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MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, Curriculum Coordinators and Grants Managers
FROM: Agency of Education Program Staff
SUBJECT: Use of Levels of Evidence to Support Grant Funded Work in Schools
DATE: February 14, 2018

Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) defines four levels of evidence that are linked to the use of federal funds applied to educational activities, strategies and interventions. Accordingly, the bulk of federal education (such as CFP) and state-funded grants (such as BEST, Act 230, Flexible Pathways) administered by the Agency of Education (AOE) will follow the same requirements as those set out in ESSA with certain exceptions (see below).

Rationale

As funds become scarcer, it is important they are distributed in an equitable manner and for activities and practices that have a proven, positive impact on student outcomes. Agreed-upon, consistent criteria for approving or denying funding requests across the AOE are critical to equitable awarding of funds. ESSA provides a precise definition of evidence that provides more clarity than prior requirements for “evidence-based” practices or “scientifically research based” practices. Applying the same requirement to both federal and state grants will allow for greater consistency in the review and approval of grant applications.

Levels of Evidence

1. **Level 1** is strong evidence. Demonstrating this level of evidence requires identifying at least one well-designed and well-implemented **experimental** study that shows a significant positive impact on student outcomes (i.e., using randomized controls).
2. **Level 2** is moderate evidence. Demonstrating this level of evidence requires identifying at least one well-designed and well-implemented **quasi-experimental** study that shows a significant positive impact on student outcomes (i.e., matched study design).
3. **Level 3** is promising impact. Demonstrating this level of evidence requires at least one well-designed and well-implemented **correlational** study that shows a significant positive impact on student outcomes.
4. **Level 4** is “under evaluation”. 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.

Level 4 Additional Explanation

The use of **Level 4 “Under Evaluation”** evidence for state grants related to the implementation of ESSA and EQS is problematic. State grants funded through the legislature expire on an annual basis, and one school year typically does not allow enough time to engage in on-going efforts to examine the effects of an activity or practice on student outcomes.

However, AOE recognizes that disallowing state grant applicants/awardees from using Level 4 evidence would prove challenging, particularly in developing areas such as personalization and proficiency-based education. We will therefore request that grant applications that propose to use level 4 evidence for state funding include (1) a theory of action that builds a compelling rationale for the proposed activities, and (2) demonstrate connections to new or existing long-term initiatives with a proven track-record for improving student outcomes, as outlined in Levels 1-3.

Additional guidance regarding state-funded grant applications seeking to use level-4 evidence will be forthcoming, as will training and additional information on the AOE website.

Exceptions

The criteria laid out in this memo do not apply to federal education activities funded under statutes or titles other than ESSA at this time (e.g., Perkins CTE funding, WIOA adult education funding). Also, for Vermont schools designated as Comprehensive or Equity only levels 1-3 will be allowable for the use of School Improvement funds. Refer to the Vermont [Continuous Improvement Framework](#) for additional information.

Additional Information

Information regarding levels of evidence can be found in the [Using Evidence to Strengthen Educational Investments](#) non-regulatory guidance document from the US Department of Education. Additional information about different types of studies that constitute 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.

Levels of Evidence and Correlations to Other Sites

Level of Evidence	Evidence for ESSA	What Works Clearinghouse
1	Strong	Positive
2	Moderate	Positive
3	Promising	Potentially Positive
4		

Suggestions for Level 4 Grant Activities

If you are considering Level 4 grant activities for the 2018-2019 school year, AOE requires inclusion of the following with your grant application:

1. Theory of Action
2. Evaluation plan for the activity so that you can study your activities, strategies, and interventions and document your results
3. Summative documentation of the evaluation results for the practice, if done previously

Support for each of these suggestions can be found in the Vermont Continuous Improvement Framework.

Questions?

If you have questions, please contact the program staff of that particular grant. Contact information and grant information can be found on the [AOE website](#).