



TRANSCRIPT

Interview:

Arizona's Approach to Guiding Districts on ESSA Evidence Provisions for K-3 Literacy

LENAY DUNN

This is Lenay Dunn from the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd. And I'm here today to talk about some of the evidence standards as defined by the Every Student Succeeds Act and their application in Arizona.

One of the broad intents of ESSA is to really encourage that evidence-based decisionmaking as a standard practice. In Arizona, there's also the Move On When Reading policy, which is designed to provide kindergarten through third grade students with evidence-based effective reading instruction. After the passage of ESSA, the Arizona State Board integrated the ESSA evidence provisions with Move On When Reading to align with the national law.

Around that time, WestEd developed an evidence-based improvement guide for states to help them strengthen their frameworks and supports for the evidence requirements of ESSA. This guide provides an initial set of tools to help states and school districts understand and plan for implementing evidence-based improvement strategies. So, through the partnership that I lead through REL West—the Arizona Literacy Partnership—we have the opportunity to work with Sean Ross, who I am joined with here today.

SEAN ROSS

Hi, I'm Sean Ross, I'm the Director of English Language Arts and Move On When Reading at the Arizona Department of Education.

LENAY DUNN

So Sean, a year ago when you were really just beginning to plan for ESSA implementation and also in integrating those Move On When Reading evidence standards, what were you and your team struggling with regarding implementation?

SEAN ROSS

So, Move On When Reading is a 45 million dollar annual program in Arizona, and it provides funding for K-3 students throughout the state to promote early literacy so that all kids are reading at grade level by third grade. It's a program that had significant changes about a year ago, one of which was the requirement that core reading programs, reading intervention programs, and professional development meet ESSA evidence level requirements.



Now, these changes went into effect on July 1st of that year, and our portal for literacy plan submission—we collect literacy plans every year from every school with K-3 students in the state, to get an overview of their literacy systems—that opened on July 31st. So we had 30 days to suddenly embrace ESSA, to understand its impact on our legislation, and then somehow turn that understanding into something for the field so that they could help meet these new legislative requirements.

LENAY DUNN

I remember having some conversations with you around that time and thinking about how REL West could help support you to really start to integrate those evidence requirements into the way that Arizona was approaching K-3 literacy. Can you share a little bit about how you moved from where you were to where you are today?

SEAN ROSS

When we began, we had very little knowledge, and on a continuum of learning, we were at the very beginning. And so REL West was brought in at an early point for us, to train us on their ESSA evidence guide. It walked us through not only the requirements of ESSA, but I think, more importantly, the philosophy behind it. Really helping us transition, the way our legislation had transitioned, from thinking about core reading programs and intervention programs and strategies as being scientifically based and moving towards evidence-based.

LENAY DUNN

I think about, at the end of that training, how you took that information, you created videos for the field to help explain the ESSA evidence provisions and their intersection with the Move On When Reading requirements.

The provisions define four levels of evidence based on a research study's design and demonstrated outcomes. Those levels are: "strong," "moderate," "promising," and "demonstrates a rationale." These evidence levels are really intended to help educators use evidence in a continuous improvement cycle to learn what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

SEAN ROSS

We actually did a little road show around the state to try to help get schools to where they needed to be in order to, to receive their funding, and one of the key things that we realized was, we needed clear paths to meeting those requirements. We needed some clear ways that schools could satisfy what we need in a rapid fashion in a way that would also, again, open up further discussions.

And so, so we crafted three paths towards approval of their literacy plans based on ESSA evidence levels. And the first path we decided, well, we couldn't possibly go through every core reading program that was being used in the state and vet it ourselves, and the one group

where we really could put this pressure on is the group that's profiting from it. And so, we decided to put the, the emphasis and the onus on the vendors themselves. And so, the first path that we built for LEAs to meet these requirements was to simply contact their vendors.

We visit their website, we click into the core reading program and up pops links to several studies, including a third-party study. And in their annual literacy plans that they submit to us, they would send us those links. And so, in a way we were still vetting these products, but we weren't having to go out and do the initial research.

And to be honest with you, that satisfied about 93 percent of the schools and districts in the state were able to find exactly what we needed from their vendor relatively readily.

So for option two—and this occurred when a vendor was either non-responsive to a school or wasn't able to provide what it is we were looking for to establish that they were evidence-based—we guided schools to look towards evidence-based clearinghouses such as What Works Clearinghouse, or EvidenceforESSA.org and we provided guidance for schools on how to examine how those clearinghouses had rated those programs, and then to provide us links to those ratings so that we could go and vet the program ourselves.

So the first two options satisfied 98 percent of LEAs in Arizona, but there were about 2 percent of LEAs who still were struggling to demonstrate that their core reading programs were evidence-based under ESSA. And for the most part, those LEAs had home-built or self-constructed core reading programs and so there was no evidence base for those. So we provided this third option for the first year only, where schools could provide us three years of literacy data to demonstrate that the program that they selected or built was in fact positively impacting student outcomes.

And we felt like this demonstrated a rationale. It met that lowest level of evidence under ESSA, and we very clearly communicated to these schools that this would satisfy the requirements for the first year, but that we would spend the next year, and we would be there to support them, trying to find a way to establish either that their program met ESSA evidence levels, or to identify an alternative way in which they could meet ESSA evidence levels while still staying true to their programs and their beliefs, and, and between that, we were able to actually approve plans for every school in the state.

LENAY DUNN

I think part of your intent was that they would move up, so to speak, the evidence levels. So if they were in a rationale, that as years continued they would move more into promising or moderate or strong as their program established more evidence.

SEAN ROSS

Absolutely, and you know, on one hand we needed to help them satisfy their requirements legally so that they were in compliance, but we also felt it was very important that while doing that, we were opening their eyes to the philosophy of ESSA, that empowering of local



education agencies to really study and examine their own programs and their own practices to be able to prove that they're working and to be able to prove that it is something that is going to work to improve reading.

LENAY DUNN

I know there was one case of a charter school that really needed some of that extra support with establishing that evidence base. Can you talk a little bit about that process and what came from it?

SEAN ROSS

There was a small single-site charter in a rural area, and this charter ascribed to a very specific type of education which, and I've been an educator for 18 years and I had actually not heard of this system before. They were very worried because they were like, "We're part of this system. We like it, our students like it, our parent community likes it, but we don't know that there's an evidence base."

So we reached out to the national agency together, and we explained what it is we needed for ESSA, and actually guided them to some examples from some other non-traditional types of education who had very successfully met ESSA evidence levels. And, the national organization effectively said, "Well, we don't have this. We can't provide this." And so, I spoke to the head of school again and I said, "Well hey, we have a third path. You know, if you, if we can't establish that your program is evidence-based this first year, we have this other path where you can send us student-level data." And so the head of school gathered her data and she sent it in, and the data was trending downwards, it actually was not showing student achievement. And this head of school and I had a very honest conversation where I asked her, "What was it about this system of education that drew you to it? What made you choose it?"

And the realization was that the philosophy they had adopted was appealing in its social and emotional aspects, and appealing in its culture-building aspects, but actually, had very little impact on reading.

And so we were able to guide her to examine some core reading programs that she thought aligned really well to their philosophy, and in fact, she went on to lead the adoption of a core reading program for her school, and it's opened up some great conversations with her teachers and her parent community and, and it's really changed the way that they're approaching education, and they're doing so in a much more reflective manner. And it was really a transformative moment and it's the one I come back to again and again when I think about ESSA and when I talk about ESSA.

LENAY DUNN

It's really about that spirit of the ESSA evidence-based provisions, using evidence to improve student outcomes within context, and what fits within the local context.



SEAN ROSS

Well and that was an important element for us is that we didn't want them to change their system. We wanted them to keep the thing that drew their community to them, the thing that made them a community. So we were able to improve this one element without losing the very thing that made them special.

LENAY DUNN

Well now that you've had, really a year of experience working with districts on aligning their core reading programs to ESSA and the Move On When Reading evidence standards, how are you taking what you've learned to scale the state's capacity-building efforts?

SEAN ROSS

We've really worked to scale up across the state in the way that we educate about ESSA and talk about ESSA. We brought a group of struggling schools and districts from around the state together for an official Move On When reading convening, which was supported by REL West as well, and our two groups presented on Move On When Reading, presented on ESSA, and then had a very meaningful section of the training on continuous improvement and examining core reading programs through the lens of continuous improvement. And we had quite a few people realizing that there was more support for their program than they realized and how readily available it was, and how they could now have really great talks with their teachers about why they were using the program they were using, and the proof they had that it worked.

And then the opposite as well. We had some interesting moments where in the room, as groups were researching their core reading programs, they realized that in fact they were not meeting ESSA evidence levels, and they had us there as resources for what to do next. And we were there not in a punitive manner but in that spirit of improvement. In that spirit of learning and growing together.

The types of phone calls we get now, instead of beginning with questions like, "What is ESSA? How does it impact my school?" The questions really start with, "Well, we know our program is currently at the demonstrates a rationale level, and obviously we would like to move up to moderate or promising or strong. What are some steps we can take?" or "what do we need to do next?" or you know, "who do we reach out to?"

And so, we've been able to change the discussions that we have in our realm, and it's making ESSA much more approachable, much more understood, and, more importantly, it's helping the field to see that this isn't just one more requirement, but in fact is a cultural shift. It's a shift in the way all of us think, at every level of education.

LENAY DUNN

To learn more about REL West and our ESSA evidence work in Arizona, please contact relwest@wested.org.



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