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Districts Sharpen Focus on Evidence in Choosing School Improvement Strategies But Want Research That Is More Relevant and Accessible

*Actions by policymakers, researchers, vendors and others could help educators
implement federal “evidence-based” requirements*

WASHINGTON, D.C.— School districts are paying more attention to evidence of effectiveness when deciding on strategies to improve low-performing schools, as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). But several districts also report difficulties in accessing and understanding academic research or finding evidence-based strategies suited to their unique needs, according to a new report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at The George Washington University.

“State and district leaders are starting to understand the many factors that impact evidence-based school improvement,” said Maria Ferguson, CEP’s executive director. “Evidence alone is not enough. Context matters, so school improvement strategies need to be appropriately aligned to local needs and goals.”

The CEP report, [*A Stronger Future for Evidence-Based School Improvement in ESSA*](#), summarizes findings about implementation of ESSA’s requirement that school improvement strategies be backed up by evidence, and provides recommendations for actions by key stakeholders. These findings and recommendations are drawn from CEP’s convening of a diverse group of educators, researchers and other experts and on earlier interviews with leaders in seven states and five school districts.

The report finds that both for-profit and nonprofit vendors play a major role in districts’ selection and implementation of school improvement strategies. While this is not a new trend, some states and districts are either limiting or strongly encouraging school leaders to select interventions from approved vendor lists. Larger vendors of packaged programs often predominate these lists because they are better able to provide the research required to meet ESSA’s evidence requirements.

The report also highlights importance of context in selecting, implementing and monitoring evidence-based school improvement strategies. “What works in one district or school may not work in another—contextual factors affect both implementation and results,” said Ferguson.

Experts participating in CEP’s research suggested that districts and schools monitor the implementation of school improvement strategies and be given the flexibility to adapt to fit the needs of their students. As part of this process, educators need research that focuses not only on the results of a school improvement strategy, but also studies implementation as it unfolds.

“This kind of research can help districts understand how teachers and principals are interpreting the research, what they need to make a strategy work, and which factors or policies impede or support implementation,” said Diane Stark Rentner, CEP’s deputy director.

The report makes several recommendations to build on the positive aspects of ESSA implementation and ensure that high-quality research evidence is accessible and useful to education leaders. Among them are the following:

- Encourage researchers to develop short, publicly accessible summaries of research that are written in a format suited to practitioners.
- Align the U.S. Department of Education’s research repositories and other public repositories so they are sortable by the ESSA evidence tiers and by specific student groups, topics, settings, and intended outcome.
- Establish incentives for university-based researchers to support schools and districts in using research to support school improvement.
- Encourage all public and private funders of research to provide open access to their research.
- Encourage nonprofit and for-profit vendors to work with researchers to study the impact and validity of their products and services in a variety of settings.

“Early state and local efforts to implement the ESSA evidence requirements uncovered some challenges related to school improvement research,” said Rentner. “If stakeholders take steps now to address these issues, educators will be better supported in their efforts to identify and implement evidence-based approaches in struggling schools.”

The new CEP report is the third in a series. Two earlier reports described findings from CEP’s state and local interviews: [State Leader Interviews: How States Are Responding to ESSA’s Evidence Requirements for School Improvement](#) and [District Leader Interviews: How School Districts Are Responding to ESSA’s Evidence Requirements for School Improvement](#).

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, the Center on Education Policy at The George Washington University is a national advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.