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Evidence-Building Opportunities Under ESSA

How States Can and Should
Generate Evidence to Drive
Better Outcomes for
Students



Evidence-Building Opportunities Under ESSA: How States Can and Should Generate Evidence to Drive Better Outcomes for Students

INTRODUCTION

The December 2015 passage of the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) marked a dramatic shift in recent federal education policy by granting states and school districts significantly more authority and flexibility to design education systems that reflect local needs and priorities. However, with increased flexibility comes increased responsibility and accountability for results. This is especially true with respect to states' charge to improve outcomes in the lowest-performing schools.

Given that previous school improvement efforts have produced inconsistent results,¹ it's not surprising that there is considerable skepticism about ESSA's emphasis on state-led school improvement. However, there is an important distinction: ESSA contains provisions that encourage, and in some cases require, the use of evidence-based approaches and continuous improvement. If implemented well, ESSA could help to ensure more resources are invested in policies, practices, and programs grounded in reliable evidence. It could also help to build the evidence base about what works, for whom, and under what circumstances.

The state and district education Chiefs who are members of Chiefs for Change are leaders in this area. They are using the evidence provisions in ESSA to support initiatives that accelerate academic progress, particularly for those students who are furthest behind. Members of Chiefs for Change are not only supporting initiatives in their own states, they are expanding the base of information available to education leaders across the country. This report builds on the work Chiefs for Change has done to [identify ways](#) to leverage

the evidence provisions in ESSA and use federal funds to support this approach. Specifically, the report offers guidance for state education agencies (SEAs) as they both use and build evidence to improve outcomes.

Many people in education have come to recognize that we can increase the likelihood of success, in some cases dramatically so, by regularly and thoughtfully using the best available evidence to inform decision making. However, it is not enough to simply *use* evidence. For a variety of reasons, we must continue to *build* evidence and expand our understanding of what works to improve academic achievement:

- 1 Although we have made important gains in understanding how students learn and how best to support that learning, the evidence base is still too thin to address the full range of challenges educators face.
- 2 New insights and innovations—including but not limited to technological ones—might be more effective than the existing practices that have already been studied and thus are able to qualify as “evidence-based.”
- 3 Even “proven” approaches need ongoing research to confirm their effectiveness, particularly with different populations of students learning under different conditions than those examined in the original research.

1 Despite having invested over \$3 billion in federal funds in the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, there has been only a modest impact. A [2016 evaluation](#) found that the SIG program did not have an impact on the use of practices promoted by the program or significant impacts on student achievement.

Section I below summarizes the evidence provisions in ESSA with a focus on those related to evidence-building. Section II outlines a proposed organizational framework for advancing state leadership on evidence-building. The framework includes three categories for SEAs to strengthen evidence-building efforts at the state, district, and school levels: (i) develop and adopt policies and practices; (ii) build tools and infrastructure; and (iii) establish partnerships. The Appendix includes a complete list of suggested state actions for building evidence and a list of recommended resources for SEAs contemplating, or conducting, evidence-building efforts.

We offer both *state-directed* evidence-building actions and *state-enabled* evidence-building actions that take place at the district or even school levels. SEAs play an important role in creating a policy environment that prioritizes and even privileges evidence; therefore, a number of potential actions fall under the “state-enabling” category (e.g., giving priority in competitive grant-making to local education agencies (LEAs) that include plans for rigorous evaluation in their applications).

Our aim is to provide a clear sense of the policies, practices, and conditions states can establish to build evidence and apply it in ways that can help solve problems and improve outcomes for students.

SECTION ONE: UNDERSTANDING ESSA’S EVIDENCE PROVISIONS

ESSA’s evidence provisions create *requirements* and *opportunities* for states to both use and build evidence. When implemented well, these provisions can improve student outcomes and increase the return on education investments.

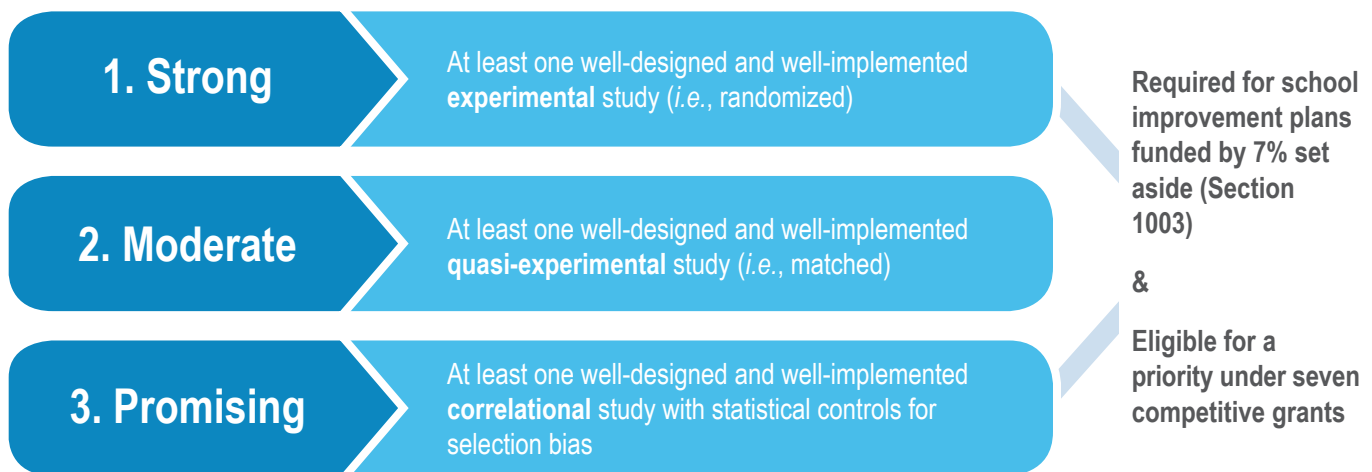
tistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on Strong, Moderate, or Promising evidence, as defined by the statute.

ESSA’s new, tiered definition of “evidence-based” includes four levels of evidence, the top three of which require findings of a sta-

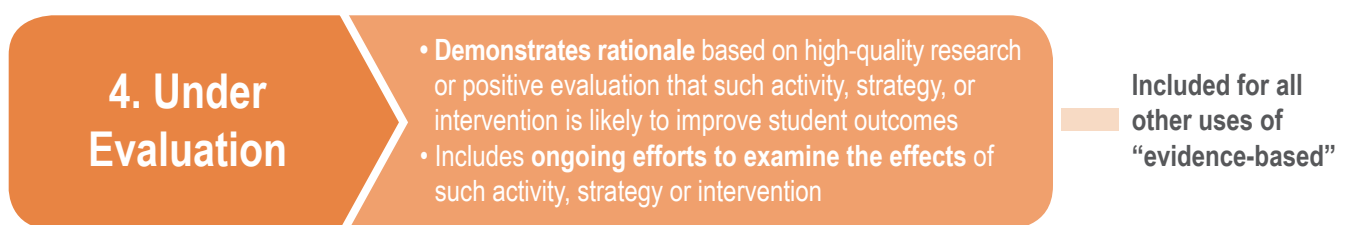
The fourth level is designed for ideas that hold promise but do not yet have an evidence base qualifying for the top three levels, as long as those approaches are coupled with “ongoing efforts to

Definition of “Evidence-Based” in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

ESSA’s definition of “evidence-based” includes four levels of evidence. The top three levels require findings of a **statistically significant effect** on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on evidence that is:



The fourth level is focused on evidence-building. It covers ideas that do not yet have an evidence base qualifying for the three levels above.



examine the effects” of the approach. Given this requirement to evaluate the impact of approaches that are not supported by evidence meeting the top three levels, level four can be referred to as “evidence-building.”

In addition to establishing this new, tiered definition, ESSA also requires in some parts, and *encourages* in others, the use of evidence-based approaches and continuous improvement to help support greater student success through the use of federal funds². Results for America’s [Leverage Points](#) report identifies 13 opportunities for SEAs to use their ESSA state plans to build and use evidence to improve outcomes; three of those opportunities (Leverage Points 3, 6, and 13) are closely related to generating new evidence. Most directly, ESSA requires that states monitor

and evaluate LEAs’ use of federal school improvement funds and allows SEAs to use part of their state set-aside to fund such evidence-generating evaluations (see Leverage Point 6).³

In enacting ESSA, Congress signaled an important shift from the compliance-based frame of the No Child Left Behind Act to a frame premised much more on state and local authority to take evidence-based actions and continuously improve education systems and student outcomes over time. To rise above mere compliance, though, SEAs must develop and implement the policies, practices, and systems that form a true learning system. By ensuring that the system not only uses evidence but builds it, an SEA can advance efforts to improve overall outcomes and close opportunity gaps for students within individual states and across the nation.

Debunking Myths

WHAT?

Myth: Evidence-building is only about “what works.”

Truth: Evidence-building involves analyzing programs and policies to understand what works, for whom, under what circumstances. Even “proven” approaches should be evaluated to determine whether the impact can be replicated at scale and to learn how approaches work for different students and under different conditions. When we build a robust evidence base, we can use that information when allocating resources—funding, time, and effort—to improve outcomes.

WHO?

Myth: Staff members with Ph.D.s are needed to conduct the research.

Truth: People with research expertise are needed to help design and conduct a research study, but evidence-building isn’t solely the province of academics or research institutions—and certainly not of them working in isolation. Indeed, we are increasingly *democratizing* evidence-building by inviting a broader and more representative group of stakeholders to determine research priorities—and in some cases, carry out the research. This helps to ensure that the research focuses on the most pressing topics and increases the likelihood that results will drive changes in policy and practice. To this end, many SEAs have forged promising partnerships with local universities and other entities to extend their research capacity.

HOW?

Myth: Only randomized controlled trials (RCTs) count.

Truth: Limiting our definition of high-quality research to RCTs—or even to program evaluation writ large, regardless of methodology—limits the role research can play in shaping policy and practice. State policymakers and practitioners should begin by establishing a set of questions they want to answer, and then, based on those questions, should consider which [research design](#) is best suited to address them.

WHEN?

Myth: We must immediately evaluate programs and eliminate funding for those that don’t “work.”

Truth: It is important to evaluate both impact and implementation. If a program is not producing the desired outcomes, that may be because it wasn’t implemented properly. By studying the way the program is structured and how it was administered, in addition to the results, we can determine whether it’s necessary to make modifications that could help to make the program more impactful. Though it may ultimately be necessary to direct funds away from programs that don’t deliver the hoped-for effects, we should first see if there are ways to make those programs more effective.

² <http://results4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ESSA-evidence-provisions-explainer-7.22.16-Update.pdf>

³ For a comprehensive list of every evidence provision in ESSA, including the section in the law where it occurs, see Results for America’s [comprehensive scan](#).

SECTION TWO: GUIDANCE FOR STATE ACTIONS TO BUILD EVIDENCE

To assist SEAs in thinking about ways to engage in evidence-building efforts, we've developed a framework that includes three categories:

- **Develop and adopt policies and practices**
- **Build tools and infrastructure**
- **Establish partnerships**

For each category, we describe the opportunity, the rationale for why it matters, key actions for SEAs, and examples of approaches

that leading SEAs are already following. Importantly, the illustrative key actions are differentiated for states at various levels of preparedness and capacity. For states just initiating a focus on evidence-building, there are “early” actions to overcome inertia and build momentum for this kind of work. For states that have already begun building evidence, “midstream” actions may help strengthen approaches and break new ground. Finally, leading states may find the “advanced” actions helpful in moving from good to great.

I. Develop and Adopt Policies and Practices to Build Evidence

The Opportunity

ESSA requires that SEAs evaluate the use of various federal funding streams, including but not limited to Title I school improvement. However, states have a real opportunity to go beyond compliance by developing and implementing policies and practices that, taken together, form a true learning agenda.

Why It Matters

Leaders at all levels should acknowledge that human beings rarely if ever get everything right the first time. Nor do we know what works across all policy areas and in all contexts. By developing policies and practices that require and/or incentivize a “learning orientation” within the SEA itself, as well as in its districts and schools, education leaders at all levels will be better positioned to understand the impact of their investments, learn from challenges, improve and course correct as they go, and recognize promising practices that can be studied and scaled.

Key Actions

EARLY

- An essential starting point for every state is to create a **learning agenda**—a *pro-active* research agenda—focused on key problems of practice that define what the state wants to learn. Before establishing a statewide agenda, an SEA new to this work could create a “mini” learning agenda centered around a single focus area.
- **Assign a single-responsible owner (SRO)** within the SEA that will serve as liaison for developing and carrying out the learning agenda.
- **Determine existing capacity** to carry out the SEA’s desired learning agenda, noting where it should engage external partners.⁴

MIDSTREAM

- **Expand the “mini” learning agenda into a broader statewide learning agenda** focused on all key problems of practice and tied to the state’s strategic priorities.
- Determine **how to study the questions or issues** identified; the design of the research will vary based on each SEA’s questions.
- **Establish funding streams** to support the desired learning agenda.
- **Implement regular leadership level routines** for reviewing progress and assessing the impact of statewide priorities.

ADVANCED

- **Establish policies within the SEA that govern how federal and state dollars are allocated** and tie their allocation to the use of evidence and a commitment to ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement. For example, develop a statewide plan for using part of the SEA’s 5% set-aside of school improvement funds to evaluate the impact of improvement efforts.
- Develop similar policies that **encourage LEAs to use program funds for evaluations**.
- **Establish evaluation plans** for all major initiatives and use results to determine impact and next steps.

⁴ See http://www.bscpcenter.org/resources/publications/SEAF_5_11.2015_final.pdf for specific ideas about the capacity needed in SEAs to advance an evidence-based policymaking agenda.

Spotlight on States

LOUISIANA

Louisiana has a statewide policy of piloting new initiatives before taking them to scale. This allows practitioners to start small, measure impact, have practical influence on the work, and adjust the approach as necessary, before replicating promising initiatives. The “pilot first” policy applies to key programmatic priorities, from curriculum adoption to school choice to educator preparation and support, and everything in between. The benefits of this approach extend beyond vetting program design and building early evidence of impact. Tactically, the approach also creates learning communities among pilot participants and fosters collaborative problem-solving and learning. It builds broader buy-in from districts and schools that watch from the sidelines as pilot participants iterate and test new initiatives; and it creates a culture that values ongoing learning and improvement. Importantly, Chiefs for Change member John White, Louisiana’s State Superintendent of Education, has intentionally created a culture where innovation is valued. White has done this by vocally championing the value he personally places on continuous improvement and building evidence of what is or isn’t working.

MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts has a specific and well-established office, the Office of Planning and Research (OPR), that undertakes research and performance management work for key strategic projects, including school turnaround efforts. OPR, led by Chief Strategy and Research Officer Carrie Conaway, is central to how the state oversees implementation of ESSA as well as how it conducts ongoing and rigorous evaluations of its key school improvement strategies. OPR works closely with the state’s District Support team led by [Future Chief](#) Russell Johnston to inform, refine, and strengthen school improvement efforts across the state. But OPR’s work transcends school improvement; it pursues a broad research agenda driven by the state’s strategic priorities through internal analyses and partnerships with researchers at universities and research firms. These partnerships are designed to generate real-time data on implementation and impact so that the state can improve its strategies and better serve the Commonwealth’s children.

II. Build Tools and Infrastructure to Make Evidence-Building Possible

The Opportunity

Thanks in part to federal and state investments in building comprehensive longitudinal data systems, education leaders, particularly at the state level, now have access to what can feel like a surplus of data. The more proximate challenge facing SEAs at this moment is building internal capacity to analyze and interpret the data so that it can be used to answer key research and policy questions—and to do so in a timely and relevant way.

Why It Matters

Generating evidence of what works, for whom, and under what circumstances in a systematic, ongoing manner requires that SEAs build the right set of technical systems and skills within their organizations to ask research questions, answer them empirically, and apply the results to their work. SEAs that seek to strengthen their internal capacity to generate evidence must invest in building the technical systems that lead to better and more frequent access to data as well as developing the “softer” skills needed to establish an organizational culture that values and prioritizes evidence-building.

Key Actions

EARLY

- **Audit existing mechanisms for collecting and regularly reviewing data** (e.g., routines, survey instruments, and data infrastructure such as the State Longitudinal Data System and state financial system); address limitations as needed.
- To **help the state complete a systems audit, consider adopting or adapting an existing tool** like Strategic Data Project’s [Strategic Use of Data rubric](#), which provides a structured and systematic way to assess an organization’s strengths and challenges around data use.
- **Gain early SEA experience with generating evidence** by investing in faster and less expensive evaluations, e.g., implementation studies that determine whether the program or initiative is operating as designed, or smaller scale, *rapid-cycle impact* evaluations.

MIDSTREAM

- **Build or expand in-house research capacity** by developing skillsets within each unit/department or creating a central research office and/or implementation unit responsible for monitoring and regularly evaluating the impact of statewide priorities.
- **Build internal awareness and understanding of the various kinds of research**, the relative merits and limitations of each, and where each fits into the SEA’s policy cycle (e.g., a *landscape* analysis can give leaders a clear picture of a particular issue in order to drive initial policy efforts and pilot strategies, while an *impact* study can help determine whether a particular program or strategy achieved its desired outcomes).

ADVANCED

- **Build SEA capacity to read evaluation findings discerningly**; program leaders and policymakers alike should know what “good” evidence looks like so as to minimize the risk of over-reading results.
- **Recruit districts into a networked improvement community** to undertake and study efforts to address key problems of practice.
- Develop a line of **technical assistance for LEAs focused on building their capacity to measure and evaluate the impact** of their programs and practices, particularly in instances where those practices are not yet supported by strong evidence.

Spotlight on States

TENNESSEE

Tennessee invested in establishing an in-house research team in 2012 under then Commissioner, and Chiefs for Change member and Chief-in Residence, Kevin Huffman, with an emphasis on internally evaluating statewide initiatives and determining which programs were more or less effective in achieving their desired outcomes. Prior to creating this team, the SEA had no concerted internal effort to evaluate the impact of state investments. Now, under the leadership of Commissioner Candice McQueen, also a Chiefs for Change member, the team has grown to 10 members and is called the Office of Research and Strategy. It has built its capacity to go beyond traditional program evaluation; it routinely designs implementation studies to guide the rollout of new pilots, leads efforts to take pilots to scale, and collects and shares real-time, actionable data with both state leaders and their district counterparts.⁵

NEVADA

Nevada's Partnership Network, a collaboration between the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) and 30 high-needs schools in its largest school district, Clark County, represents a new data- and evidence-centric approach to school improvement. Under the leadership of Superintendent for Public Instruction and Chiefs for Change member Steve Canavero, NDE works with a cadre of national non-profit partners selected based on the strength of their programs' evidence following a rigorous Request for Information process. This approach is creating a community of practice among the participating schools so they can learn alongside and from one another during implementation.⁶ Data collected locally will be used by educators and school leaders who will, together with district, state, and external partners, engage in regular cycles of continuous improvement to adjust and optimize implementation. NDE has committed to rigorously evaluate the overall initiative by hiring an external evaluator to design and carry out a series of descriptive case studies and an impact evaluation. The study is expected to indicate which elements are working well and which may need to be adjusted. Importantly, leaders from both the state and school district are committed to replacing strategies and partners that are not proving effective with those that demonstrate impact.⁷

⁵ Interview with Laura Encalade, Chief of Staff, Tennessee Department of Education, November 9, 2017.

⁶ <https://www.reviewjournal.com/opinion/commentary-collaboration-between-state-and-clark-county-school-district-aims-to-improve-local-schools/>

⁷ Interview with Brett Barley, Deputy Superintendent for Student Achievement, Nevada Department of Education, November 11, 2017.

III. Establish Partnerships to Strengthen and Accelerate Evidence-Building Efforts

The Opportunity

When asked about barriers to engaging in evidence-building, the most frequent and consistent response among SEA leaders is “capacity.” In a climate of increasingly limited resources at the state level, coupled with growing interest in and demand for evidence-based policies and practices in the field, SEAs should seek partnerships to design and carry out research collaboratively. SEAs are not the only entities with a vested interest in research partnerships; research institutions and researchers themselves are showing a desire to conduct studies that have practical applications and the potential to help solve relevant and timely challenges facing education systems.

Why It Matters

Building internal capacity to generate evidence will not happen overnight; yet the need and demand for more and better information about what works is currently being recognized at the state and local levels. Strategic partnerships with external researchers are thus a timely and common-sense solution for SEAs interested in asking and empirically answering important questions about their policy and programmatic decisions in the absence of sufficient internal capacity. Over time, strong research-practice partnerships can and should result in SEAs strengthening their institutional capacity to engage in ongoing research and evaluation.

Key Actions

EARLY

- Establish and/or strengthen **partnerships with researchers** from in-state or national research universities, non-profits, or other local partners.⁸
- Consider a **“first date” approach** to selecting research partners—not all will be a match, so start small with a discrete project and evaluate effectiveness and fit before formalizing or expanding the partnership.

MIDSTREAM

- **Convene LEAs** to establish statewide priorities, jointly determine research questions, and identify common metrics.
- Seek out **philanthropic partnerships** locally and nationally to support statewide evaluation efforts. In some cases, philanthropic partners will fund rigorous evaluation of a program, as long as the program’s delivery is funded by the state or another governmental source.⁹
- **Apply for federal funding** to engage in research through one of the [Institute for Education Statistics’ \(IES\) numerous grant programs](#), such as the Partnerships and Collaborations Focused on Problems of Practice or Policy, which pairs researchers with SEA and/or LEA partners to collaboratively design and carry out studies on policies or practices of interest to the agency.

ADVANCED

- Establish a formal **state-level research-practice partnership (RPP)**, a long-term mutually beneficial collaboration between an SEA and an education researcher focused on producing relevant research, improving the use of research in decision making, and engaging both researchers and practitioners in problems of practice¹⁰.
- **Take advantage of existing partnerships to build internal capacity** for engaging in evidence-building efforts so that, over time, functions that had previously been outsourced can be carried out internally. Use existing or new partnerships as a mechanism for building internal SEA capacity.

8 Every SEA is assigned to a federally funded Regional Education Lab (REL) based on their geographic location; RELs are charged with working in partnership with SEAs to conduct applied research and training with a mission of supporting a more evidence-based education system.

9 See, for example, the [Laura and John Arnold Foundation’s Request for Proposals](#) to fund RCTs to evaluate programs whose delivery will be funded by government or other entities.

10 See <http://nnerpp.rice.edu/> for more on research-practice partnerships in education.

Spotlight on States

TENNESSEE

In 2016, under the leadership of Dr. McQueen, Tennessee established the [Tennessee Education Research Alliance \(TERA\)](#), a formal research partnership with Vanderbilt University. The partnership seeks to create research that directly impacts state policy. Led by a full-time staff of seven and guided by a steering committee and advisory council, TERA's research agenda builds a body of knowledge that better positions the state to make policy and program decisions based on data and evidence. TERA 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. TERA is in the process of conducting research to better understand the state's human capital needs and determine how those needs can be more effectively addressed by strategies related to educator preparation, recruitment, placement, retention, and compensation. For example, TERA is studying first-year educators to determine success factors, including how they were prepared and supported by their districts, as well as recruitment and retention of both teachers and leaders of color.¹¹

OHIO

Ohio is implementing an innovative approach to utilize data to support continuous improvement at the district level. In partnership with [Proving Ground](#), an initiative housed within Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research, the state is pioneering a state-led research partnership with two LEAs that will help participating schools design, implement, and rigorously test the impact of interventions aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism. Not only will the SEA's partnership with Proving Ground generate new evidence for previously untested interventions, it will build long-term capacity for rapid-cycle research and evaluation.

NEW MEXICO

Under the leadership of Chiefs for Change member Secretary Christopher Ruszkowski, New Mexico is designing and piloting a new Education Preparation Scorecard in partnership with the University of New Mexico and LEAs. It provides a comprehensive look at the extent to which educator preparation programs (EPPs) across the state are preparing pre-service teaching candidates and is informed by evidence demonstrating that teachers are the most impactful in-school factor influencing student outcomes. The Scorecard is the culmination of unprecedented levels of data sharing between the state, EPPs, and LEAs and strategic support from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)'s Network for Transforming Educator Preparation (NTEP). Through its pilot, New Mexico intends to demonstrate the value of triangulating educator effectiveness data that it collects via its statewide evaluation system, NMTEACH, with pre-service programs to build a more nuanced understanding of how well EPPs are preparing placing educators, particularly educators of color, to thrive in classrooms across the state. The Scorecard will benefit all parties in some way: EPPs will have better information about their graduates that can inform how they design their program and help them attract strong candidates; LEAs will be able to make data-based hiring decisions; and prospective teachers will have more and better data to inform which program(s) will best prepare them for the classroom. Perhaps most importantly, the rich data collected and compiled by the state will be used to continuously measure and improve the pre-service experiences of educators so that every student has access to a well-prepared and highly effective teacher.

¹¹ Interview with Laura Encalade, Chief of Staff, Tennessee Department of Education, November 7, 2017; for more information about TERA, see: <https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/teredresearchalliance/index.php>.

CONCLUSION

Despite a significant increase in our country's investment in research and evaluation of education programs and practices, there is still so much we don't yet know about what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. The federally funded What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), which, since 2002, has conducted over 10,000 individual research studies of educational interventions to inform evidence-based decision making, has found only 184 that fully met the WWC standards. Within topic areas, these numbers further dwindle; for example, among the 227 literacy programs reviewed between 2002 and 2016, just 62 met the WWC standards and had positive or potentially positive effects on outcomes for that topic. And in a less well-researched area such as science, just five of the seven programs reviewed met the threshold of having positive or potentially positive effects on student outcomes.

It is clear that if we are to see dramatically different results in the coming years, states and their school districts, in partnership with external entities, will need to step in and play a more active role in generating evidence.

Chiefs for Change members will continue to lead in this work, building a strong evidence base through their practice to help inform decision making and provide a greater base of information to share with their peers. This work will support continuous improvement in policy and practice and will help to ensure that states are leveraging funding effectively and generating the greatest possible return on investment.

ESSA and its explicit commitment to evidence presents an immediate opportunity for SEAs, together with their LEAs and schools, to accelerate the ways in which they use and generate evidence. However, ESSA is not the only entry point for building evidence in education. States should consider adopting a learning orientation that applies to the entirety of their core work and should build capacity to effectively pursue answers to timely and relevant issues facing students, educators, and the broader community.

APPENDIX A

Suggested State Actions for Building Evidence

I. Develop and Adopt Policies and Practices to Build Evidence

- Create a **learning agenda**—a *proactive* research agenda—focused on key problems of practice that defines what the state wants to learn. Before establishing a full-blown statewide agenda, an SEA new to this work could create a “mini” learning agenda centered around a single focus area.
- **Assign a single-responsible owner (SRO)** within the SEA that will serve as liaison for developing and carrying out the learning agenda.
- **Determine existing capacity** to carry out the SEA’s desired learning agenda, noting where there is a need to engage external partners.
- **Expand a “mini” learning agenda into a broader statewide learning agenda** focused on all key problems of practice and tied to the state’s strategic priorities.
- Determine **how to study the questions or issues** identified; the design of the research will vary based on the questions the state is asking.
- **Establish funding streams** to support the desired learning agenda.
- **Implement regular leadership level routines** for reviewing progress on and impact of statewide priorities.
- **Establish policies within the SEA and on behalf of districts** that govern how federal and state dollars are allocated and tie their allocation to the use of evidence and a commitment to ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement.
- Develop policies that **encourage LEAs to use program funds for evaluations**.
- Develop a plan to **use part of the SEA’s 5% set-aside of school improvement funds to evaluate the impact** of school improvement efforts.
- **Define the state’s approach to considering what evidence is “reasonably available”** and a process for revisiting as the evidence base grows.
- Determine the state’s approach to **ensuring 4th tier approaches “demonstrate a rationale”** that is likely to improve student outcomes.
- **Require and/or incentivize experimental or quasi-experimental designs for studies** meeting the state’s definition of “ongoing efforts to examine the effects” of 4th tier approaches.
- Develop a **policy for allocating LEA grants based on best use of evidence and commitment to evaluation and continuous improvement**, including of 4th tier approaches.
- **Establish evaluation plans** for all major initiatives and use results to determine impact and next steps.

II. Build Tools and Infrastructure to Make Evidence-Building Possible

- **Audit existing mechanisms for collecting and regularly reviewing data** (e.g., routines, survey instruments, and data infrastructure such as the State Longitudinal Data System).
- To **help the state complete a systems audit, consider adopting or adapting an existing tool** like Strategic Data Project’s [Strategic Use of Data rubric](#), which provides a structured and systematic way to assess an organization’s strengths and challenges around data use.
- **Gain early SEA experience with generating evidence** by investing in faster and less expensive evaluations, e.g., *implementation* studies that determine whether the program or initiative is operating as designed, or smaller scale, *rapid-cycle impact* evaluations.
- **Build or expand in-house research capacity** through a central research office and/or “delivery” or implementation unit responsible for monitoring and regularly evaluating impact of statewide priorities.
- **Build internal awareness and understanding of the various kinds of research**, the relative merits and limitations of each, and where each fits into the SEA’s policy cycle.
- **Build SEA capacity to understand how to read evaluation findings discerningly**.
- Create a **platform for sharing results of evaluations** with LEAs across the state.
- **Recruit districts into a networked improvement community** to undertake and study efforts to address key problems of practice.

- Develop a **line of technical assistance for LEAs focused on building their capacity** to meet the “ongoing efforts to examine

the effects” of 4th tier approaches requirement (e.g., train and support the use of existing and free platforms like [RCT-YES](#)).

III. Establish Partnerships to Strengthen and Accelerate Evidence-Building Efforts

- Establish a formal state-level **research-practice partnership**.
- **Establish partnerships with researchers** from in-state or national research universities, nonprofits, or other partners (e.g., Regional Education Labs).
- **Convene LEAs** to determine statewide priorities, jointly determine research questions, and identify common metrics.
- Seek out **philanthropic partnerships** locally and nationally to support statewide evaluation efforts.
- **Take advantage of existing partnerships to build internal capacity** to engage in evidence-building efforts.
- **Apply for federal funding** to engage in research.

APPENDIX B

Recommended Resources

1. [Addressing the Challenges of Building and Maintaining Effective Research Partnerships](#) by Education Northwest: This report presents lessons learned from Education Northwest's research partnerships.
2. [Advancing School Improvement in SEAs through Research Practice Partnerships](#) by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO): This report details the value of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) for state education agencies in building state capacity and highlights RPPs in Tennessee and Oregon.
3. [Assessing Research-Practice Partnerships: Five Dimensions of Effectiveness](#) by the William T. Grant Foundation: This report presents a unified framework for assessing RPPs, including goals and indicators of effectiveness, based on lessons learned from members of existing partnerships.
4. [Better Evidence, Better Choices, Better Schools](#) by the Center for American Progress and Knowledge Alliance: This report outlines how state leaders can take an evidence-based approach to school improvement, including by promoting continuous improvement and collective learning.
5. [Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking](#) by the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center at Edvance Research: This report offers guidance to state education agencies for improving their capacity to generate, evaluate, and use evidence to influence spending, policy, and program decisions.
6. [Creating Research-Practice Partnerships in Education](#) by William Penuel (University of Colorado Boulder) and Daniel Gallagher (Seattle Public Schools): This book provides a guide for educators and researchers seeking to work together to address problems of practice.
7. ["Difficult Conversations: Learning from Tennessee's Turnaround Efforts"](#) by Nate Schwartz (Chief Research and Strategy Officer for the Tennessee Department of Education) for Education Week: This article presents lessons learned from Tennessee's experience with school turnaround, including their experiences with independent research studies and research-practice partnerships.
8. [ESSA and Evidence: Why it Matters](#) by Chiefs for Change: This policy brief provides an overview of ESSA's evidence provisions as well as detailed recommendations for state chiefs to promote the use of evidence-based decision making.
9. [Establishing and Sustaining Networked Improvement Communities: Lessons from Michigan and Minnesota](#) by the American Institutes for Research: This report provides lessons learned from Michigan and Minnesota's experiences with forming and sustaining effective networked improvement communities to inform state and district leaders.
10. [Evidence-Based Improvement: A Guide for States to Strengthen Their Frameworks and Supports Aligned to the Evidence Requirements for ESSA](#) by WestEd: This guide provides tools to help SEAs and LEAs implement evidence-based improvement strategies through a continuous improvement process.
11. [Evidence-Based Practice and School Improvement: Key Considerations](#) by CCSSO: This memorandum outlines considerations for SEAs providing technical assistance to districts on evidence-based interventions, as well as how SEAs can promote evaluation efforts.
12. [Evidence in Action](#) blog series by America Forward: This comprehensive set of blog posts covers a number of topics related to successfully building and using evidence both within and outside of the education system, including posts on ["Climbing the Ladder of Evidence to Create Results for All Students"](#) and ["Using Evidence as a Tool, Not an Axe - Creating a Culture for Learning from Evidence."](#)
13. [How Research-Practice Partnerships Can Support ESSA Implementation for Educational Improvement and Equity](#) from the Research + Practice Collaboratory: This guide for school districts, state education leaders, and researchers details how RPPs can support ESSA implementation in the areas of capacity building for educators, school improvement, school quality and success indicators, supporting English learners, and rural education.
14. [Maximize Your Program's External Evaluation](#) by Education Northwest: This report presents advice for those wishing to pursue an external program evaluation.
15. [Measures of Last Resort](#) by the Center on Reinventing Public Education: This publication analyzes the state role in school and district turnaround and provides the "key ingredients" for an effective turnaround strategy, including encouraging states to build an evidence base for school improvement.
16. [Microsite on Research-Practice Partnerships](#) by the William T. Grant Foundation: This website provides a number of resources for leading a successful research-practice partnership.
17. [National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships \(NNERPP\)](#): NNERPP provides a network of support for RPPs, including a set of resources on the topic.

18. [Non-Regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments](#) by the U.S. Department of Education: This guidance document offers strategies for evidence-based decision making and includes information on the 4th tier of evidence.
19. [Program Evaluation Knowledge Base](#) by the U.S. Department of Education's Central Comprehensive Center: This resource for project evaluation takes educators through the key steps of evaluation: planning, implementation, and using the results.
20. [RCT-Yes](#) by Mathematica Policy Research and the Institute of Education Sciences: This free software tool allows practitioners to easily analyze data and report results on the effectiveness of programs in their context.
21. [Research-Practice Partnerships: Building Two-Way Streets of Engagement](#) by Vivian Tseng (William T. Grant Foundation), John Easton (Spencer Foundation) and Lauren Supplee (Child Trends): This report explores how researchers and practitioners can best work together to advance outcomes for children.
22. [Resources on Networked Improvement Communities](#) by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: Carnegie has developed a number of resources on Networked Improvement Communities, including "[Getting Ideas into Action: Building Networked Improvement Communities in Education.](#)"
23. [Toolkit for Effective Data Use](#) by the Strategic Data Project at Harvard University's Center for Education Policy Research: This resource guide offers tools for effectively collecting and analyzing student data.