

Research Trustworthiness Checklist

With limited time and several studies competing for attention, how do you know what research you can trust to make high-stakes decisions for students and staff?

This checklist summarizes guidance shared on Episode 26 of WestEd's *Leading Voices* podcast with Kirk Walters, Vice President of WestEd's Center for Teaching and Learning. It offers practical ways to identify credible education research and includes trusted sources. Use this checklist when vetting studies to inform decisions for students and staff.

Markers of Trustworthy Education Research

- ☐ **Independent researchers conducted the study.**
Look for universities or independent organizations over internally led evaluations.
- ☐ **The researchers used clear, transparent methods.**
You can tell *how* the study was done—what happened, who participated, and how the central theory or intervention was tested.
- ☐ **The study used a comparison (control) group.**
There was a similar group that didn't receive the intervention studied, which can verify whether the tested program caused the outcome.
- ☐ **Validated measures were used.** The study used established assessments or instruments (not newly invented tests), such as National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores.

Bonus: Check that **the context of the study is similar to yours.** Knowing where the study took place and who was involved helps you judge whether the results apply to your own school or setting. For example, if you serve a rural district, seek out research that studies a rural setting comparable to yours.



Tips for Assessing Research When Time Is Limited

- **Read the abstract first.** Generally, the abstract reveals enough about the study's design to judge whether it's worth deeper reading.
- **Scan for infographics or executive summaries.** These often summarize key findings and methods quickly.
- **Prioritize trusted research syntheses and summaries.** Nonpartisan research summaries or newsletters, such as *Proof Points* from *The Hechinger Report*, distill findings from much longer papers.
- **Reach out to the authors.** Contacting researchers directly is often an acceptable shortcut to clarification. Usually, their email addresses are publicly available online.

Claims to Examine More Closely

- **"Effective."** This signals a causal claim and should only be used when rigorous evidence exists (randomized controlled trial or strong quasi-experimental design). If you see it without clear methods, be skeptical.
- **Pre-post improvement claims.** If a study is investigating a specific intervention, improvement in student outcomes from pre- to post-intervention does not prove that the intervention alone caused the improvement. To make causal claims ("this intervention led to this outcome"), researchers typically need a randomized controlled trial or a strong quasi-experimental design with a credible comparison group to demonstrate that a specific intervention led to improvement.
- **Claims based only on growth over time.** Growth is expected naturally, so it's not enough to prove impact.

Where to Find Reliable Research

- [Institute of Education Sciences](#)
- The [Proof Points](#) newsletter by Jill Barshay at *The Hechinger Report**
- WestEd [Research and Evaluation library](#)

How WestEd Can Help

Through our partnerships with local and state education agencies, we turn sound evidence into solutions and improved outcomes that are scalable and applicable across communities and for all learners. For WestEd and our partners, expanding opportunity and strengthening early care, education, and community well-being are a daily commitment. Through [Research-Practice Partnerships \(RPPs\)](#) and rigorous [evaluation services](#), we help leaders make informed decisions with confidence. Contact [Kylie Flynn](#), Lead Senior Research Scientist at WestEd, to explore a research or evaluation partnership.

*Note: This recommendation is from *Leading Voices* guest Kirk Walters and does not reflect endorsement by WestEd.