Evidence Use in Massachusetts School Districts

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# Executive Summary

As part of the early stages of an effort to support Massachusetts districts in locating and using evidence, the Office of Planning and Research (OPR) in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) sought to understand how districts are currently using, building and sharing data and research. A graduate student researcher interviewed a representative sample of school districts to answer the following questions:

1. Who in districts engages with evidence?
2. How are districts building, using, and sharing evidence?
3. What internal capacity do districts have to use data and research in their decisions?
4. Where are the constraints that DESE could address?

The researcher found substantial heterogeneity in district practices around how districts define evidence. While most districts have some capacity to draw on student data to inform instruction, measure progress, and engage in strategic planning, fewer districts have systems in place to draw systematically on education research to inform decisions. Barriers to district use of evidence include staff time, financial resources, difficulty accessing relevant and timely evidence, and to a lesser extent, school culture.

To increase the production and consumption of evidence in Massachusetts school districts, the findings suggest a number of opportunities to decrease the cost of using evidence for districts:

* Bolster **data capacity** by increasing the number of positions dedicated to data work, providing technical and data management support to districts, and disseminating user-friendly resources, differentiable tools, and concrete examples of successful data use.
* Encourage **embedded research** by increasing awareness of DESE resources, grouping resources around topics that districts can locate and apply easily, disseminating short digests of published research papers, and tapping into existing networks for sharing evidence.
* **Build cultures of evidence** by increasing the visibility of credible research, facilitating the cross-pollination of ideas and resources by evidence-oriented practitioners, broadcasting evidence-based practice success stories, and developing a common definition of the terms “evidence,” “research,” and “data.”

# Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is invested in helping Massachusetts districts locate existing research and in supporting their ability to measure the implementation and impact of district initiatives. To design an effort that can provide useful resources for districts, the Office of Planning and Research (OPR) first sought to understand current district practices in these areas. To accomplish this, a graduate student researcher conducted phone interviews with 22 staff from a representative sample of 19 districts across the state to learn more about their current district practices.

## Sample

The researcher stratified Massachusetts districts along characteristics of size, urbanicity, and student achievement. Student population determined district size. Districts with 5,001 or more students were classified as large districts, districts with between 2,001 and 5000 students were classified as medium districts, and districts with 2,000 or fewer students were classified as small districts. Urbanicity was defined as proximity to major metropolitan centers. Districts that belong to the Urban Superintendent Network, as well as other districts located within the geographic boundaries of metropolitan centers (such as charter schools) were categorized as urban. Districts in small metropolitan areas or in close proximity to large metropolitan areas were categorized as suburban. Districts not in proximity to any large or small metropolitan centers were categorized as other. Student achievement was measured by MCAS scores, with districts split into the top, middle, or bottom third of reported MCAS scores. This stratification created 27 distinct district types. Twenty-five districts were then randomly selected from these district types in proportion to their representation across Massachusetts.

The final group of 19 districts interviewed from this sample consisted of 10 small districts (53%), 6 medium districts (32%), and 3 large districts (16%); 4 urban districts (21%), 9 suburban districts (47%), and 6 other (32%); and 7 high-achieving districts (37%), 8 middle-achieving districts (42%), and 4 low-achieving districts (21%). 4 districts were charters (21%). The sample had higher math scores than the state average, likely because of lower response rates of low-achieving districts. The sample included nine Massachusetts counties: Barnstable, Berkshire, Bristol, Essex, Hampshire, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth, and Suffolk.

## Analysis

The researcher and OPR staff jointly designed the protocol and the researcher piloted the protocol with three test districts. After revising and finalizing the interview protocol, OPR invited the superintendents of the 25 selected districts to participate in the project and requested their assistance in locating an interview candidate from their district who could describe practices around data, evidence, and/or research use. Since not all districts were able to participate in these interviews due to time and/or staffing constraints, an additional 10 districts were selected at random from those missing categories and invited to participate.

Nineteen interviews were conducted with 22 staff, resulting in a 54% response rate. The interviews were conducted by phone. In three cases, the researcher spoke to two district staff members at the same time.

The researcher, who took extensive notes, recorded all interviews. The researcher then coded and analyzed the resulting qualitative data.

## Limitations

While the sample resembles the state in terms of enrollment, urbanicity, and test scores, the small size of the sample makes it likely that other districts in Massachusetts have practices, routines, and attitudes not reflected in this report.

Additionally, the questions in this interview were intentionally phrased broadly to capture the full range of data, research, and evidence activities happening across Massachusetts districts. Responses varied enormously, reflecting the variety of ways that districts are conceiving of and using evidence. One phone interview is not sufficient to capture the full complexity of the state’s evidence ecosystem, the sophistication with which districts are approaching questions of data and evidence, or the heterogeneity of evidence work within districts.

# II. Findings

## Practitioner Typology

The respondents in this sample were assistant superintendents or directors of curriculum, teaching and learning, or research (n=11); superintendents (n=6); school-level leaders (n=4); and school-level curriculum supervisors (n=1).

When asked how they use data and research in their jobs, most reported using data from the state to measure student performance. Another frequently mentioned job function was facilitating the use of state data by superintendents and school committees to inform strategic planning/goal setting and align resources with district needs. Respondents also discussed using school-level assessment data, district social emotional learning (SEL) data, and student work to track trends, plan interventions, improve teacher instructional practice, evaluate curriculum, and target instruction.

#### Table 1. Specific Sources of Data Used by Respondents

| Data Type | # Mentions |
| --- | --- |
| State data (MCAS, Edwin, RADAR, DART) | 13 |
| School-level student data (formative assessments, student work) | 4 |
| District surveys (student, teacher, community) | 4 |
| District SEL data | 3 |
| Teacher Evaluations | 1 |

#### Table 2. Specific Uses of Data in Respondents’ Jobs

| Use of Data | # Mentions |
| --- | --- |
| Measure student improvement | 6 |
| Plan/target instruction | 4 |
| Report to school committee or superintendent | 3 |
| Improve instructional practice | 3 |
| Plan interventions | 3 |
| Evaluate curriculum | 3 |
| Determine professional development | 3 |
| Align resources with objectives | 2 |

### Size of teams

Most districts reported that almost everyone in their districts engages with data, research, and evidence in some way, probably because looking at student performance data is becoming a larger part of the regular routines for teachers and administrators. Only six of the respondents mentioned having at least one additional staff member in their district whose job functions specifically relate to data or evidence. These positions were instructional coaches, data managers, and content/curriculum specialists.

In this sample, urbanicity was a factor in determining whether districts had dedicated positions for data/evidence work. Only suburban and urban districts reported having these dedicated positions. Neither district size nor district achievement appeared to be a factor in determining the size of data/research teams, at least among the districts interviewed for this project.

## Building Evidence

While 81% of districts reported partnering with an outside organization to conduct research, under half of these (38%) described formal research processes with a stated research question and formal data collection and analysis. One example of this was a district that hosted a doctoral student conducting research about family engagement. The results are forthcoming, and the district hopes that they will be able to use the results to improve family engagement practices.

The remaining 43% described working with outside organizations on a variety of activities, such as providing professional development, implementing data platforms, conducting program reviews, and developing SEL strategies.

#### Figure 1. District Research Partnerships

All districts reported conducting research of their own, but most made a distinction between their efforts to collect data and formal research studies that would “pass academic muster.” Districts described a wide range of data collection efforts such as surveys, interviews, inquiry cycles, ongoing assessments, and regular data meetings.

The types of informal research that districts describe performing are not generally scientifically rigorous, rather designed to address the wide variety of questions and challenges facing districts. Comments about informal research conducted varied widely. Districts reported collecting data to accomplish the following:

* Track progress toward district goals
* Measure impact of district programs and practices
* Perform needs assessments
* Solicit feedback from parents, teachers, and students in the form of surveys and interviews
* Measure student improvement using formative and interim assessment data and screeners
* Track school culture and climate
* Respond to information requests from school committee/district office

#### Figure 2. District Internal Research

## Using Evidence

### Making evidence-grounded decisions

Districts were asked about their processes and routines around selecting new programs or interventions. Most districts reported having at least some sort of formal process to identify gaps, explore options for solutions, and select the best option. Forty-four percent mentioned forming committees comprised of relevant stakeholders; 44% mentioned reaching out to other districts that were using those programs or materials; 25% mentioned looking into what the research base says about the topic; 25% mentioned including a pilot phase in the planning process; 19% mentioned using EdReports to get synthesized information about options; and 13% mentioned bringing in third party consultants.

Districts reported prioritizing solutions that were manageable to implement and/or worked with the local context (31%), aligned with state standards (25%), and reasonably priced (6.25%). One district described changing their assessment system after several years of working with a system that while well supported by research, was logistically challenging to use, expensive, and misaligned with the scope and sequence of the curriculum. Teacher input was key to making the decision to switch.

Districts were also asked to estimate how frequently they used data and outside research for a range of decisions.

#### Figure 3. Frequency of Evidence Use in District Decisions

Districts overall reported high rates of incorporating data and research in decision-making. The activity for which districts used data or research most frequently was “adopt new materials” (9.13), followed by “select intervention” (8.87), “provide professional development” (8.27), “inform instruction” (8.07), “allocate funds” (7.53), and finally “allocate staff” (7.0). One district noted that they gave a lower rating to “allocate staff” as staffing decisions were less likely to be influenced by performance data or outside research because teacher hiring is tied to the number of students in each grade. Another district that gave this item a low rating indicated basing its decisions to move paraprofessionals or coaches based on anecdotal evidence. These staffing decisions for this district occur long before any official data exists to inform decision-making.

### Measuring Implementation

#### Table 3. How Districts Monitor Implementation

| Method of measuring implementation | # Mentions | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Classroom observations/walkthroughs | | 10 |
| Student assessment data | | 7 |
| Instructional coaching | | 6 |
| Planning meetings | | 5 |
| Professional development | | 2 |
| Teacher evaluation | | 1 |

Districts were asked how they measure the implementation of new district practices. The responses to this question revealed a wide range of capacity to measure implementation. Some districts described robust, multi-faceted efforts to track implementation that include weekly planning meetings, classroom observations, and instructional coaching for teachers. Other districts had very few structures in place to monitor implementation, or described it as an area for growth when the resources become available. Overall, the most frequently mentioned methods for measuring implementation were classroom observations, student assessment data, instructional coaching, and regular planning meetings.

Another common thread running through responses about implementation was the tradeoff between the fidelity of implementation and adapting interventions to meet the needs of different students. Several districts described having internal conversations about the extent to which fidelity matters to their context.

### Measuring Impact

#### Table 4. How Districts Measure Impact of Practices

| Means of measuring impact | # mentions |
| --- | --- |
| Specific assessment data (benchmark, common, pre/post in area of interest) | 8 |
| Recurring data meetings | 5 |
| Student data (general) | 4 |
| Anecdotes/teachers’ working knowledge | 2 |

To see if programs or interventions are getting the results they wanted, districts reported looking at student performance data to see if there was a change from before to after implementation. Most districts mentioned specific assessments or processes for looking at data, such as benchmark assessments, common assessments, or assessments built into the intervention in question. Some districts referred non-specifically to “student data,” while others also mentioned the importance of taking into account expertise and anecdotes from teachers. Five of the districts mentioned specific, ongoing meeting structures used to analyze student data as a way to measure the effectiveness of programs.

Districts also reported taking into account the time horizons for looking for impact. One district described that small-scale interventions might be expected to yield noticeable changes within weeks or months, whereas bigger shifts in curriculum or scheduling might take years to make a measurable impact.

### Obstacles to Evidence Use

Districts reported that the biggest obstacle to the use of data and outside research are time and staff resources, followed by the perceived value of available research, and school culture around data/research.

#### Table 5. Barriers to District Evidence Use

| Barriers to evidence use | # Mentions |
| --- | --- |
| Time/Staff resources | 12 |
| Value of available research | 5 |
| Culture | 3 |
| Nothing – no barriers | 2 |
| Access to data/research | 1 |
| Platforms to use data/research | 1 |

Comments indicate that the push to incorporate data work and evidence use into existing job functions can present a significant burden. Teachers do not always have the bandwidth to add data entry and analysis to their workload, nor do teacher contracts always accommodate adding these responsibilities. It is challenging for administrators to find time to dive deep into research, even when it is about important issues facing their schools. For example, one administrator whose district is researching new elementary math programs described how strenuous it is to do extensive research on potential programs at any level of granularity. Resources like EdReports allow her to narrow down which curriculums to look at by doing the research and reporting the synthesized findings for the district. Finally, smaller and more rural schools that already struggle to accommodate teacher professional development days due to tight staffing and other logistical constraints face more difficulty carving out time for data meetings, instructional coaching, and research.

### District confidence engaging with research

One possible barrier to the use of research was confidence in interpreting and applying research findings. However, in this sample, districts reported a fairly high level of confidence in both interpreting and adapting findings from published research studies. While the mean confidence levels were very similar for interpreting and adapting for the sample as a whole (7.78 and 7.44 out of 10, respectively), all four participating urban districts (21% of the sample) felt more confident interpreting research findings than they did adapting these findings to their contexts.

#### Figure 4. District Confidence in Interpreting and Adapting Findings from Published Research Studies

## Sharing Evidence

Districts were asked how frequently they shared evidence with counterparts in other districts. Responses ranged from 1 to 10 (with 1 meaning “very infrequently” and 10 “all the time”). However, the mean, median, and mode of these responses were all 5. The most common things that districts reported sharing were tools and resources around a variety of topics, including classroom practices, assessment measures, SEL strategies, technology and resource procurement, and new programs.

Districts reported most of this sharing takes place at conferences or collaborative meetings that provide many opportunities to share and discuss problems of practice. One superintendent said that the most fruitful discussions about evidence come out of conversations where superintendents shared the issues they were facing, since many districts are dealing with similar types of questions and are highly motivated to find tools and resources to address them.

#### Figure 5. How Districts Share Evidence

## Organizational Routines

Districts have more systems for integrating data use in their decision-making than for integrating outside research. District efforts to include the broader research base in decision-making appear to be more reflective of specific individuals who want to do this work than in any particular district role or system.

#### Table 6. Structures/Supports in Districts that Encourage Evidence Use

| Structures/supports to encourage evidence use | # Mentions |
| --- | --- |
| Recurring data meetings | 13 |
| Professional development | 5 |
| Dedicated data teams | 5 |
| Curriculum validation | 3 |
| Collaborative inquiry protocol | 1 |
| Problem solving protocol | 1 |

Districts were asked about district structures or supports that encourage evidence use. Most districts mentioned having data meetings that are scheduled on a recurring basis, with some happening annually, some several times a year as assessment data becomes available, and some happening on a weekly or biweekly basis.

Several districts described efforts to expand their structures and supports around data use as a big area of focus. Others expressed that while they would like to institutionalize these practices more, it has been extremely difficult to find the time, resources, and technical support to do so.

Overall, districts use data more frequently than outside research in the district improvement planning process. Note that not all districts had the time or information to respond to this question.

#### Figure 6. Frequency of Data and Research Use in the District Improvement Planning Process (n=15)

## District Access to Research

School districts reported accessing recent findings in education research primarily through professional associations and conferences. The generic “professional associations” was mentioned 8 times, while specific associations mentioned include the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (5 mentions), the School Superintendents Association (3 mentions), and the Massachusetts School Administrators’ Association (1 mention).

The second largest channel through which districts access education research, “other education publications,” refers to research and publications not affiliated with a university, the state, or federal government. Some frequently mentioned examples of this are the Marshall Memo (3 mentions), Education Week (2 mentions), Hanover Research (2 mentions), Heinemann Research (1 mention), and Marzano Research (1 mention). The category “online research” includes social media (5 mentions). “University affiliations” include listservs and research databases. Comments in the category “state resources” specifically mentioned both the Commissioner’s Newsletter and the OPR website.

#### Figure 7. Channels for District Access to Research

### What else would districts like DESE to do to support them in drawing on data and research to use educational best practices?

| Type of support | # Mentions |
| --- | --- |
| Searchable platform to find evidence | 4 |
| Simplification of reporting systems/lighten the burden | 3 |
| Research digest/one page synthesis | 3 |
| Useful, timely data | 3 |
| Template for data analysis | 2 |
| Summits/convenings | 2 |

#### Table 7. Most Suggested Ways DESE Could Support Districts

Overall, districts are looking for ways to lower the transaction costs of engaging in work relating to data and research. Different combinations of financial, logistical, and human factors limit district capacity and there were a variety of responses to this question. Multiple responses described a searchable web-based platform on the DESE website that would allow practitioners to search for research based on topic. Others, citing the speed of production of education research, requested more research digests or syntheses to keep time-constrained educators up to speed with the latest research in the field. Other responses mentioned that making the existing DESE data systems more user-friendly would make it easier to make the most of the data. Others requested more opportunities to come together at summits or convenings for districts to share successful practices and discuss common challenges.

### Are there any resources that DESE provides now about data or research that districts find helpful?

#### Table 8. Current Resources that Districts Find Helpful

| DESE resource | # Mentions |
| --- | --- |
| Edwin Analytics | 5 |
| MCAS scores | 2 |
| Commissioner’s newsletters | 2 |
| Data Toolkits | 2 |
| District Profiles | 2 |
| DART | 2 |
| RADAR | 1 |
| EWIS | 1 |
| Moving to computer-based testing | 1 |
| Curriculum guides | 1 |
| White papers | 1 |
| Resources for ELLs | 1 |
| Resources for Special Education | 1 |
| OPR website | 1 |
| Resources for evaluation | 1 |
| Webinars | 1 |

DESE currently provides a number of resources around data and research that districts cited as being helpful to their work. Several districts expressed appreciation for the “evolution of Edwin,” and hoped that state data systems would continue to become more user-friendly.

Throughout the interviews districts mentioned MCAS scores as an important source of data. However, many districts noted that the frequent changes to the test limited their ability to draw conclusions from them.

Overall, districts had a range of awareness of the state resources available to them. Some districts identified specific tools that they use regularly. Since this was the final question of the protocol, the researcher noted that not every district interviewed had the time to explore this question fully.

# Discussion

The districts in this sample had diverse characteristics that influenced their practices and preferences around evidence use. However, a few common themes emerged around the use of data, the use of outside research, and district culture around evidence work.

Districts in Massachusetts have a wide range of capacity for engaging with evidence. Respondents described many factors that influence the extent to which district practices embed data and research use, such as the number of central office staff, district resources, staff expertise, and district culture.

### Data

Most districts have practices that place data at the heart of many decision points. Many schools look at student assessment data on an ongoing basis to inform classroom instruction, target interventions, and measure student progress. Some districts accommodate this by adding data responsibilities in addition to teachers’ existing responsibilities through the creation of teacher data teams and leaders. Other districts are able to fund FTEs such as curriculum coordinators and instructional coaches who can dedicate time to facilitating data use through data meetings and coaching. Districts are also using data to inform strategic plans, goals, and investments.

### Research

Education research plays a much smaller role in classroom practice and district decision-making than data. Respondents described looking for research to justify decisions to external stakeholders and to inform decisions around districts’ areas of concern. This suggests that respondents use evidence more reactively than proactively. When it comes to identifying, accessing, and sharing resources, professional networks and conferences appear to play a crucial role. Since most practitioners have modest capacity to keep up with education research, bringing practitioners together in a common space to discuss challenges facing many districts seems to catalyze the sharing and dissemination of research, resources, and tools.

### Building culture

Currently, there is not a clear consensus across Massachusetts about what districts mean when they discuss “data,” “research,” and “evidence.” Respondents use these terms to refer to different things – for example, “evidence” referred to a variety of decision-making inputs, such as samples of student work, classroom observations, MCAS scores, teacher expertise, and the body of research on a topic. “Research” described a wide range of scientific rigor, depending on the context and the respondent. Some districts interpreted “data” narrowly to mean MCAS scores, while others defined it more widely to include information such as demographic trends, student work, and survey responses.

While all districts expressed that it was important to rely on data to identify the needs of their students, there was more skepticism around the term research when it came to evaluating potential products, especially if research about a product’s effectiveness comes from the vendor selling it. The suspicion of bias undercuts the credibility of the research, even if the research methodology is rigorous.

There is also some skepticism around the ability of districts to build evidence by engaging in research, as it is so hard for districts to demonstrate causality. If a district is measuring the impact of a new intervention or program, they are generally looking for increases in test scores or the quality of student work. This may not reflect a causal relationship since practically nothing in the school district would be held *ceteris paribus*. One respondent described the many factors that could have led to increases in math scores in his district: an increase in the number of minutes per day students were in math class, the addition of new instructional coaches, and the variable quality of math teachers from year to year. It is beyond the capacity of most districts to devote the energy and resources to conducting education research with enough rigor to assert causal relationships.

# Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations may help DESE in facilitating data use for district decision-making, embedding research into district practices, and building cultures of evidence use:

### Data Use

The biggest barriers to data use in decision-making are time, staff resources, and access to data management systems facilitating data use across districts, schools, and classrooms. DESE could address this by considering the following:

1. *Advocate increasing opportunities for districts to fund positions dedicated to data work.*
2. *Support the procurement process for districts around technological resources.* Smaller and rural districts, especially, may not have the resources of larger districts to invest individually in data management systems. This is a barrier to efficient dissemination and sharing of data.
3. *Disseminate templates and protocols around using data to inform instructional practice that districts can easily adapt.* Giving districts concrete resources that they can adapt to their own needs will make it easier for them to adopt new practices.
4. *Provide concrete examples of what success looks like.* One district describes the difficulty of figuring out what happens after data is collected. For example, districts are interested in the most effective ways teachers and school leaders can use data that does not show positive trends. Providing examples of what this looks like may help districts leverage the data they have.
5. *Continue making state-level data systems user-friendly.* The less time districts have to spend figuring out data systems and inputting data, the more time educators will have to use the data to inform decision-making.

### Embedding Research

The biggest barriers to research use by districts are resources, access, and relevance. DESE can address this by considering the following:

1. *Increase the visibility of existing resources.* Districts have varying levels of familiarity with the resources available to them now.
2. *Create and disseminate digests of current research findings.* District decision-makers are often operating under significant time constraints, so summarizing and consolidating published papers will allow them to consume more and better research.
3. *Organize the website around topics in education.* Districts looking at published research are frequently looking for answers from the research base about a specific question. Setting up the OPR website so that educators and administrators can easily identify what they need will ease that burden.
4. *Magnify local voices using evidence within districts.* Some individuals are innately oriented toward evidence-based practices than others. Providing support, encouragement, and a platform for these educators will enhance the visibility of their efforts.
5. *Continue to prioritize making resources user friendly.* The more conveniently research can be accessed, the more likely educators at the district and school levels will use it.

### Culture of Evidence

Currently, individuals rather than district structures or routines drive district culture around the use of evidence. DESE can address this by considering the following:

1. *Expand opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas, resources, research, and enthusiasm.* Networks are an important channel through which practitioners are encountering research and resources, so building opportunities for educators to grow their personal networks around evidence use is valuable.
2. *Offer professional development and low cost, easy-to-use resources.* Developing human capital around evidence use at every level will help embed practices in the long term.
3. *Broadcast success stories.* Providing clear examples of what evidence-based practice looks like will make it easier and more appealing for districts to integrate it into their own routines.
4. *Create common understandings of “evidence,” “research,” and “data.”* Different definitions of these terms may lead to confusion around requirements and expectations.

### Customer Service

Districts make investments around staff, resources, and priorities under significant constraints. DESE can address this by considering the following:

1. *Communicate clearly and strategically around any ESSA evidence-based requirements.* Providing clear, consistent, and comprehensive guidance will reduce the load on administrators.
2. *Engage districts in communication around DESE continuous improvement efforts.* For example, many respondents commented about changes in the Edwin data system that have improved its usability. In addition to engaging in such improvement efforts, DESE should also ensure that it communicates such work clearly to districts.
3. *Link evidence requirements with real district results.* If there are reporting requirements about evidence-based practices, connect them to concrete ways that these practices will improve outcomes for students. Many of the above recommendations focus on making it less costly for districts to draw on evidence, but it is also important to reinforce the inherent value of evidence-based work.

### Avenues for Further Investigation

This survey instrument elicited descriptions of how districts use evidence in decision-making. However, it was beyond the scope of this project to assess whether respondents define “evidence” in a standardized way. Further investigation into the specific ways that districts define “evidence,” “data,” and “research” may be illuminating for future OPR efforts.

# Appendix I. Interview Protocol

Good morning/afternoon, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.

My name is Caroline Hedberg, and I am a summer fellow working with the Office of Planning and Research at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. As you may know, the federal government requires state departments of education to follow certain practices as mandated by ESSA. One of these requirements is for state departments of education to support their districts in selecting evidence-based practices. This is new to DESE and we expect it is new to many districts, so we don’t expect every district to be currently doing things with evidence. This is something we have not been asked to do before. To this end, we are trying to understand whether and how districts locate existing research and how they measure the implementation and impact of district practices.

Your answers will be aggregated with other districts in the state and nothing that you say will be connected to you or your district.

I expect this conversation to take between 45 and 60 minutes, during which time I will ask you a series of questions about how your district builds, uses, and shares evidence, and your role in these activities. Your responses will be used to inform a report summarizing the current state of evidence use across the state, which will be used by the Office of Planning and Research to create resources for districts and which you will receive a copy of. Again, nothing you say to me will be attributed to you or your district.

Does this time still work for you?

Great. I am going to start by asking you about your role in the district.

*TYPOLOGY OF PRACTITIONERS*

1. What is your role in the district?
2. In your current role as \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, what work have you done with data, evidence, and research?
3. How long have you been in this role? Prior to this, what if any other roles have you held?
4. In your district, how many (if any) other people engage with data, evidence, or research? What are their roles?

Now I’m going to ask you about how your district builds, uses, and shares evidence.

*BUILD:*

1. Has your school district ever partnered with an outside organization, such as a local university, to conduct a research study? Could you tell me a little bit about your experience with that process?
   1. Who conducted the research? What was the research question?
   2. How were the results of that research used in your district?
2. Has your school district ever conducted research on its own? Could you tell me a little bit about your experience with the process?
   1. Were you trying to answer a particular question?
   2. How were data collected? How were data used?
   3. Who was involved with designing and conducting the study? Who interacted with the findings?

*USE:*

1. When your district is considering a new program or intervention, how does your district decide what to select? For example, if you identify that your third graders are not where you’d like them to be with their reading abilities and you are choosing from different literacy interventions, how do you decide which intervention would work best for your context?
   1. Are there personnel in your district who have this responsibility?
2. When you implement something new, such as a new curriculum, intervention, or program, how do you check to see if it’s being implemented the way you intended? [building on their answer:] Could you give me a specific example of a time that your district has done this?
3. [building on #7] How did you check to see if it was getting the result you wanted?
   1. Is there a specific process in your district for this? Is there a designated individual or group who uses that process?
4. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very infrequently and 10 being all the time, how frequently does your school/district use data or outside research to:
   1. Inform instructional practice?
   2. Allocate funds?
   3. Allocate staff?
   4. Adopt new instructional materials?
   5. Select an intervention?
   6. Provide professional development?
5. [building on answers for #10] What, if anything, prevents you from using data or outside research more frequently for these purposes?
6. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being not at all confident and 10 being extremely confident, how confident are you that your school district has the capacity to accurately interpret findings from published research studies?
7. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being not at all confident and 10 being extremely confident, how confident are you that your school district has the capacity to adapt research findings to your specific context?

*SHARE:*

1. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very infrequently and 10 being all the time, how frequently does your district share data or research with counterparts in other districts? For example, presentation at a state conference, writing an article, emailing a friend/colleague in another district, through a professional association, round tables...
   1. [building on their answer] What sorts of information do you share? [if dead air]
2. In your experience, what has been the most useful way to share best practices between schools/districts? If yes: how did this relationship start?

Finally, I am going to ask you some questions about your district’s organizational capacity for evidence use.

*ORGANIZATIONAL ROUTINES:*

1. What kinds of structures/supports does your district have that encourage staff to use data or outside research to make decisions? [if dead air] For example, do you have systems that allow teachers to access data; do you hold recurring meetings in which data is used to inform planning; are there incentives for staff to use evidence-based practices; is there a regular curriculum review process?
2. If your district has a district improvement planning process, on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very infrequently and 10 being all the time, how frequently are outside research studies mentioned during the district improvement planning process?
3. [continuing] Thinking about this same process, on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very infrequently and 10 being all the time, how frequently is data mentioned during the district improvement planning process?

*CAPACITY INCREASERS*

1. Do you currently have access to recent findings in education research? If so, how do you access them? For example, through media coverage, through a professional association, at conferences, a university library, listservs, periodicals, social media…

*IF TIME*

1. What else would you like DESE to do to support your district in drawing on data and research to use educational best practices?
2. Are there any resources that DESE provides now about data or research that you find helpful?

That concludes the questions that I have for you. Thank you again for your time and your insights. Please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions or concerns.

Goodbye.

# Appendix II. Additional charts and figures

#### Table 9. Sample and state characteristics

| Characteristic | Sample mean | State mean | Difference in means |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of students per district | 2409 | 2562.723 | -153.393 |
| MCAS: ELA % of students exceeding or meeting expectations | 0.541667 | 0.517311 | .024356 |
| MCAS: ELA scaled score | 501.6833 | 500.4527 | 1.1861 |
| MCAS: math % of students exceeding or meeting expectations | 0.533889 | .497479 | 0.03641 |
| MCAS: math scaled score | 501.6889 | 499.737 | 1.9519 |
| MCAS: ELA median student growth percentile | 51.63889 | 51.05114 | -0.09811 |
| MCAS: math median student growth percentile | 54.5 | 50.69034 | 3.80966 |

#### Figure 8. Ways Districts Access Education Research by District Type

#### Table 10. Comprehensive list of ways districts access research

Graph illustrating the full range of ways in which participating districts reported accessing research.