Actionable Evidence
Toward Equitable Outcomes

A Practical Framework for Research, Evaluation, and Technical Assistance in the Education and Social Sectors

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Introduction

In recent years, policymakers and philanthropic funders have increasingly promoted the generation and use of evidence in the education and social sectors. These efforts have primarily focused on adopting evidence standards, and improving the take-up of evidence-based approaches by practitioners through improving relevance, credibility, and dissemination.

Despite these efforts, studies of research use in education suggest that too much of the evidence produced in the sector is disconnected from practice, lacks credibility, and/or is not easily accessible. Even well-designed and well-conducted research often languishes on the shelf, unused by educators and administrators. Too often, school districts, post-secondary institutions, and community-based organizations wait years for study results that offer little practical guidance, or guidance that is timely and responsive to their needs. Researchers are routinely rewarded for peer-reviewed publications, regardless of their relevance to policy or practice, but they have far less incentive to produce evidence that is practical, timely and useful for practitioners and does not appear in peer-reviewed outlets.

Those least served by the status quo in education are also most affected by our failure to build, share, and use evidence well. Persistent racial and economic segregation leads to disparities in educational experiences and outcomes for students of color and students experiencing poverty, including unequal access to funding, resources, opportunities, and evidence-based practices and support. For example, Black children are five times as likely[1] as white children to attend schools that are highly segregated by race and ethnicity, and more than twice as likely as white children to attend high-poverty schools. In addition to these structural barriers, students of color, particularly Black and Latino/a/x students, face racism and bias at both the institutional and individual levels that affect their educational experiences and outcomes, including harsher disciplinary measures. The effects[2] of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic are expected to exacerbate educational inequities[3] along racial and economic lines for years to come.[4]

To accelerate finding effective strategies that help reduce disparities and achieve markedly better outcomes for students who face systemic disadvantages, we must change the way we devise and test solutions, and build and share evidence. Evidence building should center the voices of the students and families most directly impacted

by the problems we seek to solve. As such, we need to empower and equip the broad range of leaders and practitioners who directly shape the experiences of students and families to build and use actionable evidence in service of equity. Researchers and technical assistance providers should support practitioners in building evidence that can more effectively inform decisions that affect their students and communities, and funders and policymakers should encourage and support large-scale adoption of approaches that lead to evidence that is actionable for practitioners.

Actionable Evidence Initiative

Launched in June 2020, the Actionable Evidence Initiative seeks to engage researchers, practitioners, funders, and policymakers in the education sector to accelerate the development of timely and credible evidence that helps practitioners improve outcomes for students who are Black, Latino/a/x, or experiencing poverty.

The goals for the initiative include:

- **Creating a new framework** to promote a shared understanding of "actionable" evidence.

- **Developing and curating use cases, implementation guidance and tools** to help researchers and evaluators apply the framework's principles in their own work.

- **Building a network** of researchers, technical assistance providers, funders, practitioners, and policymakers to facilitate knowledge sharing and dissemination of best practices, insights, tools, and use cases to promote more wide-spread use of actionable evidence.

- **Cultivating a Community of Practice** of researchers to build their capacity to design and implement actionable evidence approaches in their work through collaborative learning, problem solving around common barriers and challenges, and support innovation. The community of practice will help apply and evolve the framework.

- **Testing matching mechanisms** to help practitioners identify and connect with researchers who support actionable evidence approaches.

- **Identify and fund new opportunities** for intentional application of the framework during research and evaluation projects in order to validate and advance the utility of the framework.

Between June 2020 and June 2021, the initiative has:

- Convened more than 70 stakeholders, including researchers, practitioners, funders, and policymakers committed to advancing actionable evidence, to start building the Actionable Evidence Network and laying the foundation for a Community of Practice.

- Advanced a set of surveys with the Actionable Evidence Network to assess the current evidence landscape, and the opportunities and challenges faced by different stakeholders in generating and using actionable evidence.

- Created a shared framework to define the principles of actionable evidence with input and guidance from the Actionable Evidence Network.

- Commissioned a series of case studies, written by researchers and practitioners, to illustrate the principles of the framework and practices that can be used to apply them.

This document presents the framework, and an initial set of recommendations on implementation of the framework. Subsequent phases of the Actionable Evidence Initiative will continue working with the broader Actionable Evidence Network and a targeted Community of Practice to expand opportunities, use cases, guidance, and tools for applying and evolving the framework to achieve more equitable educational outcomes.

Framework Development

The Actionable Evidence Framework presented in this report is designed to inform the work of stakeholders across the evidence ecosystem, with a focus on helping researchers collaborate more effectively and equitably with practitioners on building evidence.

Defining Stakeholders and Target Audiences for the Actionable Evidence Framework

RESEARCHERS
Researchers and evaluators at universities, evaluation firms, education organizations, government agencies and philanthropy, as well as independent research and evaluation consultants.

PRACTITIONERS
Leaders and administrators at state and local education agencies; leaders, educators, and front-line staff at preschools, K-12 schools, post-secondary institutions, and community-based education organizations.

INTERMEDIARIES
Organizations and individuals — advocacy groups, professional associations, and technical assistance providers, among others — who play a role in shaping the creation and use of evidence in policy and practice. In some circumstances, researchers and evaluators may act as intermediaries.

FUNDERS
Philanthropic funders, and policymakers at the federal, state, and local level who allocate funding for education and education research.

NOTE: These categories are not always distinct, and stakeholders often play multiple roles (such as researchers at government agencies who oversee funding and policies around evidence building).

The framework was developed and refined with feedback from a community of diverse stakeholders convened for this initiative who participated in a series of virtual convenings and surveys.* About two-thirds of the participants identified themselves as researchers, evaluators or technical assistance providers, and the rest identified themselves as practitioners, funders, and policymakers. In developing the framework, the discussions with this community primarily focused on understanding the:

- Opportunities to shift practices from the vantage point of different stakeholders, and the barriers they face in taking an actionable evidence approach,

- The role of researchers as change agents, and the competencies, mindsets and behaviors researchers need to drive actionable evidence,

- The role of funders in supporting collaboration among researchers and practitioners to collaboratively generate and use actionable evidence, and

- Considerations for addressing racism and inequity in how evidence is produced, valued, and used.

The framework also builds on lessons and principles from a broader set of initiatives in the field aimed at changing the way we generate and use evidence for stronger, more equitable outcomes for communities, including:

- Research Practice Partnerships

- Equitable Evaluation Initiative

- Community-Based Participatory Research

- Chicago Beyond's "Why Am I Always Being Researched"

- We All Count

What distinguishes the Actionable Evidence Framework is its focus on empowering practitioners to drive change through engaging them equitably in the design, production, and use of evidence. **At the core of the framework's theory of change is a belief, that by prioritizing the learning and decision-making needs of practitioners, and by working collaboratively with practitioners to build timely evidence, we will see more effective programs, policies, and practices with evidence of equitable outcomes for students and families.**

In addition, the term "practitioners" refers to a broad range of actors whose decisions and actions shape the experiences and outcomes of students, including state and local leaders and policymakers, administrators, educators, and other front-line staff. Evidence priorities and learning needs will differ among practitioners in different roles and at different points in time. As such, the framework does not promote a specific methodology or type of evidence. Rather, it defines "actionable" in the context of whether it is useful in driving decisions and actions with the potential to improve outcomes, and urges clarity when planning evidence generation about the intended users.

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* The convenings took place between November and March of 2020, and were held virtually to ensure access and safety for participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Actionable Evidence for Equitable Outcomes

Responsive to operational context of practitioners

Reflects the context in which practitioners operate, including organizational settings, relationships and resources, and political and policy environment

Centers on community needs and voices

Addresses the context, perspectives, priorities and assets of students and families, along with the challenges they face

Attends to systemic and structural conditions

Considers systems, policies, practices, cultural norms, and community conditions that drive inequity, including those related to poverty and racism

Prioritizes practitioner learning and decision making

Answers questions that are highly relevant to policy and practice, and that help practitioners prioritize decisions in service of students and families.

Credible and transparent

Uses high-quality data and analysis, aligning methods with practitioner questions, timeline and context

Enables timely improvements

Allows practitioners to make evidence-informed decisions in a timely manner

Accessible and user-centered

Clearly communicates research design, analysis, and findings to facilitate practitioner understanding and use

Builds practitioner capacity for R&D

Provides practitioners with data, products, tools and trainings to own and advance their evidence agenda

Actionable Evidence Framework

Guiding Principles

The Actionable Evidence Framework outlines eight principles to guide evidence building to improve outcomes and equity in education. While the framework was designed with a focus on improving educational outcomes for students who are Black, Latino/a/x, or experiencing poverty, we believe these principles are applicable more broadly, and can be adapted to build actionable evidence for other target populations in different fields (such as workforce development and child welfare).

For evidence to be actionable, it should:

- **Prioritize practitioner learning and decision making.**
  Actionable evidence should answer questions that are highly relevant to policy and practice, and that help practitioners prioritize decisions around policies, practices, and processes that affect students and families. Evidence is actionable when it is useful to practitioners, and is used by practitioners to shape student experiences and outcomes.

  It's important to acknowledge that an effective evidence-building agenda should reflect and value the perspectives, lived experiences and expertise of multiple stakeholders, including those of researchers, students, and families (as noted below). The framework does not advocate that only practitioner perspectives and expertise should shape evidence building in education. Rather, it encourages that evidence agenda and timeline are driven by the needs of practitioners and their communities, with support from researchers, funders, and policymakers. It hypothesizes that addressing practitioners' need for evidence that is practical and relevant to their work can increase the availability and uptake of evidence to improve improve outcomes because practitioners are most accountable for delivering services and often closest to insights to help fuel what's working and what needs to change.

- **Center on community needs and voices.**
  While the framework focuses on practitioners as the drivers of change, it emphasizes that actionable evidence must also center on the priorities of students and families in the community, and actively address their context, perspectives, assets, and challenges.

Generally speaking, practitioners in the education sector [do not reflect](5) the students and families they serve, in terms of their race, ethnicity, economic status or lived experience, and their learning needs and priorities may differ from that of students and families. An actionable evidence approach asks researchers to support practitioners to better understand, prioritize, and address community needs in their learning and evidence agenda, and incorporate community voices and perspectives in the process of developing and testing solutions.

A "community" is not a homogenous entity with a uniform voice; moreover, students and families have different viewpoints and priorities, even when considering a single racial or ethnic group. To generate evidence that is actionable, researchers and practitioners need a clear understanding of these priorities and factors that drive alignment and differences in within and among communities, and use evidence to build consensus when necessary.

- **Be responsive to the operational context of practitioners.**
Actionable evidence should be responsive to contextual factors that affect practitioner capacity to generate and use evidence for decision making, including their organizational setting; relationships and resources; political and policy environment; and community context. Understanding how organizations work and how decisions and policies are made is crucial for building evidence that practitioners can act on.

- **Attend to systemic and structural conditions.**
Actionable evidence to address disparities in education must address systemic and structural conditions that drive those disparities, including those related to poverty, wealth inequality, systemic racism, and racial bias. When developing and testing solutions and when helping practitioners prioritize learning questions, researchers should consider the ways in which existing systems, policies, practices, cultural norms, and community conditions may perpetuate racial and economic inequities and impact the context in which students learn. Evidence agendas should address questions at the systems and policy level, and not just focus on interventions and programs that aim to address perceived deficits at the student, family, or community levels. At the same time, research should be attentive to systemic and structural conditions whether or not the research questions themselves are at a systems level.

- **Be credible and transparent.**
Actionable evidence should use high-quality data and study designs and analysis methods that will produce credible answers to the priority questions within a relevant timeframe. The analysis and interpretation of findings should be transparent regarding limitations in design or data collection, degree of certainty regarding conclusions, and any potential sources of bias.

For the purposes of this framework, rigor is not defined by any specific methodology or type of inquiry. Rather, the framework takes a holistic view of defining rigor, where the research methodology, design, measures, data collection and analysis are calibrated to the questions, context, and priorities of the practitioners and the communities they serve, and the research is implemented with quality.

The framework encourages the strategic use of a broad range of evidence-building methods, including the integration of qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry to address different types of learning questions and evidence needs. An underlying assumption of the Actionable Evidence Framework is that actively engaging practitioners and communities to prioritize evidence agendas and to build evidence can improve the credibility, reliability, usefulness and use of evidence for all stakeholders.

- **Enable timely improvements.**
  Actionable evidence should allow practitioners to make evidence-informed decisions in a timely manner. "Timely" is not synonymous with short-term or rapid cycle projects, and may include evidence efforts of different lengths and methods. The most important thing is to align evidence plans with the decision-making timelines of practitioners to allow for timely actions at key decision points in student experiences. As such, actionable evidence may include evidence that helps practitioners respond to urgent contextual changes, as well as evidence that answers longer term questions to drive strategy.

- **Be accessible and user centered.**
  Reporting, presenting, and sharing evidence in a way that allows practitioners to clearly understand the research design, analysis plan, findings, and implications for implementation will facilitate greater access to and use of evidence to guide policy and practice.

- **Builds practitioner capacity for R&D.**
  Enabling conditions for evidence to be actionable for practitioners include building their capacity to translate evidence into action and empowering them to continue to advance their evidence agendas. Often this requires advancing their institutional culture, knowledge, and competencies, for example, by providing practitioners with products, training, and tools that allow them to effectively communicate findings and their implications to stakeholders in ways that positively influence decisions and practice. Practitioners also can benefit from access to analysis plans and and clean data sets (when appropriate and within the bounds of data security and confidentiality protocols) they can use for future evidence building and learning efforts.

As previously noted, the framework outlined above above was refined and iterated with input from the Actionable Evidence Network, and will evolve further as the initiative continues to engage the Network and a Community of Practice, and we learn more about what it takes to make evidence actionable and used to improve outcomes for students who are Black, Latino/a/x, or experiencing poverty.

What "Actionable" Evidence Means to the Actionable Evidence Network

As previously noted, the framework outlined above were refined and iterated with input from the Actionable Evidence community, and may evolve further as the initiative continues to engage the community of practice and learns more about what it takes to make evidence actionable and improve outcomes for students who are Black, Latino/a/x, or experiencing poverty. Here, we share some of what we heard from the community about what "actionable evidence" means to them — feedback that has shaped the framework's guiding principles.

Voices from the Actionable Evidence Network

A sampling of what we heard from participants of the Network about what "actionable evidence" means to them — feedback that has shaped the framework's guiding principles:

[Actionable evidence] is **relevant and accessible**. It is produced, as much as possible, in **alignment with decision-making timelines**. It **captures multiple perspectives**, recognizing that no one stakeholder, partner, or community has all of the answers or holds all of the knowledge or expertise.

Actionable evidence is evidence that is **relevant to practitioners' high-priority questions**, is not so narrowly focused, arcane or comes with so many caveats that it will never apply to real-life decisions, and is communicated in a way that people understand the results.

Actionable evidence **sets practitioners up to both take evidence-based next steps** and to **evaluate and adjust those steps** based on additional evidence collected at the local level.

[Actionable evidence] is evidence that **can drive decisions and self-advocacy**.

[Actionable evidence] is evidence that **informs continuous improvement**.

Actionable evidence is practical (easy to understand and use), understandable (by community members and other stakeholders), **informed by real world and relevant contexts**, and **transparent** regarding potential bias.

[Actionable evidence] directly or indirectly informs high-leverage decisions regarding policy and practice, **reflects the priorities of key stakeholders, including practitioners and the target populations** (which is not always the same thing). [It] is accessible in that the findings and basic evidence that supports them are **easily understood**, evidence that is generated with approaches that **match the question and produce reliable answers** to empirical questions that drive policy and practice.

As a former practitioner, and someone who has worked in policymaking, [actionable evidence] forms the **foundation for addressing community needs in a prioritized and organized manner**. From a community power perspective, evidence frames issues and needs that are often avoided or neglected for policy action and advocacy. The challenges facing us are so large, and our responses and solutions are SO fragmented, that [actionable] evidence is needed to underscore the urgency to act and **how to apply limited resources**.

Actionable evidence is clear about who the primary audiences and intended uses/actors are for the evidence, and that the evidence is generated and presented in ways that are accessible and inspiring of action to these groups.

Actionable evidence is research or data that is obtained through **collaboration with practitioners and policymakers** and addresses issues of primary importance to their work and constituents, and is presented in ways that are **mindful of how organizations work, and decisions or policies are made**.

Actionable evidence **encompasses a range of types of data** (qualitative, quantitative) **and research** (descriptive, evaluation, cost-benefit analyses, etc.) that are useful and used in improving practice or policy.

Actionable evidence is easily **digestible, transparent** (especially around limitations), and **clear as to implementation steps**. That is, the evidence is accompanied by clear information for others to understand how to adopt.

Opportunities and Challenges to Actionable Evidence

In developing the framework, we engaged the Actionable Evidence Network to gain a better understanding of the barriers or challenges to implementing the principles outlined in the framework. The convenings, individual discussions, and surveys of the Network participants, as well as a review of literature on evidence building and use, painted a picture of the current evidence landscape, and surfaced areas that are ripe for change from the vantage point of different stakeholders in the ecosystem.

Current Context

Funding for research is typically awarded to researchers or intermediaries. This means research agendas and timelines tend to reflect the priorities of funders and researchers, and consequently, the resulting evidence is not always useful to practitioners in making decisions that are most pressing for their communities, schools, and organizations. Too often, research and evaluations:

Are primarily viewed as tools for accountability and funding decisions, and less as tools to inform strategic decisions that practitioners need to make about implementation, improvement, and scale.
For example, analyses of cost effectiveness and resource requirements for effective implementation can be useful for practitioners in choosing among alternative courses of action or policies when resources are limited, but they are conducted infrequently. Iterative cycles of evaluations that test improvements and systematic variations in practices to provide more actionable information to practitioners in a timely manner are not yet common or widely supported by funders and researchers.

Focus on the impact of programs and practices without exploring the role of structural and systemic factors that drive inequities in implementation and outcomes.
There was consensus in the Actionable Evidence community that there has been insufficient focus on understanding and addressing systemic barriers when developing and testing solutions to educational disparities, including the effects of racism and economic inequality, and too much focus on fixing what is perceived to be individual- or community-level deficits. A convening

participant said: "The more we focus on a small change or intervention without acknowledging the broader context, we start to think that the goal is an improved test score. It's not enough to acknowledge the existence of the connection between systems, context, and students' outcomes. We should also be trying to change the system and context."

Don't sufficiently or equitably engage practitioners and communities in the evidence planning, building, or sharing process.

Credibility traditionally hinges on researchers' ability to maintain distance and independence from the practitioners who are implementing the policies or programs under evaluation (the underlying assumption is that researchers are objective, and practitioners are not). Norms around keeping researchers at arm's length from practitioners and communities can engender mistrust in research, and prevents researchers from building relationships and fully understanding the context in which practitioners operate — making evidence less actionable. While students and families participate in data collection for studies (such as focus groups, interviews, or observations), they are not routinely engaged in decisions around solution development, research questions, or interpretation of findings. Many convening participants said that researchers also lack skills, training, and resources to engage practitioners and communities deeply in the evidence-building process.

Don't build practitioner capacity to translate evidence into action and advance future R&D.

While researchers commonly rely on data shared by districts, organizations, and practitioners for their work, they do not routinely share back analysis plans or clean data sets that could be used for future analysis or produce products, trainings, or visualizations that make data more actionable for practitioners. Research dissemination protocols typically prioritize the interests and knowledge needs of funders or other researchers, and not the needs of practitioners to translate evidence into action for their own contexts in a timely manner. Academic researchers, in particular, are incentivized to publish their work in journals or other peer-reviewed publications that are generally not easily and freely accessible to practitioners. It is also uncommon for researchers to share findings with practitioners during an evaluation to facilitate course corrections or improvements. Although this serves the researchers' goals of maintaining objectivity and creating "clean" comparisons for study, it discourages mid-course adjustments based on early implementation experiences and lessons.

Despite these obstacles, significant progress has been made toward building evidence that is actionable, practitioner-driven, and community-centered. Research Practice Partnerships have forged new, more collaborative ways for researchers to work with practitioners. There is growing use of research in support of continuous improvement, including use of improvement science and rapid cycle evaluations. Major education research organizations have enhanced their dissemination efforts, and have invested in practice guide and evidence reviews. The Institute of Education Sciences has been promoting more actionable evidence and evidence dissemination practices through the Regional Educational Laboratories and in systematically reviewing and disseminating evidence on the effectiveness of programs, policies, and practices through the What Works Clearinghouse. Researchers across the field are also producing shorter, practitioner-focused products for different mediums (such as practitioner briefs, podcasts, and videos) more frequently than ever. And there is a budding movement to make the research process more equitable for communities and practitioners.

The [case studies](#) aggregated by the Actionable Evidence Initiative illustrate the progress in the field and provide examples of the framework in action. In addition, a large share of the researchers in the Actionable Evidence Network reported that they have used or will use the principles in the framework in their work. However, there was consensus within the community that much more needs to be done to dismantle the structural barriers that prevent the acceleration of actionable evidence building.

What Needs to Change?

The community highlighted three, interrelated areas for change:
- Researcher capacity and incentives
- Research funding practices
- Practitioner capacity and incentives

Researcher Capacity and Incentives

For the purposes of this report, the term "researcher" includes education researchers and evaluators at universities, evaluation firms, education organizations, government agencies and philanthropy, as well as independent research and evaluation consultants. There is considerable variation in how researchers work with practitioners and communities, the role they play in the research process, the incentives they face, and their willingness and capacity to take an actionable evidence approach. And variation across researchers exists within organizations, within types of organizations (e.g., evaluation firms), and across different types of organizations (e.g., academia vs. evaluation firms). Acknowledging these variations, the Actionable Evidence Network surfaced several generalizable ways researcher capacity, competencies, and incentives pose challenges to building actionable evidence.

- Traditional training and socialization practices for researchers tend to value methodological expertise, independence, and objectivity, over competencies such as those needed for relationship development, negotiation and conflict resolution, human-centered design, facilitation of feedback loops, and communication of complex information to different audiences, including practitioners, students, and families. While growing in practice, there is still very limited attention to training and coaching on anti-racism, anti-bias, equity, and inclusion, which can help researchers more equitably engage communities in developing solutions and evidence.

- For the most part, the research community is not racially or economically diverse, and research teams often do not include members of communities being studied. Black and Latino/a/x researchers are highly underrepresented, especially in leadership and decision-making roles. Black and Latino/a/x researchers who participated in the community convenings reported facing significant challenges bringing their perspectives and lived experiences to the evidence-building process "when they are the minority in the room."

- Researchers are generally not incentivized to develop a strong understanding of practice or the decision-making context of practitioners (e.g., teacher allocation and hiring processes at the school district level), hampering their capacity to help practitioners translate evidence into implementation guidance.

- Certain types of research (such as experimental or quasi-experimental studies) are held in higher regard than qualitative research, implementation studies, or developmental work. Publishing in peer-reviewed journals is an important professional goal and advancement milestone for most researchers, and publication standards generally do not incentivize a practitioner-driven approach.

- Education researchers have been slow to adopt and integrate data science principles, machine learning, and technological advancements into their practices, partly due to funding constraints and lack of training.

- Researchers who operate in a context that values specialized expertise can find it difficult to foreground humility and empathy in their work with practitioners and communities. The Actionable Evidence Network encouraged changes in how researchers broadly approach working with practitioners and communities — promoting humility, empathy, transparency, flexibility, and willingness to learn and keep an open mind, and eschewing an emphasis on themselves as "the experts."

Research Funding Practices

The Actionable Evidence community identified numerous ways that current funding practices, both public and philanthropic, pose barriers to producing actionable evidence.

Overall, funding practices do not sufficiently and at scale:

- Support relationship and trust development, feedback loops, and formative work (such as developing theories of change) needed to develop practitioner-driven, community-centered research questions, solutions for testing, and evidence to guide decision making. "The goal of evaluation should be shifted from punitive to instructive and generative," said one convening participant.

- Support flexibility to pivot and modify a pre-defined approach or timeline as context evolves or as learnings emerge.

- Provide resources directly to practitioners so that they can invest in the learning and evidence they need.

- Support building the capacity or infrastructure needed for practitioners to develop timely evidence and engage equitably and effectively with researchers (e.g., investments in data systems or dedicated evaluation staff).

- Incentivize researchers to help practitioners build their own capacity or skills to generate evidence for continuous improvement.

- Support continuous improvement or iterative and intensive work in select areas over a sufficient period of time to create and use evidence to solve deep-rooted or otherwise complex challenges.

- Invest in projects to build evidence around systemic or structural changes, instead focusing more on individual programs or projects.

- Capture and apply learnings from "failures" as well as successes. One convening participant noted that the "don't bring bad news" attitude that is prevalent among funders hampers collaborative and continuous work between researchers, practitioners, and communities.

Many in the Actionable Evidence Network pointed out that public and private funders hold enormous power to influence the dynamics between researchers and practitioners (e.g., in terms of the questions asked and how evidence is produced and used), and that funders should take active steps to shift their practices to accelerate actionable evidence building. A researcher who attended an Actionable Evidence convening remarked that the work necessary to build actionable evidence, such as "focusing on problems identified by community partners, identifying communications that work for each partner, establishing timelines in advance, providing ongoing capacity building, and being a responsible partner about sharing feedback," is not "feasible in the existing funding structures and until they are, this work will remain challenging to do in ways that align ethically with where we should be."

Practitioner Capacity and Incentives

As discussed in the funding practices section above, the Actionable Evidence Network emphasized that practitioners generally have limited resources and capacity — including staffing, training, and technology — to engage equitably with researchers, funders, and communities in the evidence-building process. Other challenges noted by members of the Network include:

- The "need for speed" and the political and institutional pressure around expedient decision making, even when evidence is sparse, often makes practitioners "reactive rather than intentional in their change process." Many convening participants reported that practitioners do not have enough incentives or flexibility to engage in R&D and efforts to generate credible evidence. One practitioner said that "decisions are often made faster than we're able to generate evidence to inform those decisions." Another said that "[school] districts and non-profits are incentivized to have answers now and it is difficult for a superintendent to say that they don't have the answer right now."

- Antiquated or under-resourced systems, technologies, and policies for sharing data with researchers and providing them with access to students and families slows the evidence-building process.

- Silos within organizations and across organizations, particularly school systems, hamper collaboration and alignment among practitioners and affect their ability to use data and build evidence internally and externally. Several convening participants also noted that turnover in school systems is a persistent challenge that hinders efforts to build and maintain long-term partnerships.

Making Evidence Actionable

Addressing the deep-seated barriers discussed in the previous section to accelerate actionable evidence building will require significant changes to practices and incentives in the evidence ecosystem. It will take considerable time and effort to develop solutions, recommendations, best practices, and use cases for how different stakeholders can effectively facilitate change and collaborate on actionable evidence building that yields outcomes for students and families. More work is needed to develop and promulgate guidance on shifting processes, practices, and working norms for researchers, funders, and practitioners.

In the first phase of the Actionable Evidence Initiative, we focused on creating a framework, and advancing a set of broad recommendations for helping researchers collaborate more effectively and equitably with practitioners to generate, disseminate, and use evidence.

We recognize that many of the required shifts in practices will require changes in how other stakeholders (particularly funders) work. They also require structural changes for the research community, including shifting how researchers are trained and mentored, improving the racial diversity of the research workforce, and supporting engagement of researchers of color and researchers with lived experiences, among others. In subsequent phases, the initiative will focus on developing practice guides and use cases to help researchers apply the framework, as well as recommendations for funders and practitioners to support actionable evidence approaches. The initiative will also work with the Community of Practice to mitigate structural barriers faced by researchers and practitioners in collaborating on actionable evidence.

The recommendations below are organized around "stages" with the intention of helping researchers think about key considerations as they perform different parts of their work, while recognizing that, in practice, the "stages" are not always sequential.

Working Guidance for Researchers

Across all stages

Equitable collaboration between researchers, funders, practitioners, and communities is at the core of actionable evidence. With support from funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders, we envision that researchers will:

- **Engage practitioners on decisions throughout the evidence process,** including the development of research questions and improvement strategies to be tested; specification of methods, timeline, and data collection protocols; and interpretation and dissemination of findings. This should include engaging practitioners in policymaking roles (district administrators, for example) along with practitioners at the front-line (teachers, counselors, etc.) who may be involved in implementation

- **Intentionally engage students, families, and other community members in the various stages of the evidence-building process** to ensure that the: (a) research questions and proposed solutions are grounded in their needs, challenges, and context; (b) target outcomes are meaningful for them; (c) data collection protocols and instruments are respectful and responsive; and (d) research findings contribute to accurate knowledge production.

In doing so, researchers should be strategic about minimizing burden on stakeholders, and transparent about how and why they are — or are not — engaging community members in different components of the work. While striving to be inclusive of different voices, researchers should take time to build trust and relationships; explicitly acknowledge their time and effort; share documents and information that make it easier for them to understand and engage with the research; describe clearly how the information they provide will be used; and provide appropriate incentives and compensation for stakeholder participation and input. Researchers also should be mindful of methods used to recruit and engage communities — in the words of one Actionable Evidence convening participant, it is important to know "who's at the table and how they got there" — and how this may influence knowledge building and decision making.

- **Recognize the value of practitioner expertise and lived experiences of students and families**, and, in working with these partners, exhibit humility, empathy, transparency, flexibility, and willingness to learn. In their equity-focused [guidebook](#) for researcher-practitioner-community collaborations, Chicago Beyond recommends that researchers bring awareness about the systemic, institutional, and personal assumptions they are making in the process of evidence building. This is a call for researchers to be introspective about the ways that they may perpetuate racial and economic inequities in their work, and is similar to advice offered by several members of the Actionable Evidence community.

- **Invest in training and coaching to strengthen the research team's competencies for actionable evidence building.** This includes competencies in building relationships with diverse stakeholders, facilitation and active listening, human-centered design, and communicating to non-technical audiences, as well as applying an anti-racism and equity lens to their work. To the extent possible, research and evaluation teams should include individuals who share the lived experiences and the demographic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the communities participating in the research, as this can facilitate building trust and relationships with those communities and bring shared perspectives to the evidence-building process.

Evidence Planning

- **Allocate time to build trust, relationships, and knowledge** necessary for practitioners and communities to engage equitably in the evidence-building process.

- **Co-create learning agendas and evidence plans with practitioners and communities.** Work with practitioners, as well as students and families who are the intended beneficiaries of the evidence, to prioritize evidence agenda.

  - Use principles of [human-centered design](#) to fully grasp the challenges and needs of practitioners and communities from their perspectives, and co-ideate and co-develop questions and solutions with them.

  - Consider who may benefit from the evidence generated, who will use the evidence to guide policy or practice, and who is being included or not included in the process.

  - Pay attention to the potential variations in the needs and interests of different stakeholder groups, such as school district leaders, principals, teachers, and parents, and plan for building alignment on key objectives and decisions.

- **Engage practitioners, students, and families to learn about the systems and community context.** Prioritize the understanding of operational realities (such as resource availability and culture of decision making), and systemic drivers and patterns of inequity (such as racism and segregation).

- **Set up and codify clear structures, processes and tools for communication, collaboration, data sharing, and decision making across stakeholders.**

Evidence Building

- **Align research design and methods with practitioner learning agendas, available resources, and timelines.**

  - Calibrate research methods and activities to their timeline and contexts (community conditions, organizational capacity, policy and political environment, and resource availability, among others).

  - Explore new and creative ways of sequencing and designing research activities that can produce the most credible evidence possible within specified time frames.

  - Share assessments of the strengths and limitations of various research strategies (e.g., sample design and sizes, data sources, and analytic methods), as well as their implications for cost, timeline, staff and participant burden, and data sharing and privacy considerations — thus empowering and equipping practitioners to drive their own decisions. Be transparent about tradeoffs (e.g., between timeliness and precision) to inform design decisions.

  - Adapt design and methods, as appropriate, to changes in contextual conditions and practitioner learning needs.

  - Ensure that quantitative analyses are complemented by qualitative data from practitioners, students, families, or other relevant community members to strengthen credibility and transparency.

  - During analysis and interpretation of findings, be transparent about the degree of certainty regarding conclusions (for example, signaled by confidence intervals and known threats of bias for impact estimates or triangulation of qualitative evidence from different sources) and the bounds on the generalizability of findings due to sampling, measurement, or data quality concerns.

- **Use data collection tools and processes that are responsive to the needs of students and families participating in the research.**

  - Draw on input from practitioners, students, and families in designing data collection protocols to minimize burden and maximize usability. User test instruments with a sample of target respondents before large-scale implementation.

  - When using standardized instruments or assessments for measurement, consider whether they have been tested and validated with relevant target groups. Test and, as warranted, modify existing instruments to make them more timely and relevant for target groups.

- **Incorporate the voices of practitioners, communities and other relevant stakeholders in deriving meaning from findings.**

  - Contextualize findings with input from stakeholders. Address factors related to systems and structures that can affect implementation and outcomes of the study and/or the solutions tested.

  - Provide practitioners, families, and community informants with an understanding of how their input was used in the evidence-building process (e.g., helped inform the questions being asked, the outcomes measured, and the analysis, among other things).

Evidence Sharing and Use

- **Establish feedback loops with practitioners to inform key decision points.**

  - During the planning phase, develop a timeline for sharing findings with practitioners that reflects their knowledge needs at different intervals. Take an iterative approach to sharing evidence in a periodic manner, as opposed to a "one and done" approach or product.

  - Invest in products and tools that enhance the accessibility of data and evidence to practitioners (e.g., presentations and dashboards that they can also use to engage other stakeholders like district leaders, principals, or teachers) in decision making. Understand learning modalities of different stakeholders — visual, verbal, or written — and tailor communications accordingly.

  - Explain technical terms in plain language so that practitioners have a clear understanding of the methods, analysis, calculations, and limitations.

  - Where appropriate, co-develop playbooks that provide options for action and can help practitioners connect evidence to implementation.

- **Develop dissemination products and strategies that are accessible and audience specific.**

  - Understand the need for differentiation of products or strategies for multiple stakeholders, and engage practitioners and communities in identifying ways to communicate and disseminate evidence in ways that are relevant for use among stakeholders.

  - Create products that are shorter, includes data visualizations, and use language that is accessible to broader, non-academic audiences with varying levels of literacy. Consider what categories or framing of the findings would be most relevant to practitioners (e.g., pulling together findings that are relevant to staff in a particular role, even if they come from different analyses.)

  - Ensure that dissemination products are culturally responsive and are accessible to diverse audiences (e.g., ensuring that reports and data visualizations are accessible to individuals with visual impairments and accommodating multiple language needs).

  - Collaborate with practitioners to identify ways to ensure that research findings are accessible to those who may be affected by them (e.g., through community forums or social media engagements). Where relevant, share evidence with parents and community members to help them make decisions and advocate for themselves.

- **Build capacity of practitioners to act on evidence and advance their learning agenda.**

  - Offer practitioners tools, frameworks, training, and coaching that build their capacity to translate evidence into action, whether directly or through connections with technical assistance providers or other resources.

  - Share analysis plans and clean data sets (when appropriate and within the bounds of data practitioners and researchers could draw on in future evidence building and learning efforts.

Voices from the Actionable Evidence Network

Below is a sampling of guidance from the Network on how researchers can work toward building actionable evidence, which shaped the recommendations shared in this document..

Shifting Mindset and Behaviors

Be more open-minded about what types of data and research is needed, and the ways in which that data and research will be used.

Push back against language like "what works" that reinforces thumbs up/thumbs down mindset, or "gold standard" to describe RCTs.

Take a learning stance — go in first to learn and then to offer advice or assistance.

Researchers need to be clear what they can and cannot answer.

Show more empathy and willingness to be uncomfortable.

Building New Skills and Competencies

Train people how to negotiate research design and other things. Being able to go back and forth and negotiate a win-win for everyone.

Train new researchers in the skills they need to put this approach into practice — working collaboratively, building relationships, translating technical and nuanced findings without misrepresenting them.

There is a need for stronger communicators and story tellers in plain English. There is a need for research to speak normal human language.

Develop a stronger understanding of practice.

Developing Evidence Agendas and Research Questions

Don't focus on research questions, focus on actions and decisions that need to be made.

From the outset, have that open, honest conversation who's going to benefit from this intervention, this evaluation, the results? Making sure that it truly is about the communities that we're trying to work with and support, and not just about us as individuals and things that may make us feel better. So who will it benefit?

Push back on funders when they come to [researchers] with RFPs or funding opportunities to say, "Here's what the question should be."

Include communities (students, parents) in framing research questions/defining what research is needed. Focus on the decisions/ actions they are trying to take or contemplate taking. They don't often know what the research questions are, but know what decisions they need to make.

Get very concrete about how the evidence the project is going to produce will help somebody do their job better…. Is it going to create information at the end of the day that somebody can use to change a practice in a school, the principal can use, the district leader can actually use to do something different?

Look for opportunities for improvement inside of what might typically be grants or projects focused on simple impact questions.

Choosing Methods and Designs

Design evidence efforts to answer the questions of evidence users (i.e., don't create designs that result in evidence that will not answer key questions).

Design projects that result in more than a thumbs up or thumbs down verdict.

Check that you are not only evaluating what is easy to measure.

Consider more flexible approaches to evidence building.

Start by listening to what the needs are, and then figure out which of the tools in the evaluation toolkit can meet those needs.

Building Practitioner Capacity

Increase the capacity of practitioners to collect and report data through tools and guidance for evidence building.

Produce more timely information about implementation before findings are completely out.

Build tools, toolkits, and technologies for practitioners (e.g., automated dashboards).

Talk to practitioners much more regularly and get their input on issues and on draft products. Write much more clearly and in plain language and think about how practitioners will use the evidence as you produce it.

Partner with technical assistance providers so there is a connection to improving practice.

Improving Equity

Insist on research teams that are diverse/include representation of the community or intended beneficiary population.

Do the work of anti-racism and learn about/gain experience with Black/Brown/poor communities beyond coming in to do an analysis.

White researchers should be accountable for the lens that they are bringing to work in Black and brown communities.

Looking Forward

Many researchers and evaluators who participated in the Actionable Evidence convenings between November 2020 and February 2021 reported incorporating principles of the Actionable Evidence framework in their work, while recognizing the need to do more. The discussions found a considerable gap between their aspirations for actionable evidence, and what they are able to do in practice.

The next phase of the Actionable Evidence Initiative will focus on closing this aspiration-to-practice gap. This will include:

- **Developing and curating use cases, implementation guidance and tools** to help researchers and evaluators apply the framework's principles in their own work.

- **Expanding the Actionable Evidence Network** of researchers, technical assistance providers, funders, practitioners, and policymakers to facilitate knowledge sharing and dissemination of practice guides, insights, tools, and use cases to promote more wide-spread use of actionable evidence.

- **Expand and strengthen the Community of Practice** of researchers to build their capacity to design and implement actionable evidence approaches in their work through collaborative learning, problem solving around common barriers and challenges, and support innovation.

- **Testing matching mechanisms** to help practitioners identify and connect with researchers who support actionable evidence approaches.

- **Identify and fund new opportunities** for intentional application of the framework during research and evaluation projects in order to validate and advance the utility of the framework.

For up-to-date information about the Actionable Evidence Initiative and its activities, please visit: https://www.projectevident.org/actionable-evidence

Endnotes

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4 Dorn, Emma; Hancock, Bryan; Sarakatsannis, Jimmy; and Viruleg, Ellen. *"COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime." June 1, 2020.* McKinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime

5 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service. *"The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce." June 2016.* https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf

What distinguishes the Actionable Evidence Framework is its focus on empowering practitioners to drive change through engaging them equitably in the design, production, and use of evidence. At the core of the framework's theory of change is a belief, that by prioritizing the learning and decision-making needs of practitioners, and by working collaboratively with practitioners to build timely evidence, we will see more effective programs, policies, and practices with evidence of equitable outcomes for students and families.

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