School Improvement under ESSA
About Ed Trust

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| The Education Trust works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels (pre-kindergarten through college), and closes opportunity and achievement gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from other youth. | Research and policy analysis on patterns and practices that both cause and eliminate inequities.  
Advocacy to share that knowledge and push for policies and practices that help to close gaps.  
Technical assistance to districts, states, and community-based organizations. |
Goals for our time together

• Share an overview of school improvement requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act

• Share key lessons learned from prior school improvement effort

• Discuss how school counselors can prompt schools to use data to identify problems – and evidence to solve them
Our school has been identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement

Our school has been identified for Targeted Support and Improvement

Our school has been identified for Additional Targeted Support and Improvement
And you might be wondering...

- What does this mean?
- What can I do?
- What happens next?
What is ESSA?

• The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 – or ESSA – is the latest version of the federal law that covers education.

• The law was first passed in 1965, and its previous version – No Child Left Behind – was passed in 2001.
Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act provides $15 billion dollars to schools and districts across the country (with more funding going to the highest poverty districts and schools).
In exchange for that funding, ESSA requires states to take certain steps to improve outcomes for historically underserved groups of students.
ESSA requires states to:

• **Measure** how all schools are doing for each group of students on multiple indicators

• **Assign ratings to schools** based on how they are doing on these measures for all groups of students.

• **Identify** schools that are really low-performing for all students, and those that are “consistently underperforming” for any student group for **support and improvement**.

• Provide, and require districts to provide **support** to schools that need to improve.
Which schools need to take action to improve?

**Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)**

Schools that are in the bottom 5% of Title I schools for all students, or have a graduation rate of 67% or lower

**Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI)**

Schools that are “consistently underperforming” for any groups of students, as defined by the state

**Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI)**

Schools that are doing especially badly for any group of students (ad badly as the bottom 5% of schools are for all students)
Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools (CSI; bottom 5%)

- Have to work with their district and community to
  - Conduct a needs assessment; and
  - Develop and implement an improvement plan that identifies and addresses resource inequities.
- The **district** is responsible for submitting the improvement plan to state for approval, and the state has to approve the plan.
- If the school doesn’t improve sufficiently in 4 years, the state has to take “more rigorous action.”

- These schools have to be identified every 3 years.
Targeted Support and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement Schools

- Have to work with their district and community to develop and implement an improvement plan.
  - ATSI schools’ improvement plans have to address resource inequities.
- The school is responsible for submitting the plan to the district, and the district has to approve the plan.
- If a TSI school doesn’t improve in a number of years, the district has to take additional action.
- If an ATSI school doesn’t make sufficient improvement in a number of years determined by the state, the state has to reclassify it as a Comprehensive Support and Improvement school, setting the same expectations and providing the same level of support as the lowest performing schools.
This is not the first time that federal law has required action in struggling schools.

What’s different this time?
Planning time: ESSA allows a full year for improvement planning.
Funding: ESSA requires states to set aside at least 7% of their Title I, Part A funds for school improvement.

7% “set-aside” = more than $1 billion nationally

But those are by no means the only resources that schools identified for improvement can – or should – use to support their efforts.
**Evidence:** ESSA requires that this money be used to support evidence-based interventions.

<table>
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| Based on at least one well-designed, well-implemented experimental study | Based on at least one well-designed, well-implemented quasi-experimental study | Based on at least one well-designed, well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias | • Based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that the intervention is likely to improve outcomes  
• Includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of the intervention |

Required for school improvement plans funded by the **7% set aside**
Resource allocation reviews: ESSA requires states, districts, and schools to identify resource inequities.
Stakeholder engagement: ESSA requires that states, districts, and school leaders engage stakeholders in each phase of the school improvement process.
Flexibility: ESSA empowers districts and schools to make far more decisions about school improvement than prior federal policy.
But remember...
Let’s be honest... Results of past improvement efforts have been, at best, mixed...
Many schools didn’t actually improve, even when they received generous funding.

1/3 School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools improved

2/3 School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools stayed same or got worse
To be clear: The lesson here is not that money does not matter.

Research – and common sense – tell us that it does.
The lesson here also is not that improvement can’t be done.

There are schools and districts that are making significant improvement.
But given the way many states, districts, and schools have approached improvement in the past ... lackluster results aren’t really surprising.
Lesson #1: Improvement has to start and end with data.

The improvement process should always ...

• Start with data on school and district-based causes of underperformance, so that leaders can identify appropriate improvement strategies.

• Continue with data on leading indicators and progress toward long-term goals.
Lesson #2: There is no single solution or quick fix.

• Improving schools involves a lot of people and a lot of moving parts.
• Changing just one thing – like buying a new curriculum – is unlikely to create lasting improvement.
• Improvement takes time ... but there should be measurable progress.
Lesson #3: Evidence matters. So does context and implementation.

• We know a lot about what works.
• But just because a particular program or intervention improved student outcomes in one place doesn’t mean it will work in all schools with all students.
Lesson #4: Improving schools requires input and support from a diverse set of stakeholders.

• Too often, decisions about school improvement have been made to – rather than with – low-income communities and communities of color.

• Families and community members have a lot to offer as partners in the work of improving schools.
School counselors are uniquely positioned to advocate for the interest of students in the school improvement process.
Opportunity to get involved:
Join a school improvement committee!
Push for meaningful family and community engagement

Keep data and evidence at the center of the improvement conversation

Keep a razor-sharp focus on equity.

DATA → KNOWLEDGE → ACTION
How many of your students learn about the scientific method every year?

- Ask a question
- Gather information and make a hypothesis
- Test your hypothesis and collect results
- Analyze your results and present your conclusion
A logical approach to school improvement has a lot in common with the scientific method.

**Scientific Method**
- Ask a question
- Gather information and make a hypothesis
- Test your hypothesis and collect results
- Analyze your results and present your conclusion

**Logical School Improvement Process**
- Identify the challenge
- Review evidence and propose strategies
- Implement strategy, closely monitoring results
- Analyze results and adjust strategy as needed
But past improvement efforts have suffered from a **number of challenges**, including...
Challenge 1: “Solutionitis”

- Logical school improvement process
- Identify the challenge
- Review evidence and propose strategies
- Implement strategy, closely monitoring results
- Analyze results and adjust strategy as needed

i.e. Skipping this step entirely
Challenge 2: The Analytic Vortex

- Identify the challenge
- Review evidence and propose strategies
- Implement strategy, closely monitoring results
- Analyze results and adjust strategy as needed

i.e. Getting stuck here permanently
Challenge 3: Programmatic Fads

Ignoring what we do know from research and evidence

1. Identify the challenge
2. Review evidence and propose strategies
3. Implement strategy, closely monitoring results
4. Analyze results and adjust strategy as needed

Logical school improvement process
Challenge 4: The Black Box Syndrome

- Identify the challenge
- Review evidence and propose strategies
- Implement strategy, closely monitoring results
- Analyze results and adjust strategy as needed

Failure to monitor implementation and results
These challenges undermine improvement efforts in many ways.
School counselors can play a role in avoiding each of these challenges.
Countering Solutionitis

Solutionitis
Analytic Vortex
Programmatic Fads
Black box syndrome
School counselors can help make sure that the improvement process always starts with data.

And not just any data...
Just looking at achievement data and student demographics isn’t enough.

Apple Middle School
700 students
90% low-income
80% Latino
20% English learners
Schools and districts need to look at measures of opportunity to learn, including:

- Course offerings
  - Advanced courses in core academic subjects
  - Arts and career/technical education
- Student assignment to teachers and courses
- Rigor of classroom assignments
- Student and parent surveys
- Discipline data by type of offense
- Kindergarten readiness measures in elementary school... and so on
Looking at overall averages is not enough
School counselors can play a critical role by asking **equity-focused questions** that may not get asked in their absence.
What percent of students in our school were suspended out of school at least once this year?

How does the percent of students suspended in this school compare to other schools in the district? In the state?

Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities and/or English learners at this school more or less likely to be suspended? By how much?
In fact, here’s the thing:

If you start with disaggregated data and an equity focus, you will likely unearth general challenges in your school.

But if you start with schoolwide averages and general challenges... you may never get to equity.
Continuing with our discipline example...

Knowing that 35% of Black students and 10% of White students were suspended

Will eventually lead someone to ask...

What’s going on with our code of conduct?

Knowing that 20% of all students were suspended

May never lead to a question

About implicit bias among staff
Let’s try it!

**General Question**

What percent of students in our school participated in at least one advanced course last year?

**Question about between-school inequities**

?

**Question about within-school inequities**

?
Countering the Analytic Vortex
School counselors can push for a focus on things the school can control.

• One symptom of the vortex is blaming of students or the community, or focusing on things that schools can’t control.

• You can help redirect that conversation back to what schools can do.
For example...

If you hear: “Our students aren’t prepared for advanced courses.”

Ask: “How can we structure the master schedule to help students who are behind catch up?”

If you hear: “Our kids are coming to school hungry.”

Ask: “Can our district provide free breakfast and lunch to all students?”
Let’s try it!

If you hear: “So many kids are late everyday ... or they don’t even show up to school.”

What could you ask?
Move the conversation from problem to action by asking questions about what the state, district or school plans to do about the identified challenge.
Countering Programmatic Fads

Solutionitis

Analytic Vortex

Programmatic Fads

Black box syndrome
“Years and years of trying, and we still know nothing about how to improve schools...”
There is actually a lot of research out there on what works – and ESSA requires schools and districts to use it.
Some resources to keep in mind…

But remember: You do not have to be an expert to ask about research and evidence.
KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION

1. What interventions has the school tried in the past and what were the results?
2. Why does the district or school think the proposed intervention will work?
3. How will the district or school plan for and implement the intervention?
4. How will district or school leaders know if this approach is working?
5. What will district or school leaders do if it doesn’t work, and when?
KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION

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4. How will district or school leaders know if this approach is working?

5. What will district or school leaders do if it doesn’t work, and when?
Why do you think the proposed strategy/intervention will work?

- Strategy addresses the problem
- Intervention is different from what district/school is already doing
- Concrete research behind strategy
- Evidence strategy has worked in similar settings
Let’s try it!

Imagine you work in a struggling elementary school where only 10% of students are on grade level in reading and 30% of students are chronically absent. School leaders decide to adopt a new curriculum that the principal saw at a recent conference.

There are no studies on the curriculum, but teachers at the very wealthy, high-performing school in another part of the state love it.

Does the solution match the problem?  
Is it different from what the school is already doing?  
Is there concrete research behind it?  
Is there evidence that the strategy worked in a similar setting?
Challenge 4: The Black Box Syndrome

Solutionitis

Analytic Vortex

Programmatic Fads

Black box syndrome
Can you imagine scientists starting an experiment before making sure they have supplies on hand?

Or conducting an experiment and not collecting data?
In education, we do this
ALL THE TIME
Black Box Syndrome

Questions to always ask about implementation...

Who is responsible for what?

What support/training will we provide teachers? How often?

How much will it cost? Where will the money come from?

What are challenges we are likely to encounter? What’s our plan for overcoming them?
Let’s try it!

Thanks in part to your advocacy, your school has decided to implement an evidence-based practice for increasing attendance: two-way texting to remind parents about school events, notify them if their child misses school, and invite them to engage with teachers.

What questions would you ask your school’s leaders about how they will implement this new initiative? As a school counselor, what can you do to support more effective implementation?
And then there’s the twin to the “why do you think it will work” question ... we talked about earlier:

why do you think it will work?  
How will you know if it’s working?
Black Box Syndrome

How will you know if the strategy/intervention is working?

Clear, numeric measures of success – both long term and short-term

All data disaggregated by student group

Feedback loops with staff, students and families

Clear timeline for decisions to modify/change intervention
Questions?