Use of Research Evidence Under ESSA: Implications for States

AYPF Discussion Group Summary
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Washington, DC

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents states with unprecedented flexibility over, and responsibility for, the use of evidence-based strategies to improve educational outcomes. ESSA places a heightened importance on the use of research evidence as a critical tool for planning, collaborating, decision making, and continuous improvement. As state education agencies (SEAs) begin to think about the implications of this new law, it is imperative that all parties fully understand the evidence-related requirements and opportunities under ESSA, as well as the barriers and challenges that may be encountered in carrying out these new requirements. Additionally, various other stakeholders can help ensure that states are well-equipped and supported to take full advantage of this opportunity. Ultimately, ESSA presents an opportunity to better integrate research evidence at the system level in order to improve outcomes for youth.

This discussion group, made possible with support from the William T. Grant Foundation, convened representatives of SEAs, national organizations, research institutions, assistance providers, and funders to converse, build relationships, and identify concrete, actionable steps moving forward under ESSA. More specifically, meeting participants:

- Assessed the requirements and opportunities to incorporate research evidence into policy and practice under ESSA;
- Discussed the challenges and limitations states may face in conducting, acquiring, or using research evidence under ESSA;
- Examined the relationships or potential relationships both within and between departments in SEAs that may affect the implementation of these requirements;
- Explored the role that research-practice partnerships can play in meeting states' research needs;
- Collectively generated strategies to develop comprehensive and collaborative state research plans to incorporate evidence; and
- Identified remaining questions and considerations for the future.

Below are key themes that emerged from the discussion.

Improving the lives of youth as the ultimate goal
Dr. Vivian Tseng, Vice President, Programs at the William T. Grant Foundation, opened the meeting by reminding participants that using research evidence to inform policy and practice is not a priority for its own sake, but rather to "improve the lives of youth." This point was echoed by Emily Anthony, Senior Policy Advisor at the U.S. Department of Education who gave an overview of the evidenced-based provisions under ESSA and framed its significance as an opportunity to learn what is effective in order to improve outcomes for students. One participant commented, "it's our responsibility to do right by kids," even if change comes with some resistance.

Using research for continuous improvement

Part of using research evidence to improve student outcomes means emphasizing continuous improvement. Dr. Marty West, Associate Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, made the case for conducting ongoing evaluations for the purposes of continuous learning and growth. This means going beyond compliance with what is federally mandated and making research evidence an integral part of the decision-making process. Steve Fleischman, Chief Executive Officer at Education Northwest reiterated this point by saying one of the big opportunities under ESSA is the shift in focus from "prove to improve," meaning that ESSA prioritizes improvement rather than just the demonstration of effective results, as compared to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Participants agreed that a focus on continual learning from all types of evaluation results – not just the positive ones – can enable SEAs to broaden their bodies of knowledge to improve the lives of youth at scale.

Building culture and capacity

Encouraging this shift to an evidenced-based system requires building both the organizational culture and capacity at all levels, but as Dr. West noted, it is not clear if one must come first to enable the other. Dr. Tom Brock, Commissioner of the National Center for Education Research, posed the question, "What do states need to develop capacity, especially with limited resources?" He suggested building in long-term, multi-year support through government programs and foundations, developing repositories and databases for sharing information, and creating common measures and tools for universal knowledge and comparability across fields. Participants also questioned how much the lack of capacity is actual versus perceived. As one participant pointed out, all states have longitudinal data systems from the era of NCLB, meaning states may have a more robust internal research capacity than they think and instead may need to shift priorities to human capital or other capacity needs. Although there is no truism for which must come first in every situation, participants agreed that the culture and capacity for using research evidence must be present in order for states to most effectively serve young people.

Breaking down silos both across and within states

States are at very different stages of building integrated, evidenced-based systems, and working together and learning from each other is a large part of what makes that possible. A participant from one state shared: "For 15 years it was just me, but we now have a staff of three in a formal research office." Other states still lack a center or a formal office dedicated to research. In addition to vast differences across states, participants expressed a great deal of disconnect within state agencies. One participant shared that funding timelines are not aligned at the state, district, and local levels, and that sometimes funding does not get spent because of misaligned deadlines. Other states have a hard time breaking down the walls of the silos within their agencies, as priorities of an office in charge of implementation may not be the same, or well-communicated with, an office in charge of research. Ultimately states can do a better job of ensuring continual streams of communication within and across agencies. In an evidence-based system, interaction between the program and research offices (and staff) are crucial.

Finding the right balance in supporting districts
Many states wondered about the right balance of power and support between states and districts. One state-level participant candidly shared: "We hear 'we already know what we're doing and it's working' or 'tell us what to do and we'll do it.' How do we support, not dictate? How do we make conversations and engagement more robust?" States expressed concern about how to inform and yet engage with districts and schools in ways that give them choice in the decision-making process. Another participant asked, "Has there been a feedback loop back to schools and districts about what has been successful and what has been learned? How can we have conversations that are meaningful about what using evidence means and how it is making a difference?"

Balancing adaptation with fidelity in implementing evidence-based interventions
A number of participants raised questions regarding the leeway states have to adapt evidence-based programs to fit the contexts they are serving. Fidelity to the program model is important, but districts and schools want to ensure that interventions fit with the local context. Once a strategy is selected, states and districts must be able to adapt the program to local conditions without compromising the integrity of the intervention. Several tools, including non-regulatory guidance from the U.S. Department of Education, an Implementation Guide from the Florida Center for Reading Research, and a forthcoming ESSA Navigator site from Education Northwest can be helpful resources for states as they navigate between adaptability and fidelity in their implementation of evidence-based strategies.

The current focus on using evidence-based strategies is generating a great deal of discussion and thought, as indicated by the kinds of questions raised by participants in this discussion group. This is an exciting time to be contemplating how best to use this opportunity to expand the use of evidence-based strategies to improve educational outcomes for youth.

For a copy of the agenda, presentation slides, and other resources, please visit the event resource page.