

# A Reintroduction to the What Works Clearinghouse

# What Works Clearinghouse

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## **Abstract**

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is an investment of the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences. Its purpose is to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence on what works in education. The WWC’s goal is to produce high-quality products that help education practitioners, teachers, state and local administrators, and researchers make evidence-based decisions. It does so through a systematic review process, replicable documentation, and transparent reporting. The WWC team—which includes numerous contractors, consultants, academic specialists, and federal employees—produces a suite of products in varying formats carefully designed to reach audiences with distinct and sometimes diverging needs. This article provides a brief overview of these products in the hope that the various audiences will access and use them frequently.

## A Reintroduction to the What Works Clearinghouse

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) strives to produce high-quality resources to support education professionals in making evidence-based decisions. Since its inception, the WWC has created products intended for specific audiences: teachers and education practitioners, state and district administrators, and education researchers. The WWC does so by synthesizing evidence and knowledge from rigorous evaluations of educational programs, products, practices, and policies. The WWC creates various products from these syntheses, including a web-based tool to identify programs with evidence from districts around the country (*Find What Works*; [whatworks.ed.gov](http://whatworks.ed.gov)), sets of evidence-based recommendations for practice (Practice Guides), summaries of evidence on educational programs (Intervention Reports), infographics, and videos. The WWC makes the data behind those products available to interested practitioners and researchers. Most WWC products can be used by all of the WWC’s intended audiences—and potentially by many others.

Our goal in this article is to reengage the WWC audience by demonstrating the relevance of the products, resources, and supports available, and to begin a dialogue with educators, policymakers, and researchers to improve the WWC’s work. After presenting an overview of the WWC and its history, the article delves into the available resources by providing examples of their use by educators, administrators, and researchers.

### The Work of the WWC

The WWC was founded by the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) Office of Educational Research and Innovation (OERI) in 2002 to inform decisionmakers implementing programs, policies, and practices in the era of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). NCLB required that schools and districts identified as “in need of improvement” adopt instructional strategies that were supported by “scientifically based research” (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). OERI was tasked with helping schools, districts, and states identify research that showed causal connections between specific education interventions and improvements in student outcomes. To support that mission, OERI formed the WWC and adopted the National Research Council’s standards for causal studies as its working definition of high-quality impact research.<sup>2</sup> The work of the WWC continued after the creation of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (ESRA). ESRA replaced OERI with the National Center for Education Research and the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, each of which, in succession, took over responsibility for the WWC.

In the intervening 18 years, the WWC has grown dramatically, refining its standards for rigorous efficacy and impact research, engaging virtually every field within education, and producing a variety of products that make its work available to the public. By April 2019, the WWC had reviewed 10,656 studies and provided a WWC rating for 2,956 studies.<sup>3</sup> This process allowed the WWC to produce 604 [Intervention Reports](#); 24 [Practice Guides](#); more than two dozen infographics; various webinars to inform educators about available resources; and an [online course](#) on WWC review methodology, online [training activities](#), and in-person workshops to develop and train future WWC reviewers. The following sections describe these products and activities for specific audiences. Many of these

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<sup>2</sup> See the original [Request for Proposals](#) offered by OERI.

<sup>3</sup> Studies not assigned a rating were not eligible for review by the WWC. Examples of reasons for ineligibility include lack of a comparison group or outcome measures.

products can—and should—be used across audiences, but we have categorized the products according to the audience to allow for ease of use.

## **For Teacher and Educational Practitioner Audiences**

The WWC has created specific tools that support evidence-based instructional practice for school-based staff like teachers and educators.

### ***Practice Guides***

[Practice Guides](#) are designed for teachers, and provide specific recommendations based on a review of research, experience of practitioners, and opinions from nationally recognized experts. Each Practice Guide is organized into two sections. The first section is an introduction to the topic. This section identifies key takeaways from the Practice Guides, including the importance of the topic area, a brief summary of recommendations, and a discussion of the research that was used to develop the contents.

The second section contains information about each recommendation. The WWC provides an evidence rating for each recommendation—minimal, moderate, or strong—that indicates how well the recommendation is supported by research. In addition, each recommendation includes a summary of supporting research, step-by-step instructions on how best to implement the recommendation in a classroom, and a list of potential roadblocks and solutions to give educators insight into how the recommendation can realistically be applied in the classroom or school.

Educators and school administrators can turn to the Practice Guides for evidence-based strategies to implement in their schools. For example, elementary school mathematics teachers may find value in [Improving Mathematical Problem Solving in Grades 4 Through 8](#) (WWC, 2018b) when considering new teaching strategies to improve their current practice in the classroom. The home page for this Practice Guide shows the five recommendations and their levels of evidence, which are the key takeaways from the full publication. Educators may benefit from browsing the accompanying Instructional Tips document (WWC, 2018a), which details how to translate the Practice Guide’s recommendations into instructional practice and strategies.

Many Practice Guides have a set of related products that can help educators, administrators, parents, and others address the Practice Guide’s recommendations. For example, the [Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#) Practice Guide (WWC, 2016) includes supplemental resources for parents to support reading skills at home with children, as well as a [Professional Learning Communities Facilitators’ Guide](#) created by Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast (2019) to support professional development in implementing the recommendations.

### ***Find What Works Tool***

The [Find What Works tool](#) (figure 1) enables users to search for interventions that have been systematically reviewed by the WWC. Users can filter interventions by academic subject (e.g., literacy), student need (e.g., supporting positive behavior), and level of schooling (e.g., early childhood or postsecondary). The interventions are sorted by whether positive or potentially positive effects were observed in the studies, as indicated by a colored icon in the Evidence of Effectiveness column. The studies that found positive or potentially positive effects on the greatest number of outcomes or in the highest number of studies are at the very top of the list. These results can be further refined by the characteristics of the studies reviewed for each intervention, such as

whether the study included specific grade levels (e.g., sixth graders) or was delivered in specific ways (e.g., within individual classrooms or school-wide). This feature helps users find the research that is relevant to their school, setting, or student populations—a key element of meeting [evidence requirements for the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 \(ESSA\)](#).

A school’s guidance counselor, for example, might want to identify interventions to help improve high school graduation rates (which falls under the WWC’s “Path to Graduation” topic area) and college enrollment (which falls under the WWC’s “Postsecondary” topic area) for grade 12 students in the counselor’s urban school. This search identifies a subset of possible interventions, of which have potentially positive effects in both categories. Filtering these results by grade (grade 12) yields three results. A user can then select all three programs in the Compare column and click on “Compare Selected” (figure 1) to see that only Dual Enrollment Programs has evidence of effectiveness on both Dropout Prevention Outcomes and Path to Graduation Outcomes.

The educator can learn more about any program by clicking on its name, which is hyperlinked to information about its effectiveness and the context around the findings (for example, large urban school district) to help guide the decision-making process.

### ***WWC Resources Page***

For educators who want to know more about how the WWC does its work and how other practitioners have used the WWC to guide evidence-based decision making, [the Resources page](#) (see figure 2) provides multiple sources of information. Infographics, videos, archived webinars, supplemental materials for Practice Guides, and other resources to support WWC use are available on the website’s Resource page. For example, WWC infographics explain the processes behind WWC reviews and publications and highlight how teachers, administrators, state education agency staff, and researchers can use WWC resources when making instructional decisions for the classroom.

### **For State and District Administrators**

The WWC has also created specific tools that support evidence-based decisionmaking for school-based staff like state and district administrators.

### ***ESSA Evidence Tags***

The WWC’s website [includes information](#) to help state and district administrators find research evidence that aligns with the strong and moderate tiers of evidence defined in ESSA. Administrators can use the Reviews of Individual Studies search tool, discussed next, to find individual studies that have been reviewed by the WWC. Additionally, study findings have been categorized into ESSA evidence tiers.

ED operationalized ESSA’s evidence tier definitions in [nonregulatory guidance](#) and in the [Education Department General Administrative Regulations, 34 C.F.R. Part 77](#), which apply to ED discretionary grants for both ESEA and non-ESEA programs. To help practitioners better understand the ESSA evidence tiers, a [video](#) explains the criteria for considering research as Tier 1 (strong) or Tier 2 (moderate) evidence to support planned practices. Tags for Tier 3 (promising) will be added in late 2020. Additional videos on the WWC website describe ED’s [evidence definitions](#) and [how WWC Practice Guides and Intervention Reports can provide strong or moderate evidence](#).

## ***Reviews of Individual Studies Database***

Since its inception in 2002, the WWC has screened more than 10,000 individual studies for potential use in Intervention Reports, Practice Guides, grant competitions, and single-study reviews. The [Reviews of Individual Studies database](#) (figure 3) provides users with access to each of these reviews and enables them to filter reviews based on WWC ratings, study design, topic area, and findings. Users also can search for specific reviewed studies using a search box, which is useful for finding specific interventions or authors.<sup>4</sup> Studies are listed first by relevance to the specified search term(s), then alphabetically. If the study is in IES's [Education Resources Information Center](#) (ERIC), the study's abstract is displayed in the search results. Users can find more information about the study via the available link to the ERIC website, including a link to download the full text, if available. Clicking on any study citation will bring the user to the study's review page, which provides information on the details of the review.

The *Review Details* page, for example, provides information on the type of study and the total sample size. In addition to the study's WWC rating, it provides key information about the study review, including the standards version and protocol used to conduct the review and derive the rating.<sup>5</sup> Prominently displayed icons on this page inform the user whether the study meets WWC standards (either with or without reservations), whether it has at least one statistically significant positive finding, and whether the study has at least one finding that demonstrates strong or moderate evidence of effectiveness according to ESSA's tiers of evidence.

On the study's *Findings* page, a WWC rating and its finding are organized according to outcome domains.<sup>6</sup> Users will find information on what measures were used, the mean for comparison and intervention groups and their statistical significance, the finding's improvement index, and whether the findings meet ESSA Tier 1 (strong evidence) or Tier 2 (moderate evidence) definitions. States and districts are required to include evidence-based practices, programs, policies, and products in their school improvement and state plans, and the ESSA tiers of evidence provide a framework for this purpose.

Additional information about the study and its context is found on the *Study Characteristics* and *Study Details* pages. On the *Study Characteristics* page, users will find information related to the context of the study, including the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, the percentage of English learner students, and racial/ethnic distributions when available. Users will also find information related to the study's setting, such as degree of urbanicity, region, and state. The *Study Details* page provides further detail related to the setting of the study; descriptions of the study sample, intervention group, and comparison group; and information on support for implementation. This information supplies a useful snapshot for practitioners considering implementing the intervention in their own setting.

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<sup>4</sup> Should a specific study not be available in the Reviews of Individual Studies database, users are encouraged to submit requests for review to the [WWC Help Desk](#).

<sup>5</sup> While the WWC strives to maintain rating consistency across *WWC Handbook* versions, occasionally a study's WWC rating will change when re-reviewed using a newer version. It is therefore important to know when, and under what version, the WWC reviewed a study.

<sup>6</sup> During the study review process, each reviewed finding is eligible for its own WWC rating. The rating a study receives is the highest possible rating of all findings reviewed. For example, if several findings are reviewed under a quasi-experimental design, then some findings may demonstrate baseline equivalence, and some may not. The findings that do not demonstrate baseline equivalence will be rated as *Does Not Meet WWC Standards* and will not be listed on the website.

## ***Intervention Reports***

The WWC’s Intervention Reports are systematic reviews that synthesize studies on a single education intervention. The WWC combines ratings across studies that meet the WWC standards to determine the effectiveness of an intervention. The effectiveness ratings are based on the quality of research, the statistical significance of findings, the magnitude of findings, and the consistency of findings. The ratings include six categories ranging from positive to negative. As of May 2020, the WWC has published 604 [Intervention Reports](#). State and district administrators can use the WWC’s Intervention Reports to select an intervention that has a proven record of effectiveness. Information about sample characteristics and study context allow administrators to narrow their choices to interventions that have been shown to be effective with student populations that resemble those of their schools and districts. Recently, the WWC expanded the format of the Intervention Reports to provide three options tailored to different audiences: a one-page Intervention Snapshot, a four-page Intervention Brief, and a full-length Intervention Report.

The Intervention Snapshot provides an overview of the contextual and implementation factors to guide administrators’ evidence-based decision making. The Intervention Snapshot highlights intervention impacts and helps to address the questions of “for which students” and “under what conditions.” Administrators can learn about the target population for the intervention of interest, method of delivery, and frequency and duration of service. If the Intervention Snapshot appears promising, the administrator may choose to review the Intervention Brief, which expands on the information included in the Intervention Snapshot.

The Intervention Brief describes the core components of the intervention and the intended implementation of each component, including detailed information about intervention cost. While the Intervention Snapshot provides a cost summary, the Intervention Brief breaks that summary into components, including personnel, facilities, equipment and materials, cost to students and parents, in-kind supports, and sources of funding (for example, public funding, private funding). To provide quick access to pertinent information, Intervention Snapshots and Intervention Briefs emphasize visual and tabular representation of findings, participant characteristics, and the study context. Figure 4 shows an example of how the study context information is illustrated in the Intervention Brief for the [Facilitating Long-Term Improvements in Graduation and Higher Education for Tomorrow](#) (WWC, 2019) intervention.

The third document, an Intervention Report, provides expanded information on the intervention’s cost and implementation, and a summary of findings. The Intervention Report also provides an additional research summary section focused on the studies reviewed and their findings.

## **For Researchers**

The WWC has made numerous resources available specifically for researchers at academic institutions or professional institutions.

### ***WWC Standards and Procedures Handbooks***

The mission of the WWC is to be a trusted source of evidence on education interventions—programs, products, practices, and policies. As a result, much of the WWC’s effort is focused on evaluating the trustworthiness of studies of education interventions. This work is principally guided by [two handbooks](#): the *WWC Standards Handbook* (WWC, 2020b) and the *WWC Procedures Handbook*, both of which are currently in version 4.1. The *WWC Procedures Handbook* (WWC, 2020b) describes in detail the processes used by the WWC to identify,



review, and report on studies. In the fall of 2020, the WWC also produced the *Supplement to the What Works Clearinghouse Procedures Handbook* (WWC, 2020a), which provides additional guidance for complex study design effect size estimation. The *WWC Standards Handbook* (WWC, 2020c) articulates the criteria on which education intervention studies are rated. Because some aspects of review procedures—such as which specific academic databases to search—and review standards—such as the degree of inferential risk presented by any study sample attrition—vary by topic area, both the *WWC Procedures Handbook* and the *WWC Standards Handbook* delegate some decisions to the authors of WWC topic area [review protocols](#). Taken together, the handbooks and review protocols are designed to promote the transparency and consistency of the WWC’s review process, and all three are often referenced to support reviews.

The *WWC Procedures Handbook* is an operational guide for individuals conducting WWC reviews. It describes in detail the literature search procedures that will be used for systematic reviews such as those reported in Intervention Reports and Practice Guides. The *WWC Procedures Handbook* details the logistics of the review process. If a study requires two reviews, for example, the *Handbook* stipulates that the reviews should be performed independent of one another. In addition, the *WWC Procedures Handbook* describes the statistical model that is used to synthesize studies and how the study results will be characterized. It also details the conditions under which a correction for violations of the statistical assumption of independence will be implemented by the WWC and the methods for doing so.

The *WWC Standards Handbook* outlines the criteria on which studies of education interventions are judged to characterize each study’s internal validity. These criteria include the WWC’s “group design standards” for assessing the extent of sample attrition in randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and for categorizing attrition as low or high, the methods for assessing the preintervention comparability of intervention and comparison groups, measurement standards, and missing data standards. The WWC also has different standards for studies using regression discontinuity designs and single-case designs as opposed to RCTs and quasi-experimental designs, which are reviewed under the category of “group designs.” In all cases, the *WWC Standards Handbook* operationalizes the decisions that allow a reviewer to distinguish whether a study meets WWC standards.

[Review protocols](#) complete the triad of review guidance for WWC reviews. These protocol documents define the eligibility of studies and study findings for WWC review in various topic areas and specify the criteria by which baseline equivalence must be established for group design studies that are not low-attrition RCTs. Allowing these specifications to vary by topic area is one way of addressing the overarching concern that study quality is dependent on the context of the study (Valentine & Cooper, 2008). For example, in studies of dropout prevention, sample attrition is likely to be a primary concern because attriting students are likely to be dropouts. Treating them as missing data instead of as dropouts might bias the results of the study. As a result, attrition might be of more concern in the context of this type of studies than in studies where attrition is due to students leaving a program for reasons unrelated to the intervention. Delegating such decisions to topic area protocols allows the WWC to better customize its standards for particular areas of inquiry.

### **Data From Individual Studies**

The WWC makes information from all of the studies it has reviewed available through the [Data From Individual Studies](#) page. Users can extract a single file containing all study characteristics and results for the full set of studies meeting filter parameters. The full set of filter parameters includes WWC rating, topic, review protocol, intervention, ESSA rating, WWC standards version, and outcome domain.



Applied researchers can use the file to help plan future education trials. For example, a researcher may want to understand how well graduation outcomes respond to an intervention. The database contains summary statistics from individual studies so that minimum detectable effect sizes may be estimated for power calculations. After entering “meets WWC standards with or without reservations” in the WWC Rating menu and “graduating school” in the Outcome Domain menu (see figure 5), the resulting file has 15 rows corresponding to findings from eight studies. Three findings are from quasi-experimental designs that meet standards with reservations; the remaining findings are drawn from RCTs that meet standards without reservations. Information is also provided on the ethnicity, race, and gender breakdown of the participants in any of the included studies that report this information.

The findings from individual studies are found in the rightmost columns of the spreadsheet, including effect sizes, *p* values, and the binary statistical significance indicator. Filtering the data to restrict the entries to non-subgroup analyses of the full sample leaves us with the eight main findings. The document also provides sufficient information to calculate an effect size that is weighted by the relative sample sizes in each study. This information can then be used to plan recruitment efforts for educational trials.

### ***Online Study Review Guide***

Underlying all WWC products is the *WWC Study Review Guide*. A publicly available version of the *Online Study Review Guide* (OSRG) is [on the WWC website](#). Applied researchers may be interested in accessing the publicly available OSRG to better understand the WWC’s review process or to guide an ongoing evidence synthesis. The OSRG is centered on the study reviews conducted by certified WWC reviewers.

Currently, the OSRG supports reviews of RCTs and quasi-experimental designs under versions 3.0, 4.0, and (by the end of 2020) 4.1 of the WWC group design standards. The OSRG takes reviewers through each step of the review process, assists them in applying the WWC group design standards to determine a study rating, and applies WWC procedures for reporting findings from studies that meet WWC design standards.

### ***Online WWC Certified Reviewer Training***

The WWC has also created an [online version of the Group Design Standards and Procedures](#), with the goal of increasing the number of certified reviewers and broadening access to WWC training materials. The online training denotes two levels of certification for users: Receiving a *certificate of completion* represents familiarity with the WWC. Becoming a *certified reviewer* indicates an individual is certified to perform reviews using WWC standards.

### ***WWC Technical Support Webinars***

The WWC supports certified reviewers and researchers in deepening and clarifying the knowledge, understanding, and application of WWC standards and procedures through webinars. All webinars and their resources are available on the [WWC resources page](#). Previous webinar topics include confounding variables, fuzzy regression discontinuity designs, and missing data. Webinars are offered throughout the year and are open to the public.

## **Summary**

The WWC’s goal is to produce high-quality products that help education practitioners, teachers, state and local administrators, teachers, and researchers make evidence-based decisions. It does so through a routinized process,

replicable documentation, and transparent reporting. The WWC continues to produce high-quality products in varied formats carefully designed to reach audiences with divergent needs. This article provides a high-level overview of these products in the hope that the various audiences will access and use them to guide their evidence-based decision making.

Members of the education community are encouraged to engage with the WWC. Community members have access to the online group design training and may become WWC group design certified at any time. The WWC and its partners host a series of [webinars](#) each year on a variety of topics, such as how to share findings from Intervention Reports or how to discuss various methodological topics. Community members can also contact the WWC directly by submitting a request to the [WWC Help Desk](#). Through consistent and constant engagement, the WWC will continue to fulfill its mission of providing educators with the information they need to make sound, evidence-based decisions.

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Figure 1. Example: Filtered Search Steps in Find What Works

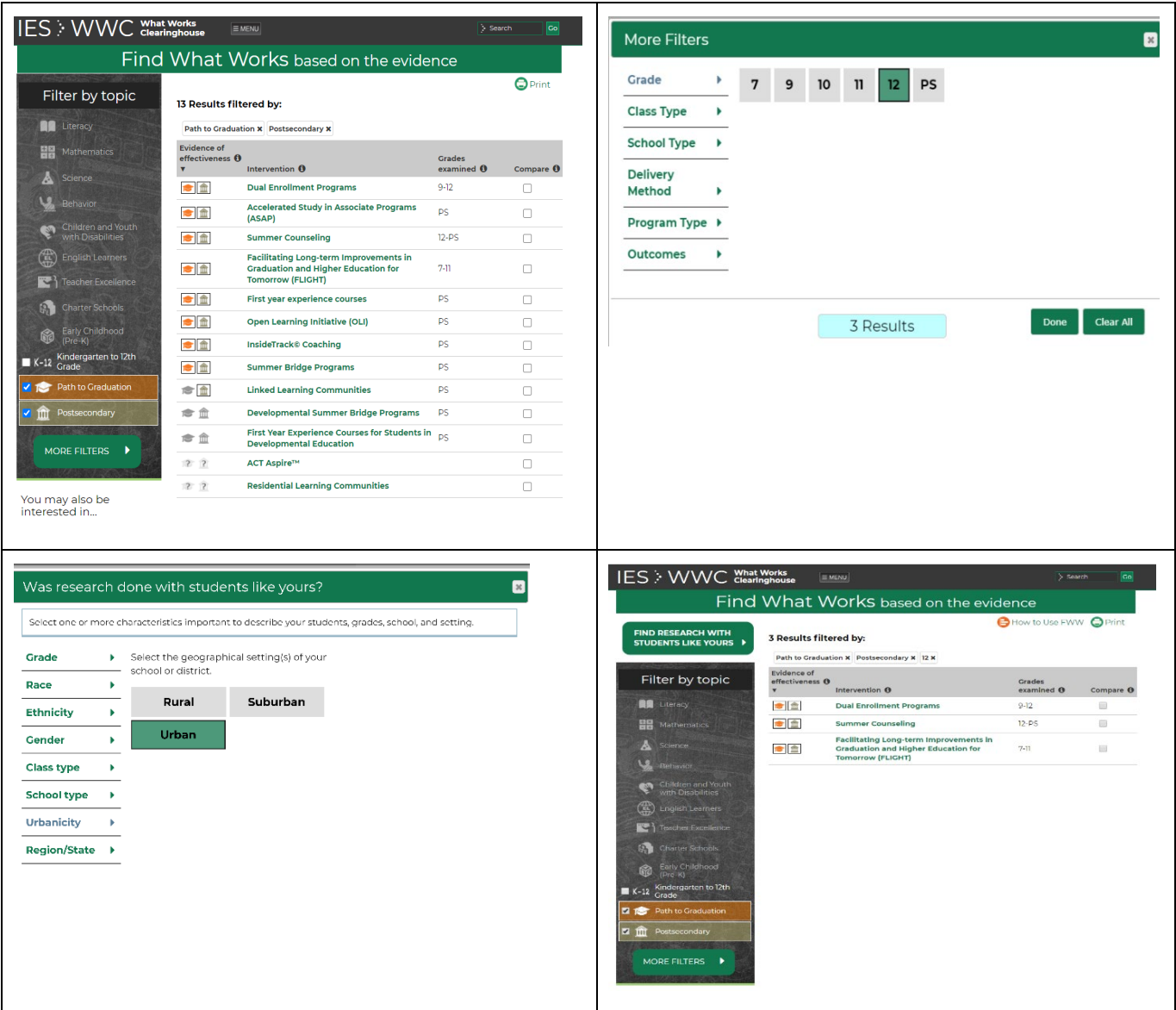


Figure 2. WWC Resources Page

# RESOURCES

About the WWC and Our Website

Evidence Tiers and WWC Ratings

Resources for Educators

Resources for Study Authors

Resources for WWC Reviewers

Archived Resources

## Evidence Tiers and WWC Ratings

Video

**Finding Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 Evidence from the What Works Clearinghouse**

April 3, 2020

*This presentation is on finding Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 evidence from the What Works Clearinghouse*

Infographic

**Guides to Evidence-Based Practices for Educators in Secondary Schools**

March 1, 2020

*The WWC practice guides provide recommendations that can help teachers, administrators, and other educators improve student outcomes. This infographic maps the practice guide recommendations for secon...*

Infographic

**Guides to Evidence-Based Practices for Educators in Elementary Schools**

March 1, 2020

*The WWC practice guides provide recommendations that can help teachers, administrators, and other educators improve student outcomes. This infographic maps the practice guide recommendations for eleme...*

Infographic

**How to Use WWC Individual Study Reviews**

January 31, 2020

*This infographic highlights how users can find individual studies that have been reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) and outcomes aligned with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) tiers of...*

Webinar

**Using Evidence-Based Practices from the WWC to Support State-Level ESSA Implementation**

December 11, 2019

*The WWC hosted a webinar on December 11, 2019 to explore how state-level staff can use WWC resources to identify and implement evidence-based practices under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).*

Video

**Using the WWC to Identify ESSA Evidence Ratings**

May 1, 2019

*The WWC includes tools to assist state and local administrators, teachers, and others in finding research that meets the definitions of strong (Tier 1) or moderate (Tier 2) evidence under ESSA. This vi...*



Figure 3. Reviews of Individual Studies Database

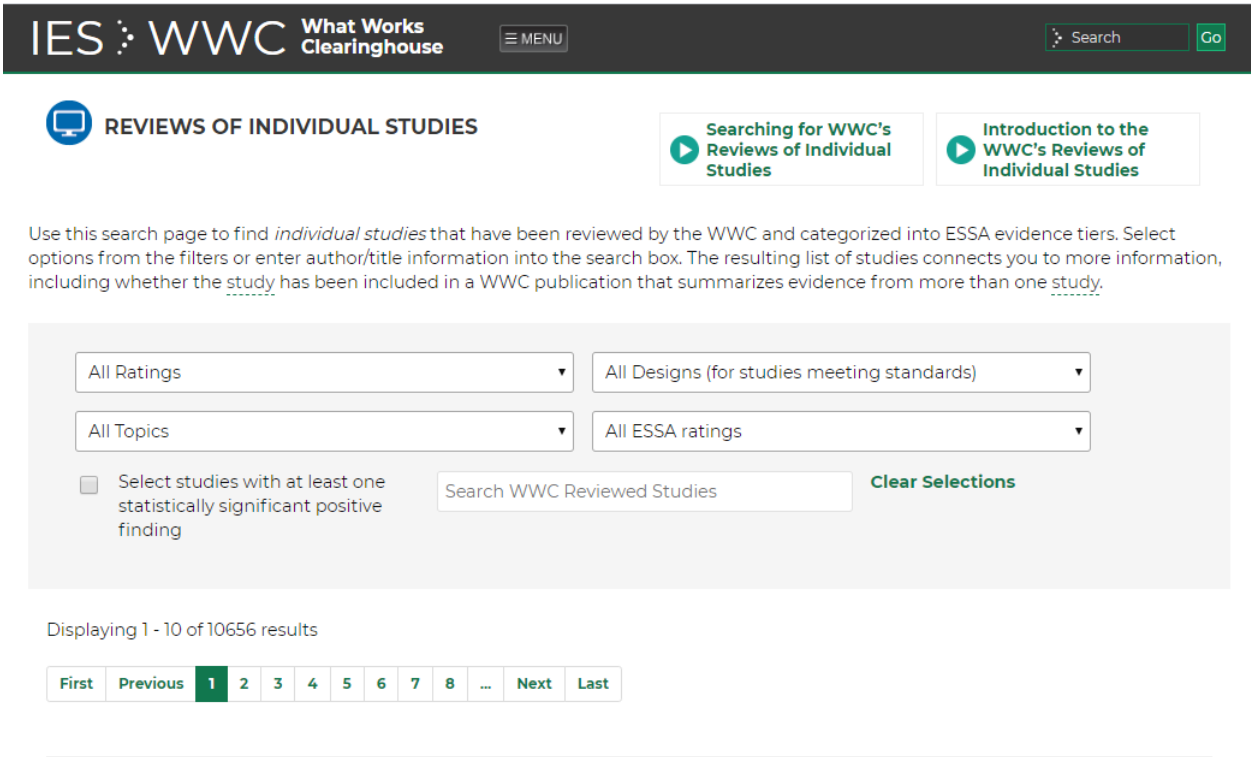
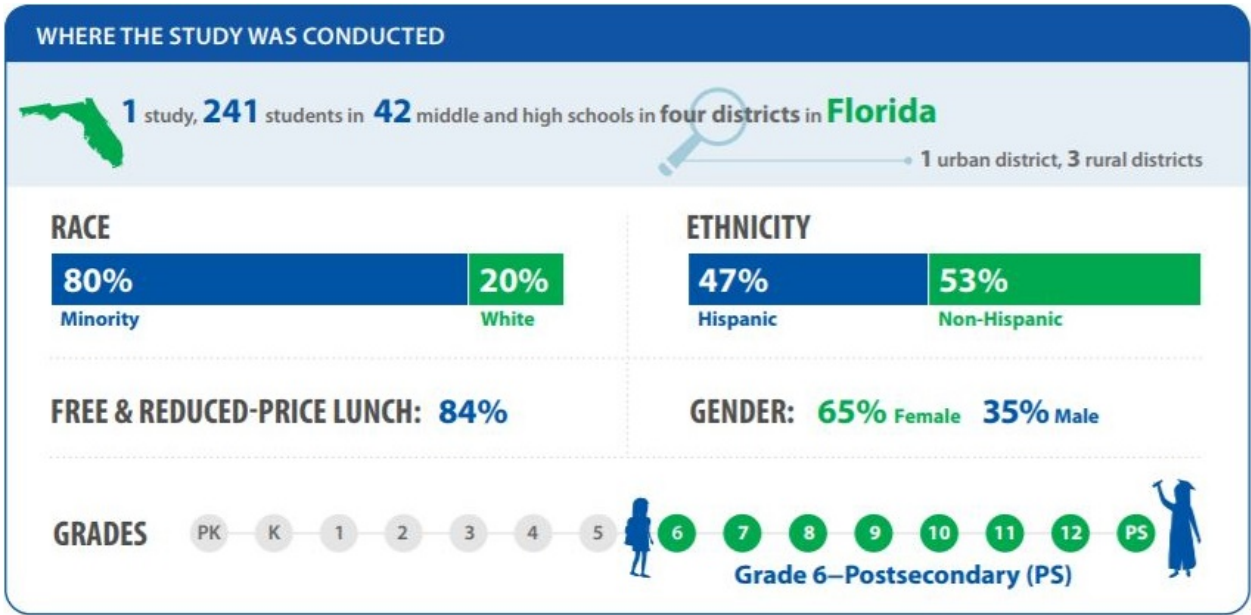


Figure 4. Summary Characteristics From Intervention Brief





**Figure 5. Search for Graduation Outcomes Within the Data From Individual Studies**

IES WWC What Works Clearinghouse

MENU

Search Go

download data from intervention reports, studies and findings in separate files; however, the filters are for use with the merged file.

The merged file contains data from intervention reports, studies that Meet WWC Group Design, Single Case Design, and Regression Discontinuity Design *Standards With and Without Reservations*, as well as individual findings from these studies.

This file does not include studies or finding from studies that *Do Not Meet WWC Standards*. Users wishing to download all studies in the WWC database, including those that *Do Not Meet WWC Standards*, should download the separate file. The merged file, as well as the separate file downloads, do not include findings that do not meet WWC standards.

Meets WWC standards with or without reservations

All Topics

All Protocols

All Interventions

All ESSA Ratings

All Standards Versions

Graduating school

☐ Download the Intervention Reports, Findings and Studies data to the separate files

Download Merged File

If you are interested in a separate data extract that includes archived reviews, please visit the [Archived Data From Individual Studies](#) page. Note that archived reviews may contain information that has been updated in new reports.

Connect With the WWC

