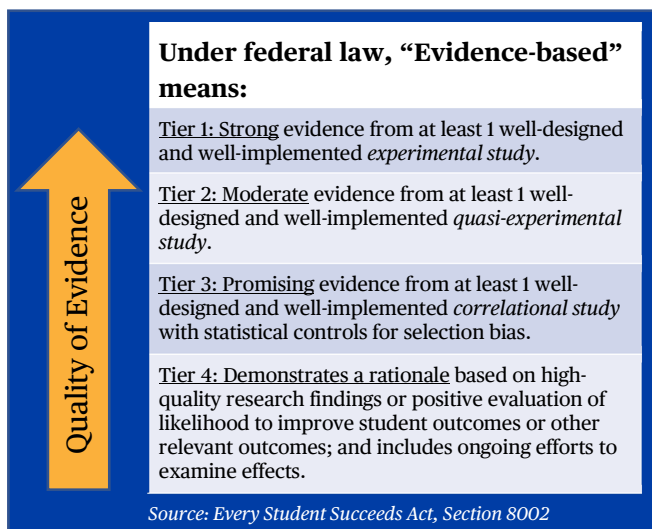


How States and Districts Support Evidence Use in School Improvement

National Center for Education Evaluation



Under federal law, “Evidence-based” means:

- Tier 1: Strong** evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented *experimental study*.
- Tier 2: Moderate** evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented *quasi-experimental study*.
- Tier 3: Promising** evidence from at least 1 well-designed and well-implemented *correlational study* with statistical controls for selection bias.
- Tier 4: Demonstrates a rationale** based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation of likelihood to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes; and includes ongoing efforts to examine effects.

Source: *Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 8002*

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* encourages educators to use school improvement strategies backed by rigorous research. Recent national surveys suggest that states and districts share that goal but may often be relying on research at lower evidence tiers.

Why this Topic

Encouraging schools to use strategies backed by research is a key driver of improvement. This notion has been embedded in federal education law since 2002, but most clearly in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). Passed in 2015, ESSA requires each state’s lowest-performing schools to implement “evidence-based” improvement strategies, but gives states and districts flexibility in how the rule is applied.ⁱ According to ESSA, “evidence” can be as stringent as multiple scientifically rigorous studies showing that the strategy is effective, or as simple as a research-based rationale for why the strategy will *likely* improve student outcomes.

Given this flexibility, it is important to understand how states and districts are actually supporting schools’ use of evidence. It may signal the extent of likely improvement in the future and help education

officials learn from each other’s approaches. Information on evidence use comes from a recent study of ESSA implementation, completed in 2018. This was a particularly important year because even though ESSA was passed in 2015, not all states received approval from the U.S. Department of Education to implement their plans until 2018. Therefore, the supports described in this snapshot mostly indicate where evidence use under ESSA is starting from.ⁱⁱ A later survey and report will examine how support for evidence use has changed.

Data and Analysis

The data come from two surveys administered in 2018, each containing a few questions on evidence use in school improvement.ⁱⁱⁱ The first survey was sent to 50 states and the District of Columbia, all of whom responded.^{iv} The second survey was sent to a nationally representative set of 713 school districts, of

which 96 percent responded. Only districts with at least one lowest-performing Title I school received the evidence-use questions.^v Responses to survey

questions were tallied across all responding states and districts to provide a national picture.

Key Findings

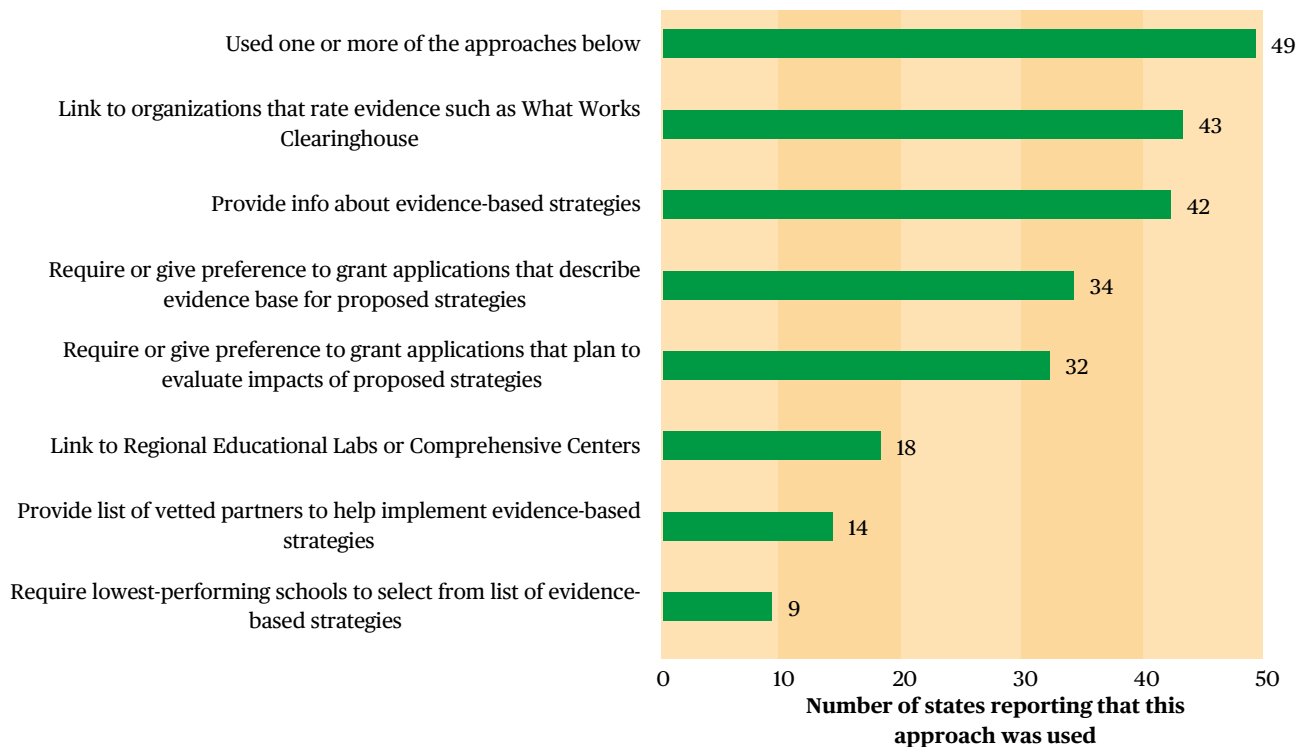
Most states pointed districts and schools to evidence on improvement strategies but few required schools to choose based on it.

- **Almost all states reported promoting the use of evidence-based strategies in their lowest-performing schools.** Overall in 2018, 49 states reported using at least one of a number of approaches to promote the use of evidence-based improvement strategies (Figure 1).
- **The most popular approach was to provide information on evidence-based strategies.** States gave this information either directly to districts and schools (42 states) or indirectly, by referring them

to the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse, Evidence for ESSA, and other organizations that rate the evidence behind different educational programs, practices, or approaches (43 states).

- **Most states also promoted the use of evidence through grant funding criteria.** For example, districts applying to their state for school improvement funds were required to provide (or received bonus points for providing) research evidence to support their proposed strategies (34 states), or a plan to evaluate the strategies as they carried them out (32 states).

Figure 1. State approaches to promote the use of evidence-based strategies in lowest-performing schools



Notes: 2017-18 survey of 48 states and the District of Columbia. The lowest-performing schools in 2017-18 include all such Title I schools, whether they were identified under the state’s own accountability system, ESSA’s new comprehensive support and improvement system, or previously identified under an older federal accountability system (NCLB’s restructuring or corrective action schools, ESEA Flex’s priority schools, 1003(g) School Improvement Grants). Oregon and Wyoming were not asked to provide this information because they had not yet identified lowest-performing schools under ESSA when the survey was administered, and did not require previously-identified lowest-performing schools to implement improvement strategies in 2017-18.

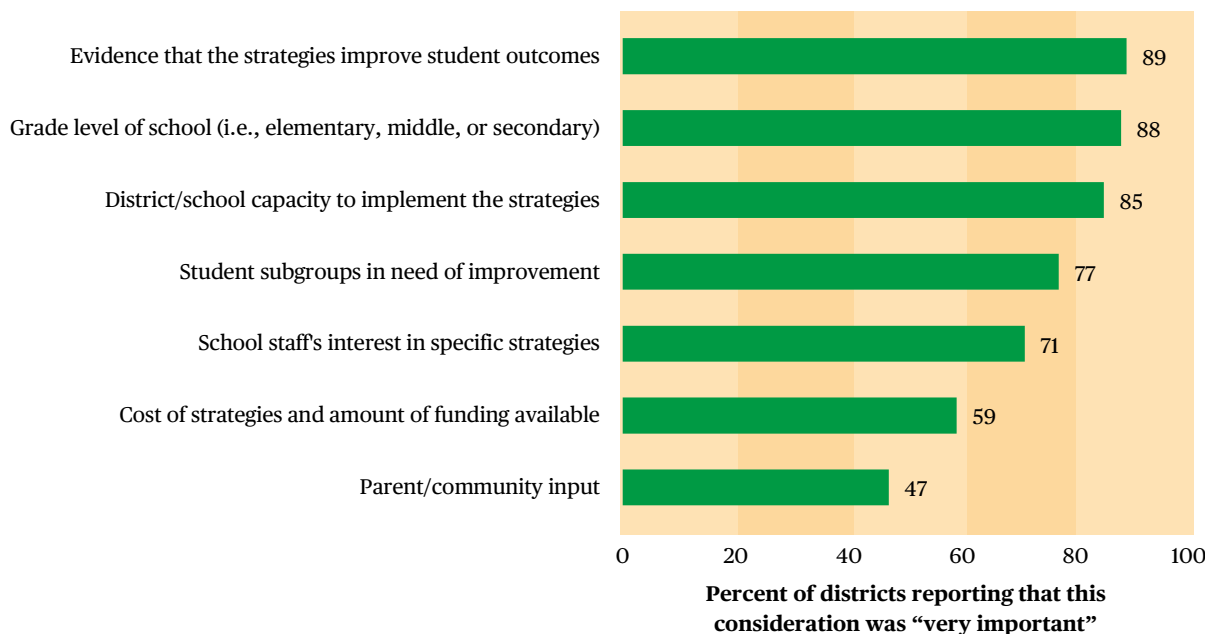
- **Just over a third of states connected districts and schools to federal technical assistance (TA) providers.** Eighteen states reported making referrals to the U.S. Department of Education’s Regional Educational Labs and Comprehensive Centers, which provide services at the state and local levels to increase research and evidence use, and to build capacity to improve educational outcomes for students. Fourteen states also reported sharing information on other technical assistance providers who could help with implementing improvement strategies.
- **Few states required schools to select strategies from a list backed by research, but the vast majority of districts reported that their schools did so anyway.** Just nine states took the potentially more stringent approach of requiring their lowest-performing schools to select from a list of evidence-based improvement strategies identified by the state (Figure 1). Still, 90 percent of districts reported

that all of their lowest-performing schools were implementing strategies selected from such a state list (Appendix Figure 1).

Most districts reported that evidence of effectiveness was “very important” when choosing improvement strategies.

In 2018, 89 percent of districts felt that evidence of a strategy’s effectiveness at improving student outcomes was a “very important” consideration when selecting strategies for their lowest-performing schools (Figure 2).^{vi} By comparison, six other common factors, including a school’s grade level, district/school capacity, high-priority student subgroups, school staff’s interest, cost, and parent/community input were rated “very important” by 88 percent, 85 percent, 77 percent, 71 percent, 59 percent, and 47 percent of districts, respectively.

Figure 2. Factors districts consider to be “very important” when selecting strategies in lowest-performing schools



Notes: 2017-18 survey of 184 (unweighted) or 3,261 (weighted) districts with lowest-performing schools, which include all such Title I schools, whether they were identified under the state’s own accountability system, ESSA’s new comprehensive support and improvement system, or previously identified under an older federal accountability system (NCLB’s restructuring or corrective action schools, ESEA Flex’s priority schools, 1003(g) School Improvement Grants).

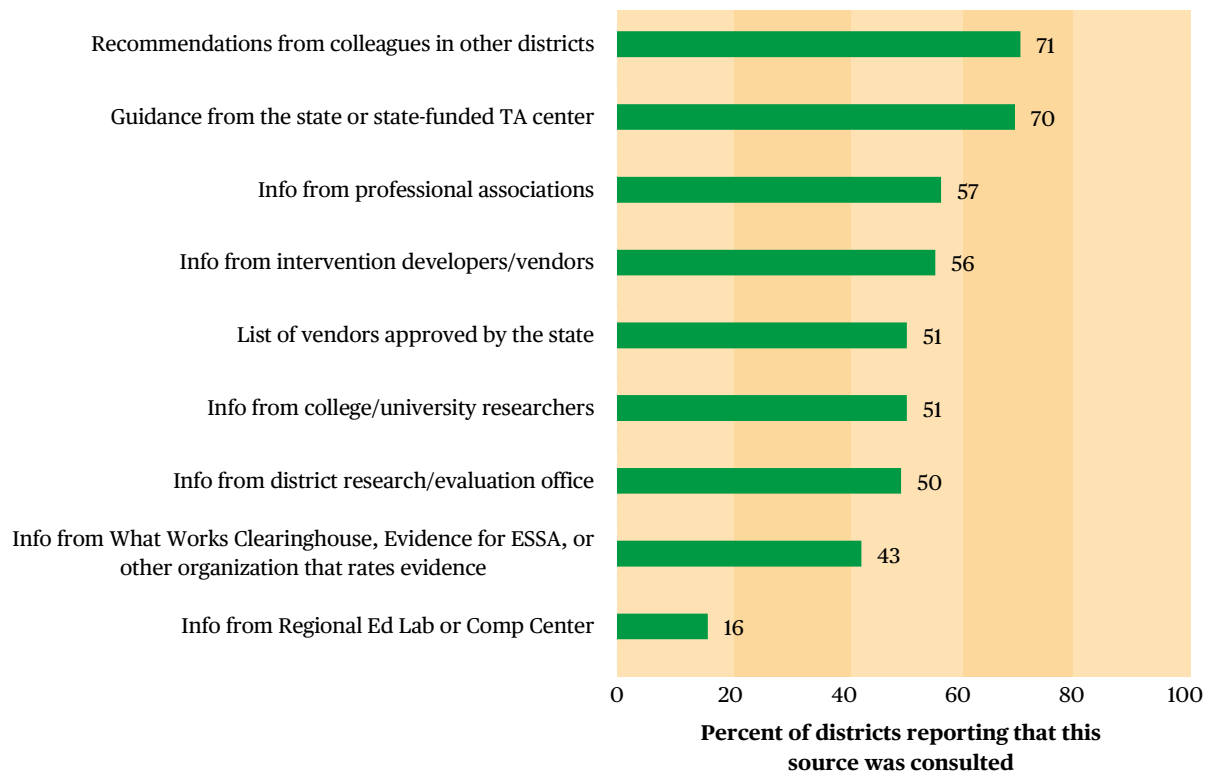
But the evidence districts relied on probably varies in quality.

- **State guidance was one of the most frequent sources of improvement strategies.** In 2018, 70 percent of districts reported receiving guidance from their state or state-funded TA centers. More than half of districts reported consulting state-approved lists of vendors, who provide materials, conduct trainings, or otherwise support implementation of a strategy (Figure 3).^{vii} The extent to which the vendors were backed by research that could meet ESSA’s evidence thresholds is unknown.^{viii}
- **Other common information sources reported by a majority of districts include colleagues and vendors.** In 2018, districts reported getting information from colleagues in other districts (71 percent), professional associations (57 percent),

and developers/vendors (56 percent). While districts likely consulted these sources for a variety of purposes, some sources—such as recommendations from colleagues, developers, and vendors—are unlikely to be sources for strong evidence on improvement strategies.^{ix} About half of the districts also reported consulting with universities (51 percent) and district research offices (50 percent).

- **Fewer districts reported getting information from sources designed to rate and share evidence, such as the What Works Clearinghouse and Regional Educational Labs.** When gathering information to select improvement strategies in 2018, 43 percent of districts reported consulting the What Works Clearinghouse, Evidence for ESSA, or other organizations that rate evidence, while just 16 percent consulted the Regional Educational Labs or Comprehensive Centers.

Figure 3. Where districts get information to help select strategies in lowest-performing schools



Notes: 2017-18 survey of 184 (unweighted) or 3,261 (weighted) districts with lowest-performing schools, which include all such Title I schools, whether they were identified under the state’s own accountability system, ESSA’s new comprehensive support and improvement system, or previously identified under an older federal accountability system (NCLB’s restructuring or corrective action schools, ESEA Flex’s priority schools, 1003(g) School Improvement Grants).

Appendix

Data Collection Procedures

The data presented in this snapshot come from state and district surveys administered in 2017-18 (between April and September 2018) as part of the [Study of Implementation of Title I/II Program Initiatives](#). A similar version of the surveys was administered in 2013-14. See Appendix B (pp. B-5 to B-8 and pp. B-14 to B-16) of a [report](#) based on those surveys for a more complete description of the sampling and weighting approach used in this study.

State Survey

The state survey, administered using an electronic, fillable PDF form, was sent to the chief state school officer in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The expectation was that different sections of the survey would be filled out by different state educational agency staff members with the most direct knowledge. The survey had a 100 percent response rate.

The state survey questions related to use of evidence asked about the state's lowest-performing Title I schools in 2017-18. These schools could have included previously-identified priority schools, as defined under the flexibility that most states began receiving from the U.S. Department of Education in 2012. This flexibility waived certain requirements under *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), which was the version of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) that preceded ESSA. A state's lowest-performing schools in 2017-18 could also have included previously-identified schools in restructuring or corrective action (as defined under NCLB), schools receiving School Improvement Grants, schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement (as defined under ESSA), or schools identified as lowest-performing under a state accountability system distinct from ESSA.

The state survey questions related to use of evidence were not applicable to Oregon and Wyoming. These two states had not yet identified lowest-performing Title I schools under ESSA when the survey was

administered and did not require previously-identified lowest-performing schools to implement improvement strategies in 2017-18. Thus, the survey directed them to skip these particular questions, and the state survey data presented in this snapshot are ultimately based on 48 states and the District of Columbia.

District Survey

The district survey was based on a nationally representative sample of 722 school districts, including 545 local education agencies (LEAs, typically school districts) drawn from the 2011-12 National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD) and 177 charter LEAs drawn from the 2016-17 CCD. The same 545 LEAs were used in the 2013-14 and 2017-18 data collection for the Study of Implementation of Title I/II Program Initiatives. The 177 charter LEAs were added to the 2017-18 data collection to more fully capture the experiences of charter districts and schools. The district sample was drawn using "minimax" random sampling, which is designed to equalize the efficiency for two types of district estimates: unit-based estimates and enrollment-based estimates. The sample design considered districts' poverty status, size, geography (Census region, state), and urbanicity.

Nine sampled charter LEAs were not ultimately eligible for the survey. The web-based survey was sent to superintendents or their designees in the 713 school districts that remained eligible, and 683 surveys were returned for a response rate of 96 percent. Applying weights to account for oversampling certain subgroups and non-response ensures that the final district statistics reported are nationally representative.

The district survey questions related to use of evidence were only asked of districts who indicated that they had at least one lowest-performing Title I school. Ultimately, 184 (3,261 weighted) districts responded to these questions, which is 27 percent (19 percent weighted) of the study's final sample of responding districts. More detail on data collection

procedures can be found at <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=ED-2017-ICCD-0124-0006>.

Survey Content

The surveys pertained to states’ and districts’ activities during the 2017-18 school year and contained questions related to core areas in ESEA Title I and Title II-A: state content standards; assessments; school accountability and turning

around low-performing schools; and improving educator effectiveness. The surveys also contain questions related to school choice. The state survey focused on state policies and supports provided to districts. The district survey focused on the implementation of state policies, adoption of district policies, and supports provided to schools. The full surveys can be found at <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=ED-2017-ICCD-0124-0007>. The specific survey questions that were used in this snapshot are reprinted below.

Relevant State Survey Questions

How is your state promoting the use of evidence-based models, interventions, or strategies by lowest-performing Title I schools implementing interventions during this school year (2017-18)? [Question 1-36]

Approach	YES	NO	NA
a. The state provided district and school leaders with information about evidence-based models, interventions, or strategies to improve student performance.....	1	0	
b. The state provided a list of vetted partners that district and school leaders could engage to implement approved evidence-based strategies	1	0	
c. The state linked district and school leaders with staff from the U.S. Department of Education’s Regional Educational Laboratories or Comprehensive Centers to obtain information on evidence-based models, interventions, or strategies to improve student performance.....	1	0	
d. The state referred district and school leaders to the What Works Clearinghouse, Evidence for ESSA, or other organization that rates evidence to obtain information on evidence-based models, interventions, or strategies to improve student performance....	1	0	
e. District applications for school improvement funds must describe the evidence base for proposed interventions, or they receive competitive preference for describing such evidence.....	1	0	NA
f. District applications for school improvement funds must include plans for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, or they receive competitive preference for evaluation plans	1	0	NA
g. Something else	1	0	
(Specify): _____			

Thinking about the state’s lowest-performing Title I schools that were implementing interventions during this school year (2017-18), what interventions, if any, did the state require during this school year (2017-18)?

[Question 1-32]

NOTE: Please select “required” if the state requires the intervention for some or all lowest-performing schools in 2017-18

Interventions	REQUIRED	NOT REQUIRED
h. Schools must implement interventions selected from a list of evidence-based programs and models identified by the state	1	0

Relevant District Survey Questions

How important were each of the following considerations when selecting the interventions to implement in lowest-performing Title I schools? [Question 1-15]

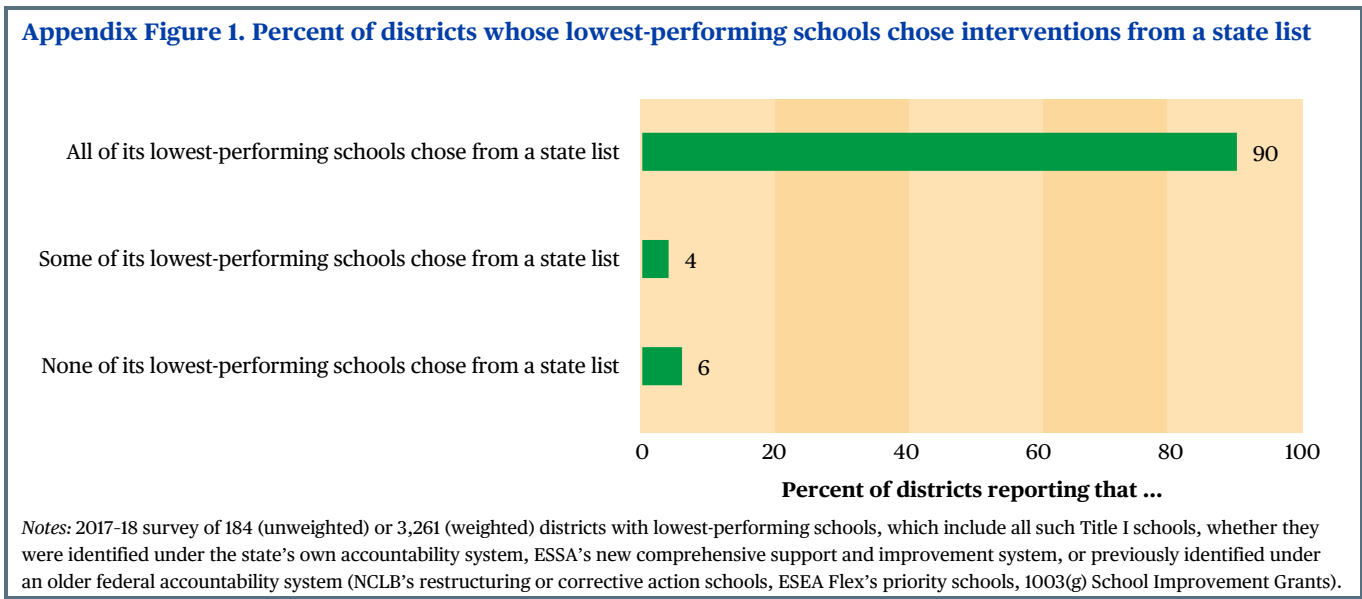
Considerations	NOT IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT	DON'T KNOW	NA
a. School staff’s interest in specific interventions	1	2	3	DK	
b. Parent and/or community input.....	1	2	3	DK	
c. Grade level of the school (i.e., elementary, middle, or secondary)	1	2	3	DK	
d. Student subgroups needing intervention to improve achievement	1	2	3	DK	
e. Cost of interventions and amount of funding available.....	1	2	3	DK	
f. District and/or school capacity to implement the interventions.....	1	2	3	DK	
g. Research evidence showing that the interventions were effective at improving student outcomes	1	2	3	DK	
h. Something else	1	2	3	DK	
(Specify): _____					

Which of the following sources of information were consulted when selecting the interventions to implement in lowest-performing Title I schools? [Question 1-14]

Sources	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a. Guidance or advice from the state education department or a technical assistance center funded by the state.....	1	0	DK
b. A list of vendors approved by the state.....	1	0	DK
c. Information provided by the intervention’s developer or vendor.....	1	0	DK
d. Recommendations from colleagues in other school districts.....	1	0	DK
e. Information from a U.S. Department of Education Comprehensive Center.....	1	0	DK
f. Information from a U.S. Department of Education Regional Educational Laboratory.....	1	0	DK
g. Information from the What Works Clearinghouse, Evidence for ESSA, or other organization that rates evidence.....	1	0	DK
h. Information from the district’s research/evaluation office.....	1	0	DK
i. Information from professional associations.....	1	0	DK
j. Information from a college/university researcher.....	1	0	DK
k. Some other source..... (Specify): _____	1	0	DK

During this school year (2017-18), are all, some, or no lowest-performing Title I schools in your district implementing the following interventions? [Question 1-5]

Interventions	ALL	SOME	NONE
f. Schools are implementing interventions selected from a list of evidence-based programs and models identified by the state.....	2	1	0



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ⁱ <https://www.alexander.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2015/12/alexander-murray-senate-passes-bill-to-fix-no-child-left-behind-85-12>

ⁱⁱ For instance, states were allowed to “freeze” the status of their previously-identified lowest-performing schools for the 2017-18 school year. These schools retained their “lowest-performing” designation for 2017-18 even though they may have been identified through an older accountability system. As a result, the data in this snapshot should not be interpreted as measuring how faithfully states implemented ESSA’s new evidence requirements in 2017-18 because not all of the low-performing schools would have necessarily been subject to these requirements.

ⁱⁱⁱ The surveys were administered as part of the National Center for Education Evaluation’s [Study of Implementation of Title I/II Program Initiatives](#), which is more generally documenting the implementation of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act’s* Title I and Title II-A programs over time. Additional details about the sampling methods and survey instruments can be found in the appendix and at <https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=ED-2017-ICCD-0124-0006>.

^{iv} However, only states who met at least one of the following conditions were asked to answer the specific survey questions summarized in this snapshot: (1) had already identified lowest-performing schools under ESSA when the survey was administered; (2) required previously-identified lowest-performing schools to implement improvement strategies in 2017-18. Two states (Oregon and Wyoming) did not meet either of these conditions. The data reported in this snapshot are thus from 48 states and the District of Columbia.

^v These districts amounted to approximately one-quarter of the total sample, or 184 responding districts.

^{vi} This finding is consistent with recent case studies on evidence use in districts: Rentner, D. S. & Kober, N. (2019). *District Leader Interviews: How School Districts are Responding to ESSA’s Evidence Requirements for School Improvement*. Report from Center on Education Policy: <https://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=1509>.

^{vii} Only 14 states provided a list of vetted partners that districts and schools could engage to implement approved evidence-based strategies (Figure 1), and only half of districts (51 percent) consulted a list of vendors approved by the state when selecting improvement strategies for their lowest-performing schools (Figure 3). Yet, the vast majority of districts—90 percent—reported that all of their lowest-performing schools were implementing strategies from a state-identified list of evidence-based strategies. This apparent puzzle could be an artifact of differences in how the survey questions were worded, or a “social desirability bias” for districts to overwhelmingly say that their schools selected strategies from a state list. It could also indicate the presence of different state lists. Perhaps districts interpreted states’ efforts to direct them to resources from organizations such as the What Works Clearinghouse or state-provided information about evidence-based strategies as “state lists.”

^{viii} Recent data from a different study of 13 state lists with a total of 151 school-turnaround vendors found that only about half of the vendors were backed by research that could meet ESSA’s minimum threshold of “demonstrates a rationale” (Tier 4), and that just 11 percent had evidence of effectiveness for improving student outcomes that meet the “moderate” and “strong” evidence levels under ESSA (Tiers 1 and 2): Meyers, C. V. & Vangronigen, B. A. (2018). So Many Educational Service Providers, So Little Evidence. *American Journal of Education*. 125, 109-139.

^{ix} Rentner, D. S. & Kober, N. (2019). *District Leader Interviews: How School Districts are Responding to ESSA’s Evidence Requirements for School Improvement*. Report from Center on Education Policy: <https://www.cep-dc.org/>.

Rentner, D. S., Kober, N., & Braun, M. (2019). *State Leader Interviews: How States are Responding to ESSA’s Evidence Requirements for School Improvement*. Report from Center on Education Policy: <https://www.cep-dc.org/>.

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