

ESSA Leverage Points

64 Promising Practices from States for Using Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes





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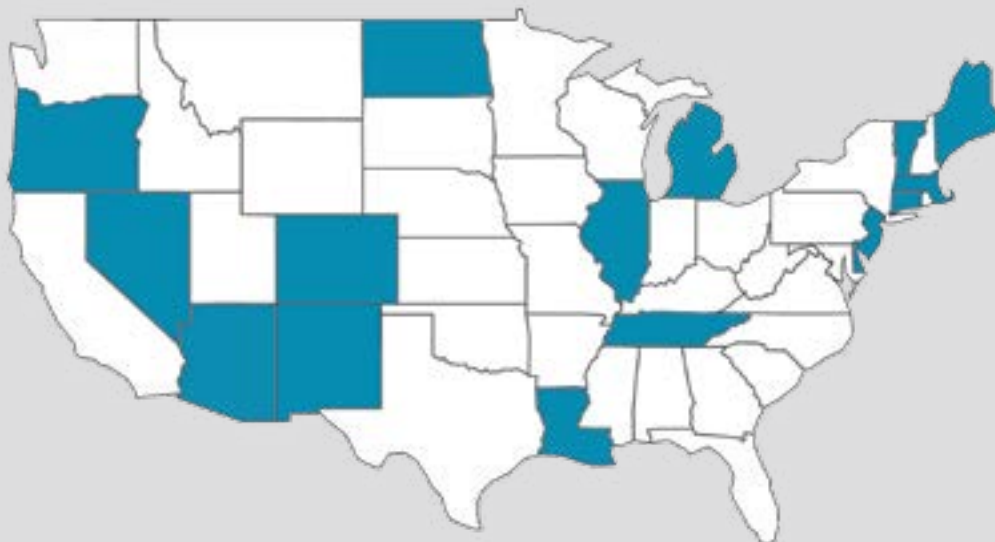
Executive Summary

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states, school districts, and schools new flexibility to design K-12 education systems that reflect local needs and priorities. In exchange, ESSA encourages, and in some cases requires, the use of evidence-based approaches and continuous improvement to drive improved outcomes.

Results for America's Evidence in Education Lab team analyzed the 17 ESSA consolidated state plans submitted to the U.S. Department of Education to date in order to examine the extent to which these states propose to use the opportunities provided by ESSA to strengthen how they use evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement. In our review, we found the following:

- Sixteen states included at least one promising practice for building and using evidence to improve student outcomes.
- Eight states included the largest number of promising practices: New Mexico, Connecticut, Tennessee, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Colorado, and Oregon.
- Unfortunately, only four states emphasize the role of evidence-based approaches outside of school improvement (e.g., ESSA Title II and Title IV); only five states pledge to conduct evaluations to build the evidence base further; and only nine states highlight the use of evidence when reviewing and approving school improvement funding applications.

In general, we were encouraged by the commitments these first 17 states made to using evidence to drive improved student outcomes, particularly among the eight states with the largest number of promising practices. However, for the majority of states, there were notable gaps that deserve further attention. In the report that follows, we summarize trends across states for each of 13 key opportunities in ESSA and spotlight those states with the most promising approaches.



Overview

State education agencies (referred to throughout this document simply as “states”) are in the midst of making significant changes to their K-12 education systems in response to the new bipartisan federal education law (the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA) which was enacted in December 2015.

ESSA shifted the federal role in K-12 education from the more compliance-oriented framework of the No Child Left Behind Act to one that provides states, school districts, and schools more flexibility and authority to design their own education systems. At the same time, ESSA requires and encourages the use of evidence-based approaches and continuous improvement to help drive greater student success. But how exactly should states take advantage of this new opportunity?

In May 2017, Results for America, in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), published [Leverage Points](#), a report highlighting 13 key opportunities for states to use the resources and increased authority provided by ESSA to strengthen how they, their local education agencies (LEAs), and their schools use evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement to improve student outcomes.

In April 2017, 16 states and the District of Columbia submitted their ESSA consolidated state plans to the U.S. Department of Education (USED) for approval; the remaining states are expected to submit their plans in September 2017. The plans outline how these states will carry out many of ESSA’s requirements, including those related to evidence-based improvements.

Results for America’s Evidence in Education Lab (Ed Lab) team reviewed this initial set of ESSA state plans to analyze the extent to which these 17 states plan to take advantage of the 13 opportunities identified in the [Leverage Points](#) report.¹ In our analysis of the first round plans, we found the following:

- Of the 17 states, 16 included at least one promising practice for building and using evidence to improve student outcomes.
- Eight states described in their plans the largest number of promising practices related to the 13 ESSA evidence leverage points: New Mexico (9), Connecticut (7), Tennessee (7), Delaware (7), Massachusetts (6), New Jersey (5), Colorado (4), and Oregon (4).
- Among these eight states, many included plans to develop and implement the five ESSA evidence leverage points that RFA believes could have the greatest impact on the use of data and evidence by states, LEAs, and schools to improve student outcomes:
 - Five states (TN, CT, MA, NM, and DE) committed to **distributing school improvement funds** competitively, at least in part on the basis of how their districts and schools plan to use evidence-based interventions (Leverage Point 4).
 - Three states (TN, CT, and NM) described in detail plans to emphasize within their local school district **applications for school improvement funds** for the use of evidence and continuous improvement (Leverage Point 5).
 - Five states (TN, CT, MA, CO, and NM) described robust approaches to **monitoring and evaluating the implementation of school improvement plans** (Leverage Point 6).

1. This report is the first of a two-part analysis of ESSA consolidated state plans, the second of which will review plans from the remaining 34 states, which are required to submit their plans by September 18, 2017.

- Four states (TN, OR, NJ, and DE) prioritized **high-quality needs assessments** as a key component of the school improvement process (Leverage Point 8).
- Three states (CT, NM, and DE) detailed strong plans for providing **technical assistance on selecting evidence-based interventions** to support schools identified for improvement (Leverage Point 9).

While our analysis revealed a good number of promising practices within the 17 state plans, there were some notable gaps:

- Only four state plans emphasize the role of evidence-based approaches outside of school improvement (e.g., ESSA Title II and Title IV).
- Only five states pledge to conduct evaluations to build the evidence base further.
- Only nine state plans highlight the use of evidence when reviewing and approving school improvement funding applications.

In the charts that follow, we have highlighted promising practices that specific states have developed and are planning to implement related to each of the 13 ESSA evidence leverage points outlined in our [May 2017 report](#). For each leverage point, we note:

- What ESSA requires and why states should care
- The range of practices that states interested in taking a strong approach to using evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement could take
- A summary of trends across the 17 state plans
- Brief descriptions of the most promising practices from these state plans
- Links to the state ESSA plans and specific page references for each strategy highlighted

Results for America is encouraged by the commitments states have made to date to leverage the opportunities in ESSA to use evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement to improve outcomes for students. We were particularly pleased with the number of states that described plans not only to use evidence but to build it through rigorous evaluation of their efforts, particularly those related to school improvement, as well as the thoughtfulness with which a select group of states plan to support their LEAs' and schools' capacity to select and implement evidence-based interventions tied to their specific needs.

There is still work to be done to ensure that the promising practices described in this report are implemented effectively and to help every state understand how they could strengthen their approaches, particularly those that did not take advantage of the ESSA evidence opportunities or did so to a lesser degree. To support states and to encourage them to consider the full set of opportunities available through ESSA to better use evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement, we will be providing each of the 17 states featured in this report, as well as the remaining 34 states expected to submit plans in September, with a state-specific summary of findings and recommendations for strengthening existing commitments and/or adopting new approaches to the leverage points in their plans that did not meet our threshold for promising practices. In addition to sharing individualized feedback with states, Results for America will conduct and release an analysis of the remaining plans later this year.

A Note about Our Analysis

Our analysis is based on the 17 ESSA consolidated state plans submitted to USED for review and approval, a process that is still under way. States will likely revise their plans up to and even after they receive approval, as they move into the implementation phase. Some states may be planning to develop and implement other promising practices in the ESSA evidence leverage points areas described below but chose not to describe those efforts in their consolidated state plans. In fact, of the 13 opportunities outlined, states are no longer required to explicitly address five of them (Leverage Points 1–5) as a result of the state plan template having been revised in April 2017, although we were pleased to see that many states nonetheless included plans related to these leverage points.

LEA Plan Process

Design a process for local ESSA plans that promotes the use of evidence and continuous improvement.

What ESSA Says

States must create local ESSA plan procedures in consultation with the governor and in collaboration with LEAs.

Why This Matters

States have an opportunity to send a strong signal to LEAs and schools about their theory of action through the LEA planning process. Those that believe in and are committed to using data-driven, evidence-based approaches to improve student outcomes can and should promote and model these beliefs through the rules and supports they put in place around LEA plan development, review, and approval.

What Leading States Could Do

- Create a local ESSA plan process that clarifies how the SEA will support LEAs in developing their plans and how the SEA will review and ultimately approve local plans, including criteria such as the degree to which each LEA's plan aligns with the LEA's particular needs and the SEA's priorities, as well as how the LEA would leverage needs assessments, data, and evidence to make the process a meaningful one that will drive effective use of ESSA funds.
- Design a local ESSA plan template (or list of required elements) that emphasizes the role that evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement will play in the LEA's plan.
- Provide technical assistance and ongoing support for LEAs to help them develop local ESSA plans that prioritize the use of data and evidence to respond to local needs and engage in continuous improvement.
- Leverage the LEA plan review and approval process to shift the SEA/LEA relationship from one focused on compliance to one focused on collaboration and learning.

New Jersey
Massachusetts
Oregon
Colorado
New Mexico



State Plan Trends

Five states articulated a clear and compelling vision for how the LEA plan process would take advantage of needs assessments, data, and evidence to make the planning process a meaningful one that will help LEAs make effective use of ESSA funds.²

Promising State Practices

[New Jersey](#) will support LEAs in a comprehensive process to develop their plans, including assistance with conducting a needs assessment, selecting evidence-based practices, and planning for and evaluating implementation (pp. 33–35), and will regularly solicit and incorporate input from district- and school-level stakeholders into their LEA planning process.

[Massachusetts](#) will provide support to LEAs to embed continuous improvement and evaluation practices in their planning processes, with an emphasis on building evidence by conducting formal evaluations for approaches that are not yet supported by evidence that meets the top three levels of ESSA’s tiered definition (pp. 34–36).

[Oregon](#) will base its selection of LEAs for state partnership and support on the results of a readiness screening protocol that assesses local context, analyzes reporting measures, and establishes priority areas for improvement. As part of this process, LEAs will conduct “evidence-based root cause analysis” in collaboration with a broad group of local stakeholders (pp. 23–24).

Both [Colorado](#) (pp. 36–37) and [New Mexico](#) (pp. 45–46) plan to use a consolidated application for all LEAs and emphasize the use of evidence-based interventions and strategies that align with specific LEA and school needs in these applications.

2. Three states did not address the leverage point in their plan. The remaining states described approaches but did not meet our criteria for constituting a promising practice.

Monitoring LEA Implementation

Leverage the monitoring function not only to measure compliance but also to support high-quality implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement.

What ESSA Says

States must monitor LEA implementation of ESSA strategies described in their plans with a focus on ensuring compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements. (Note that states must also ensure the SEA itself is complying with ESSA.)

Why This Matters

When monitoring is only about checking the box for compliance, states miss a critical opportunity to learn from and alongside LEAs and schools about what is and is not working—and to support efforts to strengthen implementation in real time.

What Leading States Could Do

- Assess the quality of LEA implementation of ESSA strategies—with an emphasis on evidence-based strategies—by regularly collecting, reviewing, and rating qualitative and quantitative data.
- Describe a process to leverage administrative data and other data already collected to minimize additional data collection burdens.
- Build monitoring systems that include not only back-end auditing but also front-end efforts to inform staff of requirements in advance, identify potential issues, integrate with technical assistance and other support systems to address problems before they result in actual noncompliance, and support ongoing continuous improvement efforts.
- Differentiate monitoring based on LEA-specific factors (e.g., performance, history of noncompliance, size, federal allocation).

Tennessee
Massachusetts
New Mexico
New Jersey



State Plan Trends

Four states describe monitoring plans that do not resemble traditional, compliance-oriented state monitoring functions. Rather, these leading states will engage in more-regular feedback cycles that build from comprehensive needs assessments and tie identified challenges to evidence-based solutions.³

Promising State Practices

[Tennessee](#) will employ a risk analysis instrument to differentiate its efforts to monitor LEA implementation and will engage in monitoring activities multiple times per year (pp. 176–79).

[Massachusetts](#), through its Office of Planning and Research, will develop specific plans, benchmarks, and outcomes for key initiatives and monitor implementation to ensure that LEAs are on track (p. 35). The state also plans to support districts in conducting formal evaluations of implementation.

[New Mexico](#) describes a well-constructed system for monitoring LEA implementation with an emphasis on establishing clear metrics and feedback loops at the outset of implementation and regular progress checks along the way, with multiple opportunities to correct course as needed (pp. 47–48). The state is leveraging its existing administrative data, which is automatically submitted daily by LEAs and schools, to regularly monitor leading indicators and ensure real-time continuous improvement.

[New Jersey](#) will take advantage of its new chief intervention officer and integrated school performance reporting system to increase the scope and effectiveness of its LEA monitoring functions (pp. 35–37).

3. One state did not address the leverage point in their plan. The remaining states described approaches but did not meet our criteria for constituting a promising practice.

Continuous Improvement

Build state and local learning systems that promote the use of evidence and continuous improvement in policies and practices focused on improving student outcomes.

What ESSA Says

States must plan for periodic review and revision of SEA and LEA ESSA plans to reflect changes in strategies and programs. States must then submit significant changes to their plans for approval by the USED.

Why This Matters

Leaders at all levels should acknowledge that we rarely if ever get everything right the first time. By adopting a learning orientation, states can position themselves to learn from mistakes, improve as they go, and recognize promising practices that can be studied and scaled.

What Leading States Could Do

- Establish routines for continuous improvement that review ESSA plans more frequently than periodically.
- Adopt and adapt best practices for promoting continuous improvement, such as data collection, feedback loops, collection of information about implementation, methods of analysis to examine effectiveness and reflect on outcomes, and the identification of challenges and potential solutions.
- Differentiate continuous improvement based on both programmatic factors (e.g., size of investment, quality of implementation, impact to date) and LEA-specific factors (e.g., performance, history of noncompliance, size, federal allocation).

Illinois
Vermont
Tennessee
Colorado
Connecticut
Massachusetts
New Jersey
New Mexico
Oregon



State Plan Trends

Nine states are embracing continuous improvement as a key component of their ESSA theory of action, although even among the strongest plans the focus is primarily on supporting continuous improvement at the district and school level, with little attention paid to how states themselves can engage in continuous improvement routines.

Promising State Practices

[Illinois](#) will foster continuous improvement by taking an internal look at its organization and reorienting its resources to ensure that the SEA can provide differentiated technical assistance to LEAs and programs that need capacity. The state will develop feedback loops with LEAs to forecast problems early and often and amend LEA plans if needed (pp. 51–52).

In [Vermont](#), every school and LEA, regardless of status, is required to submit a continuous improvement plan and will receive assistance from the SEA in implementing high-quality improvement science cycles and identifying opportunity to leverage quality interventions (pp. 68–70).

[Tennessee](#) plans to conduct evaluations of the fastest improving schools to continuously inform and strengthen implementation of interventions and supports for all schools in improvement status (pp. 116–23). Similarly, [Colorado](#) plans to evaluate the effectiveness of the statewide school improvement system and widely disseminate results to LEAs and schools (p. 41).

[Connecticut](#) developed a tiered system of support for districts that fosters continuous improvement by adjusting the frequency of progress monitoring and level of supports offered based on need and performance against goals and targets. The state is developing a rubric for LEA plan approval and ongoing monitoring and evaluation (pp. 20–26).

[Massachusetts](#)'s Office of Planning and Research (OPR) will lead the state's efforts to monitor and continuously learn from and strengthen statewide and local ESSA implementation. The OPR developed and is supporting LEAs to use a model for district planning and implementation that has three basic steps: creating a plan, aligning systems to the plan, and implementing the plan (including evaluating and monitoring progress) (pp. 35–36).

[New Jersey](#) describes a plan to leverage its chief intervention officer to regularly monitor and evaluate state and local implementation, with a focus on ensuring the state sees a high return on educational investments in the form of improved impact on schools and students (pp. 35–37).

Continuous improvement is at the core of [New Mexico](#)'s plan. The state is leveraging its existing statewide data system to provide increasingly frequent and automated reports that are made available to LEAs and schools and to identify areas of improvement and track progress (p. 48).

[Oregon](#) will require all LEAs to create district-level continuous improvement plans and participate in an annual implementation and progress review. Oregon's annual review of district-level data will be used to develop and recommend adjustments to plans and certain interventions proactively, and reviews will be cross-office and aimed at building coherent support across the department (pp. 22–24).

Allocating School Improvement Funds

Incentivize the best use of evidence in allocating federal school improvement funds to LEAs.

What ESSA Says

States must allocate at least 95 percent of the state's school improvement set-aside to LEAs with schools identified for comprehensive and targeted school improvement to help fund their support and improvement plans, ensuring grants “are of sufficient size to enable [an LEA] to effectively implement selected strategies.”

Why This Matters

Divvying up pots of money can be politically challenging, but given the stakes for students in these low-performing schools and the uneven track record of prior school improvement efforts, states should give careful thought as to how best to ensure these funds are used well.

What Leading States Could Do

Ensure funds go toward what works by:

- Awarding funds competitively based at least in part on whether the proposed use of evidence-based interventions is supported by the strongest level of evidence available.
- Awarding funds competitively as above but with additional preference points for plans that commit to strong systems of continuous improvement and/or propose to set aside program funds for evaluation.
- Award funds through a hybrid approach that provides smaller planning year grants via a formula and larger implementation grants via a competition.
- Base grant renewal decisions at least in part on the success in implementing evidence-based interventions.

New Mexico
Delaware
Tennessee
Connecticut
Massachusetts
Nevada
Louisiana



State Plan Trends

Seven states allocated school improvement funds by conditioning grant awards at least in part on the basis of LEAs' and schools' plans to use evidence-based interventions and/or the strength of the evidence supporting their plans.⁴

Promising State Practices

[New Mexico](#) plans to distribute school improvement funds via a competitive grant application, based in part on the districts' demonstration of alignment of resources to the state's school improvement strategies (leadership, differentiated support and accountability, talent management, and instructional infrastructure) (p. 86).

[Delaware](#) plans to use a hybrid formula/competition approach to allocate school improvement funds. LEAs that apply for the competitive funds will be prioritized in part on their commitment to evidence-based strategies (p. 61).

Similar to Delaware, [Tennessee](#) (p. 115), [Connecticut](#) (p. 46), and [Massachusetts](#) (pp. 52–53) will all award some priority consideration based on how LEAs propose to leverage evidence in their school improvement plans.

[Nevada](#) plans to award school improvement funds competitively to CSI (comprehensive support and improvement) and TSI (targeted support and improvement) schools and will give priority to those that emphasize the analysis of data for decision making and that choose a state-approved school improvement strategy (p. 39).

[Louisiana](#) plans to award a significant portion of the 7 percent set-aside for school improvement to make competitive grants to districts with plans for school redesign supported by the strongest evidence and to districts that include in their plans a description of the monitoring process they will use. From among eligible applications, the state will prioritize those that propose to work with proven external providers with a track record of impact (p. 63).

4. Two states did not address the leverage point in their plan. The remaining states described approaches but did not meet our criteria for constituting a promising practice.

LEA Application for School Improvement Funds

Design LEA applications for school improvement funds to emphasize the use of evidence and continuous improvement.

What ESSA Says

States must describe their plan for developing a school improvement application that includes the elements required by ESSA, including how the LEA will develop and implement CSI (comprehensive support and improvement) plans and support TSI (targeted support and improvement) schools in doing so; how the LEA will monitor implementation; and the “rigorous review process” the LEA will use with potential external partners.

Why This Matters

Designing and reviewing applications for school improvement funds are a critical leverage point for states, especially those with strong traditions of local control that reduce those states’ ability to drive change through other leverage points.

What Leading States Could Do

Advance the thoughtful use of evidence in school improvement by requiring LEAs to include additional elements in their applications, such as:

- For the selected interventions, supporting evidence that draws on research base and results of needs assessment.
- Description of plans to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, especially those supported by Level 4 evidence.
- A commitment to conducting an LEA-level needs assessment (in addition to the required school-level needs assessment) to identify gaps in LEA capacity to support implementation, collect data, and support use of evidence and continuous improvement.
- Plans to sustain funded activities after the grant period ends.

New Mexico
Connecticut
Tennessee
Maine



State Plan Trends

Four states include sufficient detail on the design of their applications for school improvement funds and on how, through the application process, they will require and/or incentivize the use of evidence.⁵

Promising State Practices

[New Mexico](#) plans to require LEAs applying for school improvement funds to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment that includes data analysis, self-assessment to understand root causes, an action plan based on the results, and a system for monitoring and implementation that includes clear metrics, feedback, and observation to track progress (pp. 86–87). LEA applications will emphasize the use of evidence-based school improvement programs.

[Connecticut](#) plans to create a consolidated application for LEAs to apply for school improvement funds, which emphasizes continuous improvement and evidence-based strategies, as well as a rubric to evaluate and approve plans (pp. 42–47).

[Tennessee](#) plans to require all identified schools to complete a comprehensive needs assessment that asks districts to reflect on student achievement, implementation of professional development, the performance of subgroups, and the effectiveness of parent and community engagement. Based on these data points, the districts are to identify three to five priorities for planning that drive goals and action planning (p. 172). LEAs will submit plans for competitive funds which will be evaluated in part by the evidence base of cited strategies, with a competitive preference for schools that include research from ESSA's top three tiers.

[Maine](#)'s LEA application for school improvement funds will require districts to demonstrate how they will identify research- and evidence-based interventions (supported by evidence from Tiers 1–3) aligned with individual needs of students and how the school will use a monitoring process for targeted interventions to ensure fidelity and effectiveness (pp. 20–21).

5. Three states did not address the leverage point in their plan. The remaining states described approaches but did not meet our criteria for constituting a promising practice.

Monitoring and Evaluating School Improvement

Use data and feedback loops to monitor and continuously improve implementation of school improvement plans and evaluate the impact on student outcomes.

What ESSA Says

States must engage in “monitoring and evaluating the use of [school improvement] funds by local educational agencies” and allows states to use part of the (5%) state school improvement set-aside to carry out these responsibilities.

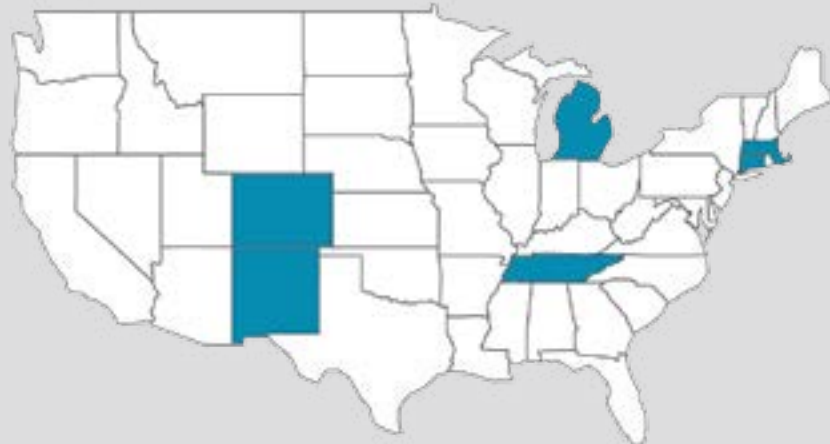
Why This Matters

As a field, there is still a lot to learn about what works to improve persistently underperforming schools. States, together with their districts and schools, can play a critical role in building the evidence base by regularly and rigorously evaluating the impact of their efforts.

What Leading States Could Do

- Monitor and evaluate LEA implementation as required but also compile and disseminate results on a regular basis so other LEAs and schools benefit from lessons learned.
- Include formative, forward-looking evaluations of implementation to complement summative, backward-looking impact evaluations and support LEAs in building their capacity to implement systems of continuous improvement.
- Differentiate monitoring and support based on need.
- Adopt a learning agenda by taking advantage of resources such as Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) and research-practice partnerships to rigorously examine the impact of interventions coupled with a robust continuous improvement process.
- Encourage, incentivize, or require LEAs to invest in low-cost but rigorous studies (e.g., randomized controlled trials [RCTs]) on the front end of their improvement efforts.

Michigan
Tennessee
Connecticut
New Mexico
Massachusetts
Colorado



State Plan Trends

Six states describe robust approaches to monitoring implementation of school improvement plans, including regular data reviews and differentiation based on school characteristics and need, although even among these six, only two establish how they will evaluate the use of school improvement funds statewide as a mechanism to deepen understanding of what works and build the evidence base for school improvement.

Promising State Practices

[Michigan](#) plans to assign to all CSI schools a state-approved implementation facilitator who will monitor the implementation of the LEA's plan. LEAs will also participate in state-directed partnership meetings that will involve ongoing support for monitoring and evaluating evidence-based interventions (pp. 36–37).

[Tennessee](#) has established the Tennessee Education Research Alliance, a research-practice partnership with Vanderbilt University, to study the issue of supporting the use of evidence in low-performing schools (p. 131).

Using a state-developed rubric for ongoing evaluation and program review, [Connecticut](#) will conduct interim progress checks with increasing support to districts based on the results, which will result in increased interventions if goals and targets are not met (p. 24).

[New Mexico](#) developed a comprehensive and differentiated monitoring plan for both its CSI and TSI schools. For CSI schools, this will include state-led on-site visits twice annually, with joint state-district progress reviews in between (a monthly touchpoint), followed by a state-created status report for the district and principal. For TSI schools, the state will augment district-led monitoring of school improvement efforts, which will follow the same six-step process as CSI schools via desktop audits (pp. 86–90).

[Massachusetts](#) has a specific and well-established office, the Office of Planning and Research (OPR), that functions like a delivery unit, undertaking performance management work for key strategic projects, including school turnaround. The OPR is already in place, and it appears to be central to how Massachusetts will oversee implementation of ESSA as well as continue to conduct ongoing and rigorous evaluations of its key school improvement strategies, which to date have effectively helped to inform, refine, and strengthen school improvement efforts across the state (pp. 35–36).

[Colorado](#) plans to leverage its Unified Improvement Planning (UIP) process to shift from planning as an event to planning as a critical component of continuous improvement. In addition to consolidating plans and monitoring, the UIP process requires all schools and districts to publicly post and gather feedback on their plans. Colorado also commits to evaluating statewide efforts to improve low-performing schools, although they do not detail what this evaluation will entail and whether it will be an internal activity or external partnership (pp. 70–71).

Technical Assistance and Support System

Design a state technical assistance and support system for school improvement that promotes evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement.

What ESSA Says

States must provide technical assistance to LEAs “serving a significant number” of CSI or TSI schools.

Why This Matters

For the vast majority of districts and schools, ESSA’s focus on evidence-based interventions will be new, and states should prioritize building capacity to select, implement, and evaluate evidence-based interventions in their technical assistance plans.

What Leading States Could Do

- Provide statewide technical assistance for qualifying LEAs that includes support for developing and implementing comprehensive improvement plans, supporting schools in developing and implementing targeted improvement plans, and developing or using tools related to school-level needs assessments and the selection of evidence-based interventions. For more details and options for state leadership in these areas, see sections 8, 9, and 10 in [Leverage Points](#).
- Use the results from evaluations to identify best practices and exemplars among LEAs and schools engaging in evidence-based practices.
- Audit (and revise as needed) existing technical assistance approaches, providers, and resources to ensure alignment with ESSA, particularly with the law’s definition of *evidence-based*.

North Dakota
Arizona
New Jersey
Delaware



State Plan Trends

Four states provide technical assistance specifically focused on implementing the key evidence-based provisions in ESSA.

Promising State Practices

[North Dakota](#) is implementing its multi-tiered system of support for all schools, which includes five components: assessment, data-driven decision making, multilevel evidence-based instruction, infrastructure and support mechanisms, and fidelity and evaluation (p. 76). CSI and TSI schools will also be assigned a liaison from the state's School Improvement and Intervention Office, as well as a partner success manager through the School Improvement Network.

[Arizona](#) will provide robust and differentiated support for the development and implementation of LEA plans, including assistance with the evidence-based decision-making process, the use of high-quality data, the implementation of evidence-based LEA and school systems and structures, and midcourse adjustments (pp. 32–34).

[New Jersey](#) will provide differentiated technical assistance through a three-tiered structure: level 1 for all schools (available resources); level 2 for LEAs with TSI schools (opt-in); and level 3 for LEAs with CSI schools (mandatory). All levels include technical assistance on key points such as needs assessments, improvement planning, use of evidence-based interventions, and evaluation (pp. 82–84).

Among the technical assistance offerings in [Delaware](#), LEAs will receive on-site technical assistance, off-site networking sessions, embedded professional learning, virtual learning experiences, guidance documents, and templates to support needs assessment, improvement planning, and monitoring. Delaware will collaborate with LEAs and regional assistance centers to develop a resource hub with regionally implemented, evidence-based strategies (pp. 62–63).

Technical Assistance on Needs Assessment

Ensure LEAs and schools conduct high-quality needs assessments that drive the thoughtful use of evidence in improvement plans.

What ESSA Says

States must ensure LEAs conduct their own school-level needs assessment in every identified CSI school, using monitoring/auditing to ensure compliance.

Why This Matters

A well-designed and executed needs assessment lays the foundation for a strong improvement plan with interventions that are not only evidence-based but have been proven effective for similar students and under similar circumstances.

What Leading States Could Do

- Create or adopt a model needs assessment that the SEA then requires LEAs to use or offers to LEAs as an option. The model should include a process for engaging stakeholders, deeply examining student academic performance, and identifying students' and schools' unmet needs; at the district's discretion, it should include performance on locally selected measures.
- Require that school improvement plans and, more specifically, selected evidence-based interventions tie directly to the needs assessment results.
- Encourage the inclusion of measures supported by research that demonstrates that they are meaningful, measurable, and malleable (e.g., chronic absenteeism versus average daily attendance).
- Create a complementary LEA-level needs assessment.

Tennessee
Maine
New Jersey
Delaware
Oregon



State Plan Trends

Five states described strong plans to leverage the needs assessment process to ensure the development of improvement plans that are truly responsive to the challenges facing particular schools.

Promising State Practices

In [Tennessee](#), as part of the planning process all districts complete a needs assessment that asks districts to reflect on student achievement, implementation of professional development, the performance of subgroups, and the effectiveness of parent and community engagement. Districts then identify three to five priorities for planning that drive goals and action planning (p. 172).

In [Maine](#), all CSI and TSI schools will receive a school improvement coach to facilitate a needs assessment and improvement plan (p. 44).

[New Jersey](#) will create needs assessment resources, templates, and, for CSI schools, intensive coaching on conducting high-quality needs assessments, including differentiated needs assessments for CSI and TSI settings (pp. 83–85).

[Delaware](#) plans to provide direct support to LEAs and schools in conducting needs assessments that involve community members in new and more inclusive ways and, as part of that support, will develop templates and guides for connecting the results to well-matched evidence-based practices.

[Oregon](#) is investing deeply in building the capacity of their districts to support local school improvement efforts by, among other things: (1) requiring LEAs selected for partnership with the state to undergo a “readiness and screening protocol” which assesses local context, analyzes local reporting measures, and develops priority improvement areas; (2) conducting evidence-based root-cause analyses through broad stakeholder engagement; and (3) supporting the development of statewide syntheses of evidence-based practices (pp. 23, 61).

Technical Assistance on Selecting Interventions

Support LEAs and schools in maximizing the thoughtful use of evidence to increase the likelihood of improving student outcomes.

What ESSA Says

States must provide sufficient guidance to LEAs such that all CSI and TSI plans include at least one evidence-based intervention and that all CSI and TSI plans supported by federal school improvement grants include at least one intervention supported by the top three levels of evidence.

Why This Matters

By broadening the definition of *evidence-based practices*, ESSA provides more flexibility on how policy and programming decisions are made while preserving the value of research-based practices. With that flexibility comes responsibility by states to ensure district and school leaders have access to and select approaches that are shown to work best and are tied to local needs.

What Leading States Could Do

- Encourage (or require) the selection of interventions that are supported by evidence from a sample population or setting that overlaps with the population or setting of the school to be served and by the strongest level of evidence that is available and appropriate.
- Establish a protocol for selecting evidence-based interventions. Support LEAs (for CSI) and schools (for TSI) in following the protocol to ensure their selections rely on the strongest available evidence and best meet the specific needs and context of the school in question.
- Support better decision making by fostering networks of LEAs (or schools) or by providing regionally based support through SEA support teams or other intermediaries.
- Ensure LEAs and schools are aware of and have access to existing databases, clearinghouses, and guidance documents that outline processes for reviewing and selecting interventions on the basis of their evidence and relevance to local context and need.
- Develop a list of vetted, evidence-based interventions that is dynamic and informed by ongoing research and evaluation locally and nationally.

Delaware
New Mexico
Connecticut
Nevada



State Plan Trends

Four states provide more sophisticated supports that, among other things, will help ensure a tight connection between the results of the needs assessment and the identification of strategies.

Promising State Practices

[Delaware](#) has designed a system of supports to advance evidence-based strategies in low-performing schools, including assisting LEAs with identifying resources from national databases such as the What Works Clearinghouse. The state will also collaborate with LEAs and regional assistance centers to develop a resource hub that aggregates regionally implemented, evidence-based strategies (pp. 62–63).

[New Mexico](#) will require CSI and TSI schools to use programs with strong, moderate, or promising levels of evidence and will provide detailed definitions of these levels (pp. 89–90). New Mexico also places an emphasis on selecting interventions that fit with the local context and need and will have regular touchpoints to analyze the impact of selected interventions.

[Connecticut](#) is creating guidance and providing support for selecting and implementing evidence-based interventions in six key areas: early learning; school climate; student, family, and community engagement; academics; English language proficiency; and on-track to graduation. This guidance and accompanying resources are intended to be dynamic rather than static and will be updated annually. The state is smartly leveraging external support partners such as the U.S. Department of Education–funded State Support Network to help develop its guidance and tools.

[Nevada](#) plans to establish and provide technical assistance based on a statewide definition of evidence-based practice and develop a list of state-approved, evidence-based service providers; in addition, the state is taking a strong role in coordinating professional development activities designed to disseminate information about and build local capacity to identify and implement evidence-based practices (pp. 37–38).

Technical Assistance on Lists of Interventions

Design and implement any state-approved lists of evidence-based interventions to ground improvement plans in the best available evidence tailored to local needs and context.

What ESSA Says

ESSA does not explicitly address a state-approved list of interventions but permits states to “take action to initiate additional improvement” in LEAs with either significant numbers of TSI schools or non-improving CSI schools and allows states to “establish alternative evidence-based State determined strategies that can be used by local educational agencies to assist” CSI schools. In other words, states are permitted to create a list but are not required to.

Why This Matters

States can significantly reduce the burden on LEAs and schools to locate and select evidence-based interventions that match their local context and need by ensuring they have access to comprehensive and well-curated lists from which to choose.

What Leading States Could Do

- Rather than creating a list, focus on providing effective technical assistance with how to select evidence-based interventions (see Leverage Point 9) and take advantage of existing databases, clearinghouses, and guidance documents that outline processes for reviewing and selecting interventions on the basis of their evidence and relevance to local context and need.
- Create a hybrid list that includes interventions from an existing external list and additional interventions identified by the SEA. Consider opportunities to inventory and evaluate the evidence base supporting current interventions being implemented at the state level and use the results to inform the list.
- Collaborate with other states to develop a list that leverages collective resources and capacity and results in a more comprehensive set of interventions from which LEAs and schools can or must choose.
- If an optional list is created using any of the above approaches, establish incentives for LEAs and schools to select interventions on the list. For example, the SEA may be able to provide implementation support, communities of practice, or even discounted prices for state-approved interventions.
- Ensure that lists are coupled with support to help select evidence-based interventions that will best meet local needs.

State Plan Trends

Six states have strong plans to ensure that their LEAs and schools have access to lists or other repositories of evidence-based interventions.⁶

6. Three states could not be rated because they did not address the leverage point in their plan. The remaining states described approaches but did not meet our criteria for constituting a promising practice.

Nevada
Illinois
Massachusetts
Delaware
New Mexico
Connecticut



Promising State Practices

[Nevada](#) will include a menu of evidence-based, prioritized interventions in its LEA application for school improvement funds. If a district selects from this menu, the state will expedite its review of their application; if a district includes an intervention or strategy that is not from the menu, it will be more deeply reviewed. The state has coupled this menu with training for school leaders on how to identify evidence-based interventions tied to local need and challenges and how to connect with some of the external partners that provide support that meets the ESSA standard for evidence-based practices (pp. 37–39).

In [Illinois](#) CSI schools are required to use IL EMPOWER, a state-developed system of approved partners who provide interventions and services, when selecting interventions and partners to include in their school improvement plans (pp. 107–8). Provider partners are approved in part on the basis of their evidence of success and their supports and services fall within three “foundational drivers of improvement”: governance and management, curriculum and instruction, and culture and climate. To complement IL EMPOWER, the state is also compiling a list of resources to support districts and schools in selecting evidence-based practices and providers (pp. 104–5).

[Massachusetts](#) developed a list of evidence-based approaches based on prior work in the state on school improvement that has had a demonstrated impact on student outcomes. The list of approaches was developed with an emphasis on the strongest available evidence from Tiers 1 and 2 (pp. 56–57).

Rather than develop a static list, [Delaware](#) will collaborate with LEAs and regional assistance centers to develop a resource hub with regionally implemented, evidence-based strategies and will focus on identifying evidence-based strategies in four key statewide priority areas (pp. 62–63).

[New Mexico](#) will provide a list of evidence-based interventions from which schools may choose; while they may use a program not on the approved list, if they do so, they must provide the evidence that the program meets the top three levels of evidence (pp. 86–86).

[Connecticut](#) will create evidence-based guidance in six key areas that LEAs can use to select evidence-based interventions that meet their needs (see Leverage Point 9 for more detail). The state will also create a rubric for evaluating additional, LEA-proposed evidence-based interventions (pp. 44–45).

Non-Exiting Schools

Promote more and/or more thoughtful use of evidence as part of the SEA's “more rigorous action” for schools that do not exit improvement status.

What ESSA Says

States must take more rigorous actions for non-exiting CSI schools, and districts must take additional actions for non-exiting TSI schools. The law on its own does not necessarily require that these actions relate to the use of evidence.

Why This Matters

The same principles of evidence-based school improvement apply to—and are perhaps even more critical in the context of—persistently underperforming schools. Although the first cohorts of non-exiting schools are multiple years away, all states have an early opportunity to reflect on past school improvement efforts and define their plans for additional, evidence-based support for their most struggling schools.

What Leading States Could Do

- Define a more rigorous state-determined action for non-exiting CSI schools (or additional action for non-exiting TSI schools) to include a new needs assessment followed by amending the improvement plan to address the reasons the school did not exit improvement status, the results of the new needs assessment, and any concerns with the fidelity or intensity of how interventions were being implemented in the school.
- Further require (or encourage) the amended plan to include additional interventions that are selected by the SEA or required to be selected from a list of evidence-based interventions, are supported by the top two levels of evidence (strong or moderate), and are, to the extent practicable, supported by evidence from a sample population or setting that overlaps with the population or setting of the school.
- Identify one or more evidence-based interventions that will be implemented across the board in all non-exiting CSI schools.
- Establish a “heavy touch” state-led process to ensure the amended CSI plans include one or more evidence-based interventions that are supported by strong or moderate evidence and that respond to the results of the new school-level needs assessment.
- Establish communities of practice that bring together school and LEA leaders to exchange ideas, observe implementation, and give and receive feedback; curate and disseminate lessons learned from LEAs and schools that are beating the odds; provide technical assistance to establish or strengthen continuous improvement routines; or place special emphasis on building LEA capacity.

Arizona
Illinois
Oregon
Delaware
Connecticut



State Plan Trends

Five states described an approach for intervening in persistently struggling schools that leverages needs assessments, continuous improvement, and/or rigorous evidence-based interventions.⁷

Promising State Practices

In [Arizona](#), CSI schools that have not exited improvement status after four years will receive intensified supports, including an in-depth needs assessment, a rigorous root-cause analysis, and assistance in identifying new evidence-based interventions that have been successful with similar populations and in similar settings. The school will also write a new plan and receive increased monitoring and support visits (pp. 31–32).

In [Illinois](#), schools that fail to meet exit criteria will receive support in choosing more rigorous and contextually appropriate evidence-based practices. Additionally, CSI schools that fail to meet exit criteria will partner with one of the state’s approved partners and will receive support in establishing a stronger monitoring system (p. 107).

As part of its exit criteria, [Oregon](#) requires that schools establish improved evidence-based systems and when progress stalls in a school, Oregon will take immediate action to redirect the use of funds toward more evidence-based interventions and conduct a new needs assessment (pp. 59–60).

[Delaware](#) will work closely and collaboratively with non-exiting schools and their districts to conduct a new, externally facilitated needs assessment; the results will be combined with deep data analyses and stakeholder input to develop a new school and district improvement plan that includes interventions which have demonstrated impact previously as well as new evidence-based interventions. The plans will also include an evaluation component and support to conduct ongoing reviews of implementation and impact (pp. 63–64).

In [Connecticut](#), any school identified for comprehensive support failing to meet the state’s exit criteria within three years will be required to implement more rigorous, evidence-based interventions with high statistical probability of success in three key statewide priority areas (p. 45).

7. Two states could not be rated because they did not address the leverage point in their plan.

Additional Action for Certain LEAs

Prioritize evidence use and continuous improvement when exercising extraordinary state authorities to intervene in LEAs unable to improve their lowest-performing schools.

What ESSA Says

States are permitted—but not required—to “take action to initiate additional improvement” in districts with a “significant number” of CSI schools that do not meet the state’s exit criteria or in districts with a “significant number” of TSI schools.

Why This Matters

LEAs are a linchpin in local school improvement efforts, ensuring schools have adequate support and are being held accountable for better results. But in districts with large concentrations of low-performing schools or even a handful of persistently struggling schools, the state can play an important role in building LEA capacity to improve schools or, in some cases, provide direct support to schools. In either case, the support should draw on the strongest possible evidence and rigorously evaluate its efforts to ensure rapid and sustainable impact.

What Leading States Could Do

- Establish one across-the-board intervention, supported by strong or moderate evidence, for any LEA designated for additional action.
- Use the results of an LEA-level needs assessment to differentiate additional actions to best match the context, needs, and assets of the students, schools, and LEAs involved. States can create a continuum of evidence-based actions from which the best fit is selected.
- Invest in rigorous implementation and impact evaluations of these additional actions to build the evidence base for how to improve persistently low-performing schools and build the capacity of their LEAs.

Delaware



State Plan Trends

Only one state described a strong plan to intervene and invest heavily in building the capacity of LEAs with large concentrations of identified schools to use evidence and continuous improvement to more effectively and rapidly help their schools improve.⁸

Promising State Practices

In [Delaware](#), LEAs with a significant number of identified schools will work in collaboration with the state to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment at both the district and school levels that will take into consideration previous improvement efforts, current school conditions, and the leadership capacity and competency at the school and district levels. This qualitative needs assessment will be combined with a quantitative data analysis related to accountability measures, school profile data, educator equity data, financial risk assessments, program analysis, community input, and additional LEA data. The state will work with external partners to develop evaluation systems and collaborate with the LEA and the school(s) to examine the findings of the needs assessment and develop an actionable improvement plan based on those findings (pp. 63–65).

8. Ten states did not address the leverage point in their plan. The remaining states described approaches but did not meet our criteria for constituting a promising practice.

Evidence-Based Allowable Uses

Advance the use of evidence-based approaches via the allowable uses of Title II and Title IV funds.

What ESSA Says

States must review LEA plans and monitor expenditures to ensure LEAs use federal funds on evidence-based activities where required by law. For those allowable uses conditioned on the availability of supporting evidence, states must determine whether evidence is “reasonably available.”

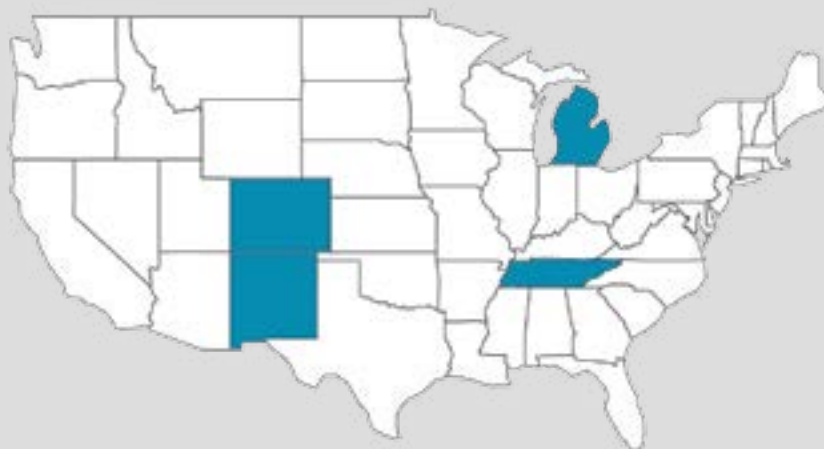
Why This Matters

There is no silver bullet for improving the quality of teachers and school leaders or ensuring students have access to safe and healthy schools, a well-rounded education, and technology for learning. Driving available resources toward the most effective and innovative approaches in these areas and continuously evaluating their impact locally will increase the likelihood that districts and schools implement coherent approaches that are backed by evidence rather than random acts of improvement.

What Leading States Could Do

- Adopt an existing or create a new state-approved list of evidence-based activities for some or all of the evidence-based allowable uses. Leverage the lists to explain transparently why evidence for a particular use is reasonably available.
- Prioritize the use of evidence in any distribution of state-level set-aside funding (e.g., 3% of Title II for leadership, 3% of Title I for direct student services, or state activities under Title IV).
- Create a research-practice partnership with a university partner or other research organization (e.g., RELs) that can both support the SEA in making well-informed determinations and help construct a statewide learning agenda to identify gaps in the evidence base and seek to fill them.

Colorado
New Mexico
Tennessee
Michigan



State Plan Trends

Four states committed to leveraging the evidence provisions in other sections of their state plans.⁹

Promising State Practices

[Colorado](#) emphasizes the importance of evidence-based strategies in a number of areas, including evidence-based professional development through a state set-aside that will, among other things, leverage existing data to evaluate the impact of teacher recruitment and retention strategies and conduct a third-party evaluation of the state's Quality Teacher Recruitment Grant Program. Colorado has similar plans to take evidence-based approaches to Title IV programs (with a focus on bullying, discipline, and parent engagement) and on efforts related to the effective use of technology to improve academic achievement (pp. 74, 79, 84, 98–99).

Both [New Mexico](#) (p. 96) and [Tennessee](#) (pp. 247–48) plan to use the Title II Part A 3 percent set-aside to support innovative teacher and school leader preparation programs that utilize evidence-based practices to ensure novice educators are fully prepared to teach on day one.

[Michigan's](#) plan includes several state programs that have evidence-based allowable uses, including Safe and Healthy Schools, in which LEAs will be supported by evidence-based practices, evidence-based professional development for educators (p. 52), and evidence-based course work.

9. Five states did not address the leverage point in their plan. The remaining states described approaches but did not meet our criteria for constituting a promising practice.



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This policy brief is part of Results for America's Invest in What Works Policy Series, which provides ideas and supporting research to policymakers to drive public funds toward evidence-based, results-driven solutions.