

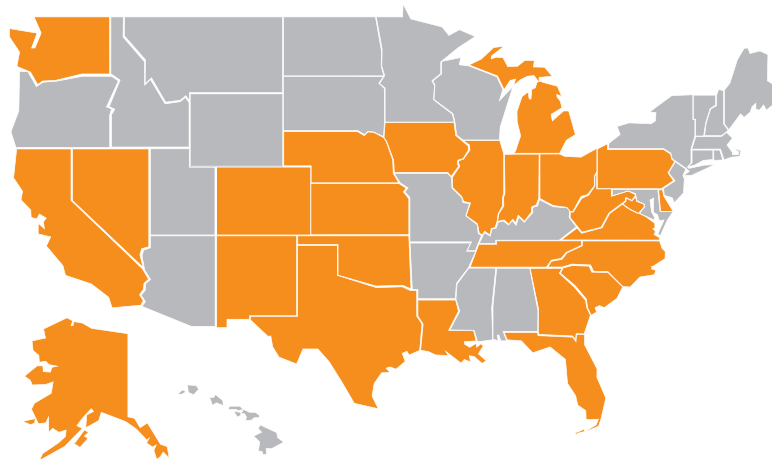
# UPHOLDING ESSA'S EVIDENCE-BASED REQUIREMENT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: THE ROLE OF A STATE

## Introduction

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national network of trained professionals working in public schools to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. CIS serves nearly 1.5 million students in almost 2,300 schools and nearly 400 school districts, helping to break the cycle of poverty by both increasing graduation rates and reducing dropout rates.

The heart of CIS's approach, which is supported by 13 independent research studies, is the concept of Integrated Students Supports, or wraparound services. Our unique model places trained site coordinators inside schools to identify at-risk students. Working with school leaders and community partners, the site coordinators provide these students with the services and supports – food, school supplies, health care, counseling, academic assistance, mentorship, guidance, etc. – needed for academic success. Because the majority of public school students today live in poverty, teachers see the need for these services daily. As many as 70 percent of teachers in CIS schools say they focus more on academic achievement because of supports provided by CIS. Of the young people who receive our individualized case management, 99 percent stay in school, and 93 percent of high school students graduate.

Communities In Schools Offices and Affiliates:  
25 States and D.C.



## Opportunities Under the Every Student Succeeds Act

CIS worked with advocates and Congressional leaders to pass the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed in December 2015 by President Obama. There are three key areas we urge states to maximize under ESSA. First, the law allows Title I and other federal funds to pay for Integrated Student Supports. Second, states must use indicators of school quality – such as chronic absenteeism – in their accountability systems, providing a more holistic view of performance. Third, the lowest-performing schools in each state must use “evidence-based interventions” as part of their improvement plans under the Title I set-aside for school improvement.

We applaud the move toward flexibility under ESSA. We appreciate that the first round of proposed guidance released in May by the U.S. Department of Education attempts to strike a balance between granting flexibility for states and upholding the law's legacy as a protector of education equity. As states start planning for ESSA implementation, we urge them, in particular, to implement the law's provisions on evidence-based interventions with strong technical assistance and a high bar for quality and fidelity to the law's intent.

## What are Evidence-Based Interventions?

The law's “evidence-based” definition stems from Sec. 8101(22). There are two categories of evidence, as noted in the table on page 2.

Interventions for school improvement – including for a state's lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools or high schools with a graduation rate below 67 percent – **must** meet the evidence tiers in Category 1, aligned with the results of the school's needs assessment. Some competitive grants in ESSA require Category 1-level evidence when reasonably available, while other grant opportunities and uses of funds permit Category 2 levels of evidence.

Proposed regulations are clear that interventions for the lowest-performing schools – through both “Comprehensive” and “Targeted” Support and Improvement, the two categories laid out in ESSA – must be evidence-based. The most recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Education does not further explain what constitutes evidence-based beyond the language in ESSA, which is why we believe states must be arbiters of quality to make sure students most in need receive the services that have the best track record of success.

## Tiers of Evidence in ESSA

### Category 1:

“demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on:”

### Category 2:

“demonstrates 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”

### 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”

Category 2 does not specify tiers, only: “includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.”

## How States Can Uphold the Evidence-Based Requirement

Requiring Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and schools to demonstrate that they are using evidence-based interventions as part of their school improvement strategies doesn't have to be burdensome. The draft regulations released by the Department hint strongly that states should create lists of evidence-based interventions allowed for school improvement, including those established by the state (for example, some states have legislation authorizing interventions such as extending the school day or year). Such a move would allow flexibility with guardrails for quality.

CIS believe that ESSA's school-improvement opportunities are chances for states to rethink their approaches, not simply continue what they did under the old School Improvement Grants. CIS believes states should use the evidence-based requirement as a way of ensuring that LEAs and schools get the biggest bang for their buck by considering the following:

## The Role of a State in Upholding ESSA's Evidence-Based Requirement

### ► Deciding the Evidence-Based Interventions

#### With a List

- State can decide which interventions it will accept (or use ones established by the state that exist in legislation or regulation). Consider setting some parameters, since the list of interventions claiming to have evidence will be long.
  - An external committee of thought partners can help the state determine the best process.
- State classifies all interventions in one of the three ESSA tiers in Category 1.
- State will have to decide how specific the intervention backed by the evidence base should be: For example, reducing class sizes overall vs. reducing class sizes in early elementary grades in schools with many low-income students.
  - State must be clear about quality and source of evidence, e.g., from universities, research institutions, think tanks, academic journals.
- If state wants vendors/partners to be approved for providing the interventions, they must show research aligned with one of the three ESSA tiers in Category 1 (could be through a new RFP)
  - State must consider whether it or other entities such as education service centers should provide the intervention.

#### Without a List

- State lets schools decide which interventions to use.
- State makes transparent the three ESSA evidence tiers in Category 1 with examples of the kind of research that qualifies for each.
- State requires schools to prove that their interventions (including those led by vendors or partners) fall into one of the three ESSA tiers in Category 1.
- Schools must undergo needs assessments to inform their school-improvement plans. Consider providing a template for those needs assessments that require schools to demonstrate how their interventions are evidence-based.



### ► Awarding Dollars

- State can redesign applications for school-improvement dollars to include demonstrations of evidence aligned with the ESSA tiers in Category 1.
- If awarding school-improvement dollars **competitively**, state gives more money to schools with higher levels of evidence for their proposed interventions.
- If awarding school-improvement dollars via **formula**, state could consider giving extra “add-on” funding tied to higher levels of evidence for their proposed interventions.

### ► Monitoring and Evaluation

- ESSA requires states to report which schools get school-improvement dollars, and for what intervention.
- ESSA also requires states to evaluate the quality of the interventions.
- The monitoring and evaluation functions have the potential to inform future interventions for low-performing schools in the state.
- Consider updating the list of evidence-based interventions after the interventions have had time to be implemented.

## Conclusion

One of the most significant shifts in ESSA is the commitment to the use of evidence to drive better outcomes for students. Implemented well, these evidence provisions can both improve student outcomes and increase the return on federal education investments by directing resources toward the programs and practices most likely to have a positive impact.

Regardless of whether the Department of Education clarifies the evidence tiers, it will be critical for states to uphold the evidence-based requirement in school interventions. Not only is it a prudent use of taxpayer funds, but it will ensure the interventions in low-performing schools have the strongest chance to succeed. States can take a number of steps as outlined above: They can create lists of evidence-based interventions, award greater amounts of funding to school improvement plans that demonstrate higher tiers of evidence, or ensure that intervention partners or providers can supply Category 1-levels of evidence before being used in schools.

