SHIFTING DOLLARS TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES: FIVE WAYS TO PRIORITIZE EVIDENCE IN STATE AND LOCAL SPENDING DECISIONS

October 2019

INTRODUCTION

We all want our nation's young people to succeed in school. Parents, teachers, and education leaders want better opportunities and outcomes for their students – greater learning gains and fewer absences, higher graduation rates, and reduced achievement gaps. **But how do we know if education efforts will get the results we seek? And how do we invest taxpayer dollars more effectively and efficiently?**

The good news is that these questions can be answered by consulting a growing body of evidence about what works in education, for whom, and under what conditions. The troubling news is that many state and local funding decisions are still not driven by evidence but by word of mouth or anecdotes.

Fortunately, an increasing number of state education agencies and school districts are changing course. When making funding decisions, a growing number are consulting the evidence and data available to them and using that information to guide how they invest their limited dollars. The federal government is also changing course. Over the past five years, Congress and the U.S. Department of Education have begun shifting over $2 billion annually toward evidence-based programs and practices.[1]

> **Defining the Terms: Evidence and Evidence-Based**
>
> In this Roadmap, we use the terms "evidence" and "evidence-based" to mean the use of rigorous, scientifically valid and reliable methods to determine and improve the impact of education programs and practices. When evidence is used to evaluate the effectiveness of a program or practice, we call it "evidence-based." For big decisions like spending, we urge states and districts to adopt a clear, universal definition like the one found in ESSA (see below).

The American public strongly supports investing taxpayer dollars in what works. According to a March 2019 poll conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, roughly nine in ten Americans believe that policymakers should seek the best evidence when making decisions.

---

[1] See Results for America, *2018 Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence* (Washington, DC, 2018, particularly Questions 8 and 9 where the U.S. Department of Education describes how it has allocated competitive and non-competitive grant dollars based on evidence of effectiveness.

And 86% support shifting taxpayer dollars toward solutions that work and away from those that consistently fail.[2]

We recognize that using evidence and data in government policy, budget, and management decisions requires numerous strategies. That's why Results for America has developed "north star" resources -- including local, state, and federal government standards of excellence -- that identify the people, practices, policies, programs, and systems that government agencies need to use evidence and data in their decision-making.

This Education Roadmap focuses on one vital sub-set of strategies -- prioritizing evidence of effectiveness in state and local education *funding* decisions. What follows are examples of how state and local education leaders are increasingly basing their spending decisions on the best evidence available, shifting education dollars toward evidence-based programs and practices, and leveraging those dollars to generate and expand the evidence base where it is lacking.

> **Defining the Terms: Programs and Practices**
>
> In this Roadmap, we use the term "programs and practices" to mean the whole range of strategies that education leaders fund, including: funding streams, programs, interventions, practices, tools, and even policies. We mean anything that can be evaluated to determine its effectiveness.

WHAT THIS ROADMAP OFFERS

This Roadmap provides specific guidance for state education agencies (SEAs) and school districts on how to improve outcomes for students by shifting local, state, and federal education *dollars* toward evidence-based programs and practices. The substance of the recommendations were informed by a number of existing RFA resources including the 2018 Federal Standard of Excellence,[3] 2018 State Standard of Excellence,[4] ESSA Leverage Points report,[5] and Workforce Policy Roadmap.

---

2 The NORC poll results can be found in Results for America, "2020 Playbook: How the Next President Can Accelerate Economic Mobility Using Evidence and Data," (Washington, DC, 2019).

3 RFA's 2018 *Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence* highlights how nine federal agencies are building the infrastructure necessary to be able to use data, evidence, and evaluation in budget, policy, and management decisions. This Roadmap specifically draws from Questions 8 and 9.

4 RFA's 2018 *Invest in What Works State Standard of Excellence* sets a national standard for how state governments can consistently and effectively use data and evidence in budget, policy, and management decisions to achieve better outcomes for their residents. This Roadmap specifically draws from Questions 10, 12, and 14.

5 RFA's *ESSA Leverage Points* report identifies 13 opportunities for states to advance the use of evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement through their implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, including six this Roadmap specifically focuses on: LP 4, LP 5, LP 6, LP 9, LP 10, and LP 13.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR PRIORITIZING EVIDENCE IN STATE AND LOCAL EDUCATION SPENDING DECISIONS

1. **Identify education programs and practices being implemented across the state and categorize them according to a common definition of evidence.**
2. **Prioritize evidence of effectiveness when allocating federal and state education funds to school districts and schools.**
3. **Prioritize building and using evidence of effectiveness in the local education budget process.**
4. **Prioritize evidence of effectiveness when issuing and managing contracts for goods and services.**
5. **Leverage grant-making processes to evaluate education strategies to further build the evidence base and support innovation.**

Under each recommendation, we include suggested actions that state and local leaders should take. We recognize that some are more challenging or longer-term than others. So we categorize them based on level of effort: *lighter lift* and *heavier lift*. However, readers should consider taking all actions, even those that may require additional time, resources, and leadership support.

Contact Sara Kerr, Vice President of Education Policy Implementation, at sara@results4america.org, for more information or support in implementing these strategies.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR PRIORITIZING EVIDENCE IN STATE AND LOCAL EDUCATION SPENDING DECISIONS

#1: Identify education programs and practices being implemented across the state and categorize them according to a common definition of evidence.

Actions:
LIGHTER LIFT
1. Adopt a common definition of the term "evidence" to be used across budget, policy, and programmatic decisions at the state level (and at the district level if possible).
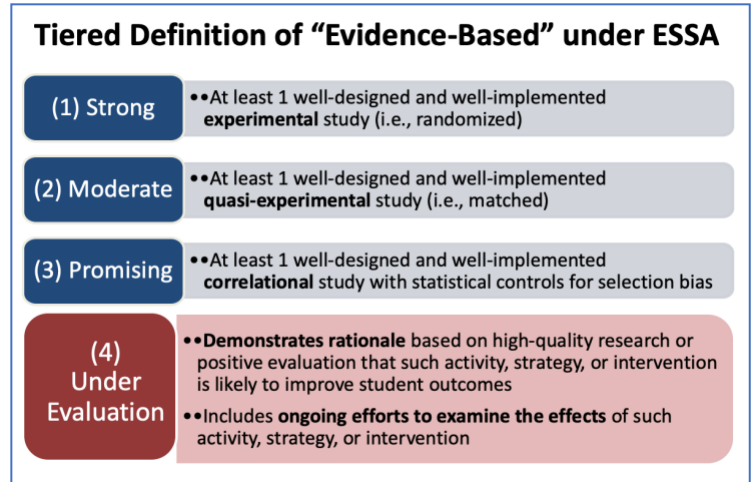
HEAVIER LIFT
2. Create a public inventory of the education programs and practices that receive the most state and local education funding and categorize them based on the common definition of evidence.

Rationale:
Before state and local education leaders decide what programs or practices to fund, they should identify their current investments and the evidence that exists to support those investments. Smart state policymakers will start by establishing a common definition of what they consider "evidence" or "evidence-based" and then use that definition to categorize the education programs and practices that receive the most state and local funding. This categorization should also include information on who those programs and practices serve and under what conditions (e.g., an after-school literacy program that serves low-income students for one academic year). Districts should also apply this same practice to their local spending decisions, to the extent evidence exists to support their major investments (e.g., transportation or capital expenditures are areas that don't lend themselves to evaluation).

Moreover, the definition of evidence should be *tiered* to appropriately capture variations in the amount and type of evidence leaders have available to inform their funding decisions, what we call the "body of evidence." For example, a literacy program showing positive impact across multiple studies in a variety of settings has a stronger body of evidence supporting it than does a program with only one study showing mixed results. Thus, the first program merits continued or increased public funding more than does the second one.

One possible tiered definition state and local education agencies could use is defined within the bipartisan *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and described in graphic form below. SEAs and districts should consider adopting or adapting the ESSA definition, since this framework is increasingly being used to inform *state* and *local* education funding decisions across the country. That said, the definition isn't perfect (e.g., only one study is required to merit inclusion in the first tier). An enterprising state may want to adapt the definition, such as tweaking the lowest tier of evidence to consider the whole body of evidence supporting programs and practices, and to ask whether a particular program/practice and related study is relevant to the population it proposes to serve.

Tiered Definition of "Evidence-Based" under ESSA

(1) Strong — •• At least 1 well-designed and well-implemented **experimental** study (i.e., randomized)

(2) Moderate — •• At least 1 well-designed and well-implemented **quasi-experimental** study (i.e., matched)

(3) Promising — •• At least 1 well-designed and well-implemented **correlational** study with statistical controls for selection bias

(4) Under Evaluation — •• **Demonstrates rationale** based on high-quality research or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes
•• Includes **ongoing efforts to examine the effects** of such activity, strategy, or intervention

EXAMPLES:

Common Definition of Evidence

Federal
- The *Every Student Succeeds Act* includes a tiered definition of evidence, which has been aligned with similar definitions used in the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) What Works Clearinghouse and EDGAR. This allows ED to use a common definition across its programs, including when allocating grant dollars. Most SEAs have adopted this definition for use in distributing school improvement funds, and an increasing number are using it to inform the allocation of other federal and state education funds.

State
- The Washington State Institute of Public Policy (WSIPP) defines evidence-based and research-based practices for policy areas including adult behavioral health, children's services, and K–12 education. WSIPP's common definition includes five classifications: evidence-based, research-based, promising practice, null, and poor. Building on this work, Washington's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction annually updates its Inventory of Evidence- and Research-Based Practices: Washington's K–12 Learning Assistance Program and Menus of Best Practices and Strategies for Math, English Language Arts, and Behavior.
- The Kentucky Department of Education has compiled online tools and resources to make it easier for its public schools to identify and implement evidence-based practices with fidelity, including a guidance document that adapts and describes ESSA's tiered definition of evidence.

Evidence Inventories

Federal

- ED's [What Works Clearinghouse](#) identifies studies that provide valid and statistically significant evidence of effectiveness of a given education practice, product, program, or policy (referred to as "interventions"), and disseminates summary information and reports on the Clearinghouse website. As of FY18, the Clearinghouse has reviewed more than 10,000 studies that are available in a [searchable database](#).

State

- [Ohio's Evidence-Based Clearinghouse](#) helps Ohio school districts identify, select and implement evidence-based strategies for improving student success. The Clearinghouse explains the benefits of evidence-based strategies, helps educators identify strategies that meet the first three ESSA evidence levels; and offers access to other national clearinghouses and research reviews that districts may want to use.
- A [2014 Mississippi state law](#) requires the Mississippi Departments of Corrections, Health, Education, and Transportation to (1) develop an inventory of their programs based on four levels of evidence (evidence-based program, research-based program, promising practice, or other programs and activities), and (2) report during the budget process about their programs' cost-benefit ratio and effectiveness.
- Under a [2015 Minnesota law](#) (section 13), Minnesota Management and Budget has developed numerous [inventories](#) of evidenced-based programs, including in the areas of [criminal justice](#), [mental health](#), [child welfare](#), and [higher education](#). Minnesota Management and Budget also maintains the [Minnesota Inventory](#), a searchable clearinghouse of more than 400 programs operating in the state. The Inventory includes a [guide](#) for using evidence in policymaking and [evidence definitions](#) to categorize interventions as proven effective, promising, theory based, or no effect.

#2: Prioritize evidence of effectiveness when allocating federal and state education funds to school districts and schools.

Actions:
LIGHTER LIFT
1. Give applicants for federal and state *competitive* grant funds preference points or an absolute priority if they propose investing those funds in evidence-based programs and practices.
2. Require applicants for *all* types of federal and state education funds to describe in their applications how they will use evidence-based programs and practices and promote continuous improvement.

HEAVIER LIFT
3. Incentivize or require (when allowed) applicants for federal and state *noncompetitive* funds to invest a portion or all of their funds in evidence-based programs and practices.
4. Provide applicants for federal and state *noncompetitive* funds, who agree to use evidence-based programs and practices, additional federal or state *competitive* funds or preference points for those funds.

Rationale:
Grantmaking is a powerful, often overlooked mechanism to improve education outcomes. When used strategically, grants to districts and schools can spur innovation and direct dollars toward

approaches with a strong track record of effectiveness.[6] Also, simply drawing attention to how applicants will use evidence-based approaches for continuous improvement when filling out the grant application itself can send a signal to the field that evidence matters.

Competitive Grants. SEAs distribute some of their state and federal education funds on a competitive basis. Grant managers should take advantage of this process by preferencing applicants who propose to invest grant funds in interventions with higher levels of evidence (as defined by the common definition described above), as appropriate to the existing evidence base. Applicants should be given preference points or an absolute priority if their proposed programs or practices meet the higher levels of evidence. For example, if grant applicants are scored on a 100-point scale, districts or schools should receive substantial base points (15-20) or bonus points (2-3 on top of the 100) for demonstrating they will invest grant funds in programs and practices with moderate or strong evidence of effectiveness. Another option is to give these applications an absolute priority, placing them ahead of other applicants who don't meet the evidence priority in the funding queue.

These types of incentives would encourage grant applicants to invest in evidence-based programs and practices, since the preference points would make it more likely they would succeed in securing funding. Second, these mechanisms would send a signal to districts and schools that they need to review the research and evaluations of the programs and practices they propose supporting with state and federal education funds to ensure they are effective. In FY18, ED used this approach in some way in all five of its largest competitive grant programs.

Application Process. As SEA grant managers design applications for any education funding stream they oversee, they should ask applicants to describe the evidence base for proposed activities, and to describe their process for building and using evidence on an ongoing basis, what's sometimes called continuous improvement. This approach requires recipients to adopt a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to all of their decisions, including: identifying needs, selecting evidence-based approaches, planning for implementation, implementing, and examining progress to determine impact and to improve over time.[7]

For example, SEAs could require districts to describe how they will use evidence-based curricula or instructional interventions in their ESSA Title I or ESSA Title II plans; and how they will monitor, evaluate, and update those approaches to ensure they achieve the desired results. Or SEAs could ask school districts to describe how they plan to use evidence when selecting external partners and vendors for new or renewed funding. Of course, this approach may require some technical assistance or other support from the SEA to help grant applicants, particularly from smaller or less-well resourced districts, understand what counts as evidence and how to incorporate it into everyday decision-making. At the very least, SEAs can direct applicants to the various clearinghouses listed in Appendix A and their own inventory of evidence-based programs and practices to encourage the use of these solutions.

Noncompetitive Funding. The bulk of state and federal education funding is distributed to districts and schools by formula, based on variables like population or poverty. However, state education leaders can still use this process to direct dollars toward evidence-based programs

---

6 See Andrew Feldman, Sara Kerr, and Ruth Neild, "Education and the Quiet Power of Evidence-Based Grant-Making" in *Governing* (January 28, 2019).

7 For more information, see U.S. Department of Education, "Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments," (Washington, DC, 2016).

and practices. State education leaders, working with policymakers, could require that a percentage of noncompetitive funds be invested in evidence-based approaches, as defined by the common definition. With respect to federal funding, SEAs have a number of tools to incentivize, or in some cases even require, districts to invest funds in evidence-based programs and practices, such as designing the district-to-state application, reviewing and approving district applications, and imposing specific conditions on district subgrants.[8]

The percentage or amount of grant funding an applicant receives should reflect the evidence base. If there is less evidence, the percentage or amount of a grant should be smaller. If the evidence base is stronger, applicants should be required to invest larger amounts -- or even all of their funding -- on evidence-based programs and practices.

A Word of Caution. Some states may witness an unintended consequence of steering dollars toward evidence-based programs and practices, namely that it can exacerbate equity gaps. High-capacity districts (or other funding applicants) with extra time and resources can more easily show they are using evidence-based approaches or spend money on evaluations, while smaller or lower-capacity districts/applicants may be unsure where to begin. Care should be taken to consider and prioritize equity up front, which may include:
- providing additional or more intensive technical assistance for smaller and lower-capacity districts to help them understand and meet new evidence requirements;
- providing a baseline of funding for all districts while steering additional, perhaps competitive, funding toward evidence-based programs and practices (sometimes referred to as a "hybrid" funding approach); or
- gradually raising the bar by starting with asking applicants to describe their approach to using evidence without conditioning funding on the description.

EXAMPLES:

Federal
- Since FY17, ED has used its common evidence definition, as outlined in the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR), when making awards in all five of its largest competitive grant programs. In FY18: (1) The vast majority of TRIO funding ($1.01 billion) was used to support continuation awards to grantees that were successful in prior competitions that awarded competitive preference priority points for projects that proposed strategies supported by moderate evidence of effectiveness, including over $300 million in Student Support Services, over $150 million in Talent Search, and nearly $400 million in the Upward Bound and Upward Bound Math and Science programs combined. (2) Under the Charter Schools Program ($400 million), ED required or encouraged applicants to support their projects through logic models. (3) For the 2017 competition for GEAR UP ($350 million), ED used a competitive preference priority for projects based on moderate evidence of effectiveness for state and partnership grants (approximately $70 million in new awards in FY17). ED funded continuation awards in 2018 for these evidence-based projects. Additionally, ED conducted 2018 GEAR UP competitions (nearly $130 million) including an absolute priority for applicants proposing evidence-based strategies to improve STEM outcomes. (4) The Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program ($200 million) required applicants

---

8 For more information, see Melissa Junge and Sheara Krvaric, "A Guide to State Educational Agency Oversight Responsibilities under ESSA: The Role of the State in the Local Implementation of ESSA Programs" (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2017).

to provide a description of the rationale for their project and describe how the proposed activities are evidence-based, and grantees were held to these standards in the implementation of the program. (5) The Comprehensive Literacy Development Grants ($190 million) required that grantees provide subgrants to local educational agencies that conduct evidence-based literacy interventions.

- In 2015, Congress included strong evidence provisions across ESSA, incentivizing and in some places requiring SEAs and districts to use evidence-based programs and practices. Relevant to this Roadmap, Title I, Section 1003 requires states to set aside at least seven percent of their Title I, Part A funds for a range of activities to help school districts improve low-performing schools. As such, districts and schools are required to create action plans that include evidence-based interventions that demonstrate strong, moderate, or promising levels of evidence.

State

- In January 2017, the Nevada Department of Education's Office of Student and School Supports began requiring Nevada school districts to invest their federal and state education funds in education interventions that meet one of the four tiers of evidence (Strong, Moderate, Promising, and Under Evaluation) defined in ESSA. Federal funds include: Title I School Improvement Grants; Title III and Title I-C Grants to Support Language Instruction for English Learners and Migrant Students; Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Achievement Grant; and Title IV-B Grants for 21st Century Community Learning Centers. State funds include: Nevada Read by Grade Three Program; Nevada Zoom School program; Nevada Victory Schools initiative; Senate Bill 178's weighted formula grant program to support extended learning opportunities; Nevada Turnaround Program; and Nevada College and Career Readiness Program.

- The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) has embedded rigorous evidence requirements into its competitive, state-funded school improvement grant programs, the Commissioner's Network and Alliance Districts, both of which provide targeted funding and support to the state's lowest-performing schools. CSDE administers its school improvement funds through a hybrid funding model: 70% is allocated through population-based formula, while the remaining 30% is competitively allocated based in part on district applicants proposing to use funds for programs and practices with strong, moderate, or promising evidence of effectiveness.

- In 2018, the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) informed its districts and schools that it would use the evidence definition in ESSA to allocate the bulk of its federal *and* state education funds (e.g., BEST, Act 230, and Flexible Pathways), while exempting federal funds other than ESSA (e.g., Perkins career and technical funding, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act adult education). The AOE provided a rationale: "As funds become scarcer, it is important they are distributed in an equitable manner and for activities and practices that have a proven, positive impact on student outcomes. Agreed-upon, consistent criteria for approving or denying funding requests across the AOE are critical to equitable awarding of funds.

- In FY19, the Georgia Department of Education created a guide for school districts, Selecting Evidence-Based Interventions, that is informed by ESSA's evidence definition and tied to districts' consolidated application for federal funding. The guide shows how districts can meet state requirements to create a common language and approach for improvement that includes how districts and schools will select evidence-based interventions and track progress to determine whether the intervention should continue as is, be modified, or be discontinued.

**Considerations When Planning and Implementing
Evidence-Based Spending Policies**

*Here is a brief summary of key issues that may arise as education leaders
implement one or more of the recommendations in this Roadmap.*

Why use evidence to inform spending? Education leaders take an evidence-based
approach to spending because it's more likely to improve outcomes, it improves
transparency in how dollars are spent, and promotes accountability for results. RFA
developed this Roadmap to show state and local leaders how they can build and use
evidence in their funding decisions.

What if relevant evidence is lacking? A robust evidence base for some goals (e.g.,
improving social-emotional learning) or target populations (e.g., older English learners)
may be lacking. Education leaders should use the best evidence available while also
investing resources in expanding the evidence base, which can include data analysis,
rapid cycle evaluation, and continuous improvement models, along with long-term
strategies like performance monitoring, evaluation, and learning agendas. Don't just
throw up your hands; dig in.

The limits of an evidence inventory. Simply picking and investing in an evidence-
based program or practice from a list doesn't necessarily mean it will address root
causes, fit local context, or be implemented with fidelity. State and local leaders need
to create guidelines and technical assistance for educators to engage in a
comprehensive approach to evidence-based *decision-making* at every step, in
addition to categorizing and helping them select evidence-based programs and
practices.

Interventions versus approaches. When making spending decisions, it's easier to
focus on discrete programs and practices that can be evaluated and purchased. But
what about core curriculum or broad initiatives like improving equity that are harder to
evaluate yet pivotal to student success? Smart leaders work in teams, scour the
evidence that is available on relevant *parts* of curriculum or initiatives (e.g., phonemic
awareness versus whole language), and adopt a "test and evaluate" approach that
uses some type of local monitoring and evaluation to determine how well the
curriculum or initiative is working, while perhaps choosing to work with a research
partner to more rigorously study longer-term impacts.

Beware the hucksters. Plenty of education vendors and consultants will tell potential
customers that their products are evidence-based or even Common Core-aligned.
They may not be. This is why inventories and technical assistance are necessary
(though not sufficient) to help busy educators and administrators sort through the junk
mail. All decision-makers should be cautious, ask for the evaluation studies, and find a
smart partner who can help them determine what's real and what's hype (e.g., help
ensure products and services meet the state's or ESSA's evidence definition).

#3: Prioritize building and using evidence of effectiveness in the local education budget process.

Actions:
LIGHTER LIFT
1. Inventory the largest district budget investments to determine the data and evidence that support them, including conducting cost-effectiveness analyses where possible.

HEAVIER LIFT
2. Develop an evaluation plan for the largest district budget investments to measure and improve their effectiveness, and to inform future funding decisions.
3. Require all proposals for major budget increases to include evidence of effectiveness to justify those increases.

Rationale:
The vast majority of school district spending is driven by the annual budget process. Few districts, outside large ones, have grant programs the way federal and state governments do. So, local leaders should find ways to prioritize evidence when allocating funds through their budget, if they want to improve the impact of their dollars. It's true that a large chunk of district spending goes to items that are not discernibly evidence-based like salaries, benefits, transportation, and building maintenance. Districts do, however, invest a lot of money on items like curricula, textbooks, and programs that can and should be evaluated. We recommend local leaders take the following actions to move in the direction of evidence-informed budgeting:

Create a Baseline. Apply the common definition of evidence (developed by the state or the one included in ESSA) to all major funding accounts or categories the district uses in its annual budget process. Create a baseline knowledge of what evidence currently exists to support district investments, including where evidence may be lacking, as well as their costs so that cost-effectiveness analysis can be done when possible.

Create Evaluation Plans. All major initiatives should have an evaluation plan to build evidence of their effectiveness. Capacity may make this difficult for smaller districts, but any effort to analyze data and generate learning is wise for a district of any size. Use a portion of state and local funds for independent, rigorous evaluations of the largest, most mature initiatives. If the district is going to spend such large sums, it should know what bang it's getting for the buck. For newer investments, use a portion of state and local education funds for low-cost evaluation, rapid cycle evaluation, and ongoing data analysis to more quickly test and iterate, perhaps anchored by a learning community.[9] Give programs a chance to improve and refine to the point of needing a large impact evaluation to rigorously measure outcomes, while also reducing or eliminating funding if they chronically fail to achieve results.

Use Evidence to Justify Increases. Require documented evidence of effectiveness to justify large spending increases or major new initiatives. For example, a district can require administrators or school leaders to submit positive evaluation findings to back up their request for additional funding or expanding initiatives. If such evidence is lacking and action is necessary (e.g., new afterschool programs for a growing student population) create a learning agenda to build evidence over time for use in future funding decisions.

---

9 For more information on how educators can build evaluation into program planning and decision-making, see U.S. Department of Education, "Evaluation Matters: Getting the Information You Need from Your Evaluation," (Washington, DC, 2014).

EXAMPLES:

- In Wake County (NC) Public Schools, proposals for new or expanded funding through the district budget process must submit information that includes: 1) evidence/data demonstrating need for funding, 2) a plan to measure the effectiveness of the initiative, and 3) research evidence that supports the initiative, such as studies from the What Works Clearinghouse.
- According to a case study by Smarter School Spending: "Traverse City (MI) Area Public Schools ran a yearlong pilot test of three research-backed curricula and compared the results to a control group that remained with the old curriculum. The pilot test considered the increase in student learning and the costs required to implement each curriculum." Following the pilot's conclusion, the school board unanimously approved a new math curriculum, as well as a new pilot test to select an English curriculum.
- The School District of Palm Beach County (FL) uses a template to track items of critical importance related to the implementation of specific district strategies. Initiatives seeking funding through the district budget process must include several types of evidence to support their request, including: 1) a rationale and justification for why the initiative is needed, 2) supporting research, namely internal or external evidence that demonstrates the efficacy of the initiative, and 3) goals, projects, and performance measures that describe anticipated outcomes.
- States can also help promote these kinds of practices at the local level. For FY19, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) required school districts to document, for review, their required evidence-based interventions, through their consolidated application but also in their budgeting process. According to GaDOE guidance, "LEAs must specify in the budget line item description whether the strategy/intervention is supported by a strong, moderate, or promising evidence base or demonstrates a rationale that is documented by a logic model on file with the LEA."

#4: Prioritize evidence of effectiveness when issuing and managing contracts for goods and services.

Actions:
LIGHTER LIFT
1. Notify current contract recipients that they must evaluate and document their evidence of effectiveness for use in renewals or future competitions.
HEAVIER LIFT
2. Use evidence of effectiveness when contracting for goods (e.g., curricula or software).
3. Use evidence of effectiveness when contracting for services (e.g., external partners or service providers), including using performance-based contracting and active contract management when possible.

Rationale:
A significant portion of education spending goes to external providers of goods and services. Unfortunately, rarely is prior evidence of effectiveness (using a common definition) used to inform contract decisions. And, rarely do grantors require a rigorous, independent evaluation to assess the impact of those goods or services, let alone determine if the provider should receive continued funding based on results. Instead, providers with the strongest personal relationships or lowest bid (regardless of effectiveness) often win funding competitions. And once they receive funding, they are more likely to continue to receive it based on inertia.

However, several states and districts are beginning to use evidence to inform their procurement and contracting processes. Some are also engaging in performance-based contracting, where they condition some or all of payment on the provider achieving agreed-upon outcomes. And, rather than waiting a long time to find out if the provider gets results, some state and local leaders are using active contract management to apply high-frequency use of data and purposeful management of provider interactions to improve outcomes from contracted services as they go.

EXAMPLES:

- The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) established a system to vet partners (e.g., vendors of services) engaging with districts and schools called the Priority Partners for Turnaround Initiative. DESE uses a rigorous review process to vet potential providers and identifies those with a demonstrated record of effectiveness in accelerating school improvement.
- In 2019, the Oklahoma State Department of Education created a rubric for use in low-performing schools to vet and select external providers. The rubric scores applicants on 10 categories, including the evidence base (aligned to ESSA's tiered definition) supporting the provider's services, and the applicant's system for evaluating the performance of its services and providing this information to the school.
- In Illinois, low-performing schools are required to use IL-EMPOWER, a state-developed system of approved "learning partners" who provide interventions and services, when selecting interventions and partners to include in their school improvement plans. 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 safe and healthy climate. The RFP for vendors is available here.
- In 2017, Ohio's State WIOA Plan highlighted the Ohio Department of Higher Education Aspire's use of a "performance-based funding formula" for approved Workforce Readiness Education providers. Grants are awarded in a three year cycle, and applicants must provide statistical evidence of program effectiveness for the prior three years related to successful student outcomes, obtainment of high school equivalence diploma, and transitions to postsecondary education and training and employment. Performance is measured annually and funding is increased or decreased based on performance against established benchmarks.

#5: Leverage grant-making processes to evaluate education strategies to further build the evidence base and support innovation.

Actions:
LIGHTER LIFT
1. Require recipients of state and local education funds to conduct or participate in an external evaluation, if asked, as a condition of receiving funds.

HEAVIER LIFT
2. Identify districts across the state willing to pool a portion of their funds with state funds to conduct a state-coordinated multi-site evaluation.
3. States should set aside 1% of federal and state grant funds, which may be pooled across funds, to support evaluations of education efforts that do not yet have sufficient evidence of effectiveness.

4. Districts should set aside a small portion (e.g., 1%) of their federal or state funds, which may be pooled across funds, to support evaluations of education efforts that do not yet have sufficient levels of evidence.

Rationale:
Unfortunately, many education programs and practices lack credible independent evidence of their effectiveness. For many issues (e.g., social and emotional learning) or populations (e.g., older English learners) there may not be sufficient evidence for addressing them, let alone for conditioning funding. Thus, innovation must be supported to seed new ideas, and new evaluations must be conducted to build the evidence base.

States and districts are great laboratories because they are already tackling many educational challenges with a variety of programs and practices that need to be iterated, tested, and evaluated (including rigorous data analysis, rapid cycle evaluation, implementation studies, and other forms of learning that generate evidence). The following represent a variety of ways to take advantage of this reality to build evidence:

Participation in Evaluation as Precondition of Funding. States can require districts or external providers to participate in state-led evaluations as a precondition of funding, should they be selected. Or, they could require recipients of larger competitive grants, such as an innovation fund, to develop and implement independent evaluations of their efforts. Districts with research capacity can follow suit with schools and providers that receive district funding.

Pool Resources for Cross-Site Evaluation. An enterprising state could identify a cohort of districts willing to join in a multi-site partnership with the state, pooling a portion of state and local funds from across a variety of streams, to engage in a common set of strategies paired with a state-led evaluation of those strategies. Regardless of the exact mechanism for funding and participation, states and districts should find ways to partner so they have large enough sample sizes and can allow for ethically appropriate randomization. Partnering would also ensure that evaluations yield the most rigorous types of evidence, when called for, along with other types of evidence building (described above) that allow for improving programs and identifying new evidence-based solutions to populate their inventory.

Evaluation Set-Aside. States and districts should consider setting aside a small amount of existing program dollars (we recommend 1%) for evaluations, with a focus on rigorous, independent impact assessments when possible -- to help programs mature and to ultimately justify increased funding. Stable funding for evaluation will allow the body of evidence to grow over time, especially in areas where it is currently lacking. This can be described as the power of a penny, using one penny of every dollar to improve how the other 99 cents work.[10]

Research-Practice Partnerships. States and districts may want to partner with a research institution, such as a local university, Regional Educational Laboratory, or another entity that can help them formulate a learning agenda, leverage resources, and augment capacity to build evidence that is policy- and practice-relevant. These relationships are sometimes called research-practice partnerships, and while they require dedicated and ongoing resources, they generate significant evidence over a long period of time.

---

10 RFA and Chiefs for Change made 26 recommendations for SEAs to drive better student outcomes through evidence building efforts. See Results for America and Chiefs for Change, "Evidence-Building Opportunities Under ESSA," (Washington, DC, 2017).

EXAMPLES:

Federal
- The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) includes rigorous evaluation requirements in its five largest competitive grant programs and requires all of its federal competitive grant program grantees to participate in evaluations if asked.
- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) authorizes the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education to set aside up to 0.5% of federal K-12 education funds (excluding ESSA Title I funds) for program evaluations.
- Federal appropriations laws in FY16-FY19 provide the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor with the authority to set aside up to 0.75% of workforce training funds for program evaluations.

State
- For School Year 2019-2020, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) is requiring its school districts to set aside $15,000 from their school improvement funds (i.e., ESSA Title I, Sec. 1003) for monitoring and/or evaluation in every school. RIDE will pre-populate the district budget template on the front-end of the funding cycle in order to ensure the funds are set aside.
- Leveraging state and philanthropic funding, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance, a research-practice partnership with Vanderbilt University, conducts independent studies and directs external research to provide relevant and timely information to state policymakers across a variety of topical areas, including early reading, professional learning, school improvement, and educator workforce.

CONCLUSION

A growing number of state education agencies and school districts are using evidence to guide how they invest their education dollars -- to ensure students have more equitable access to excellent educational opportunities and to better prepare them to succeed in school and life. This Roadmap shines a light on those states and districts that are leading the way so that others can understand the concrete actions they should adopt or adapt themselves. Momentum is building for prioritizing evidence in education spending decisions, driven by thoughtful leaders at the local, state, and federal level. We hope readers learn from and follow in their footsteps, and thus expand the number of best practices across the country.

APPENDIX: WHERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

Here are additional resources for state and local education officials interested in exploring how to direct resources toward evidence-based, results-driven programs and practices.

- Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, a project within the Institute of Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado Boulder, provides a registry of evidence-based interventions that are effective in reducing antisocial behavior and promoting a healthy course of youth development and adult maturity.

- Evidence for ESSA, developed by the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University School of Education, provides information on programs that meet the ESSA evidence standards and enable educators and communities to select effective educational tools to improve student success.

- The Pew MacArthur Results First Clearinghouse Database is an online resource that brings together information on the effectiveness of social policy programs from nine national clearinghouses, creating a common language that enables users to quickly see where each program falls on a spectrum from negative impact to positive impact.

- Social Programs That Work, developed by Arnold Ventures, identifies social programs shown in rigorous studies (i.e., well-conducted randomized controlled trials) to produce sizable, sustained benefits to participants and/or society, so that they can be deployed to help solve social problems.

- The U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse identifies studies that provide valid and statistically significant evidence of effectiveness of a given practice, product, program, or policy (referred to as "interventions"), and disseminates summary information and reports on the WWC website.

- Results for America's 2018 Invest in What Works Federal Standard of Excellence provides detailed descriptions of how leading federal agencies are prioritizing evidence of effectiveness in competitive grant programs and noncompetitive grant programs.

- Results for America's 2018 Invest In What Works State Standard of Excellence sets a national standard for how state governments can consistently and effectively use data and evidence in budget, policy, and management decisions to achieve better outcomes for their residents.

- Results for America's 2020 Playbook: 17 Ways the Next President Can Accelerate Economic Mobility Using Evidence and Data is a resource for presidential campaigns that includes 17 concrete policy proposals which the next Administration should implement to use rigorous evidence and data to advance economic mobility across the country while also making the federal government more effective and efficient.