



# Identifying Promising Practices in Charter Schools: A Framework for An Evidence-based Approach

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## Introduction

More effective responses to educational inequity will require creating and implementing new and more flexible practices that meet the needs of every student, along with disseminating more, and better, information about how these practices can contribute to closing or preventing academic achievement gaps among student subgroups. Charter schools can help with these goals, as they were created to incubate, test, and evaluate innovative educational practices, and then share these practices with other communities to replicate results. To do this, states and charter schools need a transparent mechanism for identifying, evaluating, and sharing practices with school communities that incorporates clear, well-defined language and enables the evaluation of practices using measurable benchmarks and outcomes. This paper presents states and their charter schools with an evidence-based framework for identifying innovations and promising practices that can be reported on and shared with the broader education community, including other charter schools as well as traditional schools and districts.

Previous efforts to identify promising practices of charter schools have often relied on self-reported practices from high-performing schools, with little assessment of local context, generalizability, or scalability of the specific practice. Using this approach, states typically identify the high-performing schools first (based on school performance) and then ask the schools to identify practices to highlight. This approach often divorces a school's performance from its context and assumes a causal relationship between the school's performance

and individual practices without the appropriate evidence to validate it. It is important to gather and share promising practices from schools in a variety of contexts and with a variety of performance levels — not just from high-performing schools — in order to get a more representative sample of practices that can potentially be implemented elsewhere.

While charter schools' impact on student achievement has long been studied, there is little research on what practices lead to improvements in student achievement and in what specific contexts this occurs.<sup>1</sup> Only recently has research started to emerge on what specific policies and practices make some charter schools more effective than others, including extended school days or years, comprehensive behavioral policies with rewards and sanctions, and a mission that prioritizes boosting student achievement. There is also moderately strong evidence that high-dosage tutoring, frequent feedback and coaching for teachers, and policies promoting the use of data to guide teachers' instructional practices are positively associated with charter schools' achievement.<sup>2</sup> Individual charter schools can contribute to this growing body of evidence by using the framework described in this paper to examine their own practices for impact and effectiveness.

## Purpose

This framework is meant to be a starting point for states to use an evidence-based approach to identify promising practices in charter schools, and ultimately disseminate these practices to other charter schools and educational settings. Individual charter schools can use this framework to examine their own practices for impact and effectiveness, as described in this paper. In an era when SEAs and LEAs are increasingly focused on using improvement science and implementing evidence-based initiatives, the processes and protocols included herein are intended to extend those same concepts to the charter sector.

In this framework, we propose a new approach to identifying promising practices by not limiting promising practices identification to just high-performing

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<sup>1</sup> Denice, P. (2014, August). *Are charter schools working? A review of the evidence*. Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from <https://www.crpe.org/publications/are-charter-schools-working-review-evidence>

<sup>2</sup> Gleason, P. M. (2016, July). *What's the secret ingredient? Searching for policies and practices that make charter schools successful*. Mathematica Policy Research. <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/whats-the-secret-ingredient-searching-for-policies-and-practices-that-make-charter-schools>

schools. In an effort to disconnect the identification of promising practices from overall school performance, **we advocate instead that all charter schools select a practice they believe is key to their success,<sup>3</sup> articulate their rationale for why, and then identify or build an evidence base to measure its impact.** If the practice is found to be successful, charter schools will then identify the factors that led to the successful implementation and document the context and evidence base for implementation. If the practice is not found to impact desired outcomes, then the school can pick a new practice and rationale to explore. In going through this process, stakeholders can have a better understanding of what practices contributed to which results, for whom, and under what conditions.

States can encourage schools to prioritize identifying practice areas that align to specific state priorities or needs so they can generate a timely and relevant body of evidence-based promising practices. The approach to identifying promising practices described in this paper is content neutral. That is, schools should be able to generate an evidence base for any practice(s) that they want to designate as promising.

### A Note on the Importance of Evidence

ESSA emphasizes the importance of evidence in informing decisions:

Understanding and building upon what has worked in the past, for whom, and in what circumstances offers a better chance of success.<sup>4</sup> ESSA defines four levels of evidence: *strong*, *moderate*, *promising*, and *demonstrates a rationale*.<sup>5</sup> The first three of these levels of evidence require that statistically significant outcomes be identified as a part of evaluation designs, which range from experimental (strong evidence) to correlational, with statistical controls for selection bias (promising). The fourth level of evidence, demonstrates a rationale, does not, by definition, require statistically significant findings. The various evaluation and evidence requirements of ESSA also lend themselves to the use of continuous improvement cycles to evaluate the effectiveness of practices.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> If the practice a school has identified is already evidence-based, schools are encouraged to report this information following the suggestions located in Hale, S., Dunn, L., Filby, N., Rice, J., & Van Houten, L. (2017). *Evidence-based improvement: A guide for states to strengthen their frameworks and supports aligned to the evidence requirements of ESSA*. Tool 5: Intervention Evidence Review. San Francisco: WestEd.

<sup>4</sup> Hale et al. (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act, Public Law 95, 114th Cong., 1st Sess. (December 10, 2015).

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177/text>

<sup>6</sup> Hale et al. (2017).

These evidence levels serve as the new standard for determining program effectiveness and impact in meeting the criteria for use of federal funds, such as Title I and Title II. Given the day-to-day realities of school-based practitioners and their evaluation resources and capacities, the first three evidence standards may be especially challenging. In this framework, practitioners are encouraged to examine their own promising practices and then identify and build an evidence base to measure the impact of those practices. This allows practitioners to meet the fourth level of evidence.

## Framework for Using an Evidence-based Approach to Identify Promising Practices

The primary purpose of sharing promising practices is to help others learn about, and implement, the practice to achieve similar desired outcomes. For educators to determine whether the practice will fit their particular needs and context, they need information that describes the following:

- What the practice is
- What the practice is attempting to address and for whom
- What results were achieved
- How the practice was implemented
- What contextual factors impacted implementation

In this section, we propose an approach to identifying promising practices that ask practitioners to use an evidence base to confirm the impact of these practices (see Exhibit 1). The approach includes guidelines to identify an appropriate practice and a rationale for why that practice may lead to desired outcomes; an exploration of the relevant outcome measures, available data, and impact of the practice; and an analysis of what factors make it successful. Only after engaging in these steps to ensure a practice is successful should it be shared with others.

### Exhibit 1. Evidence-based Approach to Identifying Promising Practices



## Identify Practice and Rationale

Because the goal for identifying promising practices is to help others learn about the practices and ultimately implement them, the practices chosen to be examined and shared need to meet the following criteria:

- Practices should address and improve one or more of the following core components of schools in order to have the greatest potential impact on school and student outcomes: leadership/governance, talent, teaching and learning, and/or culture.
- Practices should be adaptable to a variety of contexts. That is, they should not be so idiosyncratic to a specific school, team, or context as to be nearly impossible to implement them with fidelity and replicate the results elsewhere.

Practices should be scalable to meet the needs of larger audiences and different contexts. The logistics of scaling up should be considered across several domains, including long-term changes in practice, number of users, sustainability, and change in ownership.<sup>7</sup> Scalable practices:

- may require infrastructure or system change — beyond the target environment — to support effective implementation;<sup>8</sup>
- should include documentation to implement the practices with fidelity, including training manuals or other resources for implementation;
- should be able to measure impact using qualitative or quantitative data.

Once a potential practice has been identified, it is important to develop a rationale or theory of action for why the practice may lead to desired results and outcomes. That is, school staff should have a hypothesis stating *IF* a practice is implemented, *THEN* specific changes in practice will be made, *AND* desired results will occur. A rationale or theory of action allows for a check on whether the practice had the impact intended. This rationale can be further articulated in a logic model if desired.

## Build Evidence of Effectiveness

It is essential to identify and share what, specifically, the practice is intended to impact, and which data can be used to determine whether the practice is

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<sup>7</sup> Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K. A., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009, February). Scaling-up evidence-based practices in education. *Scaling-up Brief*, No. 1. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG, SISEP.



effective. Practices may aim to impact student achievement directly, for example, by focusing on academic interventions, or they may aim to address the root causes of low achievement, such as attendance, engagement, motivation, expectations, teacher practice, culture, and so on. Identifying these data sources early in implementation supports timely data-gathering efforts.

### Identify Data Sources

Practitioners are encouraged to think broadly about what types of data could be used as evidence of effectiveness. An approach that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data often produces the most compelling evidence.

**Quantitative data** are numeric-based data that can allow one to measure and quantify the level of change in an individual or community. Quantitative data take many forms. Schools already collect a wide variety of quantitative data at the levels of student, staff, and school, as shown in the examples provided in Exhibit 2.

### Exhibit 2. Examples of Quantitative Data

Student Data	Staff Data	School Data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attendance (e.g., number of absences)</li> <li>Discipline (e.g., number of write-ups, number of suspensions)</li> <li>Benchmarks, interim assessment scores, growth, mastery</li> <li>Scores, levels, and growth on summative assessments, such as annual statewide assessments</li> <li>Student survey results (e.g., percentage of students expressing satisfaction, engagement, feelings of safety, connectedness)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher evaluation scores</li> <li>Teacher survey results (e.g., percentage of teachers expressing satisfaction, engagement, feelings of safety)</li> <li>Teacher retention/turnover rates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attendance rate</li> <li>Discipline rate</li> <li>Average formative assessment scores, percentage at grade level, etc.</li> <li>Performance data on annual statewide assessments (e.g., average scores, percentage at grade level, growth figures, percentile rank)</li> </ul>

**Qualitative data** are non-numeric data that answer different questions from quantitative data and are more useful in capturing and describing processes, contexts, and individual stories and experiences. Qualitative methods include

interviews with staff, students, parents, or other stakeholders; input gathered from focus groups; and open-ended survey responses that can help clarify for whom the practice works, and why. Qualitative data can also help identify and describe processes and procedures and explain the mechanisms for how the practice works.

### *Analyze Effectiveness*

Analyzing effectiveness entails two primary components: (1) measuring whether the intended change in knowledge and/or behaviors was achieved, and (2) measuring how much of a change was accomplished. By answering the question, “How will we know if the practice generated improvement?” the effectiveness of the practice — or change in data — can be measured. Therefore, it is important to start at the rationale. Identifying what is hoped to change will point in the direction of what data to analyze to determine whether the change was realized. School-based practitioners may want to consider capitalizing on any existing evaluation efforts to identify available data sources. Note that a formal evaluation is not required to gather and analyze evidence of effectiveness.

The methods used to analyze effectiveness will vary depending on the type of data analyzed and the outcomes for exploration. Similar to the importance of identifying the data sources early in the implementation phase, determining the analysis approach will support timely data analysis efforts.

### **Identify Factors for Successful Implementation**

As mentioned earlier, the goal for identifying and sharing promising practices is for others to learn about, and ultimately implement, a practice found to be effective. Therefore, identifying factors that made for successful implementation is important for enabling other schools to be able to replicate the practice's success. (Identifying success factors can also help the original school sustain its success with the practice.) One such means to identify factors is through a success analysis.<sup>9</sup> While often used to organize thinking around *driving* a change process, unpacking the factors that *led* to success and the reasons for the effectiveness of the practice can be done using the Success Analysis approach illustrated in Exhibit 3.

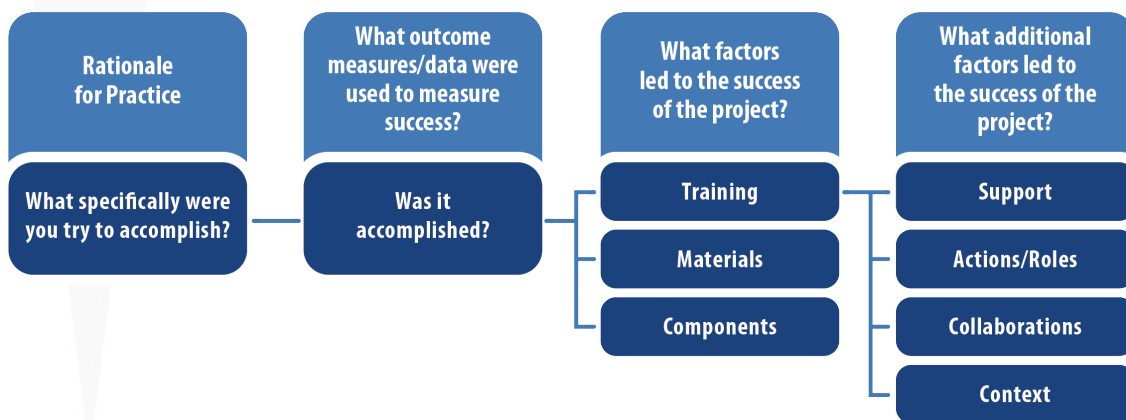
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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from the Success Analysis protocol, located at School Reform Initiative: <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/>

Practitioners can identify factors they think are responsible for the success of the practice through several means. For example, they may choose to research the history of the implementation of this practice at the school and break the history down to identify the key factors and conditions at play in carrying out the practice, and/or they may want to interview staff about which factors they feel were most important to the success of the practice:

- What, specifically, were you trying to accomplish? (What is the rationale for the practice?)
- What outcome measures and data were used to determine success?
- What primary factors led to the success of the project (e.g., particular materials, components, training, support)?
- What secondary factors led to the success of the project (e.g., conditions, attitudes, actions/roles, collaborations)?

### Exhibit 3. Success Analysis Template



#### *Tell Your Story*

Other educators grappling with similar problems of practice can learn from those who came before them. Understanding what has worked in other schools, for whom, and in what circumstances offers educators a better chance of success with implementing new practices.

To communicate what works to other practitioners, the information from the success analysis needs to be disseminated. Dissemination efforts should structure and package the needed information in a way that facilitates transferability and allows others to learn from your experience of implementation. To clearly communicate results for dissemination, we suggest including a template for practitioners to organize the information about promising practices.



Exhibit 4 provides a possible matrix of questions for schools to consider answering when writing up a description of their practice, which will be disseminated to a wider audience. Reflection questions are also provided to help the state consider whether the practice description provides the pertinent information needed to determine if a practice has a sufficient evidence base and is suitable for dissemination.

**Exhibit 4: Tell Your Story: Guiding Questions and Example Information to Share**

<b>Guiding Questions for Schools</b>	<b>Possible Information</b>	<b>State Reflection Questions</b>
<b>What is the practice?</b>	Brief overview of practice  Rationale and/or theory of action, including goals, objectives, and underlying philosophy or hypothesis	<i>Is the description of the practice sufficient for implementation elsewhere?</i>  <i>Is the practice unique to the school circumstances or could it apply to other constituents?</i>
<b>What is your school's context?</b>	Geographic location, locale (urban, suburban, rural), demographic breakdown of student body, staff qualifications	<i>Was the practice implemented in locales of interest (e.g., rural)?</i>
<b>What/whom were you seeking to address?</b>	Whole school, specific grade levels, subgroups of students, content areas	<i>Is the description of the practice sufficient for implementation elsewhere?</i>  <i>Does the practice address particular subgroups or topics of interest (e.g., diverse learners)?</i>
<b>What data were used to determine effectiveness?</b>	Describe the data sources	<i>Does the data demonstrate a link between program goals, methods, and outcomes?</i>
<b>How were the data collected?</b>	Frequency, process, time frame for data collection	<i>Were the data collected in a timeframe and frequency allowing for implementation and impact to be measured?</i>
<b>How were the data analyzed?</b>	Data analysis methods used	<i>What was the impact of the practice on data?</i>
<b>What were the results? Were the desired results achieved?</b>	Description of positive, negative, and lack of changes in knowledge or behavior measures	<i>How big of an impact did the practice make?</i>

Guiding Questions for Schools	Possible Information	State Reflection Questions
What were the experiences of the participants (students, staff, leadership, others)?	Participant survey data	Were the experiences of participants overall positive?
What are the main components of the practice?	Description of key activities and pieces needed for implementation	Are implementation factors described with enough detail for future implementation?
What is/was the role of the participants (staff, students, leadership, others) in implementing the practice?	Activities of each participant group, including time, duration, and frequency needed for implementation	Is the practice generalizable and/or scalable to other contexts?
What resources are/were required to implement this practice?	Staff model and qualifications, pre-assessments, cost, curriculum, class/group size requirements, training manuals, videos, software	Are the required resources idiosyncratic to the school?

## Conclusion

Charter schools were created with the intent to incubate, test, and evaluate innovative educational practices. However, to date there has been an insufficient use of evidence to support the claims of innovation. In time, the body of research on promising practices in charter schools will grow, enabling more effective planning and adaptation of practices that have been proven to be successful. Through use of this framework, there is an opportunity to gather and disseminate useful information about practices that show promise for adaptation across the charter school sector. Sharing these promising practices can help further the shift from *closing* the achievement gap in academic readiness for all students to *preventing* the achievement gap in the first place.

We encourage states to use this framework for an evidence-based approach to identify promising practices and the contexts in which they operate. This framework will allow states to identify practices found effective by charter schools serving students from various subgroups and backgrounds, in various geographic locales, and with various staffing approaches. This framework will

allow schools to gather and share enough information about the practices, implementation, and effectiveness to aid in fruitful dissemination and potential further study with more robust research methodology.



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