

Schools Can Help Every Student Succeed by Using Evidence-based Programs and Practices

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools must not only improve students' academic performance, but also create positive school climates, reduce bullying and other problem behaviors, and provide alternatives to discipline practices that remove children from the school. This daunting mandate recognizes that schools are well positioned to help all youth succeed. Compared to other public agencies, the education system is better equipped to provide supports to all children (and their families) regardless of their race/ethnicity, gender, income level, and disability status. Schools can also track individual students over time and ensure that those who are struggling receive assistance.

Educators know that schools should do more than focus on academics. Schools must also educate and promote the health and well-being of “the whole child.” School administrators and staff invest significant resources each year to promote student education, safety, health, and well-being. To address these needs, schools require additional resources and supports; without them, problems like bullying, harassment, and school shootings will continue.

As described in this brief, schools can enhance their efforts to prevent these problems and to help students succeed by implementing evidence-based programs and practices (EBPs). Dozens of EBPs have already been created and tested. They have been shown to improve students' academic performance and graduation rates, foster positive school climates, develop children's social-emotional learning skills, improve children's health, increase student safety, and reduce bullying. These EBPs are available and provide all the supports that schools need to implement them. To guide schools in using EBPs, this brief provides a roadmap for how schools can capitalize on these resources to enhance students' well-being, and offers recommendations for how schools can address barriers that may impede their use of EBPs.

A Roadmap for Implementing Evidence-based Programs and Practices in Schools

1. To implement EBPs, schools must know that they exist.

Many schools already deliver EBPs to students and their families; however, other schools are unaware that EBPs exist. For the use of EBPs to increase, school board members, administrators, and staff must learn that such resources are available and be persuaded to use them. But raising awareness of EBPs presents challenges because school officials can be overwhelmed by information about prevention programs and practices and may not know which strategies are effective and worth the investment.

Websites such as the [What Works Clearinghouse](#), the [Model Programs Guide](#), and the [Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development](#) help address these challenges. These sites provide information about specific EBPs that have been tested and shown to improve student academic achievement and help prevent problems like bullying, school violence, and substance use. Additionally, these websites provide contact information for developers and trainers so that school officials can learn more about the EBPs.

2. To produce positive outcomes, EBPs must be delivered as intended, in a supportive environment, and by trained staff.

EBPs are most effective when they are delivered as intended, and they may be ineffective when poorly implemented.¹ In this way, EBPs are similar to medications that are only effective when they are used as prescribed by doctors. When EBPs are delivered in classrooms, staff are often tempted to make changes to their delivery to fit the school schedule and context. However, to achieve the expected outcomes for students, all core activities of an EBP should be fully delivered “as prescribed.” To do so, school staff must select the appropriate students to participate, and implement all the required lessons, materials, content, and activities.

Communicating positive attitudes about EBPs also enhances their effectiveness. Teacher enthusiasm plays an important role in achieving the EBPs’ intended outcomes. Likewise, strong buy-in and support from administrators is needed to create a school-wide context that supports the high-quality delivery of EBPs.

School staff also require adequate preparation to feel confident and to implement EBPs as intended.² However, teacher preparation programs rarely include information about EBPs or how to appropriately use them. Fortunately, most developers of EBP programs offer initial training workshops, as well as ongoing coaching and feedback. These supports familiarize teachers with the specific content and delivery styles needed to effectively implement EBPs. They can also increase implementers’ confidence and ability to deliver EBPs, which translates into better outcomes for students. Unfortunately, schools may have limited days for in-service training, or they may lack resources to contract for such services; as a result, many teachers must try to implement EBPs without the benefit of training and coaching. For these reasons, funding and administrative support for professional development and coaching opportunities are greatly needed to ensure that staff can effectively deliver EBPs.

3. Schools should monitor and evaluate the delivery of EBPs as they do other school services and supports.

Schools routinely monitor and track individual student performance, but they rarely collect data on EBP implementation and desired outcomes. However, schools that deliver EBPs need to know whether what they are doing is working. Collecting and examining data on how EBPs are implemented, and whether desired changes are occurring, can help identify implementation problems early on, before they threaten effectiveness and schools’ investments in EBPs. By engaging in data-driven, continuous quality improvement, schools can improve implementation and increase benefits to students.

Yet many schools face substantial challenges to monitoring EBPs. School personnel may not know how to collect or analyze data about EBPs in real time so that they can quickly identify issues and implement solutions. In addition, just as schools may lack resources to deliver EBPs as intended, they may also lack training and funding for data collection and data-based decision making about EBPs. To maximize EBP effectiveness, schools may need assistance in building an infrastructure that facilitates the collection and use of EBP implementation data.

Recommendations for Building School Capacity to Implement Evidence-based Programs and Practices

EBPs can greatly increase schools’ potential to educate the whole child, but EBP use is not yet the norm. School personnel often do not know that EBPs exist, or they may lack the skills and resources necessary to effectively implement and monitor EBPs. Moreover, schools may attempt to embed EBPs in contexts that do not fully support EBP use. Here are three suggestions for addressing these barriers.

1. Develop partnerships between educators and organizations that provide training and support in how to select, implement, and sustain EBPs.

Resources such as the What Works Clearinghouse website provide user-friendly information about EBP effectiveness, but they rarely provide all the information school leaders need to know before they can implement an EBP (e.g., costs and delivery requirements). Moreover, the websites cannot help

schools decide which EBP, among all those listed, could best address the needs of their specific student populations and school contexts. While some program developers can provide assistance with these challenges and barriers, many lack the time and resources to work with all interested schools.

Fortunately, several intermediary organizations are available to bridge this gap between education research and practice.³ They include both non-profit and for-profit organizations, and they may operate out of universities or state/federal agencies. For example, the [State Implementation and Scaling up of Evidence-based Practices \(SISEP\) Center](#) at the University of North Carolina and the [Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support Center \(EPISCenter\)](#) at Pennsylvania State University both provide information, training, and consultation about EBPs. [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) provides consultation and guides⁴ designed to help schools select EBPs that can foster social and emotional learning. Also, the [Regional Educational Laboratory Program](#), overseen by the Institute of Education Sciences, works in partnership with schools to implement EBPs. All of these organizations seek to build schools' capacity to implement specific EBPs, as well as to create and use data systems to evaluate multiple EBPs. Administrators at all levels—from state departments of education, to district-level superintendents, and even school principals—can contact these organizations to learn more about their services supporting the effective delivery and evaluation of EBPs.

2. Increase school administrators and teachers' knowledge of and support for EBPs through pre-service teacher education programs and in-service training.

School administrators and teachers need formal training in how to choose and deliver EBPs. Graduate and pre-service programs should be enhanced to provide more information about EBPs as well as practice in implementing them. Educators working in diverse school settings also need greater access to resources that can support their delivery and evaluation of EBPs. This includes release time to attend trainings and receive coaching to effectively implement EBPs.

3. Ensure that school administrators create a supportive context by actively promoting EBPs, allowing teacher release time for training, and creating implementation teams.

Support from administrators is critical for the successful implementation and long-term use of EBPs. Leaders can authorize the use of an EBP and find funds to support it. Even if financial resources are limited, leaders can still take important actions to support EBPs. For example, during staff meetings, they can highlight the ways that EBPs will help address school needs and provide teachers with positive reinforcement for implementing EBPs as intended. In addition, leaders should create EBP implementation teams that include administrators, staff, parents, and students. As members of a team, these stakeholders can support each other, work together to collect data on EBP delivery, take collective action as needed to solve implementation challenges, and celebrate and publicize successes.⁵ To support these teams, administrators should allocate the resources that are necessary to collect EBP implementation data and evaluate progress made toward achieving desired outcomes.

William A. Aldridge II, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Catherine P. Bradshaw, University of Virginia

Allison Dymnicki, American Institutes for Research

Abigail A. Fagan, University of Florida

Melissa W. George, Colorado State University

Bonnie Leadbeater, University of Victoria

Nicholas Ialongo, Johns Hopkins University

For more information, please contact:

Jennifer Lewis

Society for Prevention Research

(703) 934 4850 ext. 3

References

1. Durlak, J. A. (2013). The importance of quality implementation for research, practice, and policy *ASPE Research Brief*. Washington, D.C. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
2. Crosse, S. B., Williams, B., Hagen, C. A., Harmon, M., Ristow, L., DiGaetano, R., et al. (2011). Prevalence and implementation fidelity of research-based prevention programs in public schools: Final report. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service.
3. Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231).
4. Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2013, 2015). *CASEL guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs. Preschool and Elementary school edition*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).
5. Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K. A., Metz, A., & Van Dyke, M. (2013). Statewide implementation of evidence-based programs. *Exceptional Children*, 79, 213-230.

Acknowledgments

This brief draws from a larger paper written by the Society for Prevention Research (SPR) Mapping Advances in Prevention Science (MAPS) IV Translation Research Task Force: Fagan et al. In press. Moving the Needle on Scaling-up Evidence-based Interventions in U.S. Public Systems: Challenges and Opportunities. *Prevention Science*. The Task Force was supported by the National Institute On Drug Abuse of the National Institutes of Health (NIH, R13DA033149), with co-funding from the NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, Office of Disease Prevention, Office of Research on Women's Health, National Cancer Institute, National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and the Administration for Children and Families and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention by trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.