



Network of State Turnaround and Improvement Leaders – Leadership Council

# Thought Leadership Forum Brief: Evidence-Based Improvement Under ESSA

February 2017

## Thought Leadership Forum Series

---

The Center on School Turnaround (CST) at WestEd is hosting a series of online Thought Leadership Forums for state education agency (SEA) officials who are members of the Leadership Council of the Network of State Turnaround and Improvement Leaders. The forums are intended to highlight the major considerations of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for students in chronically low-performing schools and explore how turnaround plans impact SEAs' broader improvement efforts and ESSA implementation efforts.

The initial forum, held on December 19, 2016, focused on the definition and application of evidence-based criteria within the context of ESSA. The forum featured presentations from Sylvie Hale, Director of Program Development and Strategic Planning for WestEd's Innovation Studies program, and Rebecca Herman, Senior Policy Researcher and Distinguished Chair in Education Policy at the RAND Corporation (RAND).

This brief describes the resources shared during the December 19 forum, summarizes key ideas, and concludes with recommendations to help inform the ongoing work of SEA officials on identifying evidence-based strategies and interventions in compliance with ESSA evidence requirements.

# Evidence-Based Improvement Under ESSA: Key Considerations for State and District Leaders

## New Evidence Tiers

The new federal law establishes a framework with four tiers of evidence that state and district leaders should use when identifying activities, strategies, and interventions to use to improve their schools. Under ESSA, the term *evidence-based* refers to an activity, strategy, or intervention that falls somewhere on the continuum of evidence outlined in Table 1.

## Tools and Guidance for Identifying Evidence-Based Interventions

The new law’s tiered approach to evidence-based strategies intentionally prompts states and districts to examine the full body of evidence and

make appropriate need-based decisions when identifying appropriate strategies and interventions. Accordingly, the December 19 forum presented participants with relevant tools and guidance for applying ESSA’s tiered approach to examining the evidence base underlying various strategies and interventions. Specifically, WestEd’s new evidence-based improvement guide — *A Guide for States to Strengthen Their Frameworks and Supports Aligned to the Evidence Requirements of ESSA* (Hale et al., 2017) — includes six tools designed to encourage focused conversations about appropriate evidence-based interventions and to support cross-agency collaboration when selecting and implementing evidence-based interventions. The guide includes tools for taking inventory of current improvement practices and tools for developing approaches to selecting evidence-based interventions at both the SEA and local education agency (LEA) levels. There are also tools for reviewing intervention evidence and comparing evidence-based interventions.

Another key resource shared during the forum was RAND’s recent review of school leadership interventions under ESSA (Herman et al., 2016). In it, the authors emphasized the following core findings:

Table 1. ESSA’s Four Tiers of Evidence

Tier	Evidence	Definition
I	Strong	Evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study
II	Moderate	Evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study
III	Promising	Evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias
IV	Rationale*	Evidence based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that the activity is likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes, and includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of the activity**

\*To demonstrate a rationale under ESSA, there must be a logic model that builds on high-quality prior research or a prior positive evaluation. A logic model (also known as a theory of action) is defined as a well-specified conceptual framework that identifies key components of the proposed process, product, strategy, or practice (i.e., the active “ingredients” that are hypothesized to be critical to achieving the relevant outcomes) and describes the relationships among the key components and outcomes, theoretically and operationally (USDOE, 2016).

\*\*Case studies and descriptive analyses of trends or relationships are not considered evidence under ESSA.

- ◆ Principals are second only to teachers as the most important school-level determinants of student achievement.
- ◆ Teacher turnover is lower in schools led by high-quality principals. Principals rated as more effective tend to hire and retain higher-quality teachers and these teachers improve faster.
- ◆ Schools cannot successfully “turn around” without effective leadership; furthermore, improving leadership is relatively cost-effective — that is, there are far fewer principals than teachers and each principal has the potential to affect the outcomes of many students.

In their evidence review, Herman and colleagues (pp.16–27) also applied the ESSA evidence tiers to the research base on school leadership development. They cited principal preparation programs with Tiers II–IV evidence; principal professional development programs with Tiers I, II, and IV evidence; and principal-focused comprehensive school reform models with Tiers I–II evidence. They also noted that as strategies for school improvement, working conditions — such as autonomy, incentives, and time management — *meet the criteria* for Tiers II and IV evidence. The authors, however, found no evidence supporting principal replacement as a stand-alone improvement strategy.

### Using Title I and Title II Funds Under ESSA

ESSA establishes greater flexibility in the use of school-improvement funds, allowing states and districts to select or develop interventions rather than choose from a prescribed set.<sup>1</sup> Federal funds can be used for a broad array of initiatives to improve school leadership. For example, Herman noted the following:

- ◆ Title I monies and Title II, Part B competitive grants (which both require Tiers I–III

<sup>1</sup> Schools operating under School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding must, however, still abide by SIG requirements.

evidence),<sup>2</sup> as well as an allowable SEA set-aside of 3 percent of Title II, Part A funding can be used to improve the state’s principal pipeline.

- ◆ Federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants also explicitly include school leadership.
- ◆ Tier IV evidence would generally be considered sufficient for many federally funded school leadership development activities.
- ◆ Under Title II of ESSA, an activity “is evidence-based, to the extent that the state...determines that such evidence is reasonably available” (Herman et al., 2016, p. 33).
- ◆ Some of the allowable uses of Title II, Part A funds — such as coursework for residency programs and new-leader induction and mentoring programs — do not require an evidence base from Tiers I–IV.

Federal guidance nonetheless encourages states and districts to use the strongest evidence appropriate to the need when using Title I and II funds. State and local decision makers will be best served by supporting initiatives with “a theory of action grounded solidly in research and that have the potential for more rigorous validation” (Herman et al., 2016, p. 28).

## Recommendations for Activities Related to Evidence-Based Improvement

1. LEA and SEA leaders should consider using ESSA’s evidence-based provision to assist LEAs in supporting priority areas. For example, RAND’s publication, *School*

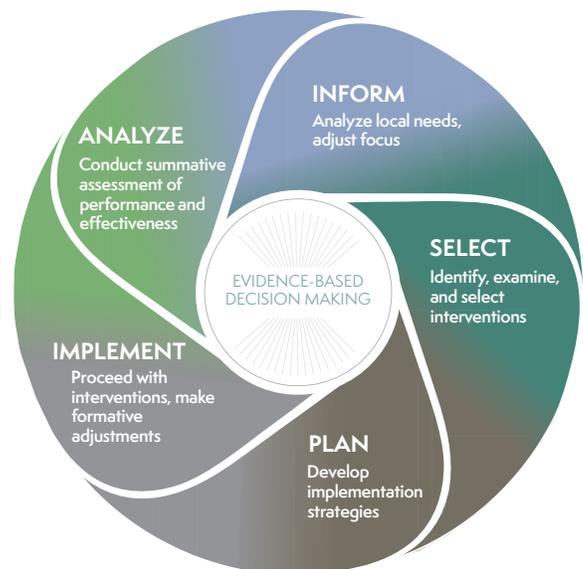
<sup>2</sup> Tiers I–III evidence is also required for some federal discretionary grant programs such as Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants and the School Leader Recruitment and Support Fund.

*Leadership Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review*, provides examples for how the evidence-based requirements could be leveraged for capacity-building efforts for principals.

- ◆ *School Leadership Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review* defines ESSA’s evidence-based requirements (see Chapter 3) and includes a comparison between evidence requirements in NCLB and ESSA (see Table 12 in Appendix B) that is a useful quick-reference guide for LEA and SEA leaders tasked with understanding and implementing ESSA: [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1550-21.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1550-21.html)
  - ◆ Additionally, SEA school improvement and accountability leads should review WestEd’s publication, *Evidence-Based Improvement: A Guide for States to Strengthen Their Frameworks and Supports Aligned to the Evidence Requirements of ESSA* – particularly *Tool 1: SEA Inventory of Current Practice* and *Tool 3: SEA Guidance for Evidence-Based Interventions*: <https://www.wested.org/resources/evidence-based-improvement-essa-guide-for-states/>
2. SEA leads for teacher quality and for school improvement and accountability should continue to work with LEAs to identify and prioritize challenges as well as to identify and evaluate evidence-based strategies and plan for their implementation.
- ◆ Tools 3–6 in WestEd’s *Evidence-Based Improvement: A Guide for States to Strengthen Their Frameworks and Supports Aligned to the Evidence Requirements of ESSA* provides SEAs and LEAs with guidance for reviewing evidence-based interventions and tools for comparing evidence-based interventions. Review of these materials and tools will prepare SEA leads to engage LEAs in the process of identifying priority challenges and identifying evidence-based strategies in compliance with ESSA evidence requirements.

- ◆ Use of the Evidence-Based Improvement Framework (see Figure 1) from Section 2, as well as Tools 1 and 2 in Section 4, of *Evidence-Based Improvement: A Guide for States to Strengthen Their Frameworks and Supports Aligned to the Evidence Requirements of ESSA* will help SEA leads initiate and support LEAs with a meaningful inquiry process focused on true systemic change rather than on a “check-list” approach to quality learning.

Figure 1. Framework: Evidence-Based Improvement



3. LEA and SEA leaders should explore and use the flexibility that is built into ESSA, especially as it pertains to using multiple funding sources for leadership development activities.
- ◆ Chapter 2 of RAND’s *School Leadership Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review* details ESSA policy and funding support for leadership development as a school improvement strategy.
  - ◆ SEAs should review the CST publication, *Using Federal Education Formula Funds for School Turnaround Initiatives: Opportunities for State Education Agencies*, paying particular attention to the sections on Title I, Part A and Title II, Part A funding in support of school turnaround strategies.

## Resources

---

- Hale, S., Dunn, L., Filby, N., Rice, J., & Van Houten, L. (2017). *Evidence-based improvement: A guide for states to strengthen their frameworks and supports aligned to the evidence requirements of ESSA*. San Francisco: WestEd. Available online at: <https://www.wested.org/resources/evidence-based-improvement-essa-guide-for-states/>
- Herman, R., Gates, S. M., Arifkhanova, A., Bega, A., Chavez-Herrerias, E., Han, E., Harris, M., Leschitz, J., & Wrabel, S. (2016). *School leadership interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence review (updated and expanded)*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Available online at: [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1550-21.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1550-21.html)
- Junge, M., & Krvaric, S. (2016). *Using federal education formula funds for school turnaround initiatives: Opportunities for state education agencies*. San Francisco: WestEd. Available online at: [http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/CST\\_Using\\_Fed\\_Funds\\_Final2.pdf](http://centeronschoolturnaround.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/CST_Using_Fed_Funds_Final2.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Education. (2016, September). *Non-regulatory guidance: Using evidence to strengthen education investments*. Washington, D.C. Available online at: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceusesinvestment.pdf>



**<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org>**

This brief was supported by the Center on School Turnaround through funding from the U.S. Department of Education, PR/Award Number S283B120015.

2017 © WestEd. All rights reserved.

Suggested citation: Center on School Turnaround at WestEd. (2017). *Thought leadership forum brief: Evidence-based improvement Under ESSA*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that works with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide, from Massachusetts, Vermont and Georgia, to Illinois, Arizona and California, with headquarters in San Francisco. For more information about WestEd, visit <http://WestEd.org>; call 415.565.3000 or, toll-free, (877) 4-WestEd; or write: WestEd / 730 Harrison Street / San Francisco, CA 94107-1242.