

Examples of How Results for America’s Definitions of “Evidence-Based Program” and “Evidence-Building Program” Can Be Used To Accomplish Different Goals

The following examples are not intended to be an exhaustive list. We encourage our government partners to use these definitions in ways that fit their unique needs and context.

Prioritizing evidence-based programs and evidence-building programs in the budget process

For the purposes of developing the Governor’s budget, evidence-based programs with impact evidence will be prioritized in funding decisions. These programs as well as evidence-based programs with implementation evidence and evidence-building programs will receive a designation in publicly reported documents.

Ensuring competitive grant funding supports both evidence-based and evidence-building programs

At least [Y]% of funding awarded from [grant program] must be used to purchase, provide, and/or implement evidence-based programs, including at least [Y]% with impact evidence. At least [Y]% of funding will support evidence-building programs that are not yet evidence-based, including at least [Y]% to support community participation in impact or implementation evaluation.

Requiring that a minimum amount of formula grant funding supports evidence-based and evidence-building programs

Recipients of [formula grant] must expend at least [Y]% of the grant award to implement evidence-based programs, including at least [Y%] with impact evidence. All other programs funded by the grant award must undergo an impact evaluation or implementation evaluation, or receive approval from the commissioner to postpone such evaluation for a specific period of time. Program evaluations should prioritize community participation in order to increase the likelihood that the evaluation will produce valid, relevant results, and community members should be adequately compensated for their participation.

Prioritizing cost-effectiveness in a competitive grant program

Up to 5 bonus points will be awarded to applicants proposing programs with strong cost-effectiveness as demonstrated by impact evidence accompanied by average implementation cost data.

Establishing evaluation policies for direct services

We strive to administer evidence-based and evidence-building programs. Therefore, programs directly administered by our agency that are not yet evidence-based must conduct an implementation evaluation within two years and programs that do not yet have impact evidence must conduct an impact evaluation within four years of receiving an annual budget greater than \$[Y], or receive approval from the commissioner to postpone such evaluation for a specific period of time. Program evaluations should prioritize community participation in order to increase the likelihood that the evaluation will produce valid, relevant results, and community members should be adequately compensated for their participation.

Establishing Ratings and providing implementation recommendations in a clearinghouse of evidence-based practices

For each intervention featured in this clearinghouse, we provide a strength of evidence rating based on the full body of impact evidence as well as implementation recommendations based on the full body of implementation evidence.

Creating an inventory that identifies the category of evidence supporting existing programs

My government wants to understand what type of evidence, if any, supports current programs we are funding in a certain policy area. Which government programs meet which category of evidence and how much are we investing in different categories of evidence-based and evidence-building programs?

Program Name	Evidence-based			Evidence-building		Neither Evidence-based nor Evidence-building
	Impact Evidence, Category A	Impact Evidence, Category B	Implementation Evidence	Understanding Impact Evaluation	Undergoing Implementation Evaluation	
Alpha	✓		✓		✓	
Beta		✓	✓	✓		
Delta			✓	✓		
Epilson					✓	
Eta						✓
Theta						✓

This inventory can be used to determine the appropriate amount of funds to allocate toward evidence-based and evidence-building programs.

Guiding decision-making around how to identify programs (and associated evidence categories) that accomplish a particular outcome

My government wants to invest in evidence-based services that will improve youth mental health. What programs and evidence support this goal? Program 1 (Impact Evidence, Category A), Program 2 (Impact Evidence, Category B), Program 3 (Implementation Evidence).

Frequently Asked Questions on Results for America’s Definitions of “Evidence-Based Program” and “Evidence-Building Program”

Q. Why did Results for America develop a new definition of “evidence-based programs” and “evidence-building programs” for governments at all levels to consider?

Results for America is committed to supporting government decision-makers to use more and better quality data and evidence to achieve equitable outcomes and deliver better results for residents. As an organization focused on using evidence to improve outcomes, Results for America must ground its support for government decision-makers in a shared definition of “evidence-based programs” and “evidence-building programs.” Over our organization’s history, we have influenced numerous federal, state, and local governments to define and prioritize evidence. While these changes have led to an increasing amount of funding toward evidence-based programs, significant societal challenges remain, including deep disparities in economic and social outcomes among historically underserved populations. To address these challenges, we’ve identified opportunities to strengthen the existing definitions. Results for America’s definitions of evidence-based and evidence-building programs encourage consideration of the full body of evidence; elevate knowledge that looks at why, how, and for whom programs work; incentivize an informed rationale; and incentivize ongoing evaluations—all things we believe are more likely to result in better outcomes for all.

Q. Our government already has a definition of evidence-based. Are you suggesting that we should change our definition to match this definition?

A number of federal agencies, states and local governments have adopted definitions of evidence-based and are using those definitions to prioritize how they spend public funds. We recognize and applaud those existing efforts, and at the same time recognize that there are ways that current definitions can and should evolve so that they are more likely to result in better outcomes for all. If you see features of this definition that would be useful in your jurisdiction, we encourage you to incorporate them into your definition, and are happy to work with you to do so. In the meantime, we’re here to help you continue shifting funding toward evidence-based investments using your existing definition.

Q. Do the definitions suggest that some types of evidence are better than others?

No. The definitions emphasize the importance of matching the type of evidence with the specific question being asked. These definitions are designed to encourage policymakers to consider which type of evidence is best for their particular use case and context.

Q. How do these definitions help a policymaker make more thoughtful decisions based on their unique context?

In response to critiques that previous definitions perpetuated a “pick from the list” mentality that did not consistently take local context or capacity into consideration, Results for America’s definitions emphasize the importance of considering the full body of relevant, credible evidence and matching this evidence to the specific issue or question a government or organization is seeking to address. This includes matching existing evidence to the proposed context for implementation and factoring in additional considerations such as implementation capacity. Notably, these definitions require that a proposed use of funds includes an “informed rationale” that makes the case for why, in a specific context, the program is likely to make a difference, and that the rationale includes input from a representative group of relevant stakeholders. These proposed definitions encourage government leaders to ask and answer a set of questions when deciding what categories of evidence to use and advocate for, including:

- *What is the central question or issue we are seeking to address? How will this program effectively address the root causes we are trying to solve for?*
- *Who am I seeking to impact, and what outcomes am I seeking to improve?*
- *What do those impacted by our decision think?*
- *What does the existing evidence base look like for this issue, given my target population and outcome(s) of interest? How recent and relevant is the evidence base?*
- *Were studies conducted in settings and with populations relevant to my local context?*
- *What resources are required to implement this program, and how does that compare to our available resources?*
- *Will the potential outcomes associated with this program justify the costs, or are there more cost-effective programs that will accomplish the same outcomes?*
- *How does this program fit into our larger strategic goals and other existing efforts?*
- *How will this program be sustained over time?*

Q. How can something be evidence-based if it doesn’t have impact evidence?

In order to be considered evidence-based, programs must have relevant and credible evidence and be supported by an informed rationale. The definition recognizes that relevant, credible knowledge is generated by multiple methods, which allows us to understand whether a program has resulted in positive outcomes as well as for whom and under what conditions.

Q. Does the definition distinguish rigor from methodology?

Yes. The definition clarifies that there are different forms of evidence—impact and implementation—which help decision-makers understand whether a program has been effective and how it can be implemented well. All research methodologies can be pursued in rigorous or non-rigorous ways, including quantitative methods, qualitative research, and mixed methods approaches. There is a place at the table for a broad set of research methodologies, as long as they are well-designed and well-implemented.

Q. Does the definition promote continuous learning and improvement?

Yes. The definition establishes clear categories for impact and implementation evaluation. For example, in a policy area with a weak evidence base, government leaders may choose to conduct an implementation evaluation to inform improvements and ensure a program is being implemented well before conducting an impact evaluation to build new knowledge about whether the program produces a positive impact. The definition can also support continuous improvement in instances where there is strong evidence of the key features of an evidence-based practice, and there is a desire to focus on implementing the practice well. Across the board, there is benefit to engage in early and ongoing efforts to understand and strengthen program design and implementation.

Q. How do we determine whether a given program that we are funding or implementing contains the defined core features of the program that has been found to produce a positive effect on an important outcome?

A program's defined core features are often included in program summaries contained in evaluations, clearinghouses and other research syntheses (e.g. IES' Practice Guides, EdResearch for Action Design Principles Briefs). For example, high-impact [tutoring](#) is characterized by defined core features that include three or more 30-60 minute sessions per week led by trained tutors with up to four students. Similarly, the defined core features of [Reach Out and Read](#) are characterized by medical providers incorporating early literacy promotion into regular checkups from infancy through age 5 and giving developmentally appropriate books to families during these check-ups.

Q. If our government invests in a program that meets Results for America's definition of evidence-based, does that mean the program will cause a significant positive effect on an important outcome?

No. Investments in evidence-based programs are key to increasing the likelihood that a government will deliver positive results for residents but, on their own, are insufficient. Policymakers must take care to ensure their decisions are designed to meet their particular community's needs and that there are sufficient resources to invest in quality program implementation and ongoing evaluation for continuous improvement.

Q. Where do "innovative" approaches fit in?

Some innovative approaches have impact and/or implementation evidence. Those that do not yet have such evidence are often in the process of building such evidence. Results for America strongly believes that governments should invest in testing innovative programs and building evidence about their effectiveness through both impact and implementation evaluation.

Q. If a program does not meet Results for America's definition of evidence-based does that mean it does not work?

No. A program may show promise, but if it has not been rigorously studied, this definition does not consider

it to be evidence-based. Results for America strongly believes that governments should invest funding in building evidence about the effectiveness of program investments through impact and implementation evaluation. We encourage governments to set aside at least 1% of their overall programmatic budgets to support ongoing evaluation, including for programs that have never been rigorously studied. We further encourage governments to include community participation in their evaluation process to increase the likelihood that evaluation findings are valid and relevant, and to compensate participants for their engagement.

Q. In the context of impact evidence, what does “the full body of evidence for a program” mean? What should I do where there is conflicting evidence about whether the program caused a statistically significant positive effect on an important outcome (i.e., some studies indicate it does and others do not)?

The full body of evidence refers to all relevant studies, including those with positive, neutral, and negative findings. Ideally, you will be able to use findings from a systematic review from a research clearinghouse, peer-reviewed journal, or other trusted source. For some programs, you will find a meta-analysis that quantitatively summarizes the full body of evidence, which may include differential effects for program variations and/or different populations served. In the absence of such a study, you can consult experts in the field (including the lead researchers for the conflicting studies) to gain a better understanding of the full body of evidence and how it might apply in your local setting. If such consultation is not feasible, you can apply your best judgment based on the information available. If you decide to implement a program model with conflicting evidence, it would be valuable to plan to conduct an impact evaluation to inform ongoing investment decisions in your community and to contribute to the broader evidence base being used by the field.

Q. How can I know if existing program evaluations are relevant for the populations we are serving or plan to serve?

Some research clearinghouses (such as the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse) outline characteristics of program participants from studies that are part of the evidence base, including race, ethnicity, income category, gender and status as an English language learner. If published information for the full body of evidence is not available, many individual studies provide participant demographic information in their published reports. If your planned service population is comparable to the populations reflected in the underlying evidence base, you can have more confidence that the findings are relevant. If you find meaningful differences, you’ll need to assess their potential relevance for the program you’re considering. For example, if you plan to serve multilingual learners, research showing the effectiveness of a literacy program that has not yet been evaluated with this population may not be relevant.

Q. Does the definition require ongoing evaluation for all evidence-based programs?

No, but we strongly encourage ongoing efforts to study how a program is being implemented and, wherever possible, its impact in order to best ensure that limited public funds are being invested in ways that are

most likely to deliver the best outcomes for residents. This could include a range of activities such as performance measurement, implementation evaluations, and impact evaluations. Policymakers need to assess the type of ongoing evaluation that is most appropriate given a range of factors, including their level of investment in a program, capacity to evaluate, the stage of implementation, available resources, and the existing evidence base. We encourage governments to set aside at least 1% of their overall programmatic budgets to support ongoing evaluation. While we understand the challenges and tradeoffs associated with reducing funding going to direct services, even small amounts, we believe there is an outsized benefit to investing in ongoing evidence-building efforts that can help us ensure the most effective use of programmatic funds, in particular for underserved individuals. We further encourage governments to include community participation in their evaluation process to increase the likelihood that evaluation findings are valid and relevant, and to compensate participants for their engagement.

Q. Can a program be both evidence-based and evidence-building?

Yes. Results for America strongly encourages ongoing efforts to study how a program is being implemented and, wherever possible, its impact in order to best ensure that limited public funds are being invested in ways that are most likely to deliver the best outcomes for residents. We encourage governments to set aside at least 1% of their overall programmatic budgets to support ongoing evaluation, including for evidence-based programs. While we understand the challenges and tradeoffs associated with reducing funding going to direct services, even small amounts, we believe there is an outsized benefit to investing in ongoing evidence-building efforts that can help us ensure the most effective use of programmatic funds, in particular for underserved individuals.

Q. How does this definition compare to current federal definitions of evidence-based?

Results for America’s definitions are designed to build on the strengths of existing definitions -see examples below –while addressing other important shortcomings, including by encouraging consideration of the full body of evidence; elevating knowledge that looks at why, how and for whom programs work; incentivizing an informed rationale; and supporting ongoing evaluation. State and federal examples of evidence definitions:

- [Americorps State and National Grant Program](#)
- [Every Student Succeeds Act](#)
- [Family First Prevention Services Act](#)
- [Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting](#)
- [Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act](#)
- [Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research](#)
- [American Rescue Plan State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds](#)
- [State of Colorado](#)
- [State of Minnesota](#)
- [State of Tennessee](#)
- [State of New Mexico](#)

Q. How is this definition different from ESSA’s definition of evidence-based?

The new definition builds on the strong foundation of ESSA and improves it in a number of important ways, including:

- All new categories require an informed rationale, which is not required in ESSA except for Tier 4.
- Category A a higher bar than current ESSA Tier 1; Category A calls for consideration of the full body of impact evidence. All categories call for evidence that is relevant for the population that will be served.
- Results for America’s definition does not consider innovative approaches to be “evidence-based.” Yet Results for America believes strongly that the government should invest funding in testing innovative programs and building evidence about their effectiveness by, for example, allocating funds to support innovative programs with an informed rationale.

Q. My government needs to invest in youth violence prevention services that work for my residents. How can I use this definition to accomplish my goals?

Results for America can work with you to determine the best course of action but, as an example, you may begin by creating an inventory that identifies the category of evidence supporting existing programs. For programs that are supported with a level of evidence that provides you with confidence they work, you could choose to invest more funding in them. If there are some that do not provide you with this confidence, your government may determine that evidence-based programs that are supported by impact evidence will be prioritized in allocating competitive grant dollars and all remaining funds must be reserved to support evidence-based programs with implementation evidence or innovative programs with an informed rationale that are subject to impact or implementation evaluation.

Q. You say this definition will help governments produce more equitable outcomes, but focusing on “similar populations” doesn’t address the fact that many studies do not focus on historically underserved populations. How will this definition address the gap in evidence for these populations and ensure that we are also building evidence and investing in programs that work for all populations, including those that are historically underserved?

Evidence-building –through impact evaluations and implementation evaluations–is a critical step in bridging the gap between the body of evidence that is currently available and the body of evidence that will enable government and community leaders to thoroughly understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. We encourage governments to set aside at least 1% of their overall programmatic budgets to support ongoing evaluation. While we understand the challenges and tradeoffs associated with reducing funding going to direct services, even small amounts, we believe there is an outsized benefit to investing in ongoing evidence-building efforts that can help us ensure the most effective use of programmatic funds, in particular for underserved individuals. We further encourage governments to include community participation in their evaluation process to increase the likelihood that evaluation findings are valid and relevant, and to compensate participants for their engagement.