

DISTRICT LEADER INTERVIEWS

HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE RESPONDING  
TO **ESSA'S EVIDENCE**  
**REQUIREMENTS**  
FOR **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

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***Purpose and Background***

In the spring of 2019, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University conducted interviews with leaders from five school districts that differed in key characteristics. The aim was to learn about districts' efforts to implement the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for using evidence-based approaches to improve low-performing schools. Under ESSA, states have more power than under previous iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to identify which schools are low-performing, and school districts have greater latitude to decide on strategies to improve these schools. The strategies chosen, however, must be backed up by evidence of effectiveness that fits into one of four "tiers," ranging from strong evidence to evidence that demonstrates a rationale (see **Box A**). These requirements offer state and district leaders opportunities for innovation as well as new and urgent implementation challenges.

This report summarizes our findings from those district interviews. A companion CEP publication issued in April 2019, *State Leader Interviews: How States Are Responding to ESSA's Evidence Requirements for School Improvement*, describes findings from interviews with state officials about how states are implementing ESSA's evidence requirements. In July of 2019, CEP and the National Academy of Education convened state and district leaders, researchers, and policymakers to discuss ways to strengthen the relationships among these communities and use evidence more effectively to support decision-making about school improvement and other education issues. A report

summarizing the findings from the state and district interview reports, as well as from the July meeting, will be issued in the fall of 2019.

## *District Descriptions, Identified Schools, and Evidence Tiers*

Interviews for this report were conducted by telephone in April, May, and June of 2019 using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews were recorded and summarized. The officials interviewed held a variety of senior district-level positions, but all had responsibilities related to school improvement, accountability, and/or research. To elicit honest responses, we assured interviewees that the names of their districts would not be identified. The findings in this report reflect the experiences of officials in these five districts only and are by no means representative of the nation's 13,000-plus districts.

All five districts participating in the interviews have both Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools and Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools, as defined in **Box B**. These five districts vary in enrollment, type of community, geographic location, and other characteristics. Throughout this report, we describe these districts as follows (which are not necessarily aligned with the categories of district size and location used by the National Center for Education Statistics):

- **Rural county district.** A rural, countywide system in a Western state with an enrollment of just over 5,000 students. About 90% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The majority (62%) of students are white, and slightly more than one-quarter are Latinx.
- **Large county district.** A countywide system in a Western state that includes two small cities within its boundaries. The district serves about 65,000 students. A little less than half of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. No single demographic group constitutes a majority of the student population; the largest groups are white (43%) and Latinx (38%) students.
- **Small city district.** A city school system in a Western state, enrolling about 12,000 students. Over 80% of students are economically disadvantaged. A majority (51%) of students are Latinx, and 42% are white.
- **Mid-size county district.** A county system in a Southern state, serving 8,700 students. All students in the district are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Just under half (47%) of the students are African American, while 37% are white and 12% are Latinx.
- **Large urban district.** A large city school system in the Eastern United States with nearly all of its students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. A majority of students are African American or Latinx.

ESSA leaves it to local education leaders to decide which “activities, strategies, or interventions” will be used to improve student learning at their lowest-performing schools; however, the actions implemented in CSI, TSI, or ATSI schools must meet one of four tiers of evidence described in Box A. In addition, school stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, must be involved in selecting the strategies and developing the school improvement plan.

## Box A — ESSA Evidence Tiers

Under ESSA, the activities, strategies, or interventions implemented in CSI, TSI, or ATSI schools must meet one of four tiers of evidence:

- **Tier 1.** Strong evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study
- **Tier 2.** Moderate evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study
- **Tier 3.** Promising evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias
- **Tier 4.** A rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes; and includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.

In districts or schools that receive school improvement grants (SIGs) from Title I funds, the chosen activities, strategies, or interventions must meet the evidence standards for Tiers 1, 2, or 3.

*Source: Section 8101(21)(A) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by ESSA*

## Box B — Schools Identified for Improvement

In school year 2018-19, the Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to identify three types of schools for improvement activities:

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools.** These include a) the lowest performing 5% of schools in the state that receive federal Title I funds and b) high schools that fail to graduate at least two-thirds of their students. School districts and stakeholders work together to determine which actions to take to improve these schools, and the selected activity, strategy, or intervention must meet ESSA's evidence requirements. The SEA approves the school improvement actions and monitors implementation.
- **Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools.** In these schools a subgroup of students is consistently underperforming, as defined by the state. The school and stakeholders work together to determine which actions to take to improve these schools, and the selected activity, strategy, or intervention must meet ESSA's evidence requirements. The school district approves the school improvement action and monitors its implementation.
- **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) schools.** In these schools the performance of any one subgroup of students on its own would lead to the school being identified as a CSI school. The school district approves the school improvement action and monitors its implementation.

*Source: Sections 1111 (d) and (c) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by ESSA*

## ***Main Themes from District Interviews***

The five districts interviewed for this project experienced different opportunities and challenges with implementing ESSA's evidence requirements. These variations were often a reflection of the specific district's context. This section summarizes the main findings about key implementation issues, along with examples of various viewpoints from different types of districts.

### ***A Sharper Focus on Evidence, but Challenges Along the Way***

All of the district interviewees credited ESSA with sharpening their district's focus on the evidence base for their current and planned school improvement activities and causing districts to scrutinize their interventions more carefully. However, the rural district interviewed is having greater problems due to a lack of capacity and a paucity of evidence-based strategies tailored to rural areas. In addition, different types of districts report challenges with accessing research databases, finding vendor products that meet their needs, and receiving adequate help from the state. And some districts would like more assistance from the research community, the state education agency, and the U.S. Department of Education.

### ***More Scrutiny of School Improvement Strategies***

While some of the districts interviewed had been using evidence-based approaches previously, ESSA requirements prompted them to ask for evidence from vendors or require principals to review the research on a potential intervention to ensure it has made a positive impact.

Most of the districts interviewed had established systems and expertise for identifying school improvement strategies that were research-based. The rural district, which has a small central office staff, struggled with this process both because of a lack of access to research databases and because most of the state-approved vendors' services and products had not been tried in a rural setting, according to the district interviewee.

### ***District Capacity to Implement ESSA Evidence Requirements***

The districts we examined differed in their capacity to deal with ESSA's evidence and school improvement requirements, according to interviewees. (By capacity, we mean sufficient staff, expertise, and funding.) As noted above, the rural district faced many capacity-related challenges in implementing the new ESSA requirements. The other districts reported being better equipped to implement the new requirements and viewed them as not that different from their previous school improvement efforts. Some of the larger districts also benefited from having a dedicated research or evaluation team.

Interviewees from two districts emphasized that school capacity was as important as district capacity in implementing ESSA's evidence requirements. What happens in the classroom is going to have the biggest impact on students, they said, and they described their districts' efforts to help principals and teachers with implementation.

## *Rethinking Vendor Relationships*

All interviewees credited ESSA with causing their districts to re-examine their relationships with vendors, including asking vendors for evidence that their products and services are effective and meet ESSA requirements. Districts faced some challenges in the process, such as difficulties finding vendors whose services and products could address the district's unique needs or vendors citing evidence of effectiveness from internally conducted studies that do not meet ESSA requirements. Some district interviewees expressed concerns about having to drop a vendor that could not provide evidence that met ESSA requirements, even though district staff knew intuitively that the vendor's approach was working to improve student achievement.

## *Support from State Agencies*

District officials' views varied on the helpfulness of their state education agency. Some interviewees did not view their state as helpful. Mostly this was due to new state leadership that lacked the historical knowledge or expertise needed at key junctures in ESSA implementation, although one interviewee expressed concern that help was not forthcoming from the state because of political reasons. In addition, low pay for state employees meant frequent turnover in key state positions. The large urban school district official noted that the SEA worked collaboratively with their district on the school improvement process, while another district interviewee said their state department of education was an excellent partner. A final interviewee acknowledged that the state was "helpful to the extent it can be."

## *Community Involvement*

The level of community involvement in schools identified for improvement differed in each district. Some interviewees reported that their district's schools had extensive and longstanding community and/or parent involvement in their schools, so the ESSA requirements did not pose challenges. Other interviewees recognized that some of their schools were better than others at cultivating community relationships. One district interviewee questioned whether parent involvement would be helpful in low-performing schools that lacked capacity and were already struggling to implement improvement plans. Another district indicated that it was focusing on building the capacity of principals and not necessarily on community involvement.

## *Other Implementation Challenges*

Some interviewees noted that they had not received adequate training before the ESSA evidence requirements took effect. Several reported difficulties accessing user-friendly research, particularly through databases or libraries with "paywalls" that require users who do not fit certain categories to pay fees for journal articles and other studies. One interviewee expressed frustration with having to drop promising school improvement strategies because the strategies lacked evidence that met ESSA criteria. Finally, to ensure that identified schools were not bombarded with advice from the various state and district facilitators, content specialists, and coaches involved in aspects of school improvement, the large urban district established a system to coordinate state and district support services for CSI schools.

## ***Suggestions for Researchers***

Interviewees made several suggestions for how researchers could help school districts with implementing requirements for research-based strategies:

- Provide district leaders with access to libraries and databases, including the elimination of “paywalls” for district staff.
- Ensure that academic research on school improvement is reported in a user-friendly format. Specifically, education leaders want short summaries that address the who, what, when, and how.
- Conduct more research attuned to different local contexts, such as school improvement in rural settings or the effectiveness of interventions for different student subgroups.
- Conduct more third-party research on the effectiveness of vendor products and services.
- Provide more research on school operational issues, such as whether the presence of a hall monitor reduces disciplinary referrals between lunch and recess.
- Create a guide or repository that sorts school improvement research according to the ESSA evidence tiers.

## ***Suggestions for State Education Agencies***

The interviews also yielded suggestions for how states could better support districts as they carry out ESSA evidence requirements:

- Provide district staff with training in how to access and analyze school improvement research. Interviewees wished they had this type of support before having to select school improvement strategies.
- Consider whether state policies that limit interventions to tiers 1-3 for all CSI schools should be less restrictive and allow tier 4 strategies where appropriate to encourage innovation or sustain promising strategies. (ESSA law restricts interventions to tiers 1-3 in schools receiving School Improvement Grants, but some states have expanded this restriction to other types of identified schools).

## ***Suggestions for the U.S. Department of Education***

The district interviewees had further ideas for steps that could be taken by the U.S. Department of Education (ED):

- Expand the evidence-based resources for school improvement in the What Works Clearinghouse and other federal databases.
- Overhaul federal clearinghouses to report information in terms of the ESSA evidence tiers.

## ***Interview Findings about Implementation of Evidence Requirements***

This section provides more detailed information from the district interviews on the main findings summarized above and on other issues related to ESSA's evidence requirements. To better convey the views of district officials and illustrate differences based on local context, we have included a selection of italicized quotations from the interviews.

### ***Process for Determining School Improvement Strategies***

Officials from the rural district interviewed attended a meeting with vendors that were pre-vetted by the state to determine which would be a good match for the needs of district schools. The official interviewed had concerns about whether these vendors, in general, were a good fit for rural districts, as explained in this comment:

*The vetted-vendors that the state provided all had track records on the East Coast, mostly in urban areas, and they were willing to extend into [our state], but it was a big shock for them. Their models don't work in [our state], so then how does their "vettedness" work because they can't do business the way they are used to doing business?*

Two vendors were selected — one that works on leadership issues and another to help the district with data-driven instruction — and the district and vendors are working together to implement improvement, as explained later in the Vendors subsection. The official from the large county system reported that the district has the capacity to research and select evidence-based approaches for school improvement. A research and evaluation team has been very helpful in determining school improvement strategies by building a library of evidence that meets ESSA criteria and conducting literature reviews that examine different programs backed by ESSA evidence. The district staff have been able to walk schools through the ESSA evidence requirements and explain how to adapt to them. The district is engaged in long-term planning for school improvement and is constantly checking school progress against the goals of the school improvement plan. Schools identified for improvement received amplified support from the district.

Building on previous school improvement efforts, the small city uses a team approach that leverages the expertise of staff from different district departments. Staff from assessment and accountability, instruction and curriculum, and the English learners (ELs) and students with disabilities support teams work with the principals of identified schools to review data and determine which evidence-based approaches to pursue. The SEA has been helpful in this process by convening meetings where district and school staff can learn how to access information on research-based strategies. In addition, the senior district staff meet weekly to analyze their systems for instruction and talent management, with the goal of spotting and addressing issues to prevent schools from being designated for improvement in the first place. The district's work is centered on providing support so that every student can learn:

*We believe strongly that when they come to us, that we can do what it takes to make sure that every student is successful. We just have to make sure that we put the systems in place that can help every child that comes in and differentiate it accordingly. We aren't there yet, but that is what we are trying to put in place right now.*

The mid-size county district reported that, in recent years, the school district has undergone a transformation due to the directives of its new superintendent. The first step has been to centralize curriculum and instruction at the district level. A team of district leaders meets weekly to review and act on issues related to curriculum and instruction, and this has resulted in a less-siloed system. This approach also gives district leaders a better idea of what is going on in all the schools and keeps them up to date on the latest information from the state. In addition, the district requires principals to meet with the district's leadership team to ensure that the purchases the principals want to make with Title I funds are evidence-based and aligned with the school's improvement strategy. Moreover, the district provides greater support to struggling schools, and has also moved some of its most effective teachers to low-performing schools. The interviewee explained that some of the improvement strategies implemented by the new superintendent have angered some of the principals, but district leaders keep emphasizing the importance of a growth mindset. She emphasized the need for district unity:

*We are really in this together. We are a school system, not a system of schools.*

In the spring of 2018, prior to any schools being identified for improvement under ESSA, officials from the large urban district met with all schools to help them understand the ESSA policies and the evidence requirements. The district also worked to familiarize school leaders with the What Works Clearinghouse and the evidence-based approaches contained therein. Once schools were identified, the district selected school improvement strategies from a state-created repository of evidence-based school improvement approaches. In addition, the district developed a list of approved vendors; part of this vetting process was to examine the research on the vendors' products. The interviewees indicated that these state and local resources are growing and will be more robust in the coming years.

## ***Challenges in Selecting Evidence-based School Improvement Strategies***

The rural district had several challenges accessing school improvement research. Since the vendor that had been providing improvement services to the district did not appear on the state's list of vetted vendors, the district interviewee consulted web sites, such as What Works, but found that the information on those web sites did not address the district's specific needs. Because of paywalls and other barriers to accessing research databases, the interviewee ended up asking her son, a college student at large university in another state, to log into his university's library to search school improvement research. This interviewee also obtained information on evidence-based school improvement from staff at another school district in her state.

*The only thing that got me through ESSA evidence without getting really upset was that I could log into this major university and I had access. I kept asking our state, "Why don't we have this?" It makes no sense that you are asking us to find evidence and we can't even look for it.*



The ESSA evidence requirements have led district grant writers in this same state to band together and help each other, the interviewee said. In light of these challenges, the interviewee reported asking the state department of education about giving districts access to research databases.

The officials from the large county system liked the “intuitive appeal” of the evidence tiers, but said it is difficult to get a large system on board with this new approach. Moreover, the district’s principals already have a lot on their plates and are not trained as researchers. According to the interviewee, the principals also lament the difficulty of accessing research due to paywalls and other factors. The district has been frustrated by the state’s refusal to allow certain approaches that district staff believe are working in their schools but lack a sufficient evidence base.

*The state has a conservative approach so things that we know work within the context of our schools, like strong PLCs [Professional Learning Communities], which would meet evidence level 2 if you implement them right ... the state won't allow those because you have to have a study specific to that project ... So that has made it a little more difficult.*

The small city system is working to improve the achievement of English learners. This past school year, the district created an EL data dashboard for each school to monitor this subgroup’s performance. The district leadership, including the teacher support team, met with each principal to review the school’s improvement plan with a focus on what the school will do to improve EL achievement. The district provided professional development for teachers and conducted teacher observations. The teacher support team spent two weeks in each CSI school. By reviewing data and observing teachers, the district was able to narrow its focus to some key strategies and will support schools in implementing those strategies, the interviewee said.

The mid-size county school district has taken the evidence requirements to heart, according to the official interviewed, by working with principals to ensure that improvement strategies meet the requirements.

In the large urban district, selecting strategies for CSI schools was challenging, according to the official interviewed, because the state is limiting those schools to strategies and approaches in evidence tiers 1, 2, or 3. This creates a challenge:

*For the CSI schools it was particularly challenging because part of our guidelines with the state was that schools could not use their CSI funding for approaches that didn't fall into the ESSA tiers 1, 2, or 3. So the repository that they provided for us didn't necessarily capture all of things that our schools would utilize, and it also didn't always itemize the particular results of that work by grade span that we needed. For example, an approach might be really good for grade 4, but this is a K-8 school and they wanted to use it for 6-8. There is no research behind it, so can we technically say that this is a tier 1 for those grades or are we forced to say that it demonstrates a rationale?*

## Capacity

The interviewee from the rural district admitted that the district's overall capacity is limited in terms of number of staff and knowledge of research. Seeking help from the universities in their state is not a promising option, since these universities tend to work with larger school systems, and school improvement research is not their strong suit. The greatest concern is capacity at the school level; the interviewee acknowledged that while the district is pushing schools to be more standards-based and use effective instructional techniques, many school staff have only a partial understanding of what needs to be done.

The large county district reported having adequate staff expertise in their research and evaluation team, but low capacity in terms of funding and support for schools.

The small city school district reported having sufficient capacity. The district offers a lot of professional development, the interviewee explained, and follows up with coaching. There are instructional coaches in every school, and the district is adding more teaching specialists to its district team for the upcoming school year. The district works with the universities in the state and with outside partners, such as the Girls and Boys Club, the YMCA, and the United Way.

The interviewee from the mid-size county district said that they have a strong and smart staff and are able to support school improvement efforts. If a struggling school needs help beyond the district's abilities, they will try to find funds to bring in the needed expertise. The real capacity concern is at the school level, the interviewee noted, because it is the teachers who have the greatest impact on students. The district is providing teachers with tools, such as curriculum guides and professional development, and is requiring teachers to submit lesson plans for review and approval by their principal. The district is also working with principals to use teacher evaluations to hold teachers accountable.

Over the two years since ESSA was passed, the large urban district has beefed up its central office staff (including research/evaluation staff) to support the use of evidence for school improvement planning, according to the official interviewed, but some challenges remain:

*It's an ongoing challenge to get everyone to be on board. For this to happen well, research use and evidence just can't happen at the central office, or in the research office, or just in the planning office ... This will be a process, but I think we have the capacity to do this.*

The large urban district is not currently working with any outside organizations to determine which evidence-based strategies should be used, although the district partners with several organizations that support other aspects of teaching and learning. One of the interviewees commented that it is easy to identify which strategy should be used, but far harder to implement it.

## Vendors

As noted above, the rural district experienced difficulty finding vendors with products and services that addressed their unique needs and context. An additional concern of this district was that vendors do not classify their products in terms of the ESSA evidence tiers. Moreover, the physical size of the county presents a challenge for vendors, as the interviewee explained:

*One of the problems with having vendors come to our district is that we are too big geographically, so you can't go to a school [in one community] and then go to a school [in another community]. It's going to take you a week pretty much to spend any valuable time in those schools. I know our principals feel like [vendors] come for two days and then they don't see them for a really long period of time.*

Eventually, this district selected vendors that had never worked with rural districts, but the district and vendors have nevertheless built relationships of trust and honesty, the interviewee added. These vendors are helping the district to improve and bring greater focus to their school improvement efforts, the interviewee said.

In the large county system, ESSA's evidence requirements have had a minimal impact on their vendors, according to the official interviewed. This is largely because the district's long-term practice has been to identify the problem that needs to be addressed and then find a product or service that specifically addresses that problem. While vendors may have evidence supporting their approaches, they do not have the capacity to scale it to 12 states, let alone 50, this official said.

The small city district is taking steps to build evidence of effectiveness for their after-school program partners.

The official from the mid-size county district reported having difficulty finding vendors that can provide evidence that meets ESSA's requirements. This interviewee expressed frustration with vendors who act like "piranhas" and inaccurately characterize their products as evidence-based when most of the evidence comes from the vendor's in-house evaluations.

The ESSA requirements, in combination with a new school board, led the large urban district to decide not to renew some vendor relationships due to a lack of evidence. The district's procurement process asks vendors of certain products and services to show evidence of their effectiveness, and vendors can earn extra points for meeting a higher evidence tier. If the vendor cannot provide this supporting evidence when requested, the school board is not likely to approve that vendor contract, said one of the interviewees in this district. These steps have changed the district's relationships with vendors in a dramatic and "really, really good way," the interviewee said.

## State Assistance

District views varied about the helpfulness of their state education agency. Interviewees who said the state was not helpful pointed to problems of turnover in leadership and staff, which meant a loss of institutional memory, or to the small size or capacity of the SEA or an unsupportive attitude about traditional public schools.

The interviewee from the large county district said the state has been helpful to an extent by providing webinars and guidance, but added that the state could have been more flexible:

*If I had to criticize, they could have let us grow with them. They [state officials] took a really constricted approach at the beginning, saying you have to meet ESSA evidence level 1 or 2 and you have to use our preferred vendors. And if we said, “This actually does meet ESSA evidence tier 1, and we have a strategy and a theory of action that’s been proven, can we use it?” they would say no because [the state’s] interpretation of this is that you have to have a paper or a research project done about the particular program with the particular personnel.*

The interviewee from the small city district reported that “the state has been so great” and often works in partnership with the district. The state has developed many resources for educators and school leaders, this interviewee explained, including data programs to inform instruction and teacher observation tools. The state has also sought feedback from districts on the types of support and training needed.

The official from the rural county district reported that the district has a much better working relationship with the state since ESSA has been implemented. “ESSA has broken silos between the state and districts.”

State support for the mid-size county district was more of a mixed bag. One of the state superintendent’s first actions, according to the interviewee, was to fire all of the state coaches who worked with teachers, principals, and the district on improving low-performing schools. While some coaches were better than others, the good coaches were very helpful, the interviewee said. The state has since restructured how it provides assistance on school improvement and rehired some of these school improvement staff. One effect of this upheaval is that this mid-size county district is reluctant to rely on the state for support:

*We don’t have a whole lot of faith that what they put in place will be helpful, so we are just depending on ourselves to make sure that what we are doing is working, and it is.*

The large urban district interviewee viewed their SEA as helpful. In addition to providing a list of approved school improvement strategies, the state has worked collaboratively with the district from the onset of ESSA implementation, and state facilitators have helped the district’s schools develop school improvement plans. These facilitators will stay with the schools as they implement the plan over three years.

## Community Involvement

ESSA requires that local stakeholders, including principals and other school leaders, teachers, and parents, be involved in developing and implementing the school improvement plans for CSI schools. There are also other requirements for parental involvement throughout federal Title I law that would apply to identified schools. The districts interviewed are taking various approaches to implementing these provisions.

The rural district officials indicated that some schools are doing a better job than others in involving the community in their schools, and that the district is not doing anything special for its CSI schools at this point. The district is currently working to get teachers and school leaders engaged with school improvement efforts, and the official interviewed said it would be futile to involve the broader school community before the school staff are completely engaged.

*We are pushing really hard to be more standards-based ... and are pushing for the kind of instruction that we know is going to be more effective with our kids, but we are working with the school staff on that and they only have a partial understanding. Trying to push that knowledge out into the community is going to be difficult ... with the high poverty and low education that most of our parents have. We are also dealing with not only a lack of knowledge but often times the parents didn't leave school with positive feelings, and so we are trying to counter that culture that is in the background.*

The other interviewees reported that their districts have undertaken some form of community outreach and involvement in their schools; often these efforts pre-dated ESSA. In the small city district, this involvement takes the form of community councils with elected parent representation for all schools. In the mid-size county district, the school improvement teams must include parents and school support staff, such as janitors or teacher assistants. In the large urban district, the community is involved in both developing and implementing the school improvement plan, and principals are required to receive input from community members and provide “proof,” such as surveys, signature sheets, and agenda items, of community consultation. In addition, the large urban district posted all of the school improvement plans on a web site with opportunities for the public and school community members to comment on them. All of the large county system's schools have community partners, and all Title I schools conduct outreach through surveys and meetings with their school communities. One official in this large county district emphasized the importance of principal buy-in:

*We try to make sure that the principals have some sort of say in the programs that go into their schools because, at the end of the day, they are the ones who are accountable for those school performance plans.*

## Other Implementation Challenges

According to the rural district interviewee, the biggest obstacle to implementing the ESSA evidence requirements was a lack of training and tools to help district staff in their new roles. The large county district has experienced problems in accessing user-friendly research. The interviewee in this district expressed frustration that the district must abandon school improvement approaches that appear to work but lack ESSA-ready evidence.

The small city system interviewee reported no obstacles with implementing the ESSA evidence requirements, but did note the importance of using evidence-based approaches:

*We want people to think outside the box, but it has to be based on strong research. Our kids are not experimental ... We are very committed to research-based strategies and the data cycle.*

The official interviewed in the mid-size county district reported no problems with the specific ESSA evidence requirements, but noted that implementation would be helped by more support for traditional public schools from their state superintendent and state legislature. This interviewee said that valuable state funds have been shifted away from traditional public schools and toward private school vouchers and charter schools.

The large urban district faced a unique challenge: the prospect of having to coordinate the assistance and support for schools being provided by a variety of state and local personnel. The interviewees in this district reported that the state is sending in content specialists, in addition to the state's school improvement facilitators, to help with the CSI schools, even though the district already has content specialists in each school, academic coaches, and district-provided literacy coaches in all its K-8 schools. The interviewees foresaw potential confusion with schools being bombarded by advice. To mitigate against this, the district is requiring the personnel from the state to first meet with district staff in charge of their particular area to coordinate services. The district wants to make each school's plan central and have the district and state services support its implementation.

## Conclusion

The CEP interviews with a diverse group of districts suggest that these districts are making a serious effort to implement the ESSA requirements for evidence-based school improvement. Despite varying levels of capacity and a range of obstacles, these districts are trying to ensure that their school improvement efforts are based on high-quality evidence. Since all of the districts reported at least some difficulties with accessing research, policymakers need to consider what more can be done to make improvement-based research evidence more accessible to the broad range of schools and communities within the U.S. Interviewees also wanted access to a wider array of research that took into account contexts other than the urban setting, citing the unique needs of rural, suburban and small city schools.

ESSA's evidence requirements have also pushed these district leaders to reevaluate the vendors who market and sell school improvement interventions and instructional materials. Some

district leaders are establishing more robust systems for identifying school improvement strategies that are both appropriate for their community and are evidence-based as defined by ESSA. Since some states have chosen to develop lists of “vetted” vendors for districts to use to meet ESSA’s evidence requirements, it is crucial that state leaders consider whether their list meets the needs of all types of districts in the state and how the listed vendors can support district efforts to identify appropriate strategies. State leaders may need additional training in this area.

As schools and districts become increasingly data-rich environments, teachers and district staff need sufficient training in how to access, analyze, and apply multiple forms of research evidence to their work. Several of the district interviewees cited a lack of capacity in this area.

Although they are still in the early stages of implementation, the ESSA evidence requirements appear to be encouraging these districts to move away from a compliance mentality and toward a more thoughtful process of school improvement based on evidence. Districts are making an effort to choose research-based strategies that address a school’s specific needs. In keeping with this focus on evidence, more research is needed to document the impact of the ESSA requirements as implementation progresses. Researchers also need to become more active players in meeting districts’ needs and assisting with this implementation process.

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