



**ASK**

## Stephanie Hirsh

### How do I justify the professional learning plan for my school under ESSA?

**Q** I keep hearing that ESSA (the Every Student Succeeds Act) has new requirements about the evidence base required for using federal funds for professional development expenditures. At the same time, I read that there is a limited evidence base related to professional learning. So how am I supposed to justify the professional learning plan for my school?

Great question. ESSA has introduced new evidence requirements tied to expenditure of funds in a variety of areas, including professional learning. We welcome this new stipulation — as this issue of *The Learning Professional* indicates, we are committed to helping educators as they find ways to document the impact, with evidence, of the links between professional learning and improved educator practice and student results. In addition, Learning Forward’s resources guide educators through a process of planning and implementing effective professional learning and documenting its impact on educators and students.

ESSA (from Section 8101(21) (A) of the text of the law) identifies four levels of evidence. The U.S. Department of Education offers the following explanation of the four levels through its guidance documents on implementation (see p. 7 of [www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseinvestment.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseinvestment.pdf)):

**Level 1 Strong:** Experimental (i.e. randomized) well-designed and well-implemented study that shows a statistically significant and positive (i.e. favorable) effect of the intervention on a student outcome or other relevant outcome.

**Level 2 Moderate:** Quasi-experimental (i.e. matched) study that is well-designed and well-implemented and shows a statistically significant and positive (i.e. favorable) effect of the intervention on a student outcome or other relevant outcome.

**Level 3 Promising:** Correlational (statistical controls for selection bias) study that is well-designed and well-implemented.

**Level 4 Demonstrates a Rationale:** Demonstrates rationale based on high-quality research or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes and includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.

There are websites that provide links to programs that have met the requirements of Levels 1, 2, and 3. For example, the Evidence for ESSA website ([www.evidenceforessa.org](http://www.evidenceforessa.org)) offers information on math and language arts programs, and the What Works Clearinghouse (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>) covers a number of areas. More websites will soon come on board, and we will keep you informed of them.

Generally speaking, we have a limited number of professional

Each issue, we ask a learning professional to answer your professional learning questions. This month’s response comes from Stephanie Hirsh, Learning Forward executive director.

development studies at each level of evidence. We need more, and we hope that you think about that as you plan future professional learning.

When the precise study you need to justify your plan can’t be found, the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) can help you establish a Level 4 argument. Each standard has a research base (see [www.learningforward.org/standards](http://www.learningforward.org/standards)), and collectively there is a preponderance of evidence ([www.learningforward.org/publications/oxford-bibliographies](http://www.learningforward.org/publications/oxford-bibliographies)) you can use to build a rationale for an investment in professional learning. This assumes that your plan will implement all of the standards with fidelity.

To meet the Level 4 requirement, you will need to establish a theory of action and evaluation plan so that you can study your strategies and document your results. At its most

**To meet the Level 4 requirement, you will need to establish a theory of action and evaluation plan so that you can study your strategies and document your results.**



simple, a theory of action states that if your team undertakes certain strategies, then it will see certain results. A theory of action carefully outlines your plan for achieving goals, details the ways you will measure progress, and shows your intention to include evidence throughout your improvement process.

Most important, I would stress that you must implement with fidelity. This requires that you provide sustained support throughout your learning, use learning designs that match the learning goals you establish, and devote sufficient time for educators to build knowledge and skills. Basically, this means that you stay true to the Standards for Professional Learning throughout your entire learning process.

One possibility you might consider, if you aren't already doing so, is how you and your teams could incorporate a cycle of continuous improvement into your work. Such cycles are inherently evidence-oriented and allow you to assess your progress continually.

While the cycle varies according to the team using it, several steps are consistent. Following identification of student goals, teams set student and educator learning priorities. Teams use learning priorities to determine the educator and student learning agenda. This decision must be informed by evidence:

- What student interventions have had impact in similar settings?

- What do adults need to learn and implement to close student learning gaps?

The more solid the evidence available on a given intervention, the more secure the team can feel about its decision. If the intervention does not meet Level 1, 2, or 3 evidence definitions, the team will need to prepare a response at Level 4, particularly if federal dollars are used to support implementation. Even if they aren't, it is still important to be able to justify a particular course of action.

#### REFERENCE

**Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author. ■