

State Models for Selecting Evidence-Based Practices for School Improvement

Background

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that schools identified by states as in need of comprehensive or targeted support and improvement utilize evidence-based practices (EBPs) in their improvement plans. Specifically, use of Title I, Part A school improvement funds is tied to the use of strategies or practices that meet the three highest thresholds for evidence defined in ESSA. ESSA also requires or encourages the use of evidence-based plans or programs for a number of other programs, such as Title II programs related to supporting effective instruction. To address the ESSA requirements for school improvement, states are planning a variety of approaches to helping their districts and schools select evidence-based practices for implementation. In addition, they may take different approaches to defining an evidence-based practice.

This document provides a brief, general framework for approaches to (1) defining EBPs and (2) supporting districts and schools in identification and selection of EBPs. For each topic, we provide a short discussion of potential benefits and challenges and offer some reflection questions for states to consider when determining an approach.

Defining EBPs

ESSA defines “evidence-based” as referring to:

“An activity, strategy, or intervention that –

(i) demonstrates a *statistically significant effect* on improving student outcomes or other *relevant outcomes* based on –

strong evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study;

moderate evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented *quasi-experimental study*; or

promising evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias; or

(ii) *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*; and

(II) includes ongoing efforts to *examine the effects* of such activity, strategy, or intervention.”

As states implement ESSA’s definition of “evidence-based,” they will need to determine criteria for each of these evidence levels—for example, the law does not define what a “well-designed and well-implemented” study means.¹

However, studies may provide information on activities that vary in terms of their specificity or who would need to carry them out, including the following examples:

- Programs or interventions for subgroups of students, such as struggling readers
- Programs or interventions for individual classrooms, grade levels, or schools, such as a particular mathematics curriculum
- General approaches to school improvement, such as a focus on school leadership

States may need to consider carefully how they are thinking about these different types of activities and what this means for what it requires in LEA applications or plans. Being clear about how such activities can lead to improvement (through a logic model, for example) is likely to be more important in situations where the activities are less well-specified.

Questions to Consider

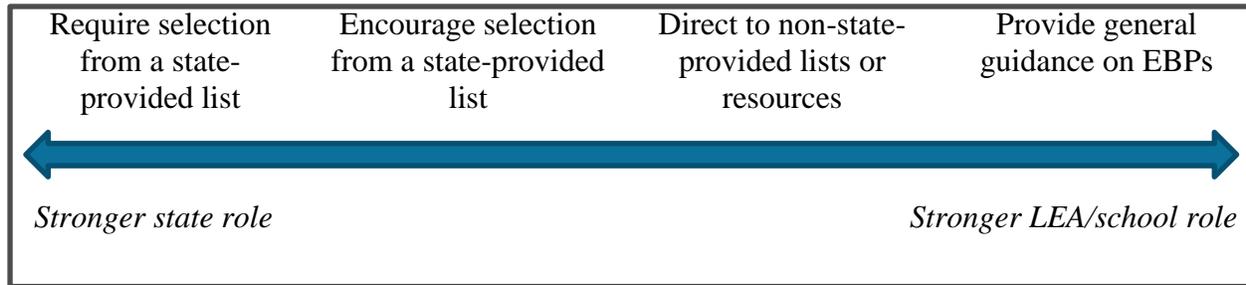
How will your state define EBPs? What types of activities will the state consider to implement evidence-based provisions? What are the implications of this approach in terms of necessary information or resources to support it?

Supporting Identification and Selection of EBPs

With respect to approaches to supporting selection, state approaches can range in terms of the role of the SEA in guiding what interventions and practices LEAs and schools select, as well as in the methods that states will use to support selection and implementation. As shown in Figure 1, states may provide very strong direction or prescription, for example by requiring selection of EBPs from a state-provided list. Alternatively, states may provide only general guidance, leaving LEAs and schools with a stronger role in interpreting ESSA provisions and selecting EBPs. Approaches can also range along this continuum, with the state encouraging selection from a state-provided list, or directing LEAs and schools to non-state-developed resources or lists. States may also blend these approaches or take multiple approaches – for instance, both offering a curated, state-provided list and directing LEAs and schools to external resources. The type of approach states take may vary based on a variety of factors, such as historical practice in implementation of school improvement and state roles, as well as state and district size and capacity. Each of these approaches may offer benefits and challenges. For example, offering districts more flexibility in selecting interventions may allow them to choose practices that best meet their identified needs or contexts; however, many districts may find it challenging to evaluate evidence for particular practices. Similarly, offering a list may make initial selection easier, but could discourage district capacity-building or buy-in or create potential for mismatches in selecting interventions that best meet needs.

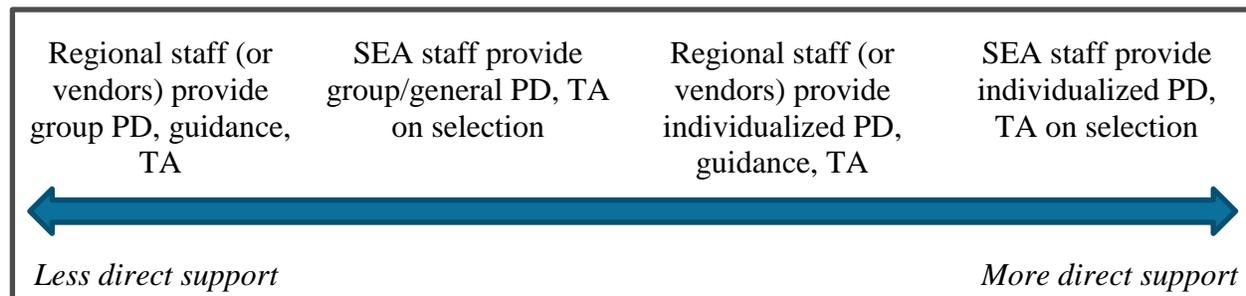
¹ To assist states, the U.S. Department of Education has [provided non-binding guidance](#) that recommends criteria for each of these evidence levels.

Figure 1. State role in selection of evidence-based practices



Similarly, states may vary in terms of how they plan to support selection and implementation of EBPs, as shown in Figure 2. Some SEAs may provide more direct support in selection, for example by offering individualized technical assistance to districts as they consider their plans. Other states may rely more on a train-the-trainer type of approach using regional staff or vendors to provide one-on-one assistance. Alternatively, states may provide less individualized and direct support, offering general guidance or support to relevant districts and schools through vendors or other non-SEA staff. Again, the type of approach states take may vary based on the state’s existing system of supports and capacity, and may offer different benefits and challenges. More direct support could help build capacity and ensure consistency among LEA plans, but may be difficult for a state to carry out. Less direct support could also offer opportunities to build capacity more broadly and/or be more feasible in terms of state staff capacity. As with selection of EBPs, states may of course also blend or take multiple different approaches— for instance, offering direct support to a small number of prioritized districts and less direct support to others.

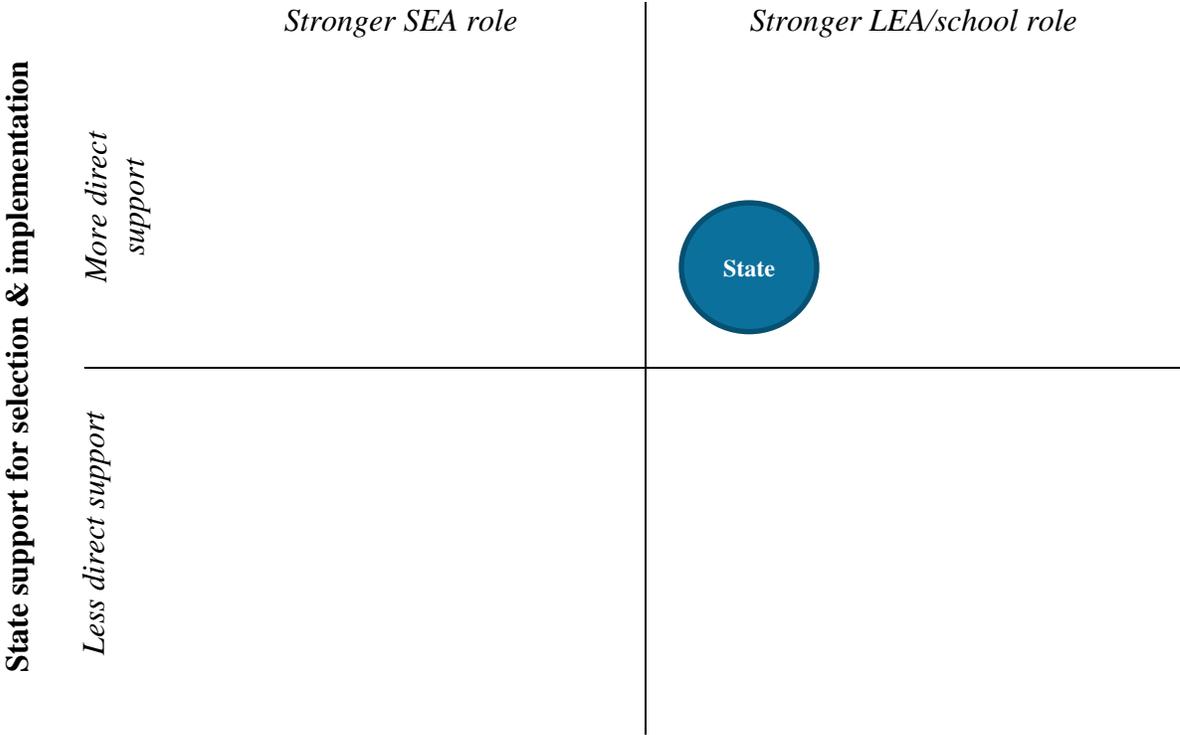
Figure 2. State support for selection and implementation



Questions to Consider

Where does your state fit? What are the implications of this approach in terms of necessary resources, engagement, longer-term capacity building, implementation, or other factors?

State role in selection of evidence-based practices





Massachusetts Profile

Basic Background Information¹

Elementary and Secondary Education Characteristics and Finance

Total Number of District & Schools: 402 Districts, 1,854 Schools (2015-16)

Approximate Number of Schools Previously Identified for Improvement: 65 schools total since 2011, 57% have exited.

Total Students: 953,758 (2015-16), 17% SWD, 9.5% ELL, 45% “High Needs,” 30% Economically Disadvantaged

Total Title I Allocations from FY 2015: \$231,735,292

Evidence-Based Practices Information

General Approach to Evidence-Based Practices

Massachusetts has a history of investing in research to see if their programs work, e.g. DESE funded two third party, external turnaround evaluations that showed positive gains. The practices described in this work (general principles for what works in turnaround like focus on instruction, safe supportive climate, etc) will continue to be pursued. Massachusetts’ Framework for District Accountability and Assistance classifies schools and districts on a five-level scale, with the highest performing in Level 1 and lowest performing in Level 5. [State law](#) requires that districts with a Level 4 school develop a Turnaround Plan for the school. A Turnaround Plan requires Level 4 districts and schools to identify priority areas and strategic initiatives at both the school and district level, aligned to the research-based findings in the [Turnaround Practices in Action](#) report ([see also info at state’s website on their framework for accountability and assistance](#)). This plan takes the place of any existing school improvement plan and becomes the basis for any federal grant funding. Level 5 is the most serious category in Massachusetts’ accountability system, representing receivership. District Turnaround Receivers are individuals or non-profit organizations that manage and operate chronically underperforming (Level 5) districts.

Planned Support for LEAs and Schools

Broadly speaking, they will take a similar approach to targeted/comprehensive schools as they did for turnarounds previously; they created a highly competitive funding process involving (for example) multiple readers of proposals, plus facilitators to reconcile readers’ proposal scores. The idea was to target significant amounts of funds to schools that are both Level 4 and ready for a significant turnaround effort.

Not sure exactly what they will require of LEAs in terms of applications and in terms of EBPs yet, but are working toward including clear requests for EBPs in any Federal allocation grants where ESSA EBPs language applies and state RFPs and documentation. Not sure what “pre-application” supports may look like yet exactly.

¹ Based on info from SEA website and ED website

The state's supports to identified schools will include direct support from ESE staff and also external partners, who ESE vets on behalf of districts; other structural changes such as Innovation Zone schools as well (and direct state takeover in extreme cases).

Massachusetts has a set of data and tools they encourage districts to use to support performance monitoring (including a new set around budget).

Biggest Challenge with Evidence-Based Practices

One challenge is a strategic one about how to organize the work of the agency to support EBPs outside of school turnaround/school improvement. They plan to try to work within the agency to make sure any competitive grant programs include research and evaluation that would result in more documentation of EBPs. MA has a research office and some capacity to internally manage work. They won't necessarily fund other big studies like the previous ones they did on turnaround because they have limited funds for evaluation and findings of the last evaluation were positive, and in the words of the external evaluators, "so conclusive." ESE is focused instead on developing and executing a strategic plan to build infrastructure for agency internal and district facing EBPs work on an ongoing basis. There is some question about how best to do this – for example, recent blog by Kane talks about an external approach through partnerships with researchers; another piece (by D. Harris) talks about a more internal approach – building capacity within agency.

Massachusetts Webinar Preparation Questions

State Definition of EBPs

How is the state defining EBPs? At the classroom, program, school level? Grain size? For all students or subgroups? What is an example of what the state might consider an acceptable EBP?

Massachusetts is interested in using ESSA as an opportunity to promote the generation and use of evidence in general, not just where it is required under ESSA. Given the context of MA – large number of districts, extremely strong culture of local LEA control, and large SES (approximately 500 staff members) – MA is focusing on promoting evidence-based strategies (rather than specific interventions) for turnaround schools. Specifically, the School Redesign Grants (known federally as SIG), have a state specific evidence base from the results of a Comparative Interrupted Time Series (CITS) that demonstrates positive significant outcomes for the way in which ESE manages its SIG competitive grant process overall. This means that the way in which the state has implemented SIG has, on average, resulted in significantly positive results for those schools. In this example, EBP is defined as a general approach to school improvement based on four specific turnaround principals. For targeted support and intervention schools (versus comprehensive turnaround) research is currently underway to determine if specific strategies are more or less helpful for students with disabilities and students who are English Language Learners. In addition, targeted support schools (like turnaround schools) are encouraged to work with partners that have gone through a state vetting process.

State role in selection of EBPs

What is the state's role in or approach to EBP selection? Does the state plan to provide a list of approved EBPs from which LEAs/schools can or must choose? Or provide general guidance on what EBPs are? Or refer to external resources or lists? Another approach? What do you see as the benefits and challenges to this approach?

The state will absolutely NOT be providing a list of approved EBPs due to the local control nature of the state as well as the number and variety of district needs. We will may be providing references to external lists and possibly providing general guidance on what EBPs are to districts. We are worried that those external lists may focus too much on interventions that are at a very small grain size. We're interested in promoting coherence as well as evidence use, and using one intervention that happened to have a positive statistically significant effect won't be helpful to the turnaround process if it doesn't fit into the overall plan for improving schools. However, the process of issuing guidance can be long. So whether and how that occurs is yet to be decided. One possibility is to develop an "EBP Road Show," a presentation that can be conducted both in person and via webinars to key constituencies. It's also possible that OPR staff might be available to consult to districts, though capacity may not allow for this. Additionally, we imagine that other than our school turnaround strategies, the state's greatest points of leverage will be through the agency's other grants to LEAs and schools. Hence, program leads within the agency will both need to be trained on EBP as well as determine whether or not applicant districts and schools, etc... meet which level of EBP as defined by ESSA. Some of our early thinking has focused on how to implement the language in Title II-A and Title IV – starting with commissioning two policy briefs – one for Title II-A and one for Title IV to summarize the

literature and its applicability to MA. At some point in the future these grant applications will likely be revised to include requirements for evidence based practices but not for 17-18; ESE plans to discuss with LEAs before doing this. ESE's Office of Planning and Research has a consultant and review process for all surveys that go out of the agency and one thought is to institute a similar process for all requests for proposals that grant funds from the state to districts/schools. Strategic planning regarding how to negotiate more and better evidence collection, is in its early stages within the agency. We imagine beginning in the agency first, perhaps with conversations with program staff about what guidance and assistance would be helpful for them. These two approaches have the benefit of including the key individuals who will be affected, inside and outside the agency. One major challenge is the potential pushback from internal and external stakeholders as well as the limited capacity OPR has to work directly with districts. Knowing how to best start in a large agency is also a challenge.

Who in the agency is responsible for determining the state role, creating lists, guidance, or other documents, and or determining what are EBPs? How is the state agency team organized to support EBPs? What other organizations (if any), such as a REL, comprehensive center, or other external partner, are working with the state?

Broadly, two staff members from the Office of District and School Turnaround, and one or two staff members from our Title I office and staff in the Office of Planning and Research, lead by Carrie Conaway, the agency's Chief of Planning and Research (OPR). More specifically, I, as the agency's Research and Evaluation Coordinator have individual responsibility for creating the agency's EBPs strategic plan. Other support will come from at least one other ESE research staff member, though in what capacity is still to be decided. In addition, we have a strategic planning group and they will be consulted for assistance with the roll out of any plan. We are working with no other organizations.

How will the state support selection of EBPs? How will information and/or technical assistance be provided to LEAs/schools to help them select appropriate EBPs? Will the state provide support directly with SEA staff, with vendors, through regional staff, etc?

The state will provide support directly with SEA staff to both individual LEAs (e.g., in feedback on applications for RFPs) and in groups (e.g., in "road show" like presentations to key stakeholders). The hope is that MA will provide both general and (some) direct support for selection and implementation of EBPs but with a stronger LEA role in selection of evidence-based strategies (i.e., putting MA in the upper right quadrant of the schematic).

How will the state differentiate supports in selecting EBPs for different districts (e.g. rural, small), if at all?

The state will differentiate between those schools that have to implement EBPs because they are identified as turnaround schools (1) and those schools that are not identified (2) or are identified for targeted assistance (3). We do plan to support all three of these groups However, we also anticipate that EBPs selection and use will range given the variation in the sizes and contexts of districts.

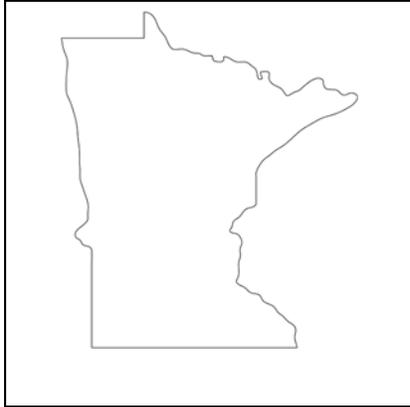
How will the state approve EBPs? What will the application process look like (e.g. what information will be requested from LEAs and schools)?

The current thinking is that the application process will be included in the federal grant programs and their support materials where use of evidence is required (i.e., Title I, IIa, etc...). We're interested in supporting both the generation and use of evidence based strategies

How is the state considering situations where either plans don't seem to include EBPs or it isn't clear there are EBPs?

Good question. In these cases, I imagine that federal formula grant applicants would receive feedback from SEA staff during the application process. Title I formula grant applications are usually read by two ESE staff members – EBPs would be included in the look fors during this review process. Depending on the application process, ESE staff members are sometimes in a position to conduct some back and forth with districts in order to arrive at a mutual agreement before grants are conferred. We'll know more about this in the next couple of weeks.

What specific challenges or questions does the state have with respect to their work and what feedback could peers provide? Frankly, with such a large agency, knowing where to start has been challenging. The agency does broadly have a good culture of using research; however, using EBP represents a new cultural shift that needs to be managed in the agency. How to go about training RFP leads on how to include EBP in their RFPs is unclear. With regard to district facing OPR has never issued guidance to districts before. Again, the strategic plan development is in its early stages and whether and how OPR would go about that is unknown at this time.



Minnesota Profile

Basic Background Information¹

Elementary and Secondary Education Characteristics and Finance

Total Number of Districts & Schools: 2,052 schools, 497 districts (328 traditional districts; 169 charter schools, 2015-16)

Approximate Number of Schools Previously Identified for Improvement: 154 (Focus and Priority, 2015-16)

Total Students: 842,932 (2015-16); about 15% special education, 8% ELL, 39% FRL Eligible

Total Title I Allocations from FY 2015: \$148,648,596

School Improvement & Evidence-Based Practices Information²

General Approach to Evidence-Based Practices

Minnesota will continue with their existing school improvement model, supported by Title I funds, and plans to update this model to better incorporate EBPs. They will rely on regional centers to provide on-the-ground support. School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding was distributed through a competitive process to schools in four districts, two of which are large enough to have their own system of support which mimics the statewide system and relies on MDE technical assistance. In response to requests received from stakeholders during engagement/feedback sessions, MDE plans to produce a non-exhaustive list of EBPs. MN is working with the Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) to help identify EBPs at the school and district level, and also has a team working on identifying EBPs at the classroom and program level. MDE has also asked the REL-Midwest to review existing tools (e.g., math and reading toolboxes) already used for school improvement to assess their level of evidence. Finally, they are working on some guidelines to help schools and districts with how to consider practices that don't appear on the EBP lists.

Planned Support for LEAs and Schools

Regional centers will support LEAs and schools, making use of implementation science tools already in place (e.g., hexagon tool), to help districts identify fit and feasibility of EBPs they are selecting or exploring. Additional support will be provided to schools identified for improvement.

MDE is hoping to produce guidance and tools for districts to think about EBPs, drawing upon the REL-West tool. They are now in the preliminary stages of producing a EBP list, with a goal of completing the list by early in the 2017-18 school year, after which they hope to flesh out the larger system in which the list "lives" before the summer of 2018.

¹ Based on info from SEA website and ED website

² Based on conversation with SEA representatives

Challenges with Evidence-Based Practices

MDE really wants to emphasize the importance of the selection of EBPs as part of a continuous improvement process, and encourage LEAs to select EPBs that align with identified needs based on a comprehensive needs assessment. They are also concerned with successful implementation of EPBs. All agree that ensuring effective use of the list is critical and a list by itself would not lead to change.

Finally, MDE is grappling with initial development of an EBP list in a few ways:

- There are many different “grain sizes” of EBPs.
- They hope to balance the need for rigor (the extent to which there is rigorous evidence of effectiveness of the given EBP) with practicality.
- They want to keep the EBP list up to date and continue to add to it – e.g., by collecting evidence of effectiveness, starting with evidence of implementation.

Minnesota Webinar Preparation Questions

State Definition of EBPs

How is the state defining EBPs? At the classroom, program, school level? Grain size? For all students or subgroups? What is an example of what the state might consider an acceptable EBP?

Question for other states: What if the grain size of the practices was large?

Ideal type of practice: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (**tiered framework for behavioral practices**): Defined, tools to measure, state expectation, and resources to implement

Based on the ideal above: Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) (**tiered framework for instructional practices**): Defined, one tool to measure. The agency advocates the use of MTSS to increase the number of students meeting grade-level standards and graduating with skills for further education and work careers. Districts may say they are doing it, but what evidence (implementation data) do they have to prove it?

- This framework needs smaller grain size practices, a usable data system, and a system of supports for the adults implementing the practices.
- Connects to parallel efforts to have curriculum and instruction reflect the Academic Standards. (Academic Standards are a roadmap. We don't implement the map; we implement the trip. We need a vehicle and a plan.)
- Measuring Fidelity of MTSS: In 2016, MDE launched an action research project with four districts piloting a fidelity of implementation tool for Math and Reading. Minnesota adapted the Tiered Fidelity Inventory from Michigan. This work is focused on systematically measuring changes in achievement and action planning strategies that increase fidelity of the multi-tiered instructional supports at the school and district level.
- Community of Practice: Minnesota hosts an active community learning how to build and sustain implementation of MTSS at the local, district, regional, and state level.

We could also include practices such as leadership or coaching.

All of the practices above require implementation of at least one practice of smaller grain size (perhaps on a list, not necessarily one of the top three levels of the "evidence-based" definition). Otherwise, what is the behavioral or instructional support? Or what are we leading or coaching?

Question for other states: What if we put only one practice on the list?

- Based on a state level needs assessment
- Assumed as a need for all, like MTSS (districts and schools would have to justify NOT using it).
- Well-defined (operationalized)
- Work with a purveyor to define framework and to build training and coaching plan.
- Focus on one main framework to define it well and build tools to measure it. It has to be teachable, learnable, doable and measurable in practice.

State role in selection of EBPs

What is the state's role in or approach to EBP selection? Does the state plan to provide a list of approved EBPs from which LEAs/schools can or must choose? Or provide general guidance on what EBPs are? Or refer to external resources or lists? Another approach? What do you see as the benefits and challenges to this approach?

We plan to provide a list of approved EBPs from which LEAs/schools can choose if it meets a need based on a comprehensive needs assessment. General guidance on EBPs is not concrete enough. What we would create is less of a list and more like a folder of resources.

Who in the agency is responsible for determining the state role, creating lists, guidance, or other documents, and or determining what are EBPs? How is the state agency team organized to support EBPs? What other organizations (if any), such as a REL, comprehensive center, or other external partner, are working with the state?

An agency core team will determine the parameters, extent, grain size, and guidance for practices on the list. This core team will include agency specialists (content and special education) and regional staff who have experience supporting identified schools. This will be assisted by a larger stakeholder group.

Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) is helping to identify what practices would generally fit the definition of evidence-based. They are starting with existing practices and evaluating those first. MWCC will also create a protocol for districts and schools to use to select a practice from the list.

How will the state support selection of EBPs? How will information and/or technical assistance be provided to LEAs/schools to help them select appropriate EBPs? Will the state provide support directly with SEA staff, with vendors, through regional staff, etc?

Regional Centers of Excellence will support implementation in identified districts and schools.

- How will the state differentiate supports in selecting EBPs for different districts (e.g. rural, small), if at all?
- How will the state approve EBPs? What will the application process look like (e.g. what information will be requested from LEAs and schools)?
- How is the state considering situations where either plans don't seem to include EBPs or it isn't clear there are EBPs?
- What specific challenges or questions does the state have with respect to their work and what feedback could peers provide?

Question: Have other states made decisions about any of the bullets above?

We want to make it very logical to use the list – broadly useful and resources are available. **We would “require” the use of continuous improvement cycles using implementation data so districts could show that there is evidence of actually implementing the practice before connecting it to student outcomes.**