



Harnessing the Power of Evidence-Based Policymaking

State boards should lean into education data and work to overcome challenges to doing so.

Evidence-based policymaking can transform the delivery of education services, restore public trust in schools, and improve outcomes for students. It can cut through the noise of political and cultural divisions and give decision makers clarity on how to prioritize the use of limited resources. And it can help build a shared understanding of where the systems designed to serve kids are working well—and where they aren’t—so that leaders can ground their decisions in facts rather than anecdotes and in real student needs rather than perceptions of them.

Given the many challenges to U.S. public education, students, educators and communities need nothing less than excellent support. By harnessing the power of evidence-based policymaking, state boards of education can make faster progress toward that excellence. When government leaders build data and evidence use into the fabric of their organizations, they are better positioned to accomplish the following:

- understand students’ needs;
- strategically and equitably invest in evidence-based strategies aligned with those needs;
- learn more about the impact of their investments, policies, and programs on students’ opportunities and outcomes; and
- continuously improve the state’s education system.

A Shared Definition and Criteria

State boards that embrace a shared definition of “evidence-based policymaking” and fully wrestle with its practical implications will be better positioned to see and effectively act upon opportunities

to address important needs. The good news is that state boards do not have to start from scratch.

There are two good starting places for understanding—and eventually adopting—evidence-based policymaking as an everyday part of how state boards approach their work: The first is a set of guiding principles outlined by the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking in 2017. The commission defined evidence-based policymaking simply as the application of evidence to inform decisions in government, and it outlined five principles for doing so (box 1).¹ The commission’s work has become a touchstone for federal government agencies, leading to a steady series of improvements,² and can serve as a model for how state boards consider the role of evidence in their own state-level context.

Second, Results for America’s “Invest in What Works State Standard of Excellence” further operationalizes what it means for evidence to inform state policymakers’ decisions.³ Every year, we analyze how state governments are using data and evidence in budget, policy, and management decisions to achieve better, more equitable outcomes for their residents. Our analysis uses 16 criteria, which fall into four groups (figure 1). Results for America has identified 263 examples of data-driven and evidence-based practices, policies, programs, and systems in effect as of August 2022 in 41 states. In over half of these, the education sector is implementing one or more of the criteria.⁴

Barriers to Incorporating Evidence

It is not an easy task for state boards to make evidence-based policymaking the new normal. The Bipartisan Policy Center’s 2018 report on how Congress

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Box 1. Guiding Principles

Privacy. Individual privacy and confidentiality must be respected in the generation and use of data and evidence.

Rigor. Evidence should be developed using well-designed and well-implemented methods tailored to the questions being asked.

Transparency. Those engaged in generating and using data and evidence should operate transparently, providing meaningful channels for public input and comment and ensuring that evidence produced is made publicly available.

Humility. Care should be taken not to overgeneralize from findings that may be specific to a particular study or context.

Capacity. The capacity to generate and use data and evidence should be integrated within government institutions and adequately funded and staffed.

Source: "The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking." Report of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, 2017.

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does and does not use evidence identified 16 barriers to evidence-based policymaking within Congress.⁵ Some of these are specific to federal-level policymaking, though state boards may experience them in slightly different ways. But the authors focus on the three major categories of barriers, which most certainly limit the degree to which state boards can make effective use of evidence:

- **perception barriers**, which affect whether state board members value evidence, believe it to be credible, and see how evidence can help the board accomplish its strategic goals;
- **institutional barriers**, which stem from the structure of the state board or the state education agency (SEA); and
- **systemic barriers**, which stem from the norms, processes, and procedures that guide the day-to-day operations of a state board and the state education agency.

Our 2022 State Standard of Excellence research strongly suggested that these three types of barriers exist at the state level as well and may be significantly impeding state boards' ability to engage in evidence-based policymaking:

- Just eight states had **statewide strategic education goals** that were public, quantitative,

published regularly, customer-oriented, aligned, equity-oriented, and publicly informed. (Other state boards may be publishing agency-specific strategic goals that may or may not connect to statewide strategy.) For state boards without established strategic goals, it will be difficult to understand how specific points of data and evidence will further their goals and to discuss the implications of data on policy and program decisions (perception barriers).

- There were no examples in which a state education agency **repurposed for results**—that is, improved outcomes by shifting funds from ineffective programs to those that get results. For state boards, there can be political risks associated with sharing and acting upon evidence about ineffective programs or, more generally, evidence that does not support a particular statewide agenda (institutional barriers).
- Eight state education agencies had authority to use evaluations to improve results. Only two state education agencies dedicated **evaluation resources** to improving results. State boards and state education agencies have many competing priorities. Where they have not intentionally organized and dedicated resources to evaluation, they will

Figure 1. Criteria for Evidence-Based Policymaking

Our 16 criteria are organized by thematic areas: managing for results, leveraging data, building and using evidence, and investing for results.

MANAGING FOR RESULTS			
<p>Setting Strategic Goals</p> <p>The state has statewide strategic goals that are public, quantitative, published regularly, customer-oriented, aligned, equity-oriented, and publicly informed.</p>	<p>Performance Management</p> <p>The state has achieved better outcomes through an enterprise performance management system that engages state leaders in using performance data to continuously improve results.</p>	<p>Culture</p> <p>The state has a culture that supports the sustainable use of data and evidence to deliver results in a transparent, equitable, and ethical manner.</p>	<p>Innovation</p> <p>The state uses innovation to achieve its priority goals and improve results for residents.</p>
LEVERAGING DATA			
<p>Data Leadership & Governance</p> <p>The state has senior leadership and governance structures with the mandate to equitably use data to improve results.</p>	<p>Data Policies</p> <p>The state has data policies that outline the principles, people and activities that govern its data collection and use.</p>	<p>Data Infrastructure</p> <p>The state has improved outcomes through technology infrastructure that allows it to efficiently collect, inventory, and share data.</p>	<p>Data Use</p> <p>The state has improved outcomes by combining and analyzing cross-agency data to inform policy, budget, or management decisions.</p>
BUILDING AND USING EVIDENCE			
<p>Evaluation Leadership & Governance</p> <p>The state has a leadership and governance structure with the authority to use evaluations to improve results.</p>	<p>Evaluation Policies</p> <p>The state has evaluation policies and a learning agenda that outline the principles, people, and activities to use evidence to improve results.</p>	<p>Evaluation Resources</p> <p>The state has dedicated resources for using evaluations to improve results.</p>	<p>Evaluation Use</p> <p>The state has improved results by using evaluation, program inventories, and cost-benefit analysis.</p>
INVESTING FOR RESULTS			
<p>Results-Focused Budget Process</p> <p>The state has improved outcomes by prioritizing data and evidence in its budget process through guidance to agencies and engagement with the legislature.</p>	<p>Results-Focused Contracting</p> <p>The state has improved outcomes by using results-focused contracts for its publicly funded programs.</p>	<p>Evidence-Based Grantmaking</p> <p>The state has improved outcomes by allocating grant funding based on evidence of effectiveness.</p>	<p>Repurpose for Results</p> <p>The state has improved outcomes by moving funds away from programs that are ineffective and toward those that get results.</p>

be less prepared to engage in evidence use (systemic barriers).⁶

Some of the most perceptive takes on the challenges facing state boards come directly from the SEA leaders who work on these issues daily. Those that become our organization's State Education Fellows have shared that state-level evidence-based policymaking is consistently at risk because of political vulnerabilities resulting from organizational structure, as well as limited, inconsistent investments in support of robust research capacity. When SEA leaders have the opportunity to generate and use evidence, there is often internal pressure to avoid negative findings, as well as external distrust of positive findings.⁷

While the barriers are plentiful and interconnected, state boards can overcome them. They do not have to do this work alone. Pew Charitable Trusts identifies several solutions to the challenges of evidence-based policymaking and calls upon philanthropies, research institutions, and other organizations to support states in this critical work.⁸ Among other steps, Pew encourages greater investments in state research capacity, increased focus on applied research, and opportunities for states to learn from each other.

State boards can also look to their peers for inspiration and support. For example, the Illinois State Board of Education used data to understand how the pandemic disproportionately affected low-income students in their state.⁹ The board is now investing \$17 million in Freedom Schools, a research-based program intended to supplement learning in school, specifically focused on supporting low-income communities. Significantly, there are evaluation requirements associated with this investment. The state will use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to continuously improve this initiative. The Ohio State Board of Education receives regular briefings from the Ohio Department of Education's director of research and evaluation, on topics ranging from Ohio students' internet connectivity and technology access, to the impact of the pandemic on student outcomes and students' mental and physical health and well-being.¹⁰ The state board uses the data they learn about through these briefings to understand students' needs and prioritize resources.

In addition, state boards can look to other state-level boards for inspiration. State-level workforce development boards also seek to improve their use of evidence-based policymaking. For example, the Colorado Workforce Development Council developed and began using an evidence continuum as part of grant award scoring. The council is awarding \$2.25 million for evidence-based strategies through their Reskilling, Upskilling, and Next-skilling Workers program. The Texas Workforce Commission piloted an evidence- and performance-based grant for a building and construction trades program focused on serving opportunity youth. The commission is scaling this approach through \$5.5 million in grant awards and using the same evidence-driven strategy for \$3 million in federal Perkins funds that will go to community colleges.

A Culture of Evidence-Based Policymaking

The culture of an organization also affects the degree to which perception and institutional barriers limit state boards' use of evidence. A culture of evidence use is one in which members of the organization place value on mutual trust, transparency, continuous improvement, and innovation. State boards that are building such a culture are not satisfied with the status quo and use data and evidence to seek opportunities for improvement. They can articulate shared goals, and they recognize that individuals in democratic societies can disagree on how to meet those goals and still use data and evidence to build consensus around solutions. And they center students, families, and communities in all aspects of policymaking, ensuring that they are engaged in collecting, interpreting, and acting upon data and evidence.

State boards interested in strengthening their culture of evidence-based policymaking can break this process down into a series of steps, each of which will move them closer to a culture of evidence use:

1. Work together to articulate the importance of evidence-based policymaking for the state board and for the state's education system.

Where there is disagreement on the value of evidence-based policymaking, identify the reasons and work to remove those barriers to agreement. Start by finding common

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ground. What goals can all board members stand behind, regardless of political leaning or personal preference? Use the common goals as the board's North Star and adopt an evidence-based agenda as the means through which the board will overcome divisive decisions.

2. **Take stock of the best practices that are embedded in the state board's day-to-day operations.** Which practices represent areas of strength for the state board? Which practices are opportunities for growth? Results for America's State Standard of Excellence can serve as a resource for identifying the practices that characterize a robust system for evidence-based policymaking.
3. **Use this stock taking to build a holistic picture of how the state uses its resources—its data infrastructure, organizational structure, and communication strategies—and identify strategic opportunities to break down barriers to evidence-based policymaking.** The most effective evidence-based policymaking happens when leaders understand how evidence-based practices fit together and where gaps in best practice might limit effectiveness.
4. **Commit to investing in the resources the state board needs to engage in evidence-based policymaking.** Most SEAs do not have dedicated research staff whose time is primarily dedicated to developing the kinds of practices that will make it easier for state boards to engage in evidence-based policymaking.¹¹

At the federal level, increased focus on evidence-based policymaking is leading to important cultural and systemic changes among federal agencies. Since 2013, federal agencies across sectors have shifted more than \$19.7 billion in funds to evidence-based programs and policies.

A greater focus on state-level evidence-based policymaking likewise can improve how states use data and evidence to make decisions. Already, there are states making great strides. Since 2018, there has been a 130 percent increase across sectors in the number of practices we have featured in our analysis. State boards can lead the way in this critical work. Building a strong culture of evidence use, investing more resources in internal capacity, and systematizing the use of data and evidence in board decision

making can all help meet the significant challenges of these times. ■

¹The commission's report defines "evidence" as systematically collected data that have been analyzed with rigorous research methods to provide insights about how policies and programs operate.

²Nick Hart and Sara Stefanik, "Evidence Commission after 5 Years: A Progress Report on the Promise for a More Evidence-Informed Society" (Data Foundation, September 2022).

³Results for America, "2022 Invest in What Works State Standard of Excellence" (2021), <https://2022state.results4america.org/>.

⁴Examples associated with the education sector are not limited to examples that come specifically from state boards of education or state education agencies.

⁵Nick Hart, Edward "Sandy" Davis, and Tim Shaw, "Evidence Use in Congress: Challenges for Evidence-Based Policymaking," vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, March 2018).

⁶There is no requirement compelling states to participate in Results for America's "State Standards of Excellence," and states that receive "credit" for a practice, policy, or program may be less inclined to continue reporting additional examples. Thus the analysis may underestimate the number of practices, policies, and programs in place, yet it remains the most comprehensive data on state-level evidence-based policymaking available.

⁷Elizabeth Farley-Ripple et al., "Building Capacity for Evidence-Informed Improvement: Supporting State and Local Education Agencies" (University of Delaware, October 2022).

⁸"To Overcome Challenges to Evidence-Based Policymaking States Need Outside Help," fact sheet (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts, September 12, 2022).

⁹"Illinois Seeks to Bolster Research-Based, Multicultural Programs through Freedom Schools Network," web page (EduRecoveryHub, 2022), <https://edurecoveryhub.org/practice/illinois-seeks-to-bolster-research-based-multicultural-programs-through-freedom-schools-network/>.

¹⁰Ohio Department of Education, "Data Insights: Ohio Students' Internet Connectivity and Technology Access," web page (May 9, 2022), <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Reset-and-Restart/Data-Insights-Ohio-Students-Internet-Connectivity>; Ohio Department of Education, "Data Insights: Early Signs of Recovery in the 2021–2022 School Year," web page (August 9, 2022), <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Research-Evaluation-and-Advanced-Analytics/Data-Insights/Early-Signs-of-Recovery-in-the-2021-2022-School-Year>.

¹¹Based on spring 2022 research by the Results for America team, leveraging SEA organizational charts and website reviews as the primary data source.

Adopt an evidence-based agenda as the means through which the board will overcome divisive decisions.

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