

EBITE RESOURCE GUIDE

RG02a Understanding ESSA Levels 1 and 2 Interventions

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to provide a general overview of the ESSA Tiers of Evidence (“ESSA Levels”) used to evaluate Evidence-Based Interventions—with a focus on Levels 1 and 2.

How to Use This Guide

Review this guide if you are new to using EBIs and the ESSA evidence framework or if you simply need a refresher before you start your school improvement work.

Overview of the ESSA Tiers of Evidence (“ESSA Levels”)

The ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) is a U.S. federal law that governs K-12 education policy and emphasizes evidence-based practices to improve educational outcomes for all students. Under ESSA, Evidence-Based Interventions (EBIs) are categorized into four tiers (or levels) based on their level and type of evidence determined via research studies conducted on the interventions. These tiers are known as “ESSA Levels” (see Figure 1) and educators can use this framework to help select EBIs that would align best to the SMART goals they have identified based on needs assessment.

UNDERSTANDING THE ESSA TIERS OF EVIDENCE				
	TIER 1 Strong Evidence	TIER 2 Moderate Evidence	TIER 3 Promising Evidence	TIER 4 Demonstrates a Rationale
Study Design	Well-designed and implemented experimental study, meets WWC standards without reservations	Well-designed and implemented quasi-experimental study, meets WWC standards with reservations	Well-designed and implemented correlational study, statistically controls for selection bias ^a	Well-defined logic model based on rigorous research
Results of the Study	Statistically significant positive effect on a relevant outcome	Statistically significant positive effect on a relevant outcome	Statistically significant positive effect on a relevant outcome	An effort to study the effects of the intervention is planned or currently under way
Findings From Related Studies	No strong negative findings from experimental or quasi-experimental studies	No strong negative findings from experimental or quasi-experimental studies	No strong negative findings from experimental or quasi-experimental studies	N/A
Sample Size & Setting	At least 350 participants, conducted in more than one district or school	At least 350 participants, conducted in more than one district or school	N/A	N/A
Match	Similar population <i>and</i> setting to your setting	Similar population or setting to your setting	N/A	N/A

a. Findings from experimental and quasi-experimental studies that either (a) meet the first three criteria for Tiers 1 and 2 but not the sample size, setting, or match requirements, or (b) do not meet WWC standards but statistically control for selection bias between the treatment and comparison groups are also eligible to meet Tier 3 Promising Evidence.

Figure 1: Chart explaining the ESSA Tiers of Evidence and the five criteria educators should examine to determine if it aligns with established SMART Goal(s). Source: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/blogs/RELMW-ESSA-Tiers-Video-Handout>

What are ESSA Level 1 and 2 Interventions?

EBIs categorized as Levels 1 and 2 are deemed to have the strongest evidence for effectiveness based on a review of findings from experimental research (Level 1) or quasi-experimental research (Level 2) conducted on the intervention.

In addition to meeting the study design criteria, Level 1 and 2 interventions must meet the four other criteria as shown in Figure 1. It is important to note that the educators who are evaluating the intervention should pay close attention to the last criterion to determine if the EBI should be considered—the population studied and the setting in which the study took place. If your team determines that the research on the EBI was conducted using a population and setting that matches your target population and setting, this makes for a very strong alignment of the EBI to your local needs.

ESSA Level 1: Strong Evidence

Interventions with this designation have been supported by strong evidence from well-conducted experimental studies, such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs). These studies demonstrate a statistically significant and meaningful positive impact on student outcomes, and their effectiveness has been proven through rigorous research.

ESSA Level 2: Moderate Evidence

Interventions with this designation have evidence from quasi-experimental studies or other research designs that provide moderate support for their effectiveness. While the evidence may not be as strong as in Level 1, it still suggests a positive impact on student outcomes.

To Remember

It's important to note that, in terms of rigorous research evidence, ESSA Levels 1 and 2 are usually most desirable for evidence-based interventions when making decisions about education policies, funding allocations, and program implementations in school improvement efforts. These levels prioritize interventions that have a solid research base and have demonstrated positive effects on student learning and achievement. However, Level 1 and 2 interventions are not always the best for every context. These EBIs are sometimes costly or require certain contextual attributes (e.g., human resources, materials, culture, etc.) that some settings may not have readily available for effective implementation. Also, there are many EBIs that just have not been researched enough to be categorized as Level 1 or 2. In these cases, it is a great idea to look for Level 3 or 4 EBIs that may be a better fit for your needs.

Resources

Brief REL Midwest, American Institutes for Research Handout explaining ESSA Tiers of Evidence and their determining factors: [ESSA Tiers of Evidence: What You Need to Know](#)

What Works Clearinghouse Website explaining ESSA Tiers 1 and 2 and how to use information on WWC to identify interventions within those tiers: [Using the WWC to Find ESSA Tiers of Evidence](#)

Institute of Education Sciences Video (5:46) explaining the four ESSA tiers of evidence and how schools and districts can utilize them to assess interventions: [Understanding the ESSA Tiers of Evidence](#)