



Putting ESSA's Evidence Standards to Work for Your State

Schools receiving federal improvement dollars need to pick programs that line up with one of three top evidence tiers.

by Robert E. Slavin

What matters most in education is what teachers do in the classroom to enhance student achievement. For this reason, state and district leaders must take steps to ensure that principals and teachers have effective textbooks, software, professional development, and programs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) moves away from the compliance-oriented approach of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and gives states great authority to decide which programs and practices they will implement, especially in low-performing schools.

NCLB tried to nudge states, districts, and schools toward using programs and materials that were proven to be effective. The law promoted the use of programs “based on scientifically based research.” But that definition did not spark much

change. The problem is that just about anything in education can be said to be “based on” some study that qualifies in some sense as scientifically based research.

The Three Tiers

In contrast, ESSA has much more specifically defined what constitutes proof of effectiveness for students. ESSA focuses on three main levels of evidence. At each level, a program must have at least one study with a significant positive outcome and no studies with significant negative outcomes. For a “strong” rating, at least one study must have compared an experimental group using the program to a control group using ordinary methods, with schools,

teachers, or students assigned at random to the experimental or control groups. For a “moderate” rating the requirements are the same, except that the experimental and control groups can be matched rather than assigned at random. For a “promising” rating, a correlational design can be used. There is also a fourth category—“demonstrates a rationale based on high-quality research”—which does not require any actual evidence and should therefore be considered evidence building rather than proven.¹

Finding programs that meet ESSA’s evidence standards is not difficult. At evidenceforessa.org, made by my colleagues and me at Johns Hopkins University, you can find reading, math, and (soon) science programs listed by their strong,

moderate, or promising evidence levels. The programs can also be searched and filtered to find programs that suit specific needs. This website was created in partnership with several national education organizations, including NASBE.

Programs that meet ESSA evidence standards represent a wide array of approaches and usually differ markedly from ordinary textbooks or traditional professional development. Several are one-to-one or one-to-small group tutoring programs, using either teachers or paraprofessionals as tutors. Others are whole-school reform approaches, such as Building Assets, Reducing Risk (BARR) for high schools and our own Success for All elementary/middle school model (see box).

Box 1. Examples of Evidence-Based Whole-School Approaches

Struggling schools are eligible under ESSA for school improvement funding and for other federal or state funds. These schools need help in all aspects of their functioning—curriculum, professional development, student services, assessment, classroom management, and more. Such schools usually benefit most from coordinated, comprehensive approaches that deal with all aspects of school improvement and provide experienced coaches to work with schools over time. BARR and Success for All are two examples of such whole-school reform approaches.

Building Assets, Reducing Risk

BARR focuses on ensuring that students in low-performing high schools succeed in the crucial ninth grade year. BARR seeks to improve students’ social-emotional skills, build positive teacher-student relationships, and overcome nonacademic barriers to learning, such as truancy and misbehavior. BARR schools closely monitor student achievement and behavior using real-time data analysis. Teacher teams and block scheduling are used to build connections among teachers and students. Teachers of all subjects meet regularly to review progress of at-risk students and make plans to deal with academic or behavioral issues. Two randomized studies found positive effects of BARR on reading and math achievement, qualifying it for the ESSA “strong” category.

Success for All

Success for All provides schools whose students are in prekindergarten to grade 8 with extensive materials, software, and coaching to help all staff use proven teaching strategies, especially cooperative learning. Struggling students receive computer-assisted small-group or one-to-one tutoring. Programs for parent involvement, integrated social services, social-emotional learning, attendance, school climate, and other elements are also provided. A building facilitator helps all teachers implement with quality, and principals, facilitators, and teacher teams learn leadership strategies. Implementation is phased in over time, with standards for quality implementation at the classroom and school levels. Two large randomized evaluations, as well as several matched studies in many parts of the United States, have found positive effects of the approach, qualifying it for ESSA’s “strong” category.

How Can States Ensure Proven Programs Really Work?

Just as buying a Stradivarius will not make someone a concert violinist, adopting an evidence-based program will not magically transform struggling schools. Successful implementation of even the best, most proven program requires time, effort, and a strong commitment from education leaders at all levels. Here are a few pointers on how to maximize the odds of getting good results.

- **Be tough.** Change is hard, and educators may try to use new initiatives to obtain more funding to support what they have always done. Do not let this happen. Staff of struggling schools should have input in selecting programs from off the evidence-based menu, and they should participate in all phases of planning and implementation of those they select. However, the ESSA evidence standards are intended to provide incentives for schools to adopt and implement new approaches proven in rigorous evaluations. ESSA gives states an opportunity to introduce their lowest-achieving schools to proven programs, provided by capable national leaders in school transformation. Staff of struggling schools need to put their energies and talents into implementing transformational programs known to be effective, not minor variations of what has failed in the past.
- **Start with needs assessments.** School and district leaders should do needs assessments to determine what their children need most and then look for programs that meet those needs. In evaluating district plans, state leaders should look for well-thought-out strategies for assessing school needs.
- **Get buy-in.** Educators will do a much better job of implementing programs if they have had a role in selecting them. States should help eligible schools find out about all the proven programs that serve their subjects and grade levels. State leaders can encourage district and school staff to examine websites of proven models, call or visit staff in similar places who have used the programs, and so on. Then school staffs should vote on what they think will most benefit their students. State leaders should look for effective

These approaches can make big differences in struggling schools. For example, nonprofit Success for All has worked for many years with the Steubenville, Ohio, school district, a disadvantaged district (81 percent free and reduced price lunch, 61 percent white, 25 percent African American) that now routinely outperforms middle-class suburban districts across Ohio and the nation.² Some programs make effective use of technology, such as READ 180. Others are based on cooperative learning.

There are proven programs for every type of school: urban, rural, or suburban, serving white, African American, Hispanic, or English learners, and in all parts of the nation. The best programs provide extensive, high-quality professional development.

Why Do ESSA Evidence Levels Matter?

ESSA mentions evidence levels frequently, but they are particularly important for a few federal funding sources that states administer:

School improvement. School improvement has changed since NCLB. Under ESSA, states have to set aside 7 percent of their Title I, Part A funds (which altogether total roughly \$1 billion annually) for struggling schools, which include the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent, and schools with consistently underperforming subgroups. ESSA provides far more flexibility than NCLB in how to improve these schools, and decision making has been shifted to the states and local education agencies to design, implement, approve, and monitor improvement plans. But one thing the law makes clear: In order to receive these funds, schools must commit to implementing programs that meet one of the top three ESSA evidence categories, and states' departments of education must review proposals to be sure that schools receiving school improvement funding are using proven programs that meet the ESSA definitions.

Other federal funding. In seven other federal competitive grant programs, ESSA awards competitive preference points for grant applicants who propose using programs that meet one of the top three evidence categories. The largest of these is Title II, for professional development.

Just as buying a Stradivarius will not make someone a concert violinist, adopting an evidence-based program will not magically transform struggling schools.

strategies for ensuring buy-in in district plans. They should encourage district leaders to let school staff make informed choices of proven programs, since local staff will implement them and thus ought to be vested in making them succeed.

■ **Plan for quality implementation.** Extensive professional development accompanies every proven program, and such programs have staff to help schools plan and carry out top-quality implementation. States should encourage district and school leaders to arrange for high-quality training, on-site coaching, and effective uses of materials and software, and they should ensure there is adequate funding for these purposes. Most proven programs have standards of implementation to be sure that schools are on track. Program providers and school leaders should work closely to plan implementation, set quality standards, and make timelines for phasing in program components.

■ **Continually assess and improve.** On a regular basis—usually quarterly and annually—schools using proven programs need to take stock and be sure students are making expected progress toward school goals. If there are gaps in implementation or outcomes, school staff need to make immediate changes. State leaders should look for plans that ensure ongoing assessment of program implementation and may arrange to offer schools technical assistance to continuously assess and improve implementation and outcomes.

States should not be satisfied with a few pilot programs. Once they begin to find out what works in their own contexts, they can scale up successful school models over time and, if necessary, shift funds away from less-promising approaches. State leaders may host or encourage schools implementing a given program to join statewide, regional, or national networks of schools implementing the same programs, where they can learn from others, share best practices, address challenges, and discuss problems and solutions.

More Cost-Effective Spending, Benefiting More Students

ESSA only requires use of programs that meet

the top three evidence standards for school improvement grants, and it provides incentives for using them in other federal funding applications. But why restrict use of evidence to only these? States make their own grants and administer federal flow-through money in areas beyond what ESSA mentions. State boards of education have the right and responsibility to set guidelines for any form of funding related to improving education practices and outcomes, so it makes sense for them to require or at least incentivize use of programs and practices with evidence of effectiveness. That evidence gives state boards and states' departments of education objective information with which to guide district and school leaders toward programs and practices that work, are ready for immediate use, and are provided by capable organizations.

The number of proven programs is growing and will continue to grow as demand increases, and states and districts are participating in their development and evaluation. ESSA requires that only schools receiving school improvement funding use programs that have been proven effective. Other schools can and should participate in development and evaluation of new programs that may one day meet ESSA evidence standards. But there is no reason to wait. Why not use what is known to work now, as widely as possible, while additional programs are added to the list?

State education agencies and state boards of education have more autonomy than ever before under ESSA, and they have a central role in helping their districts and schools learn about and use programs whose effectiveness is supported by evidence. The national evidence movement in public education—and the ESSA evidence standards specifically—provide tools and assistance that states can use to improve outcomes for their students. But a tool left in the shed does not improve anything. It is time for states to step up and put these opportunities to work. ■

¹Results for America, “ESSA Leverage Points: 50-State Report on Promising Practices for Using Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes,” 2018, <https://results4america.org/tools/essa-leverage-points-50-state-report-promising-practices-using-evidence-improve-student-outcomes>.

²“ExtraOrdinary Districts: Episode 3: Steubenville, Ohio,” Education Trust, <https://edtrust.org/extraordinary-districts-episode-3-steubenville-ohio/>.

State boards of education have the right and responsibility to set guidelines for any form of funding related to improving education practices and outcomes.

Robert E. Slavin is director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University.