

NPEA DATA COUNTS FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS SUMMER 2018

Introduction

The NPEA Data Counts (NDC) project was launched at the 2015 NPEA annual conference in Philadelphia, after a year-long collaboration among twelve (12) program leaders, three researchers, and NPEA staff. Funded by The Esther A. & Joseph Klingenstein Fund, this project was designed to bring together member organizations and explore the possibility of developing data collection strategies to show collective impact. The NDC pilot group worked together to create, define, and pilot test a set of 10 Key Indicators that were deemed by the group to be essential to measure progress and success for programs in the educational access and equity space. These indicators, and the 23 data points that represent them, include demographic and background characteristics of the students, as well as progress measures in middle school, high school, and beyond. Specific definitions were provided for each element, and the team developed a Data Collection Tool that would allow NPEA to assemble robust, aggregate, and comparable data across the network. It was hoped that with this approach, members would be in a better position to collect and use data themselves to understand program effectiveness and deepen impact throughout the field.

After launching the NDC Indicator List and fine-tuning the Data Collection Tool, NPEA promoted the use of NDC among members by...

- Conducting two rounds of data collection in the Fall of 2015 and 2016, focusing on nonprofit/program and school members, about 65 percent of whom responded each year;
- Producing several data-related reports including A Summary of Aggregate Findings for each set of data collected (2015 & 2016), “Dashboards” that compare individual program data to aggregate findings (2017), and a “Data Spotlight” that highlights results and program practices on one of the NDC Indicators (2018);
- Administering and analyzing a member survey (2017) to elicit feedback on the process and deepen understanding about how organizations use and work with data;
- Focusing attention on the importance of data by featuring NDC in member communications, offering sessions about NDC and data at every annual conference, and hosting introductory data-related webinars.

NPEA has made a significant effort to leverage NDC to encourage organizations to pay attention to data on a regular basis. Ultimately, it is hoped that by improving data collection, use, and analysis, higher-quality programs and better outcomes for youth will result. This is a long-range goal that will take time to be realized. The present study was pursued to explore what programs report they have gained from NDC so far. What is learned from this study is intended to inform the shape of the next phase of NDC.

The Study Design

Brigham Nahas Research Associates (BNRA) proposed a qualitative approach to this research to deepen what was learned from the survey initiated by NPEA last year. NPEA staff selected and recruited member organizations to participate. These included programs that were known to be invested in working with data and who had a range of experiences with NDC. They were asked to participate in either a focus group facilitated by BNRA at the 2018 NPEA conference in New Orleans or an individual interview, in-person or over the phone after the conference.

Research protocols were developed jointly by BNRA and NPEA, including four main question areas:

- How are member organizations involved in working with data in general and with NDC in particular?
- What are their impressions of NDC products (including the Indicators List/Tool, summaries of findings, dashboard comparisons, and others)?
- What impacts has NDC had on the organizations and how they work with data? How have organizations used NDC and data to make program changes and inform practice?
- Looking ahead, what can NPEA do to best support data work among member organizations?

Thirty-four (34) individuals participated in the study, 23 in focus groups and 11 in interviews. This included a mix of programs, from those that were only a few years old to some of the most established in the field. The majority (30 of the 34) considered their organizations at least somewhat “data driven,” while the rest (4) described data work as “developing” or “emerging” in their organization. All were familiar with NDC, and 21 of the programs had completed the NDC Data Collection Tool at least one time. Six (6) had been part of the pilot group, so were deeply involved in the initiative from the start. Research participants were all assured confidentiality and that results would be reported to NPEA without any identifying information.

These protocols were used to guide each of the focus groups and interviews so the same topics were covered across the board. All sessions were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were used to identify themes and findings that were first discussed with the NPEA team, and are reported herein.

The report to follow organizes findings from the research in three sections:

- The Value and Impacts of NDC
- Areas for Improvement
- Looking Forward

The Value and Impacts of NDC

NPEA’s launch of NDC was well-timed as data was—and continues to be—a topic at the forefront of the agenda for member organizations. Everyone who participated in the study affirmed the importance of collecting and using data in ways that will enhance their programs and attract funding. While most organizations were already collecting data on their students before becoming involved in NDC, none of the respondents were entirely satisfied with the data practices of their organizations, and all felt there was ample room for improvement and growth in their organizations and in the field.

When asked about what they gained from NDC, the comment, *“We have stronger data as a result”* was a common refrain. What “stronger data” actually means depends on the starting point of the organization, and where they are in their development of data practices. The newest programs tended to focus most on the Indicators List as the most valuable resource, while others also talked about the specific definitions and the process of data collection as adding value to their work. The tangible benefits of each of these are described in this section.

The Indicators and Definitions

The Indicators List, the data points, and the detailed definitions were identified consistently as the most valuable part of NDC, both by those who completed the Tool and by those who did not. The list was the most widely recognized NDC resource, and was consistently mentioned first in response to questions about what was gained. The indicators and definitions were described as *“thoughtful”* and *“thorough,”* and several noted the value of having the list emerge from a process that involved members in the field so the indicators are both research-based and reality-tested. In addition to the list, there was general appreciation for the specificity of the definitions among those who used the Tool. There was a great deal of confidence that the list is a good one.

It was reassuring for new programs and for those charged with developing a data strategy to have the NDC list as an *“anchor”* to get started and to which to compare themselves. Across the membership, it is common for a program staff member to become the de facto “data person” for their organization. Without a background in research or analysis, those in this situation were especially grateful for the NDC guidance as a source of reassurance that they were making good data choices. As one person put it, *“we are still figuring it out, and it is incredibly helpful for us to have NDC as something to align with.”* Another elaborated on why the list was important, *“it allowed us to not have to hire a consultant to help us think about what kind of data to collect and what would be most helpful to us going forward for our organization.”*

When there was a difference between what the organization was doing and what NDC recommended, it incited conversation among staff about whether to change practices to align with NDC, keep what they had already been doing, or both. Several examples of changes were described. One program has committed to adding an element each year so that over time they will become more aligned with NDC, feeling this was a realistic goal given organizational resources. Others noted that they changed intake forms to include data points suggested by NDC, such as adding elements to their questions about income and the educational backgrounds of parents and guardians. NDC prompted others to *“ask questions differently or categorize it differently, seeing it as a standard for our peers.”* Another noted, *“We used to say, ‘here’s what we’re planning to capture’ and then when we joined NDC we were like, wait, let’s also capture X, Y, and Z. It was good to have that to guide us.”*

Among programs with well-developed data practices, it seems that NDC opened conversations when their data did not align, but this group was less likely to say they changed their practices as a result. These programs report that what they were doing served their purposes and aligned to their missions, so they were less motivated to change. Instead, the NDC Indicators served as a complement to current practice or a checkpoint, rather than a driver as it did with newer programs. This is an important

distinction because these programs view NDC mostly as a resource and (perhaps) an emerging standard, but not as a “must do.”

In two of the focus groups, members talked about NDC generating positive peer pressure around their data collection and reporting: *“Some of the data I didn’t know was embarrassing!.. These are things you should track from day one.”* This was said with a laugh in recognition that NDC makes them want to keep their data practices current so they become, or remain, leaders in the field. Another commented that, *“if you don’t have them [the data], not only are you not in alignment in the field, but it starts to look a little shady, like why aren’t you reporting on that.”* A few wondered whether funders and schools would start to expect programs to collect all of the NDC indicators in the future (a step beyond peer pressure), essentially establishing this list as the “standard” for all. It was suggested that this would urge programs to more fully embrace the NDC Indicators List in the future as the benefits would be tangible, perhaps even nonnegotiable. Among the most established programs, this would likely have significant leverage.

The Process of Data Collection

While the indicators list and definitions are important to anchor data work, the process of completing the Data Collection Tool was also very valuable to members.

Collecting data from member organizations is not an easy task for NPEA. It required the development, pilot testing, and revision of a complicated Survey Monkey Data Collection Tool, and a long and persistent process of urging programs to take the time to complete it. NPEA took this responsibility very seriously and pursued respondents with vigor. When asked why programs participate, the most common response was something along the lines of, *“because NPEA/Karin/Zeva asked me to!”* Loyalty and allegiance to NPEA was a driver, along with wanting to contribute to NPEA’s success. Several members also commented about being part of a national effort: *“I like being part of a national thing. We feel alone and small, and we are not making a huge difference as we are only helping this many kids, but we have these like-minded colleagues who are doing their work and we’re in it together.”*

Despite the challenges of asking programs to complete the Tool, the effort was well worth it. Programs that completed the Tool describe a much deeper impact of NDC than those that did not. The act of assembling the data for the Tool seems to make the indicators and definitions have meaning and inspire action. This is especially interesting because even though the request was to report the data to an external entity (NPEA), the gains were most important internally, as was described by one respondent, *“Data Counts gave me an opportunity to just broad[ly] map and be able to see the landscape, so trying to answer those questions was perhaps more helpful to me than it was to Data Counts!”*

Several themes emerged for why the data collection process was so valuable:

- First, committing to complete the NDC Tool “forced” -- a word used repeatedly -- programs to pay attention to data in ways that many typically had not before. This idea of NDC as an “accountability tool” was raised in every focus group and in most of the interviews. One member said that NDC “forces real attention on some things that I often kick down the road.” Another member explained, *“it intensely focuses us a couple times a year. NPEA is asking the questions so we do a deep dive in*

data.” And the experience led one respondent to describe how after she completed the data “it was like, ‘Oh look! This is really helpful data that no one had looked at before’...I took it back to our team and I showed them and we looked at it together.”

- The second theme concerns drawing attention to data quality and integrity. The process of gathering the elements to answer the NDC questions revealed trouble spots for data integrity and completeness that had been ignored or unknown. As one respondent put it, “NDC identifies problems and we can’t ignore the quality gap! Without quality data we can’t do anything with it anyway -- NDC makes it so you can’t turn away from that.” Another noted, “[Data Counts] internally calls us out on data collection, I mean why are we missing so much data” and, similarly, another reflected, “I have a number of questions for why some of our student numbers are different from our whole student number...and why are data missing?” By asking the questions in a way that establishes a baseline or denominator (i.e., how many students overall in each category), incomplete, missing, and incorrect data become obvious to those completing the Tool. Members said that these revelations opened conversations with their team and pushed them to think of ways to improve.
- Finally, NDC called attention to data management challenges, prompting many discussions about the importance of investing in a better way to store, organize, and analyze student and program data. For some, it was “shocking that we can’t get these data quickly” and for others it was confirmation that investment in data infrastructure (whether already made or that are being considered) is worthwhile and important. In organizations where responsibility for data is shared among several people and where data are collected and stored in multiple places (the norm for most), NDC data collection required a team effort. This drew attention to problems and prompted conversation about improvements, but this is an area where most were concerned about their ability to make progress.

While some described the process of completing the NDC Tool as time-consuming and difficult, all felt it was worthwhile internally because the process made them pause and think critically about their data practices, which is certainly a first step to making productive decisions to improve.

Areas for Improvement

There are two areas for improvement that emerged in the study. First, the reports and products generated less enthusiasm among members than the Indicators’ list and process. The second concerns using NDC to inform practice.

The Products

After each iteration of data collection, NPEA produced and distributed a Summary of Findings that looked at the data across the network. After the second round, they also produced a set of program-specific “Dashboards” that graphically present each program’s data back to them along side of the aggregate data. Finally, and most recently, NPEA produced a “Data Spotlight” that highlighted one key indicator with best practices and reflections from programs on what they do to achieve successful results.

When asked about NDC and what programs gained or valued about the initiative, the reports and dashboards rarely came up without probing from the interviewer. The exception was the most recent release—the Spotlight—which was mentioned twice in focus groups as being very interesting and valuable. When described, others in the group thought the content sounded great, but they did not remember seeing it themselves. For those that mentioned it, the Spotlight was described as aspirational and practical because it showed what programs were doing to get results with students.

When asked specifically about the two Summaries of Findings, which were on hand for the focus groups and described during interviews, most struggled to recall whether they saw it or read it. Comments like the following were common: *“I had them in my inbox, but never got back to them”* and *“I get hundreds of emails a day and often don’t loop back.”* One person noted, *“For me, it is going to take some time [to review them] and that time never comes.”* Most commented that the summaries were “good” and it was “nice” to see the data for everyone together, but no one found it particularly useful or memorable.

The most specific feedback the programs provided about the products was that there was just too much text and it would take too much time to absorb them, so they are not inclined to read them. Further, unless the usefulness and value of the material are immediately clear and compelling, people put them aside. A few people mentioned things like, *“think executive summary”* or *“one-pagers,”* with the content run through a lens of “how can I use this,” which would make it more relevant for those running a program. In general, the more established the program, the less value they saw in the products themselves, and the less attention they paid to them.

The Dashboard reports were more memorable to those that saw them, but most did not find them valuable. While a few members reported that they appreciated seeing their program data mirrored back to them, only one person offered an example of how the comparisons were used. Instead, the feedback was that the aggregate context was neither useful nor understandable. As one person described, *“I looked at it, I thought about it, but I didn’t know how to use it.”* Another recounted how the program looked great versus the aggregate, but *“Who are these programs? I can’t spread this news because what does it really mean? If I can take this to my development person and say ‘Hey, highlight this!’ Or to my program person and say ‘wait, why are we low here,’ then I’ll use it, but with the aggregate, I’m not sure how to caveat and contextualize it, so I put it aside.”*

It is extremely important to note that while they did not find the presentation of data vis-a-vis the aggregate helpful this last round, there was widespread consensus that a more rigorous and robust comparison would be extremely valuable to all of them. This is not news to the NPEA team who was well aware of the shortcomings of using aggregate comparisons. This was the best possible “first time” approach given resources that were available, but it falls short and should be revisited for the next round to make sure these kinds of comparisons are clearer and more useful if NPEA decides to provide them.

Using Data to Inform Practice

“We do [data work] for accountability purposes, but there is so much happening in a day we are not able to find time to actually use data to improve practices.”

“We do not do a lot of data inquiry work...our data quality isn’t there yet.”

“We’re so much better at data collecting now, but not as much on using it.”

“We’re great at collection, and have strong visualization which we use for development, and we’ve gotten a lot better at actually tracking students. But for the ‘so what?’ We are not yet there yet.”

“For us, [NDC] was so useful on the front end, defining what we should collect...but not so much on the other end.”

These quotes illustrate the type of comments members made when asked whether Data Counts has led them to make program changes and improvements. NPEA is credited by almost everyone with helping improve the quality, completeness, and clarity of data, which is a huge step toward becoming data driven and toward positioning organizations to use data to inform practice in a rigorous way. The process of moving from data collection and reporting to analysis and program change, however, does not happen easily or naturally, and most programs need more support in this regard.

When asked why it is so challenging, program leaders talked about how data analysis and inquiry work requires more expertise around data than they have in-house. Others noted that it is difficult to get their staff to use or see the value in data because, *“few come to this work because we love numbers.”* Others said their staff are not resistant, but that lack of time is a significant issue in their program: *“It is really hard to find time to ask ourselves what the data mean.”* Others described the challenge of managing change in organizations that have operated the same way for a long time.

This is not to suggest that programs are not using any data in their decision-making. In fact, staff working directly with students use what they are learning every day to make program adjustments and changes to what they are teaching and to the individual counseling and guidance provided to students. They may not call it “data work” or “analysis” but they are using information to inform what they do. A few of those interviewed provided examples where their outcome data suggested some program changes, such as adding a program component to help with college persistence when they saw less than expected graduation rates, or looking at college outcomes for students from different high schools to determine what extra supports scholars need or what high school recommendations they would make to students. These were not necessarily prompted by NDC, but are examples of areas where some programs reported on how data has informed their work that might serve as examples going forward.

At the same time, most of those interviewed said they did not feel that their organizations are using a systematic or planful approach to review data regularly or strategically to inform decisions. Instead they were responding to external requests, especially around fundraising and grant reporting. All talked about data analysis and use as an area for growth and improvement and they would welcome NPEA’s support and help in this regard. It is not something that seems to evolve naturally in organizations that tend to be very lean and where staff wear many hats.

Looking Ahead

When asked what they would like to see from NPEA to support data work in the future, a number of suggestions were offered. There was, however, concern about NPEA’s bandwidth given the staff size

and the growing membership. Before additional recommendations were offered, there was a general plea that the association continue to do what it is known for, namely offering excellent conferences, resources, opportunities to connect, and very personal and hands-on services to members. No one wanted to see the association stretched any thinner than it already is. Members realize that additional data support would require a significant commitment of resources and staff time so their suggestions here were quite measured.

NPEA has developed a reputation among member programs included in this study (many of whom belong to several associations) as a very trustworthy and comfortable affinity group. Maintaining this is important to the success of NDC and to the future of NPEA. A few issues stood out in the research that are important to note:

- Members expressed no concern about sharing their data with NPEA and were completely assured that NPEA would hold program data in confidence. This speaks to the personal relationship members have with the NPEA team, and the level of trust they have inspired.
- Members are comfortable sharing and discussing their challenges and struggles within the NPEA family, and seeking help from NPEA staff and from the connections they make within the NPEA network.
- There is a high level of trust placed in the NPEA team, and a sense of mutual obligation to be actively involved and engaged in NPEA initiatives.

NDC worked because a good number of member organizations stepped up. Members benefited because they participated and learned from being involved. The challenge for NPEA is how to continue to encourage that level of involvement in the future. Whatever next steps NPEA takes—whatever products are launched or trainings provided—they need to be made extremely relevant to the members, in terms of improving student outcomes, attracting additional funding, or (ideally) both.

To those ends, several recommendations are offered for consideration concerning the data collection process, the indicators themselves, future products, and support.

The Data Collection Process

There was general satisfaction with the indicators and the Tool, but there were a few ideas about the process to consider:

- Members noted that funder buy-in or endorsement of the NDC Indicators would go a long way toward ensuring that they continue to pay attention to and value it.
- People noted that it would help if they could complete the Tool in sections (or share the responsibility with others) and to work on the Tool over a period of time by starting or coming back to it. The Tool is set up to allow for this, but this was not clear to everyone. For the next round of data collection, NPEA can be more explicit in their instructions so it is clear members can start and return to the survey and can access it on multiple devices.
- A few people talked about timing of the instrument (i.e. “fall is my busiest time!”), but there was no consensus on when would be best as program schedules vary. Strategies around timing

should be revisited, perhaps introducing some flexibility from the start that would allow programs to decide when to complete the Tool.

- Two respondents noted that they did not complete every item even when they had the data available, either because they ran out of time or assembling the data would be too cumbersome. NPEA should consider adding a final question to the instrument to clarify this.

The Indicators

On the indicators themselves, respondents suggested some revisions to consider and a few areas in which to expand:

- **High School Rigor:** It was suggested that the current focus on AP exams is going to become less relevant in the years to come, so NPEA may want to revisit the data elements behind this indicator, perhaps adding things like dual enrollment, completion of IB and Honors Level courses, and so on.
- **The Financial Aid Gap** was considered an important addition, but there was some discussion about the level selected for reporting, and it was suggested the indicator should be a little more fine-grained to capture greater detail (e.g., < \$5,000/year, \$5-10K, or more than \$10K).
- It was noted that **college selectivity** as a metric works well for some programs (those with a high school placement component), but not for others. Several members wondered if the issue of “best-fit institution” might be revisited in the future, to be one that combines financial fit, academic fit, and institutional indicators such as graduation rate rather than relying on “selectivity” as a metric of success.
- There was a lot of discussion that the membership would like to see a set of **“success indicators” at the post-secondary level**, with guideposts along the way toward the ultimate measure of graduation within 4 and 6 years. It was also suggested that some measure of career success or stability is important.
- A few members also suggested NPEA indicators need to start **prior to middle school**.
- The lack of a common measure to assess **social and emotional learning** was raised repeatedly, and members would like to see NPEA continue to weigh in and provide references around this, though there was agreement that consensus would remain elusive for the foreseeable future.

Products

This was an area where members would like to see the most change and improvements as was described in the previous section. One person suggested a lens for thinking about products that seemed to resonate with others: *“To me, the measure of usefulness or value of a product is whether or not it is used to improve services to young people.”* With this in mind, several recommendations were offered:

- **Comparison Dashboards:** If NPEA decides to repeat them, it will be important to make the comparisons more nuanced and robust. There were a number of ways programs suggested NPEA group the data to make more valuable “apples-to-apples” comparisons.

- Program Models and Dosage (i.e., those with independent school placement, multi-year interventions, school-based separate from stand-alone programs)
- Regional and Location type (i.e., programs in the Northeast, urban areas separate from rural/suburban)
- Program Size (i.e., budget, staff-to-student ratio)
- Mission and Target Population (i.e., high achieving separate from underrepresented in general)

If done well, these comparisons would allow the programs to have a better sense of what the findings mean and how they can use them. While pursuing these kinds of comparisons is time-consuming and resource-intensive, it is the product programs want to see and, as such, an important one to consider to keep member programs engaged in NDC going forward.¹

- **More Spotlights:** As the one resource that was met with enthusiasm, it is recommended that future products use this publication as a model. More specifically, shorter pieces that focus on a single topic or data point, what it means, and how it informs practice would be well received. This was preferred over documents that try to cover too much information—in text or in graphics—without being grounded in practice.
- **National/Regional Context and Comparison:** Several suggested that they would benefit from having the data and citations on hand from the national or regional sources so they could put their own data in that context. They find these on their own, but they wondered if NPEA could have a role in making sure the field was using the same sources. These members see NPEA as a source that could establish a standard for these measures as well.
- **Citations:** It was suggested that for the indicators, it would be helpful to have citations for studies that articulate why they are important (i.e., why do we care about things like attendance or algebra?) that programs could use in grant writing and to justify the importance of data to their teams.

Convenings and Trainings

For brand new programs, those just getting started with data, and new members, all of the existing NDC materials, tools, and the webinars are thought to be good resources. Those who have been engaged in this work for a while are looking for more. NPEA members say they like to connect with each other and the suggestion that NPEA organize convenings and conversations around key data-related topics came up often. It was noted that a short conference session on data “*isn’t enough. I can*

¹ Several members from the Boston area commented on the value of the Boston After School & Beyond (Boston Beyond) comparisons, which show program data vis-a-vis well defined cohorts of similar programs. It should be noted, however, that this is a much larger project than NDC in terms of scope, resources, and budget with different goals. It is raised here only as an example of a dashboard programs found useful. Boston Beyond also provides data coaching, affinity groups, and the like to focus on data use, which is beyond the scope for this initiative, but may be worth understanding in more detail.

reach out to people after, but we're all busy." They need more depth of material and time to act on what they learn.

Several topics came up that people said they would be interested in learning about from or along with their peers:

- **Data Management Systems:** Everything from “what should you ask a database consultant” to “migrating into Sales Force” were offered as topics people would like to discuss with each other. It was suggested that they were more interested in hearing from their peers, than a vender or consultant, and they cautioned against having NPEA endorse any one product.
- **Data Analysis/Using Data for Program Improvement/Showing Impact:** People were very interested in a “What can you do with data when you have it?” discourse or “using spreadsheets to do analysis” or even a “Q&A about what you can and can't say with data.” The idea of a multi-session training or discussion group came up a few times, and was seen as attractive to some, especially if they could use their own data as a sample. While this is likely outside of the scope of NPEA, the team could identify an online course on the topic, and if a group signed up together, perhaps NPEA could host an online discussion group for members. The key here is for members to be able to use their own data in the course, making it more immediately useful and meaningful.
- **Data Buddies/Mentors/Coaches:** Several people noted that learning to use data may require more one-on-one help, especially for programs not yet willing to share their own data. It was suggested that it would be helpful to have a list of the “data people” in organizations who would be willing to share ideas, mentor other members, and connect when data questions arise. It was noted that people working on data often are not the people who come to the conference, so connecting through another forum would be helpful.

Concluding Comments

As NPEA takes the time to reflect on their work with NDC and the impact it has had on the field, there is reason to be proud. Members have increased their focus on data and many have made significant improvements to their data practices. The feedback about new indicators, products, and trainings will be an essential touchpoint for thinking through next steps and priorities for NDC in the future.

The foundation of NDC is in the experience of the member organizations and schools who shaped the indicators and committed to advancing them in the field. As NPEA explores new directions for NDC, it would be wise to continue to draw upon this model and collaborate with members, new and old, to shape the work. This will help ensure that the products and practices are useful to and supported by program leaders, while creating a cadre of NDC champions to keep it relevant and firmly embedded in the realities of programs, organizations, schools, and other initiatives that aspire to improve the educational and life outcomes of young people.