



**Non-Regulatory Guidance:
Using Evidence to Strengthen
Education Investments**

September 16, 2016

Purpose of the Guidance

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) has determined that this guidance is significant guidance under the Office of Management and Budget's Final Bulletin for Agency Good Guidance Practices, 72 Fed. Reg. 3432 (Jan. 25, 2007). See www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/fy2007/m07-07.pdf. Significant guidance is non-binding and does not create or impose new legal requirements.

The Department is issuing this guidance to provide State educational agencies (SEAs), local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, educators, and partner organizations with information to assist them in selecting and using "evidence-based" activities, strategies, and interventions, as defined in Title VIII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). If you are interested in commenting on this guidance, please email us your comment at OESEGuidanceDocument@ed.gov or write to us at the following address:

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
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For further information about the Department's guidance processes, please visit www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/significant-guidance.html.

The Department does not mandate or prescribe practices, models, or other activities in this non-regulatory guidance document. This guidance contains examples of, adaptations of, and links to resources created and maintained by other public and private organizations. This information, informed by research and gathered in part from practitioners, is provided for the reader's convenience and is included here to offer examples of the many resources that educators, parents, advocates, administrators, and other concerned parties may find helpful and use at their discretion. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of links to items and examples do not reflect their importance, nor are they intended to represent or be an endorsement by the Department of any views expressed, or materials provided.

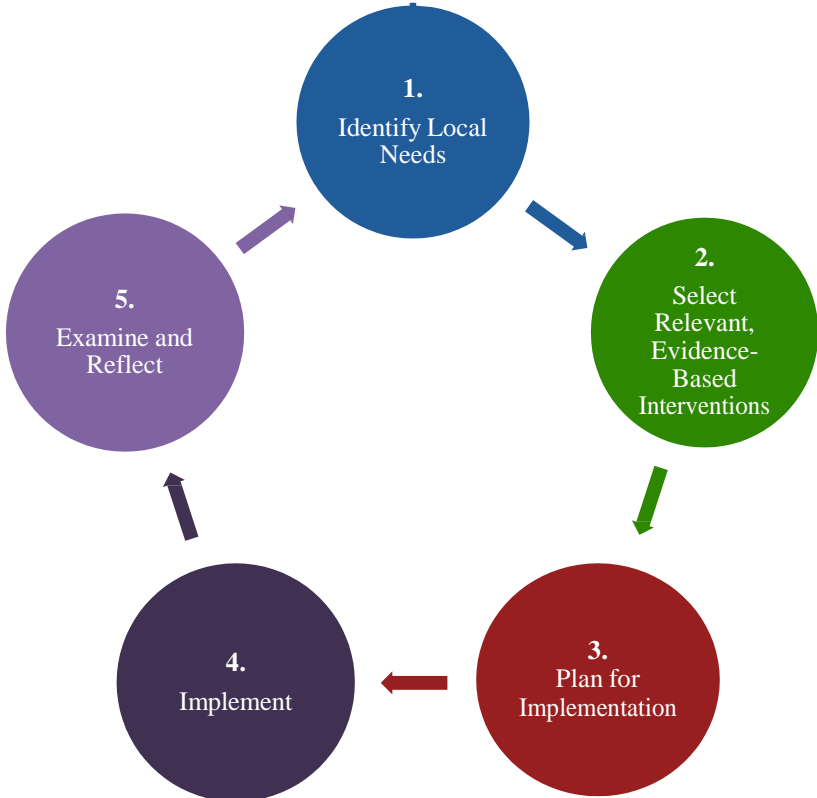
Introduction

Using, generating, and sharing evidence about effective strategies to support students gives stakeholders an important tool to accelerate student learning. ESEA¹ emphasizes the use of evidence-based activities, strategies, and interventions (collectively referred to as "interventions"). This guidance is designed to help SEAs, LEAs, schools, educators, partner organizations and other stakeholders successfully choose and implement interventions that improve outcomes for students. Part I of this guidance reviews steps for effective decision-making and Part II of this guidance recommends considerations, resources, and criteria for identifying "evidence-based" interventions based on each of ESSA's four evidence levels in Section 8101(21)(A) of the ESEA.

¹ Throughout this document, unless otherwise indicated, citations to the ESEA refer to the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA.

Part I: Strengthening the Effectiveness of ESEA Investments

Ways to strengthen the effectiveness of ESEA investments include identifying local needs, selecting evidence-based interventions that SEAs, LEAs, and schools have the capacity to implement, planning for and then supporting the intervention, and examining and reflecting upon how the intervention is working. These steps,ⁱ when taken together, promote continuous improvement and can support better outcomes for students. Links to resources, definitions for *italicized words*, and other relevant information are included in endnotes.



Step 1. IDENTIFY LOCAL NEEDS

SEAs and LEAs should engage in timely and meaningful consultation with a broad range of stakeholders (e.g., families, students, educators, community partners) and examine relevant data to understand the most pressing needs of students, schools, and/or educators and the potential root causes of those needs. Interviews, focus groups, and surveys as well as additional information on students (e.g., assessment results, graduation rates), schools (e.g., resources, climate) and educators (e.g., effectiveness, retention rates) provide insights into local needs.

Some questions to consider:

- Which stakeholders can help identify local needs and/or root causes?ⁱⁱ
- What data are needed to best understand local needs and/or root causes?
- How do student outcomes compare to identified performance goals? Are there inequities in student resources or outcomes within the State or district?

- What are the potential root causes of gaps with performance goals or inequities?
- How should needs be prioritized when several are identified?



Step 2. SELECT RELEVANT, EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Once needs have been identified, SEAs, LEAs, schools, and other stakeholders will determine the interventions that will best serve their needs. By using rigorous and relevant evidence and assessing the local capacity to implement the intervention (e.g., funding, staff, staff skills, stakeholder support), SEAs and LEAs are more likely to implement interventions successfully. Those concepts are briefly discussed below (also see Part II of this guidance for more information on evidence-based interventions):

- While ESEA requires “at least one study” on an intervention to provide *strong evidence*, *moderate evidence*, or *promising evidence*, SEAs, LEAs, and other stakeholders should consider the entire body of relevant evidence.
- Interventions supported by higher levels of evidence, specifically *strong evidence* or *moderate evidence*, are more likely to improve student outcomes because they have been proven to be effective. When *strong evidence* or *moderate evidence* is not available, *promising evidence* may suggest that an intervention is worth exploring. Interventions with little to no evidence should at least *demonstrate a rationale* for how they will achieve their intended goals and be examined to understand how they are working.
- The relevance of the evidence – specifically the setting (e.g., elementary school) and/or population (e.g., students with disabilities, English Learners) of the evidence – may predict how well an evidence-based intervention will work in a local context (for more information, also see Part II and endnotes). SEAs and LEAs should look for interventions supported by *strong evidence* or *moderate evidence* in a similar setting and/or population to the ones being served. The [What Works Clearinghouse™ \(WWC\)](#) uses rigorous standards to review evidence of effectiveness on a wide range of interventions and also summarizes the settings and populations in the studies.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Local capacity also helps predict the success of an intervention, so the available funding, staff resources, staff skills, and support for interventions should be considered when selecting an evidence-based intervention. SEAs can work with individual and/or groups of LEAs to improve their capacity to implement evidence-based interventions.

Some questions to consider about using evidence:

- Are there any interventions supported by *strong evidence* or *moderate evidence*?
- What do the majority of studies on this intervention find? Does the intervention have positive and statistically significant effects on important student or other *relevant outcomes*, or are there null, negative, or not statistically significant findings?
- Were studies conducted in settings and with populations relevant to the local context (e.g., students with disabilities, English Learners)?
- If *strong evidence* or *moderate evidence* is not available, is there *promising evidence*?

- Does the intervention *demonstrate a rationale* that suggests it may work (e.g., it is represented in a *logic model* supported by research)?
- How can the success of the intervention be measured?

Some questions to consider about local capacity:

- What resources are required to implement this intervention?
- Will the potential impact of this intervention justify the costs, or are there more cost-effective interventions that will accomplish the same outcomes?
- What is the local capacity to implement this intervention? Are there available funds? Do staff have the needed skills? Is there buy-in for the intervention?
- How does this intervention fit into larger strategic goals and other existing efforts?
- How will this intervention be sustained over time?



Step 3. PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION

An implementation plan, developed with input from stakeholders, sets up SEAs, LEAs and schools for successful implementation. ^{iv} Implementation plans may include the following components:

- ✓ A *logic model* that is informed by research or an evaluation that suggests how the intervention is likely to improve *relevant outcomes* (also see Part II of guidance for more information on logic models);
- ✓ Well-defined, measurable goals;
- ✓ Clearly outlined roles and responsibilities for people involved, including those implementing the intervention on the ground, those with a deep understanding of the intervention, and those ultimately responsible for its success;
- ✓ Implementation timelines for successful execution;
- ✓ Resources required to support the intervention; and
- ✓ Strategies to monitor performance and ensure continuous improvement, including plans for data collection, analysis and/or an evaluation (also see Step 5 in this guidance).



Step 4. IMPLEMENT

Implementation will impact the ultimate success of an intervention, so SEAs, LEAs, and schools should have ways to collect information about how the implementation is working and make necessary changes along the way. Some questions to consider:

- What information will be collected to monitor the quality of implementation? Is additional information needed to understand how the implementation is working?
- Is the implementation plan being followed? If not, why not? Are changes needed?
- Are more resources required? Do resources need to be realigned or timelines adjusted? Are stakeholders being engaged?
- What are unforeseen barriers to successful implementation?
- How is implementation working with other existing efforts?

- What does the information being collected suggest about the success of the implementation?
- Are changes needed to improve the implementation?
- Is the intervention ready to be scaled to more students or educators?



Step 5. EXAMINE AND REFLECT

As part of implementation and decision-making, there are different ways to examine how interventions are working. Performance monitoring involves tracking data about an intervention to see how performance compares to identified targets and goals. Rigorous evaluations measure the *effectiveness of an intervention*, answering questions about the impact of a specific intervention on *relevant outcomes*. These types of information are most valuable when shared with key stakeholders for decision-making. Both concepts are briefly described below (also see Part II of this guidance for information on the different levels of evidence):

- Performance monitoring involves regularly collecting and analyzing data in order to track progress against targets and goals. Performance monitoring can help identify whether key elements of a *logic model* are being implemented as planned and whether the intervention is meeting interim goals and milestones, and suggest ways the intervention could be changed for continuous improvement. Performance information can also provide insight into whether the expected outcomes are being achieved. This constitutes examining the effects of an intervention, as mentioned in evidence that *demonstrates a rationale*.
- Evaluations of effectiveness may be appropriate when SEAs and/or LEAs want to know if an intervention affected the intended student or educator outcomes. These types of evaluations may meet *strong evidence* or *moderate evidence* levels, as defined in ESEA section 8101(21) and clarified in Part II of this guidance.^v

Some questions to consider:

- What are reasonable expectations of success and how can success be measured?
- What are interim progress and performance milestones that can be tracked?
- What have participants (i.e., students and educators) in the intervention shared about their experience and how the intervention was implemented?
- Is there the need and capacity to evaluate the *effectiveness of an intervention* through a study that could produce *strong evidence* or *moderate evidence*, or would *promising evidence* from a correlational study or performance data that *demonstrates a rationale* suffice?
- How could knowledge about this intervention be shared with others and incorporated into decision-making going forward?
- Based on information, should this intervention continue as is, be modified, or be discontinued?