



IN PRACTICE
*Lessons for
and from
Practitioners*

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Setting Strong Benchmarks

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This post is the first in a new web series on the work of MDRC's technical assistance teams. Subsequent posts will offer tips, tools, and stories from our collaboration with programs.

Program managers and funders alike are increasingly asking themselves or their grantees, "Are we where we should be at this point in time?" The answer to this question can often be found by using benchmarks, which provide achievable, short-term goals that can help gauge progress toward bigger, longer-term goals that are integral to service delivery.

In research studies, setting benchmark performance goals takes on a new level of importance. Benchmarks help a program focus on delivering the essential services that are fundamental to its theory of change.

Social welfare programs often track these "big three benchmarks": Enrollment, participation, and staff performance. For example, in a family intervention, how many parents are enrolled per month? To track participation, how many are attending planned workshops and counseling sessions? Possible staff performance benchmarks might include measures of quality, such as "successful contact with a referral partner" or "successful job placement."

Here are key questions to work through when setting benchmarks:

- **How are you defining your benchmark?** If your benchmark measures the number of enrolled participants, define what "enrolled" means. Does it mean that all paperwork is completed, or can some be completed later? Good benchmarks are easy to understand.
- **Do you set the benchmark to achieve a goal, or exceed it?** Consider any constraints (limits on space or staffing) or rewards (funder bonuses) relating to a benchmark. Good benchmarks are shared with, agreed upon, and understood by key stakeholders — particularly staff members who are responsible for delivering services related to benchmarked goals.
- **How often will progress be assessed, and by whom?** Programs with ambitious enrollment goals or narrow eligibility criteria may want to track progress weekly; others may only need to take stock monthly. Good benchmarks are measurable against a concrete standard, or goal.
- **Which staff members are responsible for realizing the benchmarks?** If multiple staff members are involved, they must sort out individual roles and responsibilities in reaching the goal. Good benchmarks are achievable and realistic.
- **Are data available to track progress toward the benchmarks?** Plan on involving information technology staff early and often to ensure reliable tracking. Good benchmarks are quantifiable.
- **What happens if the benchmark is not met?** Are adjustments possible? What repercussions might come into play? Good benchmarks are high priorities for an organization.

NEXT MONTH, IN PRACTICE WILL FEATURE A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE OF HOW TO SET ENROLLMENT BENCHMARKS.

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