How States Work with Districts to Use Evidence Under the Every Student Succeeds Act

<u>Symposium Justification</u>

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, Public Law 95, 114th Congress, 2015) much responsibility for education policy was returned to the states (Gross & Hill, 2016; Weiss & McGuinn, 2017). This is reflected throughout the law, including portions that address the requirement of "evidence-based" educational practices. ESSA does not prescribe specific evidence-based activities that must be adopted by states, districts, or schools to improve student performance (Lam et al., 2016). Rather, the law specifies different thresholds of evidence that states and districts must meet in order to use certain formula funds or receive discretionary grants. Non-regulatory guidance, now reflected in proposed EDGAR provisions, encourages a continuous improvement approach, so that better evidence is built over time (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Federal Register, 2017).

ESSA provides state education agencies (SEAs) with new opportunities to establish formal policies supporting the wider adoption of evidence-based programs among local education agencies (LEAs) in their states (Results for America, CCSSO, 2017). However, states face challenges with the new expectation that they identify, or help LEAs identify, effective interventions (Kane, 2017). Simply put, many states currently do not have the capacity to help select and support local evidence-based approaches (Joachim, 2016). An additional challenge for SEAs is that improving education outcomes is not as simple as identifying effective interventions and implementing them with fidelity because local context influences implementation and the extent to which an intervention impacts outcomes (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; McLaughlin, 2006; Honig, 2006).

Given the challenges states face in these new responsibilities, they are seeking assistance from intermediary organizations to help them: determine how evidence on different interventions aligns with the ESSA standards, translate this evidence into local contexts, and formulate a plan for how their agencies will work with LEAs to select, implement, and evaluate these activities (McLaughlin, 2016; West, 2016). One set of intermediary organizations is the Regional Education Laboratory (REL) network, funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) with the primary mission of helping to build the capacities of states and local schools districts to collect and use data and evidence. RELs are explicitly required by ESSA to assist SEAs with carrying out the law's evidence requirements when such help is requested. Other active intermediaries include nonprofits and institutes of higher education.

States vary in how quickly, and in what ways, they are approaching ESSA planning. Some states' plans have been approved by the U.S. Department of Education and others are in the review process. Even among states with approved plans, the details on evidence use are often being worked out during implementation. The focus of the proposed symposium is on how states are approaching ESSA's evidence provisions, with the assistance of intermediary organizations, to inform LEA implementation of ESSA evidence-base provisions. ESSA is a significant opportunity for increased use of evidence in education and this symposium seeks to inform what this looks like on the ground in this early stage and identify opportunities for the research community to support implementation.

Section 1- Emerging SEA Approaches to Evidence Provisions (30 minutes)

Authors: Sara Kerr, Results for America; Lenay Dunn, REL West at WestEd

This first section will set the stage for state presentations by giving background on ESSA, the evidence provisions, and frameworks for thinking about how states can implement them. For example, Results for America has identified thirteen leverage points in consolidated state plans where SEAs can articulate how they and their LEAs will use evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement through ESSA implementation to improve student outcomes (Results for America and CCSSO, 2017). These leverage points are distributed across the plan sections on performance management, school improvement, and the sections on Title II and Title IV.

Results for America's Evidence in Education Lab team analyzed 17 ESSA consolidated state plans submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in order to examine the extent to which these states propose to use the opportunities provided by ESSA to strengthen how they use evidence, evaluation, and continuous improvement (Results for America, July 2017). In this review, they found that sixteen states included at least one promising practice for building and using evidence to improve student outcomes. But only four states emphasized the role of evidence-based approaches outside of school improvement (e.g., ESSA Title II and Title IV); only five states pledged to conduct evaluations to build the evidence base further; and only nine states highlighted the use of evidence when reviewing and approving school improvement funding applications. Many of these details may emerge as states become more specific about how they will implement their plans.

REL West, as the lead for a cross-REL working group on use of evidence in the context of ESSA, developed a typology of state approaches to guiding LEAs in the selection of evidence-based interventions. The typology has been used in a number of settings and has been well-received by states as a stimulus for discussions about their respective approaches. The typology contains four categories based on how prescriptive the SEA is with regards to the selection of activities and how much support the SEA provides during the selection process. The categories are:

- Reviewer: where an SEA reviews LEA plans and provides feedback as needed;
- Guider: where an SEA provides upfront guidance to LEAs and provides feedback as needed;
- Vetter: where an SEA guides the development of LEA plans by using a set of criteria to vet plans and then provides feedback to LEAs against those criteria
- Definer: where the SEA creates a list of approved strategies, activities, or interventions from which LEAs must choose.

Other resources are also in use, including guides that help unpack a framework for continuous improvement like the one in the nonregulatory guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These resources are intended to assist SEAs as they think about the state policy context, their internal capacity, communication and support structures already in place, and the evidence available for strategies or practices that may be included in a state's own school improvement framework.

<u>**Section 2 – Supporting Evidence Use in Arizona**</u> (20 minutes)
Author: Sean Ross, Arizona Department of Education

This section of the symposium will focus on now the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) has undertaken the process of establishing and implementing guidance for LEAs around ESSA evidence provisions and strategies to support LEAs in using these provisions to improve their strategies and supports for all students.

A key resource in Arizona has been the guide *Evidence Based Improvement: A Guide for States to Strengthen Their Frameworks and Supports Aligned to the Evidence Requirements of ESSA,* (Hale et. al., 2017), which provides tools to help states and districts select evidence-based improvement strategies. The guide recognizes school and district improvement as a continuous, systemic, and cyclical process, and emphasizes the use of evidence in decision-making throughout the continuous improvement cycle. The purpose of the guide is to build capacity of states and districts to understand the evidence-related requirements of ESSA and, consequently, select and implement evidence-based interventions with the strong potential to improve student outcomes in their context.

Staff in several departments of ADE met together for joint training based on the WestEd guide (Hale et. al., 2017). One area of particularly intense application has been K-3 reading programs; the state has "Move on When Reading" legislation requiring students to be retained at the end of third grade if they are not meeting standards, with some exceptions. Internal working groups focused on helping guide LEAs in establishing that their K-3 core reading programs meet ESSA evidence levels. ADE established guidance for LEAs on ESSA evidence levels, and also developed and disseminated a brief video that provides background on ESSA, goes into more depth on ESSA evidence levels, and provides three clear strategies for establishing that a core reading program is evidence-based. This resource has been well received by districts and ADE received feedback that it clarified expectations for LEAs. Direct support has also been provided by ADE staff to LEAs, which in Arizona include a number of charter schools or networks.

Enacting a continuous improvement process, ADE is establishing a cycle of feedback from LEAs to ensure state guidance and support meets LEA needs to navigate implementation of ESSA evidence-based provisions.

Guiding questions for this, and the other state sections, include:

- What role is the SEA playing (or planning to play) in working with LEAs to select, implement, and track progress on evidence-based activities?

- How has ESSA been a positive opportunity for you?

- What challenges have you faced? What lessons learned would you share?

- How have you benefitted from partnership with research organizations and other intermediaries?

Section 3 - Supporting Evidence Use in Mississippi (20 minutes)
Authors: Sonja Robertson, Mississippi Department of Education; Laurie Lee, REL Southeast at Florida State University

This section will describe the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and their efforts to better understand the ESSA evidence requirements and help LEAs select evidence-based programs. Their particular focus has been on training staff in districts whose schools are in need of improvement.

Florida State University developed *An LEA or School Guide for Identifying Evidence-Based Interventions for School Improvement* (Lee, Hughes, Smith, & Foorman, 2016) to help LEAs or schools: evaluate the evidence base for interventions as they identify those to be included in the school improvement plans; determine the interventions that have strong evidence and are relevant and appropriate to meeting the needs of the school; and plan to provide resources and support for schools that will be needed for successful implementation. The guide takes users through a self-study process that facilitates investigation and discussion of an issue or topic so that decisions can be made through the collaboration of a variety of local stakeholders. The goal of the process is to select candidate interventions for schools needing improvement based on the strongest evidence available.

Direct training using this guide was conducted at MDE so that staff across program offices that support schools in need of improvement could help LEAs with the self-study process. In addition, at MDE's request, workshops were provided in three regions of Mississippi to familiarize participants with the guide and the self-study process. These participants included staff from LEAs, representatives from schools in need of improvement, and federal program officers.

This initial training was scheduled in advance of schools and districts needing to review evidence and make decisions, and it was well-received. But LEAs reported that they were going to need additional support as they engaged in the review and planning process. Follow up support is being provided at all levels, as implementation unfolds.

Section 4 – Supporting Evidence Use in Vermont (20 minutes)
Author: Lori Dolezal, Vermont Agency of Education

The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) has developed a Continuous Improvement Framework and established a Networked Improvement Community on Evidence Based Practices to support LEAs in selecting and implementing evidence-based practices. AOE is providing LEAs with guidance and support to encourage the selection, development, and collection of evidence based on the state's Education Quality Standards and ESSA evidence provisions. The AOE does this using a Continuous Improvement Framework founded on improvement science principles (Cohen-Vogel, Wagner, Allen, Harrison, Kainz, Socol, & Wang, 2015), which allows schools to use evidence-based practices, as well as practice-based evidence, to improve teaching and learning. Through iterative, plan-do-study-act cycles school systems can collectively learn quickly and build confidence in the efficacy of change ideas. In effect, they can use practice-based evidence to document what works, for whom, in which set of conditions (Bryk, 2015).

AOE's Continuous Improvement Framework offers support for the local selection of evidence-based practices by providing a wide selection of sources from which educators can choose evidence-based practices. These practices are categorized under the five broad domains of Vermont's Education Quality Standards: Academic Proficiency; Personalized Learning; High-Quality Staffing; Safe and Healthy Schools; and Investment Priorities. Additionally, in the framework, AOE provides guidelines and tools, including the WestEd guide (Hale et. al., 2017), to assist schools during the decision-making process. The inclusion of "demonstrates a rationale" under the ESSA evidence standards offers schools the flexibility to innovate and collect evidence on specific practices, and then scale-up practices with a subsequent evidence base. AOE offers written guidelines and coaching support to help schools document their change ideas and supporting evidence prior to completing their applications for federal funding.

Section 5 – Audience Participation, and Q&A (30 minutes)

During this section, the moderator will facilitate a dialogue between authors and the audience. Prompts to facilitate discussion include:

- If you are working with an SEA as a researcher or TA provider, what role is the SEA playing (or planning to play) in working with LEAs to select, implement, and track progress on evidence-based activities? What are other states doing to help their LEAs navigate ESSA evidence levels, and how can states evaluate their own resources to ensure that they are accomplishing their intended goals?

- If you are a researcher or technical assistance provider, what suggestions do you have for practitioners at the state and local levels, with regards to implementing the ESSA evidence provisions?

- If you are a practitioner, how can the research community help you in your role selecting and implementing evidence-based programs? What are your needs?

- If you are a researcher or technical assistance provider, what suggestions do you have for types of research design processes—and practical measures—for LEAs and schools to strengthen the evidence base for activities implemented under the "Demonstrates a Rationale" level in the ESSA guidelines?

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