kindergarten "ready-to-learn" on the literacy components of tests or of observation-based measurements.
9. Number and percent of parents who, after program completion, reported spending substantially more time with their children in literacy-related activities.
10. Percent of participating parents who reported that the service provided to them and their children was either excellent or good (not fair or poor) as to its: (a) convenience of location and time; (b) quality of the instruction (considering both the tutor and tutoring methods or materials); and its (c) helpfulness in improving literacy.

Programs for School-Age Youth

11. Number and percent of school-age children served by the program whose scores on the literacy components of tests had improved significantly at the end of the program.
12. Number and percent of school-age children served by the program whose scores on the literacy components of tests at the end of the program placed them at least at the appropriate grade level for their age.
13. Number and percent of school-age children served by the program whose teachers (or, perhaps, parents, or even the students

themselves) reported the participants had improved significantly in their literacy skills after receiving the program's service—and that the program's service had been an important factor in that improvement.

Workforce/Workplace Literacy Programs

14. Number and percent of employees whose scores improved b "X" amount from the starting level measured on entry into the program.
15. Number and percent of program participants who were promoted to positions requiring greater literacy skills, or took other jobs in the business requiring greater literacy skills, within "X" months after completing the program.
16. Number and percent of (a) program participants and (b) employers of participants who feel the program helped improve their ability to do their job to a large or moderate extent.

Providing information on learning opportunities

17. Number, and percent, of those needing literacy help that saw or heard about learning opportunities through coalition-sponsored information activities.
18. Number, and percent, of persons seeking information on literacy services that used the information to enroll in a literacy improvement program.

Professional Development

19. Number and percent of professional development recipients who report that the coalition's professional development opportunities led them to make changes in their service delivery practices.

Recruiting volunteers

20. Number of volunteers that the coalition helped recruit who are known to have performed volunteer work for one or more literacy programs.
21. Number and percent of programs that report that the coalition's recruitment efforts had helped them to a substantial extent.

Coordinating literacy activities among funders, sponsors, and service providers

22. Number and percent of coalition partners who reported that the coalition activities had been of substantial help to them.
23. Number and percent of coalition partners that reported that they found the coalition to have helped them substantially improve their services to persons needing literacy assistance.
24. Number and percent of coalition partners who reported that the coalition activities had contributed substantially to increasing the amount of resources for improving literacy in the community in the past year.

Tracking progress in improving literacy in the community.

25. Number and percent of programs that report that the coalition's assistance on tracking literacy progress has been useful to them in improving their literacy services.

Exhibit 3

Uses for Performance Information

Identify Needed Improvements

- Identify community literacy level/needs for literacy services
- Identify progress being made by individual literacy programs
- Identify service procedures or policies that need improvement

Motivate and Help Staff and Volunteers

- Provide a basis for regular staff program reviews
- Identify training and technical assistance needs
- Provide recognition awards to programs, staff and volunteers for good outcomes

Identify What Works

- Identify and disseminate successful practices Best Practices
- Test program changes or new programs

Demonstrate Accountability to the Board, Funders, and the Public

- Inform board members
- Inform current and potential funders
- Report to the community

NOTES

[1] This list has been abstracted from "Guide to Performance Management for Community Literacy," National Institute for Literacy, Washington DC, 2008.

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