

# The Learning Impact Fund: Building evidence and impact in practice

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## The role of evidence in schools

School leaders play an important role in building the knowledge base about ‘what works’ and using evidence to better inform schools’ decisions about teaching and learning. In his recent review of the use of education research in policy and practice, Ben Goldacre (2013) explained: ‘By collecting better evidence about what works best, and establishing a culture where this evidence is used as a matter of routine, we can improve outcomes for children, and increase professional independence’ (Goldacre 2013, p. 7).

Evidence for Learning (E4L) is an independent, national, cross sectoral non-profit organisation that is dedicated to supporting building, sharing and using evidence with, by and for Australian school leaders and teachers (Vaughan, Deeble & Bush 2017). Evidence for Learning is supported by Social Ventures Australia, a \$1 million education grant from the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, and the UK’s Education Endowment Foundation.

A key element of E4L’s work is the Learning Impact Fund. It is designed to build new evidence to identify which programs work best in raising the educational outcomes for Australian students, particularly for disadvantaged learners. To date, four independent trials of Australian programs have been commissioned, each program paired with an independent evaluator to conduct a rigorous evaluation on its impact on academic measures and relevant features of its implementation (including cost). Since its launch in May 2016, over 430 schools are participating in these trials. Another E4L activity is encouraging the uptake and use of evidence through the Teaching & Learning Toolkit, a free, online summary of global education research on 34 teaching and learning approaches (Evidence

for Learning 2017a). The Toolkit also supports evidence-based decision-making and in-school evaluation through the development of implementation resources (Vaughan et al. 2017).

The ways in which educators think about and engage with evidence is important (Brown 2017; Goldacre 2013; Sharples 2013). In evidence-informed practice, school leaders and teachers are ‘integrating professional expertise with the best external evidence from research to improve the quality of practice’ (Sharples 2013, p. 7). Rather than using a top-down approach, educators become ‘active agents of improvement’ who ‘place primacy on addressing the specific questions that practi[s]ing educators confront and embrace their learning-by-doing orientation’ (Bryk 2015, p. 469). In his recent book, *New Imperatives for Educational Change*, Dennis Shirley (2017) argued that school leaders and teachers need to use evidence from practice to attain a better grasp of what promotes student achievement and what strategies undermine it. This might lead to change practices from something as broad as a comprehensive school-wide reform program with instructional components or as narrow as a specific curriculum or instructional strategy.

Such an ‘evidence for improvement’ perspective calls for educators to ‘break down walls of solo practice’ (Bryk 2015, p. 469) to ‘access, understand, share and act on many forms of evidence, including research’ (Nelson & Campbell 2017, p. 130). This premise is central to E4L’s work, which builds on the conceptual model of an evidence ecosystem (Evidence for Learning 2017b) adapted from the work of Jonathan Sharples (2013). Figure 1 illustrates how evidence is brought together through an interconnected process of professional inquiry and school improvement. It is the interaction of these two processes in an evidence ecosystem which improves efficacy and efficiency.

This practice-based evidence is gathered through a systematic process guided by the Impact Evaluation Cycle (Evidence for Learning 2017b) (see also Vaughan et al. 2017, p. 33).

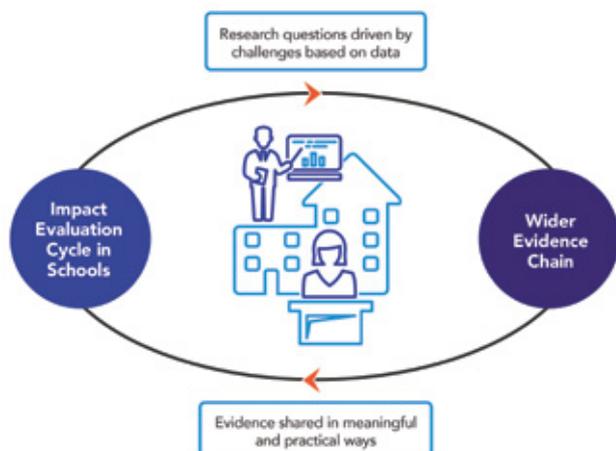


Figure 1. Evidence Ecosystem  
Source: Evidence for Learning, 2017b

### Building evidence through the Learning Impact Fund

The Learning Impact Fund is a first-of-its-kind evaluation model in Australia, designed to rigorously test and independently report on education programs, in order to support the scale up of the most effective approaches for raising students' academic achievement.

#### Delivery principles

The Learning Impact Fund's core principle is to deliver independent, rigorous and transparent research to generate evidence about what works best in raising the academic achievement of disadvantaged students in Australia. Despite the consensus to evidence, there is a 'relative shortage of rigorous evidence about "what works", "in what contexts" and, increasingly, "at what cost"' (Sharples 2013, p. 10). The Learning Impact Fund adds to the pool of rigorous evidence by identifying programs with potential and funding an independent evaluation and report on it. Three broad principles guide the Learning Impact Fund:

**Research independence:** The Learning Impact Fund is designed to ensure the delivery of independent, robust and transparent research. It does this by pairing programs with independent evaluators (from an eight-strong E4L selected panel of experts) to conduct rigorous research on its impact in schools. Drawing on the Education Endowment Foundation's work, trials follow a set of standards, expectations and guidelines to ensure due diligence at each stage of the evaluation cycle, from evaluators' appointment, to trial implementation and reporting. Each trial develops and follows an Evaluation Protocol and undergoes a rigorous peer-review process to ensure fidelity and integrity of *both* the data and the research process.

**High-quality research:** High quality research is needed to gather robust evidence of what works and why. To achieve this, all projects are subject to a quantitative impact evaluation that estimates the effect on students' academic outcomes. Alongside every impact evaluation is a process evaluation where rigorous qualitative research supports the understanding of quantitative results. The process evaluation also determines program fidelity (i.e. if it was delivered as intended) and importantly, the successful conditions for delivery in schools. Randomised controlled trials are used where possible to reliably compare two interventions to find out what works best (Goldacre 2013; Haynes, Service, Goldacre & Torgerson 2012; Sharples 2013).

**Communicate evidence:** The Learning Impact Fund ensures a robust evaluation of the intervention in the form of a plain English and digestible report for use by educators that will report key conclusions of program effectiveness. The report will articulate on the results of both the impact and process evaluation, highlighting three important considerations for successful school-based implementation to help school leaders and teachers make their own informed choices with better evidence:

- **Average months' worth of learning progress:** The report will communicate the potential gain in terms of additional months' progress you might expect students to make as a result of the intervention.
- **Cost to implement:** Cost of implementing an approach in schools will be estimated based on the cost of training or professional development required and any other additional resources.
- **Security of evidence:** The report will show how the strength of conclusions made based on the methodological quality of the trial (e.g. design of the evaluation, sample size, attrition from the evaluation, threats to validity).

#### Model

The Learning Impact Fund commissions three types of trials, depending on the stage of the program: pilot trials, effectiveness trials and efficacy trials (See Figure 2). *Pilot trials* evaluate programs where prior evidence is limited to determine feasibility for large scale implementation. Unlike efficacy and effectiveness trials, these are typically smaller scale interventions where evaluation teams develop a theory of change for the intervention, before the project begins, to illustrate how activities are to be developed to achieve an intended outcome in a particular context. A process evaluation is conducted to understand if any changes in behaviour occurred in students and teachers. *Efficacy trials* determine if a program can work under ideal or developer-led conditions across a large number of schools. *Effectiveness trials* test the degree to which the program can be scaled across the country under 'real world' conditions. The objective is to test the magnitude of the effect of this in practice, and in so doing, understand why interventions may differ in outcomes and the kinds of conditions it is likely to work in and why.

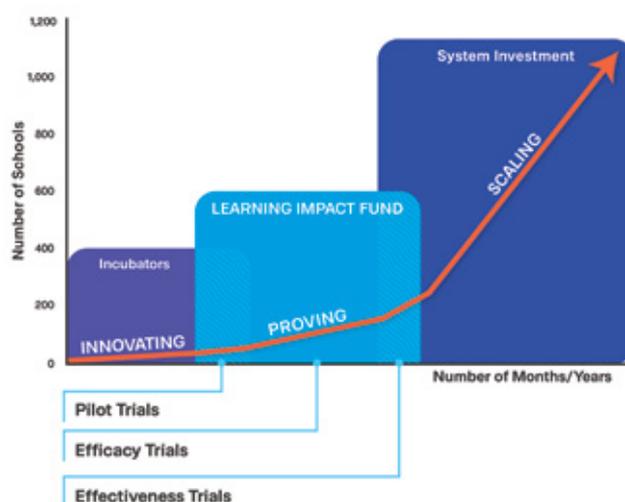


Figure 2. Learning Impact Fund Model  
Source: Evidence for Learning, 2017b



### Current projects

Four trials of programs are currently underway to understand outcomes on teaching and learning across different learning areas:

- **Thinking Maths** - a pedagogical approach that seeks to improve Year 7 and Year 8 students' achievement and engagement in mathematics learning. The program is developed by the South Australian Department of Education and Child Development (SA DECD) based on its Teaching for Effective Learning Framework and is evaluated by researchers at the Australian Council for Educational Research. The trial will be completed in mid-2018.
- **MiniLit Literacy (Building Better Readers)** - a program targeting the bottom 25% of readers in Year 1 and provides out-of-classroom group lessons focussing on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension to improve literacy. It is developed by the MultiLit organisation and evaluated by Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the Centre for Program Evaluation at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. The trial will be completed at the end of 2018.
- **Quicksmart Numeracy** - a small group tuition intervention to increase fluency and automaticity in mathematics for students performing in the bottom third of their cohort. The program is developed by SiMEER National Research Centre at the University of New England and evaluated by the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre at the University of Newcastle. The trial is expected to be completed at the end of 2018.
- **Resilient Families** - a school-based family intervention program delivered by Deakin University that aims to engage parents in a social-emotional learning curriculum. The evaluation, run by the research team from the School of Education at Western Sydney University, will investigate the program's effect on students' academic outcomes. The trial will be completed in early 2020. See <http://evidenceforlearning.org.au/lif/current-projects/>.

### Linking evidence to action

Educators need to engage with evidence to understand what works best to enhance professional expertise (Brown 2017; Cartwright 2013; LaPointe-McEwan, DeLuca & Klinger 2017). Four key factors influence the quality of implementation in impacting students'

outcomes (academic and behavioural) and teachers' attitudes and practices within education. These are important considerations when planning for successful implementation.

- Fidelity (ongoing support)
- Dosage (amount of participation in a certain activity)
- Quality of delivery (support from principals)
- Acceptability (teachers' participation and attitudes to that activity). (Albers, Pattuwege & Vaughan 2017).

A school culture for evidence and inquiry is necessary for this work. Ben Goldacre (2013) argues that school leaders and teachers need to 'use better evidence about what works best, and [establish] a culture where this evidence is used as a matter of routine... to improve outcomes for children, and increase professional independence' (p. 7). This work should be supported by activities in the wider evidence chain. Citing the case study of the Knowledge Network in Applied Education Research (KNAER), Nelson and Campbell described the powerful way in which a system-wide strategy enacts evidence-informed practice. Such partnerships developed overtime can offer 'opportunities for collaboration, co-creation, sharing and application of professional knowledge and external evidence... where [i]ndividuals, such as school and system leaders, and organisations, such as professional associations and research institutions, can play an important intermediary role in mediating what evidence is communicated and connected to practice' (Nelson & Campbell 2017, p. 131).

The Learning Impact Fund partners with developers, evaluators, and schools to generate new evidence in Australia. In the broader work of E4L, we are working with systems, universities and national education organisations to create tailored toolkits that map policies and programs to the 34 approaches within the Teaching and Learning Toolkit (Evidence for Learning 2017a). The aim of this work is to 'provide evidence within a localised context familiar to the frontline professional' (Vaughan et al. 2017, p. 33).

There are persistent challenges in understanding and using evidence. Mediating these challenges requires 'blending the importance of quality products, collaborative relationships and commitment to develop capacity and addressing challenges system-wide' (Nelson &

Campbell 2017). The Learning Impact Fund is adding to the first of these with 'quality products' and E4L's wider work generates practice-based evidence to support school leaders and teachers in sharing and applying professional knowledge and evidence.

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