

# “Doing What Works” Bridges Research and Practice

For education research to matter, it must reach educators in a form that is informative and readily usable. Translating research into practice is not a new challenge, but the explosion of online environments and access to multimedia technologies have opened new possibilities for addressing this longstanding challenge.

Enter Doing What Works (DWW), an online library of resources that is “building a bridge between research and practice,” according to WestEd Senior Program Director Nikola Filby. Launched five years ago by WestEd for the U.S. Department of Education (ED), in partnership with American Institutes for Research and RMC Research Corporation, the DWW website includes content based on research undertaken by ED’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Its strength lies in its “wealth of high-quality, practical tools that school leaders, service providers, and university faculty can use, particularly for planning and conducting their own professional learning,” says Filby.


The DWW website, [dww.ed.gov](http://dww.ed.gov), provides access to resources in six broad areas: data-driven improvement, quality teaching, literacy, math and science, comprehensive support, and early childhood education. The material is organized into 16 topics, such as: “Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools,” “How to Organize Your Teaching,” “Adolescent Literacy,” and “Encouraging Girls in Math and Science.” Most of the topics correspond to existing IES “practice guides.” More than 400 people have signed up for a webinar on the most recent topic, “Teaching Fractions,” which is particularly relevant to Common Core Standards.

Educators can access all the material on the website – supported by federal funds, free of charge to users. DWW has been used by teachers, professional development providers, coaches, school and district administrators, technical assistance providers, university faculty, data specialists, employees of state education agencies, among others. In October 2011, WestEd was awarded a five-year, \$15-million continuation contract to develop additional content for the website and strengthen outreach and support for users.

## Implementation Awards Help Fine-Tune DWW

Although the DWW website has grown increasingly popular – the number of visits tripled from 2008 to 2011, including a quadrupling of the number of long visits – and users indicate that its content is helping them achieve their goals, Filby says there is still much to learn about how to deliver the resources in an effective manner. In late 2010, to increase use and gain insights into how people were using DWW resources, WestEd granted implementation awards to 26 school dis-

► This article was first published in WestEd’s *R&D Alert*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2012.



districts and other educational agencies — institutions of higher education, national associations, and nonprofits — to use the website's materials in their professional development programs. The awards typically helped recipients fund planning time, adapt DWW materials, and develop and pilot professional development relevant to their settings. DWW staff worked closely with local project coordinators, providing technical assistance and other support.

The Spring-Ford Area School District (Pennsylvania), for example, used its implementation grant to have seven elementary schools develop behavior support teams, guided by DWW materials. In the North Kitsap School District (Washington), staff designed professional development that focused on using nonlinguistic representations — such as pictures, diagrams, charts, and models — to reorganize their teaching in order to increase student achievement. According to one of the district's English Language Arts teachers who participated in professional development organized around DWW materials, “students are better equipped to show their understanding by using a variety of tools and strategies.”

In exchange for the implementation funds, awardees were asked to document how they used DWW materials, describe the outcomes they achieved, and explain how they planned to sustain their programs. A Spring-Ford special education teacher, for example, said the fact that the materials were research-based gave the district's professional development program credibility. “It's tiring for teachers to have something new to do each year, so the research base helps them know that it is worth doing.”

Recipients' feedback has helped WestEd evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of DWW. One of the main strengths, Filby says, is that it “offers a wealth of quality, research-based material of a sort that has not been available before in a practical, easily accessible platform.”


But, she adds, having so much material turns out to be a mixed blessing. “It's like a library — a modern library — organized around learning, seeing, and doing, which people tell us makes sense. We've learned that because the site is so robust we have to make sure people know what — out of all the material available — is going to be particularly useful to them.” Some users have reported that the breadth of resources can be overwhelming, and consequently can require time and skill to figure out how to use the website effectively.

## **A Bridge in Three Parts**

The website is organized around a three-part framework that invites educators to “Learn What Works,” “See How It Works,” and “Do What Works.”

According to Filby, “users can learn what the research says” through videos, with transcripts, that summarize the research and explain key concepts of the recommendations; a diagram that serves as a visual reminder of the recommendations; and a short video of an expert discussing, and sometimes demonstrating, the recommended practices. The “Learn What Works” section also provides a link to an IES practice guide.

The “See How It Works” section features video clips of teachers engaged in putting the recommendations into practice and, simultaneously, describing the process. “The videos show the teacher working with her students, but what you hear is a narration by the teacher about what she's doing, why she did it, and the results,” says Filby. “It's a much more efficient process than sitting in



a classroom observing a 45-minute lesson. In less than four minutes, you get a bird's-eye view of a lesson and hear the teacher reflect on what happened.” The teachers featured are, according to Filby, working at “real schools doing these things successfully.” Profiles of the schools are provided so users can compare them to their own. But Filby notes, “even if the schools aren't all that similar to yours, maybe what they're doing is still applicable.”

Lastly, each practice section helps educators “Do What Works” by providing downloadable PDF documents that describe practical ways to put the recommended practices into place and provide the actual tools to facilitate that process. The tools include outlines and agendas for workshops, self-assessment instruments, planning guides, and worksheets to help participants complete tasks such as analyzing how well collaborative time is being used in a school and selecting members of a team to guide the way a school uses data to improve instruction.

Based on input received so far, plans call for making the website even more user-friendly. One enhancement will be to offer more examples of how educators nationwide are using the material. Another will be to improve the search feature “so people can find material for a specific audience or purpose — for example, those materials especially suited for beginning teachers,” says Filby. She adds that WestEd staff are also developing more structured professional development packages, such as one that provides a sample agenda and all materials for a two-hour workshop on using data.

Overall, Filby believes principals and other school leaders recognize the value, especially in these hard financial times, of an online resource that takes advantage of the latest interactive technologies. “Yet, if our goal is to build a bridge between research and practice, we're only partway there,” Filby says. “We've made the research understandable and brought it to life through some real-life examples. But we need to keep improving usability, finding more ways to help people know how to put it into action in their own settings. That's the challenge.”

Because the implementation awards have proven helpful to the development of DWW resources, “we'll be offering more awards as a way of encouraging people to use the website and let us know how it's working,” Filby says. Details will be available on the DWW website. Staff will also make presentations and consult with organizations interested in using the materials.

“Contact us,” she says. “We're here to help.”

For more information about Doing What Works, contact Nikola Filby at 415.615.3124 or [nfilby@WestEd.org](mailto:nfilby@WestEd.org).