

How to Define What Outcomes and Related Metrics Matter Most

Measurement isn't just a yardstick for success; it's a tool for learning and improvement.

The basic steps of nonprofit measurement and learning are relatively straightforward and grounded in strategy: **Define** what outcomes and related metrics matter most based on your theory of change. **Measure** the metrics by collecting quantitative and qualitative data. **Learn** and improve based on the data you collect. Throughout, it's important to engage stakeholders (constituents, communities, and your board), from incorporating input on what outcomes matter to closing the loop once you have the data.



The resources that follow focus on one aspect of measurement, defining what outcomes and related metrics matter most:

- **A set of guiding questions** to help your leadership team align on an outcomes framework based on your theory of change and identify metrics
- **Examples** of how organizations have applied these guiding questions to align on outcomes

For more practical tips across all these steps, see [“A Practical Guide to Nonprofit Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning”](#) on Bridgespan.org.

Questions for Leadership Teams to Define What Outcomes and Related Metrics Matter Most

What are your organization's goals (intended impact) and how will you achieve them (theory of change)?

- You should be clear on your intended impact and theory of change first, since your measurement strategy needs to be grounded in them. (For more, see "[What Are Intended Impact and Theory of Change and How Can Nonprofits Use Them?](#)" on Bridgespan.org.)
- Consider also engaging stakeholders (e.g., constituents, front-line staff, and board) to create a learning agenda to identify, prioritize, and address critical open questions and knowledge gaps, such as:
 - What aspects of your theory of change and/or logic model have the least evidence (whether internally or externally)?
 - What strategic decisions tied to your impact can't you make over the next 3-5 years because you don't have the data/evidence?

What inputs, outputs, and outcomes (your logic model) map onto your intended impact and theory of change?

- Thoughtfully engage constituents and communities in defining outcomes. (For more, see "[How Nonprofits Can Incorporate Equity into Their Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning](#)" on Bridgespan.org.)
- Articulate what outcomes you would see in the short, medium, and long term.
- Focus on outcomes that are directly attributable to your work, if possible, as opposed to those that you and many others contribute to.

What metrics will help you know that these inputs, outputs, and outcomes occurred?

- Select the fewest metrics to each that would signal you are on or off track.
- Consider whether the burden of collecting data on the metric is worth what it will tell you about your impact.

What tools will you use to collect that data? How often will you need to collect it?

- Use third-party tools that already exist, where possible.
- Tie timing of data collection (e.g., monthly, quarterly, annually) to when your leadership team will need it for decision making.

The following pages share examples of outcomes frameworks, including one from ImmSchools, an organization profiled in the article "[A Practical Guide to Nonprofit Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning](#)" on Bridgespan.org, and a template your organization can use to develop your own.

EXAMPLE

Outcomes framework for ImmSchools, a nonprofit supporting schools to create a positive school culture and climate for all



Metric (data source)

In the next five years, we will double our reach in public schools, ensuring they offer affirming, safe, and welcoming spaces for all to thrive, regardless of immigration status

Theory of action	Inputs	Outputs	Short-term outcome	Medium-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Create and codify professional development and other school-based interventions for cultivating a positive school culture and climate for immigrant students	Staff with deep expertise in immigration and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools complete full curriculum <p>Reach: # of students, families, and educators reached (operations data)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School leaders implement inclusive policies Educators employ culturally informed practices Students and families increase participation in school and community spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools reflect a safe and welcoming school culture Parents and caregivers feel safe and welcome to support their children Students feel a sense of belonging in school and increase attendance at school <p>Student sense of belonging: % increase in student level of agency and psychological well-being (our survey data)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students realize the academic and social-emotional growth students experience when they feel a sense of belonging at school (e.g., improved graduation rates, college readiness)
Convene school, system, and community partners to unearth promising practices	Codified curriculum and robust supports such as trainings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published research on impact <p># of publications</p>	<p>School culture: % of partner schools adopting core components of immigrant-friendly school culture and climate framework (our rubric)</p>		<p>Existing literature and research partnerships</p>
Engage local, state, and national leaders in strategic advocacy to ensure optimal conditions	Policy and advocacy working group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners engaged and aligned on a shared policy agenda <p># of partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement with local, state, and/or federal policy makers and influencers <p>Outreach: # of media mentions, conference presentations</p> <p>Relationships: # of meetings with elected officials, participation in coalitions</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local, state, and/or federal policies aligned with framework <p># of policies adopted</p>
	Evidence-based research on program model				

1 ImmSchools has started with tracking interim metrics for its systems change work, since it is newer and ultimately supports their other outcomes

2 ImmSchools pivoted to using fewer data collection tools (e.g., a rubric and survey), all clearly connected to what they want to learn about their theory of change

3 ImmSchools focuses its measurement where there is less evidence in the field (e.g., on activities that build culture) and leverages strong existing evidence to connect the dots

EXAMPLE

Stylized example of an outcomes framework for a direct service nonprofit that implements a tutoring program in schools

What are your organization's goals and how you will achieve them?	Theory of Change			Intended Impact	
	We deliver an evidence-based tutoring program to public high school students who are behind in state math tests			In the next five years, we will cut in half the racial disparity in graduation rates in the three largest school districts we work in	
What inputs, outputs, and outcomes map onto your intended impact and theory of change?	Input	Output	1 Short-term outcome	Medium-term outcome	Long-term outcome
	Staff who tutor students	Students participate in tutoring program	Improved competency in key math skills	Improved state math test scores	Improved graduation rates
What metrics will help you know that these inputs, outputs, and outcomes occurred?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % staff who receive all trainings • Student prior math test scores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % attendance • % completion • % student satisfaction 	2 • % improvement in math skill tests by race	• % improvement in math state test scores by race	• % graduation rates by race
What tools will you use to collect that data? How often will you need to collect it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our operations data (annual) • School district test score data (annual) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our program data: (quarterly) 	3 • Our program data: skill assessment before/after program (quarterly)	• School district test score data (annual)	• School district graduation data (annual)



These outcomes are directly attributable to its program. They would realistically be seen in the short, medium, and long term



Even in this simple example, there are many metrics this nonprofit could list (e.g., breaking down scores by each math competency like topics within algebra, geometry, pre-calculus, etc.), but it focuses on the most important metric for its intended impact



Using a mix of program and administrative (school district) data, this nonprofit collects shorter-term metrics more often, so leadership can make adjustments, as needed, if they are off track toward their medium- and longer-term goals

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