



Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

Recognizing the Role of Research and Evidence

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created unimaginable challenges and change in the past year, and this has been especially true for young people. These disruptions have also elevated the need to rebuild better than before the pandemic—going “back to normal” is not enough. We need significant and collective investments of resources, energy, collaboration, and innovation as we build forward together in support of young people. The passage of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) represents one such opportunity. With \$500 billion in funding set aside for state and local education agencies, childcare agencies, and the Corporation for National and Community Service through AmeriCorps and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), this is a historic investment in comprehensive¹ afterschool and summer programs that can support young people during the hours they are out of school.

Ongoing guidance from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) specifies what state and local education agencies must do with these funds. Importantly, ARP funding requirements specify that state education agencies “must reserve, at a minimum, 7 percent [of] its total allocation as follows:5 percent for interventions to address learning loss, 1 percent for summer enrichment programs, and 1 percent for comprehensive afterschool programs.”

As such, within the applications for funding, states must describe “the evidence-based summer learning and enrichment programs” and the “evidence-based comprehensive afterschool programs” that address or otherwise ensure a response to the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students.

And, finally, language in the latest [ED COVID-19 Handbook](#) from ED states

*“Just as we continue to look to the evolving science as we work to reopen schools safely, so too should we turn to **research and evidence**, as well as the **voices** of students, educators, staff, and their families, to inform efforts to address the social, emotional, mental health and academic impact of COVID-19. With the passage of ARP, states, districts, and schools now have significant federal resources available to implement **evidence-based** and **practitioner-informed** strategies to **meet the needs** of students related to COVID-19, including students most affected by the pandemic and for whom the pandemic exacerbated preexisting inequities.”² (p. 1)*

¹ Comprehensive programming provides a safe and healthy environment for learning and development that meets basic individual needs and supports a well-rounded education. A well-rounded education is one that includes core academic subjects (e.g., reading, language arts, mathematics), other disciplines (e.g., music, arts, computer science), and social and emotional learning and development.

² Emphasis added for illustrative purposes within this guide.

While the goals to “build back better” are clear, the use of “research” and “evidence” may be less so. What do these terms mean and how are they different from each other? Moreover, what does the emphasis on research, evidence, voice, and need mean for afterschool and summer programs that aim to leverage ARP funds in support of youth, families, and communities?

Research is the process of testing a program or practice to answer a question (i.e., to determine effectiveness). Research focuses on increasing knowledge through rigorously designed studies of implementation and outcomes. In this case, outcomes may be determined in a number of ways, and the focus of the studies is not on outcomes alone.

Evidence is the information learned from well-designed research that enables us to draw conclusions with confidence in the outcome. Evidence goes beyond rigorous study design to focus on how outcomes are improving, for whom, and under what conditions. Typically, evidence is determined through rigorous and documented evaluations of impact using high-quality design (e.g., random process). There are many standards for evidence, however, and these will vary based on the funding source and criteria they include and state and local decisions, among other factors.

Evidence-based practices, therefore, derive from studies with documented evidence of effectiveness. That is, prior evidence from a well-designed study has shown this practice to be effective in producing an intended outcome. One can assume that using this practice with a similar population or in a setting similar to the one that was studied should produce similar effectiveness (i.e., outcomes).

This is a time of opportunity. Afterschool and summer programs must demonstrate how they meet the needs of young people in research-informed, evidence-based, and practitioner-focused ways. The good news is that there are many ways to do that! Importantly, afterschool and summer programs must do the following:

- Recognize and then clearly articulate how they can support youth, families, and communities.
- Describe the research and/or evidence for their program.

For some programs, this may mean presenting high-quality research on effective programs and showing how their program aligns (e.g., by creating a logic model). For other programs, this may mean implementing an evidence-based curriculum as an accelerating learning strategy. Some programs may do both, and others may find different opportunities! What is important to remember is that guidance from ED requires programming that is comprehensive and fosters a well-rounded education. An evidence-based academic curriculum alone will not be enough to accelerate learning in response to the crises of this past year. Moreover, extensive research suggests that only when learning is comprehensive and supports the whole child that thriving is possible. Well-rounded learning and development is at the heart of afterschool and summer—now is the time for programs to shine!

Afterschool and summer programs must capitalize on this moment. Programs should take this time to reflect on their plans, practices, and partnerships to ensure they meet youth, family, and community needs in ways that are grounded in the research and evidence. This series is designed to provide guidance about the research and evidence for afterschool and summer programs to ensure that programs are best positioned to leverage ARP ESSER funds in support of building back better.

What's next?

Guide 2 describes 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. **Guide 3** in this series aims to demystify what evidence-based means for afterschool and summer learning programs, and **Guide 4** provides strategies—including how to create a logic model—to leverage the historic investment in afterschool and summer programs.



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