EdResearch for Action

EDRESEARCH FOR ACTION OVERVIEW BRIEFS

WRITER'S GUIDE

Updated May 2023

About this Guide

Education decision-makers need research-informed insights that help them better understand a problem and how they might address it, and these types of insights are rarely stated explicitly or prominently in technical papers.

The EdResearch model of writing prioritizes putting the "bottom line" up front. We emphasize points of consensus in a field, identify areas where the evidence is less solid, and provide scale and context for results. By following the guidance in this Writer's Guide, authors will be able to use their judgment and experience to draw clearer conclusions in order to elevate key messages that are relevant and actionable for policymakers and practitioners.

RESULTS FOR AMERICA

ANNENBERG BROWN UNIVERSITY

Part I: Communicating for Impact

EdResearch for Action research overview briefs use a consistent structure to organize and arrange content for clarity and practicality. All briefs are formatted with the following sections:

1. **Central Question**
2. **Breaking Down the Issue**
3. **Evidence-based practices: What does the research say about effective ways to address this challenge?**
4. **Practices to avoid: What strategies have been proven ineffective?**

Effective research briefs are built on a series of **Key Insights** that communicate findings in new, unexpected, and practical ways. These insights are statements of evidence - not direct advice - that form the building blocks of each section within the research brief. They are the primary ingredient in producing a brief that is engaging and useful.

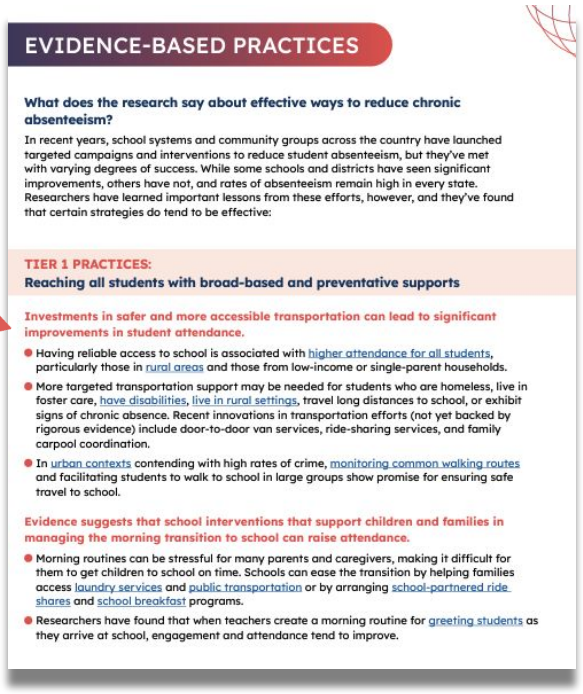
Key insights are:

- Big ideas that *synthesize* what we have learned from years of research.
- Actionable, relevant, and interesting statements that readers could learn a lot from even if that is all they read.
- Specific; they address the decision points district leaders are facing: specific choices they will need to make or specific and non-obvious things they can learn from research.

Key insights are NOT:

- Only about individual studies.
- Topic sentences that summarize ideas without drawing out implications for action

Key Insights are in red



EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

What does the research say about effective ways to reduce chronic absenteeism?

In recent years, school systems and community groups across the country have launched targeted campaigns and interventions to reduce student absenteeism, but they've met with varying degrees of success. While some schools and districts have seen significant improvements, others have not, and rates of absenteeism remain high in every state. Researchers have learned important lessons from these efforts, however, and they've found that certain strategies do tend to be effective:

TIER 1 PRACTICES:
Reaching all students with broad-based and preventative supports

Investments in safer and more accessible transportation can lead to significant improvements in student attendance.

- Having reliable access to school is associated with higher attendance for all students, particularly those in rural areas and those from low-income or single-parent households.
- More targeted transportation support may be needed for students who are homeless, live in foster care, have disabilities, live in rural settings, travel long distances to school, or exhibit signs of chronic absence. Recent innovations in transportation efforts (not yet backed by rigorous evidence) include door-to-door van services, ride-sharing services, and family carpool coordination.
- In urban contexts contending with high rates of crime, monitoring common walking routes and facilitating students to walk to school in large groups show promise for ensuring safe travel to school.

Evidence suggests that school interventions that support children and families in managing the morning transition to school can raise attendance.

- Morning routines can be stressful for many parents and caregivers, making it difficult for them to get children to school on time. Schools can ease the transition by helping families access laundry services and public transportation or by arranging school-partnered ride shares and school breakfast programs.
- Researchers have found that when teachers create a morning routine for greeting students as they arrive at school, engagement and attendance tend to improve.

This approach will often result in statements that are detailed, surprising, and potentially controversial, and ideally will not be something that readers could say without knowing the research.

Developing Key Insights

The book Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* outlines research-based suggestions for how to make your ideas “sticky” (i.e., how to make your ideas remembered, repeated, and acted upon). The book employs the acronym "SUCCES" (with the last s omitted). Each letter refers to a characteristic that can help make an idea "sticky.”

The framework below is our interpretation of applying the SUCCES acronym to writing actionable Key Insights in research overview briefs.

SUCCES factors when writing Key Insights:

Simple – Find the core of the idea.

- Determine the single most important thing. Taking out unnecessary thoughts is often the easy part. What’s harder is taking out ideas that may be really important but just aren't the *most* important idea.
- This involves forced prioritization- striking the right balance between providing sufficient nuance about research findings and focusing on the most relevant points for your audience.

Unexpected – Grab people's attention by surprising them

- A way to do this is by highlight things that are counterintuitive to generate curiosity
- Figure out what is counterintuitive about the message - What are the unexpected implications of your core message? Why isn't it already happening naturally?
- Present numbers or statistics in surprising ways, making them less abstract.

Concrete – Make sure an idea can be understood and remembered later

- Use examples and provide numbers whenever possible to help people start from a common level of understanding and make things less abstract
- Doing this well requires an understanding of the contexts and scope of work of the intended audience.

Credible – Give an idea believability and credibility

- Show, don’t tell: Use convincing details.
- Examples create credibility

Emotional – Help people care about an idea

- Include ideas that speak to justice, fairness
- Appeal to self-interest or self-identity

Stories – Empower people to use or apply an idea through narrative

- Examples of where research-based ideas have been implemented well or creatively
- Explain the logical chain of ideas or events - X led to Y led to Z. Explaining what we know about why an idea works or doesn’t work is more compelling than leaving it out.

Examples of Rewriting Key Insights

1 The new version is:

Simple- it focuses on the low pay for mentors

Concrete- it adds numbers to help explain the size and scope of the challenge ("minimally compensated" is abstract while $200 is concrete)

Unexpected- it provides imagery and context for the $200 by saying the number of of hours that $200 realistically covers

Original	Rewrite
Many teachers are reluctant to be mentor teachers because it is not only a challenging job when done well, but also they are minimally compensated and trained for their service.	Effective mentor teachers are hard to recruit likely because they are underpaid. Programs only pay mentors $200 on average for their service, covering only about five hours of the 50+ required in a semester.

2 The new version is:

Concrete- it adds numbers to help explain the size and scope of the challenge ("no guarantee" is abstract while 80% of the time is concrete)

Unexpected + Emotional- it grabs people's attention and helps them care about the idea by providing the 80% statistic

Original	Rewrite
Students who plan to go to college are often told they are doing rigorous work, but earning a good grade in a course is no guarantee that a student has learned what the state expects her to have learned in that course.	In one study, students spent 80% of their time on work that **did not** meet standards for college readiness.

3 The new version is:

Stories- it explains why attendance incentives are not useful if they are focused on perfect attendance

Unexpected- it goes against the traditional understanding of positive reinforcement, which assumes that rewarding good behavior will encourage more of the same behavior

Original	Rewrite
Attendance incentives can be useful in some cases, but are likely less useful if they are focused on perfect attendance.	Attendance awards often backfire. Once students have received an award for good attendance, they perceive the awards as a signal that they can now afford to miss class.

4 The new version is:

Simple- it focuses on the academic impact of building positive relationships.

Concrete- it provides an example- a focus on positive relationships can be built into an academic intervention to see positive impacts

Original	Rewrite
Positive relationships fuel the connections that support the development of the complex skills and competencies necessary for learning success and engagement.	Academic interventions often have larger effects when students report positive developmental relationships as a priority component of the intervention.

Part II: Building the Research Brief

The EdResearch Brief Production Process:

Structuring the Research Brief

In our experience, it can be difficult for authors to decide how to sort the available research evidence across the three buckets of findings, (i.e., Breaking Down the Issue, Evidence-based Practices, and Practices to Avoid). We will work with you on this, and the next section of this guidance further describes each.

Central Question

This is the question of practice that the brief addresses. It is critical to define a clear, crisp, compelling, right-sized topic & question- we will work with you to do this at the very start of the process.

Breaking Down the Issue

This section should set you up for the next one; the problems you list here should be addressed by your strategies.

The first section includes:

- Why this issue is important?
- Who is affected by it (especially if it is related to equity)?
- How big is the problem and how widely does it vary?
- How have we addressed the problem historically? Has it become more or less of a problem over time?
- Definitions of key terms and contextual details

The second section includes:

- Why is this an issue? Do causes of the problem differ by types of students or schools?
- How does it affect students?
- Who experiences greater negative effects and by how much (e.g., how do effects vary across students and schools)?
- What is the magnitude of the effects? Are there differential effects on math/reading?
- How do the effects comparing to the effects of other educational inputs?

Evidence-based practices

What does the research say about effective ways to address this challenge?

- This section includes interventions or practices backed with research evidence demonstrating their effectiveness.
- These insights are statements of evidence - not direct advice.

Example

Providing students more access to college counselors and setting aside time for college applications during the school day can raise college enrollment.

Practices to avoid

What strategies have been proven ineffective?

- This section includes commonly implemented interventions or practices that either research evidence suggests **do not** work or there is an absence of research that shows they do work.

Example

Causal studies of the effectiveness of co-teaching, an approach where special educators support students with disabilities in the general education classroom, have found no positive effect on student achievement - and some preliminary evidence of negative impact - in ELA and Math.

Writing the Supporting Bullets

Accompanying each Key Insight are supporting bullets that break down the insight into its crucial components.

- Use plain language to describe the **strength of the research**
  - Have there been multiple trials? Causal evidence? But do this briefly, e.g., "a descriptive study showed…", "a randomized trial found…"
  - In the case that you provide strategies that are not well-studied but are recommended by experts, explain **why the source of information is trustworthy**
- Specify **for whom** the intervention worked
  - Did it work more or less for particular students group or grades?
- Include the **magnitude of the benefit**, preferably in months of student learning.
- Include **costs** if available
- Provide **implementation contexts** or nuances
- Include as much as you can about ***how and why* it works** (see here). Without answers to questions of how and why things happen, it's hard to bridge the gap between research and practice.

Additional Resources

- What's in a Frame? (FrameWorks Institute, 2020)
- Equitable language guide (University of Washington, 2021)
- WHO Strategic Communications Framework for effective communications (World Health Organization, 2017)