

Levels of Evidence and Research-Based Practices

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance document is to support teams in considering the strength of evidence for particular practices being used in instruction and intervention, and to clarify the expectations related to research-based practices and special education eligibility, as described in Vermont [Rules 2362](#) and [2362.2.5](#).

Background

In December of 2015, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law and the reauthorized legislation, which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), is the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA). One of the requirements under ESSA is that districts and schools use evidence-based practices, which refers to practices, programs, strategies, activities, and/or interventions that are grounded in research and have evidence to show that they are effective at producing results and improving outcomes when implemented.

Instructional practices are always expected to be grounded in research and [Section 8101\(21\)\(A\)](#) of the ESSA identifies an evidence-based practice as being supported by four possible levels of evidence: level one is strong evidence, level two is moderate evidence, level three is promising evidence or evidence that demonstrates a rationale, and level four is under evaluation.

Evidence ratings are fluid and as practices are researched, ratings can change. Evidence is leveled based on how a practice is studied, which must occur in a systematic way with a suitable sample size to align with levels one through three. The levels of evidence rely on variables under ESSA and for a state, district, or school to consider an intervention as a level one evidence-based practice, the setting and samples from the studies used to determine the evidence level must overlap with the population and setting of the state, district, or school interested in implementing the intervention. The first three levels all require statistically significant positive effects on student outcomes based on the available research. That requirement is not applicable to level four.

The four levels were reviewed in Vermont's memo from 2018, [Use of Levels of Evidence to Support Grant Funded Work in Schools](#). For more information on the process of determining levels of evidence, please visit [The Evidence Provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act](#), which offers definitions of evidence-based interventions per the ESSA guidelines.

Evidence requirements under ESSA are intended to improve student outcomes and to ensure that programs, products, practices, and policies are employed that work across populations. In addition, the implementation of evidence-based practices is mandated for federal and state-

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funded grants. The bulk of federal education (such as Consolidated Federal Programs) and state-funded grants (such as BEST, Act 230, Flexible Pathways) administered by the Agency of Education (AOE) are linked to the four levels of evidence and the use of federal funds applied to educational activities, strategies, and interventions. All schools are required to use evidence-based practices and all instruction, curriculum, and intervention must align with one of the four levels of evidence. This alignment also meets the criteria for evidence requirements under IDEA.

Evidence-Based Practices and Special Education Eligibility

Eligibility for special education is presumptive on the fact that a student has had full access to the LEA's educational system. That includes first instruction and interventions that are grounded in evidence-based practices, a mandated component of ESSA. Special education eligibility determinations under The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and state special education rules require that teams should "document evidence that scientific, research-based interventions have been implemented with fidelity," and additionally document "high-quality instruction and scientific research-based tiered interventions aligned with individual student need." Please see [Rules 2362](#) and [2362.2.5](#) and the [State of Vermont Special Education Rules](#) for the full text.

Research-based interventions are expected to be [scientifically based](#) as defined in Vermont's Special Education Rules, but fit within ESSA's established framework. Any instruction or intervention practice that has been assessed and found to meet the criteria outlined in levels one through three would by definition meet the requirements for research-based interventions as defined in Vermont's Special Education Rules. Other individualized classroom or student specific interventions may still meet the requirements if they are based on research (see sections; Considerations for Evidence Level Four, and Resources to Support Evidence-Based Practices).

Additionally, eligibility for special education will incorporate a variety of data sources and evidence-based practices are just one consideration among many in instructional decision-making. During the assessment process, teams must follow the steps necessary to gather evidence that will be used to determine special education eligibility, and includes but is not limited to, psychological, educational, social history, and medical assessments. In addition, if an Evaluation Planning Team (EPT) believes a student is potentially in need of related services, assessments are performed in those areas as well.

An EPT should also consider how it will use evidence such as grades, performance on individual and group assessments, continuous progress monitoring, attendance, observations, clinical judgment from qualified experts, and samples of student work throughout the Assessment Process. It is important to note that this is also a critical moment to get all adults on the same page about the best way to move forward to better meet the needs for a student who needs additional or different support, whether they are ultimately found eligible for Special Education.

Considerations for Evidence Level Four

Level four encompasses certain practices grounded in research and is defined as “under evaluation.” This indicates that based on existing research, the practice does not yet meet the criteria to be aligned with levels one through three, and ultimately has not yet shown statistically significant improvement. There are two criteria for this level of evidence. The first is that a compelling rationale can be provided based on high-quality research or positive evaluation that the practice is likely to improve student outcomes. The second is that there are on-going efforts to examine the effects of the practices on improving student outcomes. When considering how evidence level four relates to grant applications, please see [Level Four Additional Explanation](#) in Vermont's memo from 2018, [Use of Levels of Evidence to Support Grant Funded Work in Schools](#).

Even if an intervention does not meet the criteria expectations for levels one through three, any intervention that meets the two parameters identified above would be considered level four and applicable when discussing a student’s eligibility for specialized instruction. Teacher created curriculum and interventions that are grounded in research-based practices can often be classified as evidence level four.

Additional information about different types of studies that constitute as evidence can be found at either the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) or in Appendix G of [Vermont’s Continuous Improvement Framework](#). [Evidence for ESSA](#) is another resource designed to assist educators in determining levels of evidence.

Resources to Support Evidence-Based Practices

The resources below are intended to support schools and districts in determining and discovering practices that are research-based, as well as identifying what level of evidence a particular practice might be identified as under ESSA.

[Best Evidence Encyclopedia](#): The Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE) is a free website created by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education’s Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE). It is intended to give educators and researchers fair and useful information about the strength of the evidence supporting a variety of programs available for students in grades K-12.

[Evidence-Based Practices Module from IRIS](#): These three modules from the IRIS Center discuss the importance of identifying and selecting evidence-based practices, implementing an evidence-based practice or program with fidelity, and evaluating whether an evidence-based practice is effective for the young children or students with whom you are working.

[High Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities](#): In partnership with the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform (CEEDAR), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has developed and published a set of high-leverage practices (HLPs) for special educators and teacher candidates. More information on all the HLPs can be found on this website.

[Navigating Evidence-Based Practice Resource Websites Online Module](#): This online module, from the Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, guides viewers through several technical assistance websites that review, compile, and summarize the results of existing research on educational practices and clarifies what EBPs are, highlights what to look for when selecting EBPs, and helps guide the selection of EBPs for particular subgroups of students or local contexts.

[Non-Regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments](#): This guidance by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of State Support was designed to support Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and schools to select and implement interventions that will improve outcomes for students in accordance with ESSA.

[What Works Clearinghouse](#): The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is an investment of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) within the U.S. Department of Education that was established in 2002. The mission of the WWC is to be a central and trusted source of scientific evidence for what works in education.