

# 2021 Moneyball for Education Policy Recommendations



March 2021

## About Results for America

Results for America is helping decision makers at all levels of government harness the power of data and other evidence to solve our world's greatest challenges. Our mission is to make investing in what works the new normal, so that when policy-makers make decisions, they start by seeking the best data and other evidence available, then use what they find to achieve better results.

# Table of Contents

- Introduction.....4**
- Using Evidence to Advance Racial Equity in Education.....7**
- Revise and Align the Definition of “Evidence-Based” .....8**
- Shift Additional Competitive and Formula Funding to Evidence-Based Approaches.....9**
- Invest 1% of Federal Education Program Funds in Evaluations.....15**
- Build a Larger and More Effective Evaluation, Research, and Development Infrastructure.....16**
- Produce More Relevant, More Meaningful, and More Accessible Data to Support States, Districts, and Schools.....18**
- Conclusion.....20**
- Acknowledgements.....21**



## Introduction

The known consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on education are severe, and there is still much we do not know. Student and staff needs are increasing at the same time that state and local government revenues—the major sources of public education funding—are heading for [steep declines](#). This dynamic of increased need and declining resources is [heightened](#) for students who have been held farthest from opportunity by the inequities in our society and our public systems, including K–12 education: students of color, students from low-income families, English language learners, and students with disabilities. In many cases, these same students are suffering disproportionately from the virus itself, bearing the unique burden of complex health and economic harms that the pandemic has exacerbated. Meanwhile, there is increasing urgency to ensure racial justice and equitable economic mobility for these students.

In this context, it is more important than ever for education leaders at all levels of the system to embrace evidence and data to inform their day-to-day decision-making. Doing so is not a solution on its own, either for new challenges like COVID-19 or for long-standing challenges like systemic racism, but it is absolutely necessary to help make the most effective and the most equitable use of all available resources to improve opportunities and outcomes for all students.



This report updates Results for America's (RFA) previous [recommendations](#) for how federal education policy can and should advance the use of data, evidence, and evaluation to solve some of our nation's most pressing education problems. Like all of RFA's [policy roadmaps](#), [spending roadmaps](#), and [Standards of Excellence](#), following these recommendations would advance the effectiveness of public policy and the well-being of our nation's young people by building on the foundation of our [Moneyball for Government principles](#). Those principles call on government agencies and leaders at all levels to

Help improve outcomes for young people, their families, and communities by:

- Building evidence about the practices, policies and programs that will achieve the most effective and efficient results so that policymakers can make better decisions;
- Investing limited taxpayer dollars in practices, policies and programs that use data, evidence and evaluation to demonstrate how they work; and
- Directing funds away from practices, policies and programs that consistently fail to achieve measurable outcomes.

These principles have long-standing [bipartisan support](#) and reflect what Americans want from their government at this time of great uncertainty and heightened need. According to a [May 2020 poll](#) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 92% of Americans believe that the government should use evidence and data to inform its decisions and 89% were likely to support a political candidate who was moving government spending to interventions that have been proven to work.

In 2015 RFA collaborated with Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute and Bethany Little of EducationCounsel on our first [Moneyball for Education](#) report that suggested "ways to revamp federal education policies and programs to help lawmakers spend public funds more effectively and efficiently to improve student outcomes." The report made [seven general recommendations](#) for how the United States Department of Education (ED), Institute of Education Sciences (IES), National Center on Education Statistics (NCES), and US Congress could advance the use of data, evidence, and evaluation at all levels of the education system.

In the five and a half years since publication of that initial report, federal education policy has made important progress, including progress on several of our recommendations. ED has consistently ranked as one of the top three agencies in RFA's [Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence](#). In 2015, Congress made one of its most notable commitments to evidence-based policymaking by enacting the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ED has been implementing ESSA's [93 evidence provisions](#) and has also been helping state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs or school districts) implement them. In some areas, these efforts are making a difference in how education leaders make decisions and how they are leveraging federal—and in some



cases state and local—funds to improve outcomes for students. For example, the [Nevada Department of Education](#) has shifted 100% of its federal school improvement grants to LEAs to evidence-based approaches while the [Ohio Department of Education](#) has leveraged ESSA's evidence provisions to accelerate its progress toward functioning like a [learning agency](#) that embraces the Moneyball principles.

For all of this progress, there is still much more that ED and Congress can do to fully embrace the Moneyball principles, both in how they approach their own decision-making and in the ways they influence how states and districts approach theirs. If implemented, the recommendations described in this report would increase the likelihood that federal funds will be used to improve opportunities and outcomes for all students throughout the nation. Across the recommendations, we identify specific actions that are ripe for ED and/or Congress to take now as well as some initial thoughts on larger policy changes to begin working toward later, including in the context of the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act:

1. *Revise and align* the definition of "evidence-based."
2. *Shift* additional competitive and formula funding to evidence-based approaches.
3. *Invest* 1% of federal education program funds in evaluations.
4. *Build* a larger and more effective evaluation, research, and development infrastructure.
5. *Produce* more relevant, more meaningful, and more accessible data to support states, districts, and schools.



## Using Evidence to Advance Racial Equity in Education

Racial equity and inclusion must be at the forefront of how education systems approach evidence-based policy and practice. Leaders who have access to more and better information—and who are trained to navigate the nuance and possible bias in this information—can use data to advance equity. They can better identify disparate racial outcomes, understand the root causes of those outcomes, and target resources to solutions that not only work to close gaps in opportunity and outcomes, but also address the underlying systemic barriers of such disparities. A drive toward building and using evidence and data can expand opportunity and inclusion, especially if decision-makers focus on using those data to illuminate issues in the education system rather than committing the too-common mistake of attributing problems to the children themselves, or to their families. At the most basic level, federal, state, and local education leaders must be able to measure, using disaggregated data with strong privacy protections, whether investments are having the intended effect—that is, whether they are reducing racial disparities and accelerating economic opportunity.

A good example of applying an equity lens to evidence-based policymaking is the [Best Starts for Kids](#) initiative in King County, Washington. In reevaluating its approach to procuring and delivering health and human services for children and families, [King County](#) engaged human service providers, service recipients, and community groups. The county gathered feedback, identified community-defined objectives for improvement, and established outcome goals for each contract. It also invested in technical assistance and capacity building to break down the barriers that providers encounter when applying for government contracts. Data [dashboards](#) and qualitative feedback loops ensured that adjustments could be made during implementation to help providers meet their outcome goals. At the same time, the initiative preferred evidence-based interventions and incorporated evaluation to build new evidence about innovative approaches. The results were a more-diverse health and human services provider network, a shift in program focus to early intervention services, enhanced use of data in decision-making, and—most importantly—[improved outcomes for a diverse array of children and families](#). In 2019, for example, 76% of children ages 0–5 served by Best Starts for Kids showed progress in using appropriate behaviors to meet their needs, 75% showed progress in acquiring and using new knowledge and skills, and 74% showed progress in positive social/emotional skills and relationships. Best Starts for Kids shows the important role that participant feedback can have in designing programs and developing outcome goals that meet the needs identified by individual communities. A logical next step for this type of innovative approach is to continue to build evidence of effectiveness, including conducting randomized controlled trials, as appropriate, so that improvements can be continuously made.

## 1. Revise and Align the Definition of “Evidence-Based”

- *NOW*: ED should strengthen [existing guidance](#) to clarify the current definition and encourage SEAs, LEAs, and schools to more deeply consult the evidence base as they select and implement evidence-based interventions.
- *LATER*: Congress should move toward a streamlined definition of “evidence-based” that more directly promotes innovation, continuous improvement, and scaling of proven K–12 interventions.

ESSA's definition of “evidence-based” [includes four levels of evidence](#) that, for the first time tie federal K–12 education funding to evidence of effectiveness and provide an important framework for ED, states, districts, and schools to be able to better build, understand, and prioritize evidence of what improves outcomes for students.

The definition represented an important breakthrough in evidence-based policymaking, but it was only a first step that would need improvement, and there is a growing consensus that the time is ripe to improve it. For instance, the current definition does not acknowledge either the importance of considering a full range of evidence as part of selecting an intervention or the relevance of the existing evidence to the problem being solved. A revised definition would incorporate these concepts and seek to align ESSA's programmatic definitions, IES's research definitions and, ideally, the definitions in other federal statutes both within and beyond education laws. This alignment would make it easier for practitioners to navigate the evidence base as they search for the best strategies to support students. Furthermore, any revision process would create space for ED and the broader education field to grapple with important questions about the relationship between evidence-based interventions and equity, including emerging questions about how to [democratize evidence-based decision-making](#).

We have elsewhere recommended a three-tiered definition of evidence that in our view promotes innovation, continuous improvement, and the scaling of proven K–12 interventions. For example, see RFA's [2020 Playbook](#), [The Power of Evidence and Data to Advance an Equitable Economic Recovery](#), and [Moneyball for Workforce Development](#). This approach can serve as a starting point for reconsidering ESSA's definition, a process that we will lead in advance of congressional action to reauthorize ESSA. We will engage diverse leaders in the evidence-in-education movement, reflect on what we currently have in place, and ultimately generate a new proposal for the field that centers equity as it promotes innovation and scales proven results.

In the interim and as an important step in this direction, we recommend that ED strengthen and elevate the existing [2016 guidance](#) about ESSA's evidence-based definition to clarify that SEAs, LEAs, and schools should regularly

- examine a range of evidence to avoid relying on a single study that is actually an outlier,
- consider the effect size in the evidence to ensure the intervention has demonstrated having a substantial impact on desired outcomes, and
- ensure relevance by emphasizing that (i) the proposed use of the intervention should



be the same as (or closely related to) the use that was found to be improved in the cited study (i.e., a proposed literacy intervention should have supporting evidence of effectiveness in improving literacy outcomes rather than outcomes related to math or behavior) and, where possible, (ii) the studied population should overlap with the intended recipients of the proposed intervention.

Strengthening the guidance along these lines and promoting it widely in the field would increase the likelihood that investments of ESSA funds improve outcomes that matter to stakeholders.

## 2. Shift Additional Competitive and Formula Funding to Evidence-Based Approaches

- *NOW: ED should prioritize evidence of effectiveness in all of its competitive grant programs—including those in ESSA, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and Title III of the Higher Education Act—through tiered-evidence frameworks, evidence preference points, and other evidence-driven strategies.*
- *NOW: ED should use available tools such as conducting research and providing technical assistance to help SEAs and LEAs increase their use of evidence-based approaches in school improvement plans.*
- *NOW: ED should fund an independent study or Congress should ask for a US Government Accountability Office (GAO) study of how the evidence-based allowable-use provisions have been implemented since ESSA's enactment in 2015.*
- *NOW: IES should publish a biannual determination of the state of the evidence base—beyond what clears the bar for inclusion in IES's What Works Clearinghouse—for each of the 15 reasonably available provisions that SEAs can rely on in the absence of conducting their own literature reviews.*
- *LATER: Congress should expand the allowable-use and reasonably available provisions in ESSA to change them from an exception to the default rule.*
- *LATER: Congress should incentivize SEAs and LEAs to shift more formula funds to evidence-based approaches.*

ESSA represented a breakthrough in evidence-based federal education policy. As detailed in our 2017 [Leverage Points](#) paper, Congress provided states and districts with at least 13 different ways to use and build evidence, across 93 specific provisions in the law, in support of better student outcomes. Some of those opportunities have taken hold and begun to make a difference in how SEAs and LEAs operate, while others have yet to move from mere legislative text to on-the-ground action. For example, the [Direct Student Services program](#), authorized within ESSA, allows an SEA to set aside up to 3% of its ESSA Title I funding to allocate competitively to districts proposing to implement evidence-based interventions on a range of priorities. Yet only three states—Louisiana, New Mexico, and Ohio—have thus far taken advantage of this opportunity. The recommendations in this section can help realize the full potential of ESSA's current evidence provisions.

IES in particular can play a role in supporting the take-up of evidence-based interventions by SEAs and LEAs. It could, for instance, biannually publish a determination of the state of the evidence base for the various ESSA provisions that require evidence so that states do not have to spend time conducting their own literature review and instead can focus on helping their districts understand the evidence base.

Prioritizing evidence of effectiveness in both competitive and noncompetitive grant programs would ensure that limited federal dollars achieve the greatest impact possible. Programs and practices with strong levels of evidence supporting their effectiveness in improving students' academic trajectories would rise to the top while programs with no evidence that they improve student outcomes would receive less funding. In short, what works for students—particularly those students held furthest from opportunity—would and should be more of what ED funds.

Accordingly, ED and Congress should pursue the following strategies, among others, for shifting more federal funds to evidence-based approaches: (i) prioritize evidence of effectiveness in all ED competitive grant programs, (ii) increase the use of evidence-based approaches in school improvement plans, and (iii) incentivize evidence of effectiveness in formula-funded grant programs.

#### **i. Prioritize Evidence of Effectiveness in All ED Competitive Grant Programs**

Prioritizing evidence in competitive grant-making is already happening on a large scale at the broader federal, state, and local levels. Federally, 13 of the 28 [largest competitive grant programs](#) at 14 of the largest federal human services agencies use evidence of effectiveness when allocating funds. While the rigor and application of these evidence standards vary by agency and program, there are examples of well-implemented provisions.

The [AmeriCorps](#) State and National competitive grant program [application](#) emphasized evaluation, allocating up to 20 points out of 100 to applicants proposing to invest funds in interventions that met one of three definitions of evidence of effectiveness.

incorporated evidence as absolute priorities or via competitive preference points in all 5 of its largest competitive grant programs and in 30 such competitive programs overall. Following are some examples of these grant programs:

- In FY19 the vast majority of TRIO funding (\$1.06 billion) was used to support continuation awards to grantees that were successful in prior competitions; these grantees awarded competitive preference priority points for projects that proposed strategies supported by moderate evidence of effectiveness. Within the TRIO program, ED will make new awards under Student Support Services, a competition that

Shifting more funding toward evidence-based interventions means that more students will benefit from effective programs *and* practices. Organizations with track records of success like the [National Writing Project](#), [Knowledge Is Power Program](#) (KIPP), and [PowerMyLearning](#) would expand the reach of their evidence-based programs by partnering with additional communities. At the same time, districts and schools would stop using ineffective or less-effective practices and instead would adopt (and adapt) more-effective ones, such as [high-dosage tutoring](#), [early college high schools](#), [high-quality curricula](#), and a wide array of [educator effectiveness strategies](#).

provides points for applicants who propose a project with a key component in its logic model that is informed by research or evaluation findings that suggest it is likely to improve relevant outcomes

- Under the Charter Schools Program (\$440 million), ED awards replication and expansion grants only to charter management organizations with evidence of prior success.
- For the 2019 competition for the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) (\$360 million), ED used a competitive preference priority for projects based on moderate evidence of effectiveness for state and partnership grants (approximately \$28 million in new state awards in FY19). Additionally, ED conducted 2018 GEAR UP competitions (nearly \$130 million), including an absolute priority for applicants proposing evidence-based strategies to improve science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) outcomes.
- ED's Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program (\$200 million) required applicants to provide a description of the rationale for their project and to describe how the proposed activities are evidence-based; grantees were held to these standards when implementing the program.
- The Comprehensive Literacy Development Grants (\$190 million) required grantees to provide subgrants to LEAs that conduct evidence-based literacy interventions.

Currently, seven ESSA competitive grant programs<sup>1</sup> provide competitive preference points to proposals backed by evidence, but they do not *require* the use of evidence-based interventions. Dollars spent on these programs could be better targeted and more efficiently used to provide significant positive benefits if they were invested in what we know works for students. Congress should prioritize evidence-based approaches for all of ESSA's competitive grant programs, along with competitive grants in other federal education laws such as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and Title III of the Higher Education Act. At the same time, ED should conduct an annual review of its competitive grant programs across all federal education laws to identify, prioritize, and act on additional opportunities to integrate an emphasis on evidence-based approaches.

## ii. Increase the Use of Evidence-Based Approaches in School Improvement Plans

ESSA requires SEAs to invest 7% of their ESSA Title I, Part A funds (representing \$1.1 billion out of \$16 billion in FY20) in improving schools that have been identified as needing comprehensive or targeted support. Each school-based improvement plan *must* include evidence-based interventions that meet one of the top three levels of evidence—strong, moderate, or promising—as defined by ESSA (not the demonstrates a rationale tier). When Congress passed ESSA five years ago, it prioritized the use of evidence in Title I, Part A to ensure that dollars spent on school improvement efforts were being maximized: students in these schools did not have time to waste on improvement efforts that were not working. ED can and should do more to help SEAs and LEAs realize the potential of Congress's approach.

---

<sup>1</sup> The seven grants are (1) SEED, (2) Statewide Family Engagement Centers, (3) LEARN, (4) School Leader Recruitment and Support, (5) Full-Service Community Schools, (6) Promise Neighborhoods, and (7) Supporting High-Ability Learners and Learning.





Although implementation has varied and outcome data are for the most part not yet available, some states and districts have fully embraced the emphasis of evidence-based approaches in the school improvement context. In [Nevada](#), for example, districts that for decades had identified external partners through personal relationships rather than evidence of impact began centering results when selecting and engaging with school improvement vendors. In Humboldt County, one of the state's most rural and economically disadvantaged districts, a new partnership with Achievement Network contributed to [double-digit gains in reading among third-graders in the district](#). But although states like Nevada have required that 100% of school improvement grants be spent in support of evidence-based approaches, other states have required that improvement plans include just one evidence-based intervention to comply with ESSA's mandate. In some instances, this minimalist approach has contributed to a check-the-box mentality that is less likely to improve outcomes.

ED should leverage its available tools to deepen SEA, LEA, and school commitment to taking advantage of the evidence base to design and implement more-effective improvement plans. First, ED should study or Congress should call for GAO to examine how the 7% set-aside has been used thus far. Among other process and outcome inquiries, ED or GAO should first seek to answer the following: *What percentage of the funds have been used to support evidence-based interventions (by level of supporting evidence)? What are the nature of those interventions? What conditions and resources are necessary to successfully implement them? What are SEAs doing to ensure fidelity of implementation and to sustain implementation over time?* Second, ED should provide technical assistance to help SEAs design their own school improvement systems that deeply integrate evidence-based approaches, including into SEAs' grant application design, allocation methodology, review and approval protocols, technical assistance (including for needs assessments and plan development), and progress monitoring to support continuous improvement. Third, ED should revise its own monitoring and evaluation systems to focus on how well SEAs are implementing the evidence provisions in their state systems of school improvement and to what extent their investments in evidence-based approaches are helping improve outcomes in identified schools.

If ED takes these steps in the short term, students in schools identified for improvement will have a better shot at receiving the supports they need and deserve. Furthermore, ESSA's current approach to school improvement will have a more robust track record for Congress to consider during any future reauthorization.

### iii. Incentivize Evidence of Effectiveness in Formula-Funded Grant Programs

With about 90% of federal education funds allocated through *formula* grants, efforts to shift more funds to evidence-based approaches will have limited impact without a purposeful strategy to expand beyond *competitive* grants and the 7% set-aside of Title I for school improvement. Other ESSA formula-funded titles that would benefit from provisions defining and prioritizing evidence include Title I, Part C, which helps districts and schools provide an adequate education to migrant students; Title I, Part D, which provides districts and schools with additional funding for "children who are neglected, delinquent and at-risk and for children and youth in adult correctional facilities"; Title II, Part A, which helps districts improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, principals, and school leaders; Title III, which helps districts support English language learners; and Title IV, Parts A and B, which help districts support afterschool and other student-support programs. In FY19 these titles received a combined total of more than \$5.5 billion in funding that likely would have yielded better results for students if it had been spent on interventions with known evidence of effectiveness for those students.

Although ESSA *requires* SEAs to invest only at least 7% of their Title I, Part A funds in evidence-based ways, there are dozens of instances in other formula programs where Congress has indicated that some allowable uses of funds must focus on evidence-based programs or practices (using any of the four evidence levels). For example, LEAs may spend Title II funds on any of 16 allowable uses, but if they choose to spend it on professional development or class size reduction, [they must do so in evidence-based ways](#). This approach drives toward more use of evidence while preserving flexibility for SEAs and LEAs; that flexibility was a priority during negotiations over ESSA. At the same time, this approach also acknowledges that, in some areas, more evidence must be built before *requiring* an evidence-based approach.

Now that SEAs, LEAs, and schools have had some experience implementing the requirement to include evidence-based interventions in the context of Title I, Part A funds for schools identified for improvement and support, it is time for ED to pay more attention to the allowable-use provisions in other titles of the law. Doing so would deepen SEA and LEA engagement with evidence-based decision-making and could lead to significant shifts of federal funds into evidence-based strategies and interventions, resulting in better student outcomes.

In the short term, the federal government should take at least the following two steps to activate these allowable-use provisions:

First, ED should fund an independent study or Congress should ask for a GAO study of how the provisions have been implemented since ESSA's enactment in 2015. *To what extent did SEAs and LEAs invest federal funds on allowable uses that ESSA requires to be evidence-based? What processes did SEAs use to evaluate the evidence supporting those proposals? How were the proposed expenditures distributed across the four tiers of ESSA's*

*evidence-based definition? What were the challenges of implementing these provisions? What opportunities do ED and SEAs have to support LEAs moving forward?* With a better understanding of how these evidence provisions are being implemented, ED could provide targeted technical assistance where needed and then could integrate the evidence provisions as an area of focus for its annual ESSA monitoring process.

Second, ED should issue regulations or revise the 2016 [evidence guidance](#) that explains an SEA's duty to evaluate the evidence base for the relevant set of allowable uses and then to update those evaluations over time as additional research is conducted. Specifically, in 15 of the allowable-use provisions discussed above, ESSA includes a further caveat that the evidence-based language applies *only* if the SEA (sometimes in consultation with LEAs) first determines that supporting evidence is reasonably available. If the SEA determines the evidence base is lacking, then LEAs are free to ignore the evidence-based language altogether. For example, Congress mandated that any use of Title II funds to reduce class size must align with the existing evidence but only if the SEA first determines that relevant evidence is available. There is a robust evidence base about the limited ways in which class size reduction positively impacts student outcomes, but unless SEAs are making these determinations, LEAs may continue to ignore what is known from research. In addition to or even pending regulations (or guidance), IES should publish a biannual determination for each of the 15 reasonably available provisions that SEAs can rely on in the absence of conducting their own literature reviews.

In the long term, Congress should significantly expand the allowable-use approach. Currently that approach functions as an exception, and requires evidence-based approaches only for a limited and predetermined list of allowable uses of funds sprinkled across different sections of the law. Congress could instead turn this exception into a default rule by requiring that *all* allowable uses be evidence-based, especially formula funds such as ESSA's Title II, Title III, and Title IV, as well as other ESSA competitive grant programs and even other federal education laws.

To preserve state and local flexibility—and in recognition that the evidence base is stronger in some areas than in others, and is more relevant to certain contexts/populations than others—Congress should simultaneously expand the reasonably available caveat discussed above. In other words, as SEAs and LEAs plan how to use federal funds to meet their needs, part of their process in using those funds should be consulting the reasonably available evidence to inform their spending decisions. If they can demonstrate that evidence is unavailable in a particular context, SEAs and LEAs would still be able to use the funds to meet their needs in that area with an approach that currently lacks an evidence base. Another advantage to switching from an exception to a default approach is that ESSA implementation could adjust as the evidence base grows over time without waiting for the next reauthorization.

Finally, another route to shifting more formula funding is through Congress, which can be more aggressive in creating new ways to incentivize or require shifting formula funding to approaches that are more likely to improve outcomes. For example, Congress could reserve a portion of any additional education stabilization funds that are included in a recovery package for SEAs that agree to spend or distribute those funds on evidence-based approaches. Another approach would be for Congress to create a new grant program to top off incentive funding to SEAs and/or LEAs that agree to invest more federal formula funds



in evidence-based approaches.<sup>2</sup> This approach would help convince states and districts to spend formula funds on interventions with moderate or strong evidence of effectiveness and then report on costs and benefits to support further return-on-investment analysis.

In addition to looking to other federal agencies for examples, ED can also learn from the [states](#). For example, the [Nevada Department of Education](#) emphasizes evidence in 10 of its federal and state grant programs. Beginning in 2017 Nevada began requiring that school districts invest awarded funds from two federal grant programs in interventions that meet one of the four ESSA tiers of evidence (strong, moderate, promising, and demonstrates a rationale). From there, Nevada passed legislation and expanded its state regulations to require the use of evidence-based practices in not just these two federal grant programs, but also in an additional federal program and seven state programs, increasing the amount of dollars flowing in an evidence-based manner to almost \$200 million.

### 3. Invest 1% of Federal Education Program Funds in Evaluations

- ***NOW:** ED should allocate 0.5% of its discretionary program funding to evaluate the effectiveness of its grant programs.*
- ***LATER:** Congress should require the secretary of education to set aside at least 1% of discretionary program funds for evaluation.*

Congress and federal agencies spend billions of dollars every day on big problems, but they often fail to invest in the infrastructure needed to evaluate the efficacy of those efforts. According to a [2017 Government Accountability Office report](#), 39% of federal managers said they did not know if an evaluation of any program, operation, or project they were involved in had been completed within the previous five years. Federal, state, and local education departments can improve the impact of program funds through conducting rigorous evaluations of programs that receive federal funds in order to identify which interventions and aspects of interventions are working well, for whom, and under what circumstances.

This approach holds broad public support. As noted above, a [May 2020 National Opinion Research Center poll](#) found widespread support for investing in evidence across the political spectrum, from federal and academic leaders to policy experts. An earlier poll conducted in [March 2019](#) found that 84% of all Americans support allocating at least 1% of federal funding for evaluation.

---

<sup>2</sup> The approach described here is based on an innovative proposal in ED's [FY2016 budget](#). At that time, ED proposed a new \$100 million competitive grant, the Leveraging What Works program.



Moreover, a number of federal agencies have also made ongoing investments in evaluation. RFA's 2020 [Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence](#) found that [six large](#) domestic federal human services departments and agencies invested, on average, 0.52% of their budgets on evaluation activities in FY20. For example, in FY20 the [Administration for Community Living](#) at the Department of Health and Human Services invested 1.11% of its \$2 billion budget while [AmeriCorps](#) invested 1% of its \$806.53 million operating budget in evaluation.

In FY20, for example, [ED invested \\$237 million](#) in evaluations, evaluation technical assistance, and evaluation capacity-building. Although that investment represented a significant increase from the \$39.7 million spent in FY18, it still amounted to just 0.4% of the agency's \$47.9 billion discretionary budget (not including Student Financial Assistance and administrative funds). The FY20 investment still falls short of the amount authorized by the bipartisan ESSA, which allows the ED secretary to allocate up to 0.5% of federal K–12 education funds (excluding ESSA Title I funds) for program evaluations. Some of these funds could also be used to support SEAs in expanding their evaluation capacity. Given the new and urgent needs facing our schools, teachers, students, and parents, it is critical for federal and state education officials to help teachers, principals, and district leaders understand what programs are working for whom and under what circumstances. The secretary should immediately increase ED's evaluation investments and then do so each year, and Congress should work toward requiring the secretary to set aside at least 1% of discretionary grant funds for evaluations.

## 4. Build a Larger and More Effective Evaluation, Research, and Development Infrastructure

- ***NOW:** Congress should increase the Education Innovation and Research Program appropriation from \$190 million in FY20 to \$500 million in FY21.*
- ***LATER:** Congress should double the IES budget from \$623 million to \$1.25 billion.*

In addition to not currently investing sufficient resources in program evaluations, we are also currently not investing enough resources in education research and development (R&D). This underinvestment can be understood in both absolute and relative terms: The two major federal agencies that invest in education research—the National Science Foundation and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)—had total budgets of roughly \$9 billion in FY20, compared with more than \$41 billion for the National Institutes of Health.

Meanwhile, [data](#) from FY2015 show that R&D [accounts](#) for an estimated 0.4% of total education spending but 6.3% in health, 12.3% in defense, and 46.1% in energy.

We cannot build the evidence base—especially to better understand what works for whom and under what circumstances—nor design the effective tools and resources educators want and need without dramatically increasing the R&D education infrastructure. As an initial matter, Congress should increase its investment in ED's premier innovation program—the Education Innovation and Research grant program. Since its creation, this tiered-evidence program has seen steady increases to its appropriation, but its appropriation level in FY20, \$190 million, is the highest funding level the program has ever received. That is an insufficient amount of funding to operate a true innovation fund that could support evidence-based and evidence-building programs aimed at improving student outcomes across 50 states.

As a longer-term matter, Congress should double the federal investment in education research, starting with an increase of the IES budget from \$623 million to \$1.25 billion, and should dedicate a percentage of that funding to research that directly addresses racial equity issues in education. More money is of course insufficient on its own, but it is a necessary step along the way to fully embracing the Moneyball principles and transforming education at all levels to embrace a [learning systems](#) approach.

One technique to help ensure these additional funds will be used effectively is to bolster federal support for research practice partnerships. These partnerships come in [many sizes and shapes](#), but they are all designed to focus on facilitating sustained joint problem-solving by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to improve student outcomes. ED has in the past oriented its [Regional Educational Laboratory](#) program toward [research alliances](#) that connect researchers and practitioners, although [IES](#) has recently signaled [some](#) skepticism of this approach and has called for greater attention to be paid to evaluating their effectiveness in improving outcomes. Congress should ensure that new R&D investments include significant and sustained support for research practice partnerships. Connecting R&D to practitioners' authentic needs and questions will lead to greater return on investment, too, since the outputs will be more timely, more relevant, and more likely to be used to support students.



## 5. Produce More Relevant, More Meaningful, and More Accessible Data to Support States, Districts, and Schools

- *NOW: ED should support SEAs in making sure new school-level spending data reports are effectively communicated to the public.*
- *NOW: ED should fully implement the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018.*
- *LATER: ED should help SEAs improve state longitudinal data systems to better link data sources across the pre-kindergarten through workforce (P-20) continuum.*

Our first four recommendations focus on using and generating research evidence. But equally important are all the ways that data should inform decision-making at the federal, state, district, and school levels. Investing further in systems of collecting and sharing relevant data would help build a learning system approach at every level of the education system. Using data as a [flashlight rather than a hammer](#), education leaders can pose and answer authentic questions; unearth otherwise hidden inequities; continuously improve policies, systems, and practices; and transparently share progress with and make data accessible to families, students, and other key stakeholders.

ED and SEAs have made important progress on data collection, management, and reporting since 2001 when Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act. SEAs have, with the support of federal funding, built and improved state longitudinal data systems. Stakeholders throughout the education system now expect data to be disaggregated based on characteristics such as sex, race and ethnicity, and family income. ESSA contains numerous new data reporting requirements such as adding [school-level spending information](#) to annual report cards to help shine a light on resource allocation as a key driver of (in)equality. Going forward, ED should ensure that this school-level spending data adheres to a set of five [basic principles](#), including whether it is [comparable, clear, and easy to use](#). ED can help ensure there is clarity and ease of use by issuing guidance clarifying that state and local spending data cannot be lumped together but must, like other data, be disaggregated. In addition, ED should provide states with technical assistance and resources to help them (1) decide what pots of funding to include in their reporting, (2) make their data comparable across districts, and (3) publish their reports in a downloadable format so that stakeholders can easily access, manipulate, and analyze data in ways that help answer questions and inform decisions.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's [Office of Planning and Research](#) works closely with academic researchers to conduct rigorous evaluations of school turnaround and other efforts in the state to create data that can inform the efficacy of the programs going forward. Ohio's [Office of Research, Evaluation and Advanced Analytics](#) is responsible for helping educational leaders across the state recognize, gather, analyze, evaluate, and leverage data to solve problems and improve student outcomes. That office facilitates data-collection initiatives, including [Empowered by Evidence](#) and [Ohio's Evidence-Based Clearinghouse](#). The [Ohio Department of Education](#) has partnered with the [Ohio Education Research Center](#) to share education data across the state.

The federal government should continue to build on this progress. A good place to start would be for it to fully implement the [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018](#) that [both promotes data accessibility and enables responsible data use](#). ED has for years been on the leading edge of federal agencies in RFA's Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence, which positions it to be a model agency with regard to how it implements the provisions of the new law—such as developing an agency-wide learning agenda, conducting a capacity assessment, and adopting an evaluation policy. Becoming a model agency will further bolster ED's commitment to making data available to practitioners and policymakers at each level of the education system. It will also provide ED with important opportunities to break down silos and approach data collection and use across programs to prioritize research questions, build capacity to use data to find answers, and reflect on the efficacy of the agency's learning efforts.

Maintaining (and even accelerating) ED's progress on data collection, protection, use, and reporting also means preserving important data collections such as the [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) and other National Center for Education Statistics initiatives. Every agency should from time to time audit its data collections to look for redundancies, unnecessary collections, and ways to reduce the administrative burden on SEAs and LEAs. But there should be a high bar for eliminating or substantially reducing a longstanding data collection, which could threaten ongoing research and make it more difficult to track progress over time. Similarly, ED should strive to preserve key data that may be more difficult to collect during the COVID-19 pandemic, including but not limited to annual summative assessment data required by ESSA, while also considering what new data should be collected, such as information about the type of learning environments students are experiencing.

ED should also help state longitudinal data systems evolve further, especially in terms of better linking data sources to coordinate across the P-20 continuum. To be most effective, state and local education agencies need longitudinal data systems that [equitably](#) integrate administrative data from early childhood, postsecondary education, workforce, judicial, and public health and benefits agencies. By investing in and supporting the further development of these data systems, ED can ensure that states combine administrative data from across their social services agencies to better understand what is working in their communities. It is critical that these enhanced, linked data systems provide data in timely and user-friendly ways to allow policymakers and practitioners to make real-time decisions to improve outcomes. Additionally, these data systems allow rigorous program evaluations—including of long-term outcomes—to be conducted at low or modest cost since key study outcomes can be measured with administrative data.



One important opportunity to advance these data priorities is through the next reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA), which is long overdue. The following are some [initial recommendations](#) for Congress to consider:

- *Codify* the ways that leading states are now using their Statewide Longitudinal Data System, including to connect data systems across the P–20 continuum, by incorporating references to the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Higher Education Act, and other relevant laws.
- *Broaden* ESRA's allowable uses provisions so more funding is available to make timely, high-quality data available for research that directly benefits K–12 schools, as well as other public tools or analyses.
- *Allow* ESRA funds to be used for training staff on the use of data and research, and for hiring SEA research directors who can serve as [brokers between agency staff and researchers](#).
- *Dedicate* one of the ESRA-funded comprehensive centers to data support with a mandate to focus on privacy, data use, and data literacy.
- *Repurpose* funding for state data coordinators to allow funds to be allocated to support data use and privacy instead of to be simply for ED Facts data submissions.

## Conclusion

Federal education policy has made important strides since RFA published [Moneyball for Education](#) in 2015. ED's progress in making the use of data, evidence, and evaluation part of the agency's new normal has been sustained across different administrations and has accelerated through the reauthorization of the major federal K–12 education law. Now we are facing a time of increasing student needs, greater urgency to address long-standing inequities, and diminishing resources. Implementing these five recommendations will help ensure that when education policymakers—at all levels of the education system—make decisions, they first seek the best evidence and data available, then use what they find to achieve better results.



# Acknowledgements

Results for America gratefully acknowledges all of the individuals and organizations who contributed their insight, advice, and expertise throughout the development of the Moneyball for Education report. We would especially like to recognize **Dan Gordon** and **Bethany Little** of EducationCounsel for their significant contribution to this project from inception to publication.

Results for America would also like to express its appreciation to the following individuals and organizations for their generosity of time and their valuable and constructive suggestions: **Yan Leigh**, Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development; **Rachel Anderson**, Data Quality Campaign; **Jim Kohlmoos**, EDGE Consulting LLC; **Winnie Chan**, **Ivy Smith Morgan**, and **Terra Wallin**, The Education Trust; and **Ruth Neild**, Mathematica.

The Results for America Education Team for this project included **Miles Bullock**, Strategic Communications Consultant; **Zachary Coile**, Vice President, Strategic Communications; **Sara Kerr**, Vice President, Education Policy Implementation; **David Medina**, COO and Co-Founder; **Kate Tromble**, Vice President, Federal Policy; and **Laney Umland**, Associate, Education and Workforce Development.

The views expressed herein are those of Results for America and do not necessarily reflect the views of those listed in this acknowledgements section, other organizational partners, or funders.

# 2021 Moneyball for Education Policy Recommendations



[results4america.org](https://results4america.org)



[info@results4america.org](mailto:info@results4america.org)



[@Results4America](https://twitter.com/Results4America)

