Evidence-Based Intervention

The Every School Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) mandates that evaluations of school activities, strategies or interventions be based on evidence, laying out a broad hierarchy ranging from “strong evidence” that the intervention improves student outcomes, to “moderate evidence,” and finally “promising evidence.” For some programs, it is enough that interventions “demonstrate a rationale” based on high-quality research and that they include ongoing efforts to examine the effects of that proposed interventions [Sec. 8101(21)(A) of ESEA]. Notably, interventions covered by the set-aside for low-performing schools in Title I must meet one of the first three levels of evidence: strong, moderate, or promising. Interventions funded by the American Rescue Plan and addressing learning gaps due to lost learning opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic must also be evidence-based.

The strength of the evidence for improving student outcomes is related to the results of experimental studies. For evidence to be considered “strong,” it must have been borne out in at least one well-designed and well-implemented study involving large multi-site samples of overlapping populations. In other words, the study must have examined both rural and urban populations, students of different ethnic identities and differing levels of economic well-being. The results of the study must not be contradicted by the results of similarly well-designed studies. “Moderate” evidence is judged according to the same criteria, although supporting evidence comes from a “quasi-experimental” study.
“Promising evidence,” then, results from a correlational study, but not necessarily of the scale needed for “strong evidence.”

In practical terms, most LEAs often do not have the time or resources to experiment and evaluate potential interventions themselves. For this reason the U.S. Department of Education has created the What Works Clearinghouse (https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/). Similar resources are coming online from a number of private entities as well, such as Evidence for ESSA (https://www.evidenceforessa.org) created by the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University. These websites present data on the outcomes obtained through various popular programs, broken down by subject area and school type (elementary, middle, high school, etc.)

In an effort to help LEAs find and identify programs that fit local needs, the Office of Federal Programs has created a series of tables describing interventions that have been tested and ranked, along with the ranking assigned (Tier 1, Tier 2, etc.) and links to the literature behind the interventions and the studies evaluating them. There are tables currently available for the areas of Math, Reading, English Language Proficiency, Parent/Family Engagement, and Safe and Healthy Schools. These tables can be found under the “Evidence-Based” tab of the Office of Federal Programs’ website (Evidence-Based Interventions | Oklahoma State Department of Education).

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