



Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

Recognizing the Role of Research and Evidence

What does “evidence-based” mean for afterschool and summer learning programs?

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In [Guide 1](#) in this series, we defined key terms you might see in the federal relief plans.

Research focuses on increasing knowledge through rigorously designed studies of implementation and outcomes and has historically prioritized a rigorous study design, with less emphasis on attainment of outcomes or the ways in which those outcomes are determined. We summarized the research in [Guide 2](#).

Evidence goes beyond a focus on rigorous study design to prioritize the extent to which outcomes are improving, for which students, and under which circumstances. Evidence is typically determined through rigorous and documented evaluations of impact; however, the criteria for evaluating these studies varies. **Evidence-based practices** are then identified using prior evidence from a well-designed study that has shown a specific practice to be effective in producing an intended outcome. In this guide, we explore what evidence-based means for afterschool and summer learning programs.

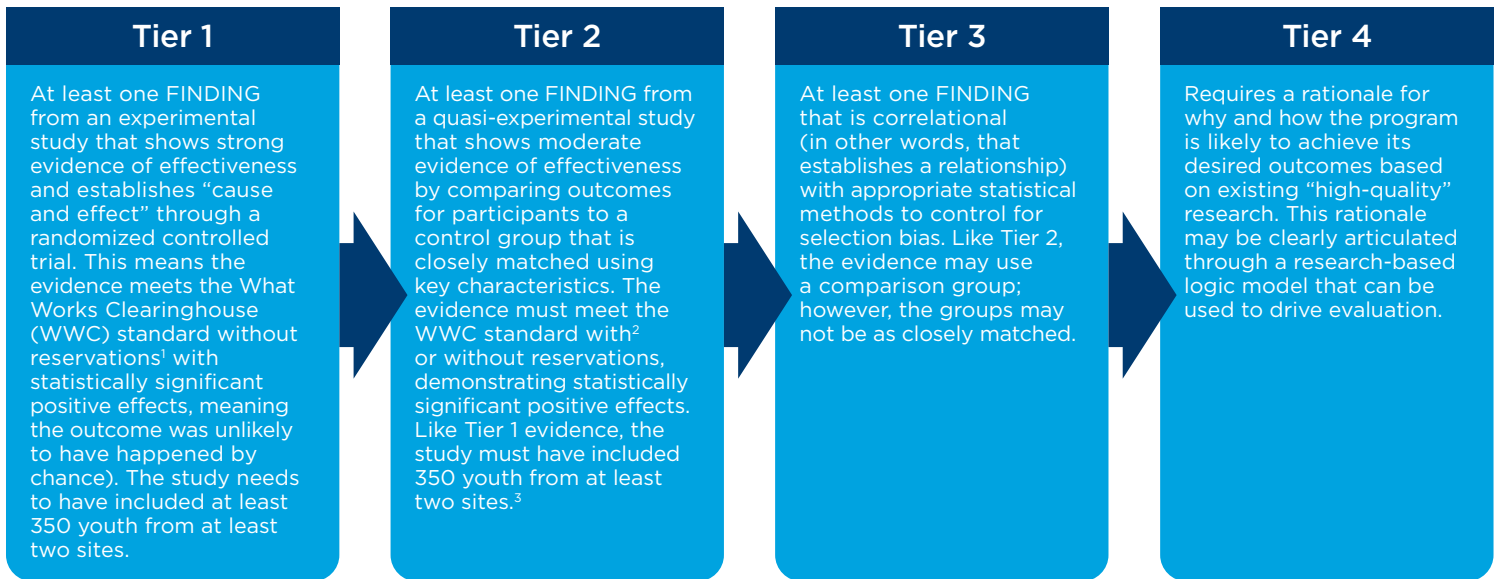
The American Rescue Plan Elementary Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) fund provides funding for state and local education agencies, childcare agencies, and the Corporation for National and Community Service through AmeriCorps to “help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the nation’s students” (view the [fact sheet](#) for more information). The U.S. Department of Education has encouraged the use of research and evidence in tandem with local voices, needs, and assets when planning for how they will use ARP ESSER funds. Evidence requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are designed to ensure that states, districts, and schools can identify programs, practices, products, and policies that work (i.e., produce intended outcomes) across various populations.

Understanding Evidence-Based Requirements and Standards

While the allocation of funds is left to the discretion of the states, one thing is clear: afterschool and summer programs must provide comprehensive programming that is evidence-based. Evidence requirements may vary from state to state and at the local level, however. For example, evidence requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are designed to ensure that states, districts, and schools can identify programs, practices, products, and policies that work (i.e., produce intended outcomes) across various populations and states may require afterschool and summer programs meet a specific level of evidence.

To determine the level of evidence based on the ESSA criteria, expert reviewers examine evaluations of programs using five factors: study design, study results, findings from related studies, study context (e.g., sample size, setting), and how the study context aligns with the local context for implementation. There are four tiers of evidence that range from the most rigorous (“strong,” Tier 1) to the least rigorous (“demonstrates a rationale,” Tier 4).

An Overview of the ESSA Tiers of Evidence



The Evidence-Base for Afterschool and Summer Programs Using the ESSA Tiers of Evidence

A [review by Neild et al. \(2019\)](#) summarizes “virtually all available evidence on the effectiveness of specific afterschool programs, based on a comprehensive literature search and review of studies published in 2000 or later” using the ESSA tiers of evidence. Neild and colleagues found a mix of more than 60 branded and unbranded programs with evidence of effectiveness meeting ESSA Tiers 1-3. They also note that effective programs exist for all grades and most program types. In a similarly focused [review of summer learning programs, McCombs et al. \(2019\)](#) found more than 40 summer programs with evidence of effectiveness meeting ESSA Tiers 1-3. Findings from this review suggest that, within the set of rigorously studied programs, summer programs can succeed in improving youth outcomes, but there is more promising (Tier 3) than strong (Tier 1) evidence.

¹ “Meets WWC Standards Without Reservations” usually means that a study was a randomized controlled trial that experts determined was well-designed and well-implemented.

² “Meets WWC Standards With Reservations” means that a study has some potential issues that require caution (e.g., an experimental design that was not well-designed or well-implemented or a strong quasi-experimental design).

³ Context matters: According to the WWC, “under ESSA, for a state/district/school to consider an intervention as a Tier 1 evidence-based practice, the setting AND samples from the studies used to determine the evidence tier must overlap with the population AND setting of the state/district/school interested in implementing the intervention. For a state/district/school to consider an intervention as a Tier 2 evidence-based practice, the setting OR the samples from the studies used to determine the evidence tier need to overlap with setting OR population.”

Ensuring Programs Are Well-Designed and Well-Implemented

What is most important—and what has been prioritized in the reopening guidance—is that programs are well-designed and well-implemented, leveraging the strong research and evidence for afterschool and summer programs. A logic model is one way to design a program for success and to demonstrate the research and evidence base.

Program design and implementation must begin with a foundation in local needs and voices to ensure that programming is comprehensive, supportive, and intentional. Then, **it is important to consider the evidence when making decisions about what will work for your program, your participants, and in your context.**

Many funding streams from the U.S. Department of Education, when implemented at the state and local levels, require a certain level of evidence and often align with the ESSA tiers of evidence.

- When evidence requirements specify Tiers 1–3 or evidence-based interventions, adopting a specific intervention with demonstrated evidence of effectiveness may be appropriate as part of the larger comprehensive program. Many state and local education agencies are providing a list of allowable curricula or are encouraging programs to consider evidence-based curricula as part of their programming model.
- In many cases, state and local education agencies will allow for evidence-based programming that meets at least the fourth ESSA tier of evidence. **The fourth ESSA evidence tier is designed to encourage innovation.** Tier 4 requires a “well-specified logic model that is based on rigorous research. In addition, an effort to study the effects of the program must already be planned or under way.” Most afterschool and summer learning programs can work toward Tier 4 evidence by creating a logic model that is grounded in the research and integrates, to the extent possible, evidence-based practices in consideration of local context and goals.

No matter the evidence requirements, a program’s logic model must describe why and how the program will improve outcomes and to establish a rationale for those expected improvements. The term “well-specified” means that this rationale is specific, measurable, and grounded in rigorous research.

Key Points to Remember:

- 1 The ESSA tiers of evidence are one way to categorize evidence, and these tiers are typically used for federal and state funding decisions. The required level of evidence will vary based on the funding source and decisions made at the state and local levels.
- 2 Tier 4 is not a catchall for anything that does not meet the requirements of Tiers 1–3. Blog posts, magazine articles, and books, for example, might give insight into potential strategies but will not provide sufficient information to review, describe, or evaluate the strategy.

What's next?

Guide 4 in this series provides strategies—including how to create a logic model—to leverage the historic investment in afterschool and summer programs. Use **Guide 4** along with this guide and **Guide 2** (which described what we know from decades of research on afterschool and summer learning programs) to ensure that programs are grounded in the research and driving toward the evidence.

References

- Augustine, C., McCombs, J., Unlu, F., Ziol-Guest, K., Naftel, S., Gomez, C., Marsh, T., Akinniranye, G., & Todd, I. (2019). *Investing in successful summer programs: A review of evidence under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2836.html
- Neild, R. C., Wilson, S. J., & McClanahan, W. (2019). *Afterschool programs: A review of evidence under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Research for Action. <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Afterschool-Programs-A-Review-of-Evidence-Under-the-Every-Student-Succeeds-Act.pdf>

Resources

- The Wallace Foundation. *Evidence-based considerations for COVID-19 reopening and recovery planning: Afterschool coordination systems to support afterschool programming*. <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/evidence-based-considerations-for-covid-19-reopening-recovery-planning-afterschool-coordination-systems.aspx>
- The Wallace Foundation. *Evidence-based considerations for COVID-19 reopening and recovery planning: Summer learning with academic and non-academic activities*. <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/evidence-based-considerations-covid-19-reopening-recovery-planning-summer-learning-with-academic-non-academic-activities.aspx>
- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. *What Works Clearinghouse*. <https://whatworks.ed.gov>



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