

Key Finding #3—Market Gaps: A Market with Growing Pains

A growing market heading in the right direction

While the increasingly diverse landscape of information sources is complex, we see evidence of a positive trend: both supply and demand for evidence on effectiveness are growing. Decision makers across domains voiced their interest in understanding such evidence and described their searches for this information. Indeed, they are often attempting to integrate this information into funding and intervention selection decisions.

We also see many organizations responding at an incredible pace to decision makers' need for information. Over the past decade, government at all levels and other funders have sponsored the creation of new clearinghouses or further development of existing ones in order to validate and make available the existing evidence on effectiveness.

Even within their resource-constrained environments, several clearinghouses described their efforts to continually improve their website functionality and content. By soliciting user feedback, they are starting to identify the gaps in meeting users' needs and plan their responses. About this improvement process, one clearinghouse interviewee said, "A clearinghouse is a long-term process... It's a big cultural change; it's accelerating now, but it's not going to change overnight. It's going to require repetition and getting the incentives set up right."

Researchers and synthesizers described how they also are responding to demand by further developing and sharing evidence in various forms. And peer networks and advisers are increasingly taking on this topic, disseminating evidence on effectiveness, and guiding decision makers in its use.

Interestingly, we heard that clearinghouses and synthesizers are even influencing their domains to improve evidence on effectiveness through their roles in defining rigorous criteria. "One priority for us is driving funding to fill gaps, such as getting developers to better codify models and getting actual empirical articles to be more rigorous," said a representative at one clearinghouse. "For example, the What Works Clearinghouse has an author guideline template, which is getting everyone to follow guidelines and include what needs to be included." Such guidelines—whether explicit like those from the What Works Clearinghouse⁷ or implicit—can help increase quality evaluation studies, ultimately expanding and improving the universe of information that can be made available to decision makers.

Budget cuts in recent years have driven decision makers at all levels to pay more attention to evidence as a way to use limited resources more effectively.

7 What Works Clearinghouse™ Reporting Guide for Study Authors, http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/reference_resources/wwc_gsa_v1.pdf.

In addition, decision makers are starting to recognize the value of results achieved by effective interventions. This recognition is largely being pushed by the government—at the federal, state, and local levels—encouraging the funding, development, and use of evidence on effectiveness.

Six gaps that remain in the market

As is often the case, with growth comes growing pains. Gaps have emerged in the market between what users want and what suppliers offer. While there is a strong foundation on which to build, these gaps must be addressed for the market to maintain its momentum.

Gap 1: Comprehensiveness. Decision makers want information on a broader range of interventions with varying levels of effectiveness. They also want to know which interventions have not been reviewed or rated.

Those who decide which interventions to pick face a dizzying array of choices. Imagine a county child welfare director who must select an intervention that will provide in-home supports to families whose children have just been reunified after spending time in foster care. The director can select from a handful of well-known national interventions supported by purveyors, another set of codified “do-it-yourself” interventions, and a large number of homegrown interventions. In many instances, there is also the option of continuing with the intervention already being delivered, which could fall into any of the above categories. Similar spectrums of intervention options are available in most domains.

To support informed decisions, comprehensiveness of information sources—particularly clearinghouses—is critical. Being aware of what has limited or mixed evidence is as important as knowing what has strong evidence. For example, a decision maker might assume an intervention not listed on a clearinghouse simply has not been reviewed, when in fact, it may have been found to be ineffective.

Unfortunately, such comprehensive information is not currently available from most clearinghouses (see [Appendix 6](#) for clearinghouse coverage). Clearinghouses play a critical role in identifying *effective* interventions, using literature reviews to systematically identify studies in their domains. However, this information alone is not enough. Clearinghouses do not typically list interventions that:

- have not yet been considered in their specific domain(s),
- are in the queue for review,
- did not meet minimum standards/eligibility for review,
- were reviewed but not rated (e.g., due to insufficient number or type of studies),
- lacked strong research evidence, or
- lacked evidence of intervention effectiveness.

One of the reasons for this lack of comprehensiveness is that clearinghouses can only review and display the studies available to them. Our research revealed

a bias in the research community to publish only studies that show positive outcomes. Therefore, many studies on interventions that are currently at other points along the spectrum do not show up in clearinghouses' literature reviews and will not make it onto the sites.

One government interviewee looked to policy as a potential solution: "Once a state implements a new policy, whatever it is, it should make sure there is an evaluation process attached and publish what it finds—and ensure that findings are widely disseminated. Evaluation and publishing might be done to some extent, but it's hard to find." Programs like the US Department of Education's Innovation (i3) Fund are starting to play this policy role. Such programs help increase the number of studies available by requiring rigorous evaluations and submission of evaluations to clearinghouses. In fact, the Department of Education has funded 117 unique i3 projects to date, all of which are being evaluated and submitted.

A few clearinghouses are much further along in terms of comprehensiveness. For example, the What Works Clearinghouse is very transparent in listing many studies—including those that are under review and those that did not meet minimum standards (i.e., 'ineligible for review')—which are not commonly included on other clearinghouses. CrimeSolutions.gov has also made progress lately, posting an "insufficient evidence" list for interventions that lack strong research evidence. A few other clearinghouses are beginning to follow suit. One clearinghouse interviewee noted, "The next step for us is to figure out a way to show the results of the thousands of studies we review [which are not deemed effective] and to put them out in a way that is balanced and clear. It's important to have that kind of counterweight, some sort of neutral party reporting on these things."

However, these are the exceptions. Our interviews revealed the following reasons why most clearinghouses omit studies or interventions that are ineffective or simply inconclusive:

1. **Ideology:** They believe their core role is to show only those interventions that work, often according to high standards of rigor.
2. **Fear of negative consequences:** Sites need purveyors to cooperate and so do not want to discourage them from submitting studies for review.
3. **Selection risk:** They believe decision makers may incorrectly assume that all interventions listed on the site work and thus inadvertently select an ineffective or inconclusive intervention.
4. **Lack of resources:** To conserve their limited resources, clearinghouses selectively choose to examine interventions that have a strong likelihood of passing criteria.

In our interviews, lack of resources was the most cited constraint. For many clearinghouses, particularly those of the federal government, there are very few dedicated full-time employees and work is primarily conducted by contractors. Limited resources create challenges for clearinghouses, preventing them from holistically fulfilling their core role of building out comprehensive databases of

interventions and studies. “We have reviewed 10,000 studies, but there are many more studies out there...we only have so much bandwidth,” one clearinghouse interviewee said.

In fact, several clearinghouses do recognize the importance of more comprehensive databases and would like to address the gaps when they have sufficient resources. However, research and approaches are rapidly changing in many of these domains, and clearinghouses sometimes struggle to keep up-to-date. It may be necessary to frequently re-review particular interventions or continually review newer models in order to remain relevant for decision makers.

Gap 2: Implementation. Decision makers want information about interventions beyond evidence of impact—including peer experience implementing the intervention—to help them make informed decisions. Few clearinghouses provide this level of information.

Evidence on a specific intervention—which clearinghouses provide in the form of underlying studies and validation of research—is important but not sufficient to make informed decisions about adopting an intervention. Like any other consumer, decision makers are making a purchase decision. In addition to evidence on effectiveness, they need to weigh the costs and benefits of the product and the likelihood the product will actually work for them. Therefore, they need more intervention-specific information, as well as examples of other communities to help conceptualize implementation.

Specifically, to help them make purchase decisions, we heard that decision makers need the following information:

- Up-front and ongoing costs of implementation for comparison across interventions.
- A comparison of costs to the likely benefits of intervention success (e.g., positive social outcomes).
- Detailed characteristics of the population addressed by a given study or intervention (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, special needs).
- The level of intervention modification possible without impacting the evidence base.
- Readiness for dissemination and availability of implementation planning details—such as manuals available, required resources, training available/required, timelines, and links to the underlying resources.
- Contact information for the purveyor for follow-up questions or purchasing.

We heard about the need for such information throughout our interviews. One principal explained, “We do research outside of our school. We want to know what other high-performing districts or schools of our size are using. For us, it’s important to know *size* and *budget*: can I implement with my staff and budget?” In addition, one child welfare administrator noted, “We don’t use [clearinghouses] to make decisions. We believe we need to read the papers themselves; we need

to assure ourselves that those studies have been completed on populations that are very similar to ours.”

Yet this information is often difficult to find on the clearinghouses. A primary factor is that evaluators do not capture such data systematically within the intervention studies themselves. A few clearinghouses try to contact the evaluators or purveyors to request this additional detail. However, even when this information is included in the studies, some clearinghouses do not systematically extract and present it in a way that is readily accessible to decision makers (see [Appendix 7](#) for availability by clearinghouse).

Of the different types of data, cost of the intervention is the most frequently requested but the most difficult to find, primarily due to its lack of inclusion in studies. “The number one thing people asked about, but could not get, was information about cost,” said Rebecca Kilburn, a senior economist at the RAND Corporation and former director of the Promising Practices Network (which has since closed). “For example, someone might be considering a few programs and might want to go with the one that has lower outcomes if it has even lower relative cost. There are those types of trade-offs they are making [between costs and benefits].”

“The number one thing people asked about, but could not get, was information about cost. For example, someone might be considering a few programs and might want to go with the one that has lower outcomes if it has even lower relative cost.”

REBECCA KILBURN, SENIOR ECONOMIST,
RAND CORPORATION AND FORMER DIRECTOR,
PROMISING PRACTICES NETWORK

A few clearinghouses are working to make additional intervention-specific information accessible. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) is a well-regarded resource for cost-benefit analysis on interventions for the state of Washington, and similar work is being initiated by Results First (see [Spotlight: Washington State Institute for Public Policy and Results First](#)). WSIPP is not a standard clearinghouse. Rather, it conducts nonpartisan research at the direction of the Washington State Legislature. However, it does act in the standard clearinghouse role of aggregating, standardizing, reviewing, and rating interventions, and then goes a step further to determine whether the intervention is a good investment. Other clearinghouses can use WSIPP’s information (as the UK’s Investing in Children clearinghouse already does) or conduct similar analyses. Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE) has a user-centered feedback loop to understand what people are looking for on the site. In response to feedback, HomVEE has started to provide more implementation planning support.

Spotlight: Washington State Institute for Public Policy and Results First

Each year, states face tough budget choices, and policy makers need to focus taxpayer dollars on the programs and services that yield the greatest benefits in the most cost-effective ways. Washington State has implemented a unique approach to meeting this challenge. In the mid-1990s, the state legislature began to direct the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP)—a nonpartisan research institute—to identify evidence-based policies that have been shown to improve particular outcomes.

Most notably, WSIPP uses a cutting-edge research model to produce independent assessments of the benefits and costs of a wide range of program options from the perspective of Washington citizens and taxpayers. The results of this approach enable policy makers to compare and rank programs. Such information has been well-received both within and outside of Washington State. While originally focused on criminal justice, WSIPP has applied the same evidence-based and benefit-cost approach to other public policy areas, including K-12 education, early childhood education, child welfare, and mental health.

Based on WSIPP's model, The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative (Results First) is working with a growing number of jurisdictions to help them implement a customized cost-benefit approach to policy making. Results First provides hands-on technical assistance to help decision makers compile and analyze the program, population, and cost data needed to operate the model. It then helps these jurisdictions interpret the results and make evidence-based budget and policy decisions that provide the strongest return on public investments.

Since 2011, 16 states and four California counties have partnered with Results First to apply this customized, innovative cost-benefit approach to policy and budget decision making. Over the past two fiscal years, five states—Iowa, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont—have used the Results First model to target \$81 million in funding toward programs that the model shows will achieve higher returns for taxpayers. A number of states also have passed statutes embedding Results First cost-benefit analysis into their budget processes.

For more information: <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost> and <http://www.pewstates.org/projects/pew-macarthur-results-first-initiative-328069>

In addition to cost, decision makers highlighted peer experience with a given intervention as another key area of interest. Peer perspectives have been and will continue to be a very important factor across domains. Demonstrating the strength of peer input, the website Teachers Pay Teachers—a marketplace for education resources created by teachers—receives 50–100 times the number of unique monthly visitors as even the most visited clearinghouses (see [Appendix 4](#) for relative estimates of different information sources).

Decision makers want to understand and connect with peers who have implemented the specific interventions they are considering. They generally want to understand the successes and challenges—lessons learned—from peer experiences, and heed their advice. Many decision makers believe that information from peers with

similar population characteristics is the best proxy they can get to determine the likelihood of success of a certain intervention with their populations. Not surprisingly, most expressed the desire to know where interventions had been successfully implemented, what lessons have been learned, and how to contact these communities.

However, information on peer experiences is not readily available through clearinghouses or other formal evidence on effectiveness providers. In broad terms, clearinghouses are an information repository; they do not have a sales, support, or tracking function. They do not know who has selected an intervention and whether it was ultimately successful. Moreover, they serve as objective reviewers of evidence to maintain their credibility. They do not offer opinions on specific interventions. Therefore, while peer implementation may be of high value to decision makers, clearinghouses are not the right vehicle to supply it. Yet, there are no other information sources taking on this role today.

Gap 3: Guidance. Decision makers are looking for guidance and support in selecting and planning to implement the appropriate intervention. Clearinghouses, however, are not set up to provide this, and the intermediaries in this space are still relatively limited.

In addition to information, our interviews revealed that many decision makers need more support to help them make informed decisions about which interventions to select. It requires a lot of time and expertise to gather the necessary information for each option and weigh decision factors such as costs, size of outcomes, and likelihood of outcomes. One child welfare administrator pointed out, “I am not certain that the information is not out there; I just think it’s not out there in a format that is easily digestible, easily understandable. In all of my policy staff, I do not have one highly skilled research-type mind.” Under a lot of pressure from stakeholders to make informed, well-researched decisions, decision makers need to be able to substantiate their final selections.

Through our interviews, we heard from many decision makers who want tools to help guide them through the selection process. These include:

- Tools (e.g., surveys) to assess community needs, such as risk factors and required outcomes;
- Criteria or steps (e.g., guides, webinars) to use for selection among potential interventions;
- Ability to sort or filter interventions by multiple dimensions of the target population—assuming this information is captured systematically to begin with; and
- Next steps (e.g., guides, links) to take after intervention selection.

These types of support could be self-administered or involve decision makers relying on advisory services to guide them through the selection process. The level of support required depends on the decision maker, the complexity of

selection options, and the type of decision. One educator noted the importance of accessing multiple types of support: “Having a wide web presence is a start, but also having a person who you can easily reach out to in order to get more help would be great.”

Most clearinghouses do not provide sufficient selection guidance. For starters, they are constrained by the information included in the underlying studies. When information on a target population is available, clearinghouses do not always extract this information to make it sortable, filterable, and searchable. Few clearinghouses provide or link decision makers to assessment tools or step-by-step guidance; where such tools do exist, they can be difficult to find on the websites. And almost none of the clearinghouses have the resources to provide hands-on advisory services through the selection process. “My impression is that you do have to go to that individual level,” said Danielle Mason, who heads the What Works Team within the UK Cabinet Office. “[Helping individuals] requires going beyond saying ‘here’s what works’ and saying ‘here’s how it’s applicable

“[Helping individuals] requires going beyond saying ‘here’s what works’ and saying ‘here’s how it’s applicable to you’—but this is a challenge since it is much more resource-intensive than just providing information.”

DANIELLE MASON, HEAD, WHAT WORKS TEAM,
UK CABINET OFFICE

to you’—but this is a challenge since it is much more resource-intensive than just providing information.”

However, several clearinghouses are recognizing the need to provide greater guidance, and a few are beginning to build out self-administered tools and capabilities. For example, the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for

Child Welfare is currently revising its existing section on Screening and Assessment Tools to better meet the needs of its audiences. The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices allows decision makers to search for applicable interventions by gender, geographic location, age, and race/ethnicity of the intervention target population. The Office of Adolescent Health’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention resource center includes a full page of resources for selecting an evidence-based program.

Advisers are beginning to play a role in guiding decision makers to choose interventions. This may start with needs assessments for their populations, evolve into research and effective intervention selection guidance, and flow all the way through to technical advice in implementation. Advisers are aware of multiple clearinghouses and use them regularly. They leverage evidence in the research they do to support their partner organizations or communities. One adviser explained, “The reason we are tasked with questions, even though the information is available on clearinghouses, is that while the information up there is useful, it tends to be very broad and doesn’t provide information relevant to implementation issues and considerations.”

A number of advisers already operate in this space. For instance, a few education interviewees mentioned Hanover Research, an information services firm that uses a fixed-fee partnership model. Hanover Research conducts custom research

projects for its K-12 partner organizations—schools, school districts, and regional education agencies—that involve the review of research and best practices to address a specific question. We also heard about the Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support Center (EPISCenter), sponsored by the government of Pennsylvania, which works closely with communities in the state to select and implement youth-focused interventions from a menu (see [Spotlight: EPISCenter, a Center of Excellence](#)). Several universities, such as Case Western Reserve University, are developing similar centers of excellence that serve as hubs for local advisory services. One provider said, “The network of centers of excellence, like the EPISCenter and others, are great examples of intermediaries...they know who to call and their calls will be answered. Not many groups can span these boundaries.”

Spotlight: EPISCenter, a Center of Excellence

The Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support Center, or EPISCenter, a project of the Prevention Research Center at Penn State University, is a unique and successful adviser model. EPISCenter is aimed at providing technical assistance to communities and service providers in Pennsylvania to support the implementation of a menu of evidence-based prevention and intervention programs. The center is a collaborative partnership between the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and Penn State University. It receives funding and support from the commission and from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare.

Where communities have received evidence-based program implementation grants from Pennsylvania, experts from the EPISCenter provide technical assistance to local staff on implementation, evaluation, and sustainability, and help develop the infrastructure to monitor the program. Over time, providers build internal capacity for these operations and many continue to report data to the EPISCenter even after their initial funding has ended. A lighter model for support and resources is available for non-grantee communities. As a center developed by the state and supporting recipients of grants, EPISCenter also can communicate and connect with a variety of stakeholders. Since 2008, the center has assisted in establishing nearly 300 evidence-based programs in more than 120 communities throughout the state.

For more information: <http://www.episcenter.psu.edu/>

With a more limited set of consumers and more resources than clearinghouses (such as through revenue models), advisers can provide one-on-one interaction and support for decision makers. They have expertise in research, as well as practice translating studies into application. They also tend to be more accessible to decision makers than clearinghouses.

Unfortunately, the adviser market is sparse and underrepresented, and awareness is low. The importance of local context makes most advisers regional in nature, driving fragmentation. In areas without advisers, it is unclear who exactly could or should play this more hands-on role. Due to the high demand for one-on-one support services, and the limited capacity for any given organization to do this in a high-touch way, most regions lack a sufficient number of advisers to meet the needs of decision makers.

There are a variety of perspectives on who should fill this gap. Some feel that more university research centers could be hubs for a local advisory function, whereas others believe that state governments should develop centers which provide this support, perhaps associated with grant programs. However, there is no obvious or one-size-fits-all solution. Each state—along with relevant funders—will likely need to develop a plan to build out these capabilities.

Gap 4: Synthesis. Decision makers are looking for more than just interventions. They also are looking for information on policies and management decisions, as well as synthesized findings and best practices. This information is not available systematically and can be difficult to find, even where it does exist.

Through our interviews, it became evident that decision makers face other important decisions in their roles that do not involve selecting a single intervention. They must make important decisions about policies and management—and would like to base these decisions on evidence, as well. For example:

- In education, leaders need to make decisions on school/district management issues (e.g., hiring and firing, budget management, schedules and calendars, accommodating special populations).
- In child welfare, county administrators need to make decisions on policies or principles for management of work (e.g., case load, removal from the home).

Unfortunately, decision makers have few sources to turn to for this information today. Clearinghouses often lack evidence on effectiveness related to policies and management decisions. This most likely is due to a lack of studies or evaluations on these types of practices, as it is harder to establish evidence and objectivity in research. However, it could also partially result from clearinghouses having limited resources, less expertise in these areas, or a lack of clarity on this additional set of decisions that decision makers need to make.

Decision makers also are looking for summarized information about effective interventions, primarily best practices and components of effective interventions. One school district administrator explained, “If we are looking at specific programs or materials, then What Works Clearinghouse is a good place; if we are looking for best practices in certain areas, we will go to universities or other organizations where it is their area of expertise.”

Summarized reports can help translate detailed scientific research into practical guidance and “how tos.” This is particularly helpful for practitioners—audiences such as principals and teachers—who might not have backgrounds in technical research and evidence but are still interested in improving outcomes. This also can be relevant for decision makers who have limited time and bandwidth for detailed research, but who are interested in summaries of key findings or implications.

Due to constraints within their existing infrastructure, decision makers are often looking for summaries of successful model components across interventions. This occurs frequently in child welfare where implementing a totally new model

is uncommon due to entrenched services and provider relationships. Decision makers are looking for incremental or continuous improvement, rather than a complete overhaul to a new packaged intervention. Synthesis reports and meta-analyses that identify successful components or practices across multiple interventions are useful, as decision makers can implement these to improve existing work. Dan Cardinali, president of Communities in

Schools, explained, “We try to avoid only pointing affiliates to programs that have been demonstrated to be effective for lots of reasons: they might be too costly, require intensive training, or can’t be sustained after initial investment. We strive to look across the programs, figure out the most effective strategies, and help them incorporate these strategies into what they are already doing.”

“We try to avoid only pointing affiliates to programs that have been demonstrated to be effective... We strive to look across the programs, figure out the most effective strategies, and help them incorporate these strategies into what they are already doing.”

DAN CARDINALI, PRESIDENT,
COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

In 2013, there were over 370,000 downloads of What Works Clearinghouse’s practice guides—more than twice the number of downloads of its intervention reports.

Clearly, decision makers value summarized information and synthesis. Yet it is unclear who is responsible for providing these things. No one currently does it systematically, although some clearinghouses have started to take on more of a synthesizer role. The What Works Clearinghouse has launched practice guides,

which have been well received. In 2013, there were over 370,000 downloads of the practice guides—more than twice the number of downloads of intervention reports. The What Works Clearinghouse interviewee told us, “For practitioners, our most useful product is the practice guides.” However, most clearinghouses do not play this synthesizer role, nor do they believe it is their role to play.

A number of intermediaries—in particular synthesizers and researchers—provide this support, either by conducting meta-analyses or synthesizing existing research. For instance, Chapin Hall provides additional research and synthesis in the child welfare space. In some cases, intermediaries leverage the information from clearinghouses, and then provide additional value through aggregation and analysis. As a clearinghouse that also acts as a researcher, Child Trends is able to leverage its own underlying database of over 650 programs to synthesize learnings. The resulting fact sheets, called LINKS Syntheses, are organized by program population, outcome, and approach.

More often, there is not a direct link or relationship between clearinghouses and synthesizers/researchers. This limits the benefits to decision makers. Complicating matters, even when synthesizers directly leverage underlying research that is evidence based, the findings or recommendations of the synthesized research are not necessarily evidence based and statistically significant (outside of meta-analysis). Decision makers therefore need to

keep in mind this distinction between effective interventions and synthesis as they use this information.

There are many synthesizers and researchers in each domain. However, it is not always apparent where decision makers should go for certain information. There are no clear winners or market leaders. Although there are multiple sources for synthesized information, the information is not always sufficient, nor does it necessarily reach decision makers. Clearinghouses are partly playing the role of synthesizers themselves but only on an ad-hoc basis. Synthesizers and researchers are important players, but they are still sub-scale and may not be known to decision makers. A smoother supply chain from interventions to synthesis is required in order to engage decision makers.

Gap 5: Usability. Users do not find clearinghouses easy to use, nor do they understand the differences between them.

We interviewed several types of users with a range of clearinghouse experience. While they acknowledged the critical role of clearinghouses, many were confused or dissatisfied with their experiences—which discourages them from using the sites on a more regular basis.

Part of their confusion is due to a lack of understanding of the differences between clearinghouses. This is particularly vexing when there are several clearinghouses reviewing the same studies for the same domain outcomes (e.g., in child welfare), or even using the same underlying databases. While each of the clearinghouses may add unique value, it is not always apparent what that unique value is. Clearinghouses often operate in isolation and do not clearly articulate their points of differentiation relative to other sites in the space. In interviews, decision makers were unable to identify the differences among clearinghouses.

Different rating scales and criteria are another area of confusion for users. There are often advantages to the differences in validation processes, due to different audiences or outcomes of interest. Yet since the differences are not clearly defined, ratings can appear inconsistent to users. Consider Blueprints, which rates interventions as “model” or “promising” based on intervention specificity, evaluation quality, intervention impact, and dissemination readiness. Meanwhile, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP) Model Program Guide (MPG) rates the same interventions as “effective,” “promising,” or “no effects” based on a program’s conceptual framework, design quality,

“Users have told us it’s confusing. They go to one clearinghouse and there is this rating. They go to another, and it’s a different rating. What does that mean?”

CAMBRIA ROSE WALSH, PROJECT MANAGER,
THE CALIFORNIA EVIDENCE-BASED CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR CHILD WELFARE

outcome evidence, and program fidelity. Therefore, users can find conflicting information about a given intervention across clearinghouses. For example, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America received the highest classification of “effective” from OJJDP’s MPG, but it was only rated “promising” by Blueprints. “Users

have told us it's confusing," admitted Cambria Rose Walsh, project manager of the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. "They go to one clearinghouse and there is this rating. They go to another, and it's a different rating. What does that mean?"

To start addressing this challenge, Results First has developed a Clearinghouse Database aimed at compiling and comparing the ratings of interventions across clearinghouses (see [Spotlight: Results First Clearinghouse Database](#)).

Spotlight: Results First Clearinghouse Database

The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative (Results First) created the Clearinghouse Database to assist policy makers at all levels of government in making data-driven budget decisions. This one-stop online resource gives users an easy way to find information on the effectiveness of more than 900 interventions as rated by eight national research clearinghouses. The database uses a simple color-coding system to reconcile the different ratings terminology used by clearinghouses and provides hyperlinks to their program pages so users can easily access the valuable information that has been compiled. Results First plans to enhance this resource in the near future by including additional search options and information.

For more information: http://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/Assets/2014/09/Results_First_Clearinghouse_Database.xlsx?la=en

Furthermore, it can actually be difficult for users to determine which clearinghouses relate to the domains in which they are interested. Clearinghouses use a range of descriptors to indicate the topics they cover (see [Appendix 5](#) for US-focused clearinghouses by domain). For example, many clearinghouses describe their content as covering broad topics such as youth, children and families, or community health. It is unclear how their intervention scope might overlap with those clearinghouses that have more narrowly defined themes (e.g., juvenile justice, teen pregnancy).

Poor and confusing website navigation also causes problems for clearinghouse users. Interviewees did not find the sites to be very intuitive in design, which sometimes prevented them from using the full functionality of the site. Even frequent users often were unaware of certain site content. Others lamented that the sites were overwhelming, and it was unclear how to effectively use them. One child welfare administrator explained, "If I go to a federal website, it might take a half hour to find one piece of data because I have to maneuver through so many different sites [and possibly] be directed somewhere else."

Our high-level evaluation of the major clearinghouses confirmed many of the concerns of end users. The majority of clearinghouses do not provide adequate information on what to do upon site entry or how to best use the site. Navigation can be overly complex, often causing users to click numerous times to reach desired information. Searchability and sortability on key dimensions such as

name, intervention type, outcome, and setting are also lacking, making it hard for users to find the most appropriate intervention.

There are best practices that clearinghouses can learn from. For example, Blueprints provides clear navigation guidance upon site entry as well as video tutorials for users. Meanwhile, the UK's Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook allows users to search or select along multiple dimensions and defines ratings within the results to ease comprehension. Some larger sites have developed feedback loops with target audiences to improve delivery. For example, OJJDP's MPG is conducting focus groups with its users to improve site usability.

Part of the difficulty in navigating these sites can be attributed to the broad range of users that clearinghouses are targeting. In trying to be everything to all audiences, clearinghouses can become a bit unwieldy or overwhelming. It is difficult to guide users effectively through the site when each user might be looking for different information in different ways.

Many clearinghouses, therefore, remain difficult to differentiate and difficult to use. This will be important to address moving forward, as audiences need to understand how to use the sites in order to obtain their full benefits.

Gap 6: Awareness. Decision makers receive information about interventions from purveyors and peers, but they do not receive information about evidence in a systematic or effective manner.

Almost all the decision makers we interviewed were aware of the concept of evidence on effectiveness. Most have heard about clearinghouses or other sources in their respective domains, and this awareness appears to be growing. However, many admitted they do not use these resources often and do not appear to be making decisions with evidence on effectiveness top of mind. The most prevalent reason given was that the strong presence of purveyor and word-of-mouth information crowds out evidence on effectiveness, which they would often have to seek out.

Purveyors have strong marketing efforts and relationships, and their presence in many domains competes with evidence for attention. For example, decision makers in education are inundated with vendor pitches that tend to crowd out detailed research. The pitches are voluminous, accessible, and provided directly to decision makers in clear terms.

“I get inundated with products and salespeople constantly. If I would be inundated on the other end—‘here are the evidence-based practices...’—then I would not have to use the other resources.”

DR. LAURENE LANICH, ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
OF TEACHING AND LEARNING, WEST DES MOINES
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

It is difficult for clearinghouses or other evidence on effectiveness information sources to directly compete with the sales pitches of vendors, developers, and providers. Further complicating this imbalance is that purveyors often tout their products as evidence-based practices, whether or not they have been

officially validated. These messages not only guide decision makers toward sub-optimal interventions, but they can also desensitize them to the important concept of evidence. Dr. Laurene Lanich, assistant superintendent of teaching and learning at the West Des Moines Community Schools in Iowa noted, “I get inundated with products and salespeople constantly. If I would be inundated on the other end—‘here are the evidence-based practices, here is how to use this information based on your needs’—then I would not have to use the other resources and that would make my job a lot easier.”

Additionally, decision makers have relied heavily on formal and informal peer networks and word-of-mouth for information regarding effective interventions. Some networks include: professional networks and associations (e.g., American

Decision makers have relied heavily on formal and informal peer networks and word-of-mouth for information regarding effective interventions.

Association of School Administrators, Child Welfare League of America), key conferences, online forums and blogs, and contacts and personal networks.

Clearinghouses and other sources of evidence on effectiveness do currently try to leverage the more formal peer

networks. Most clearinghouse interviewees mentioned having a presence at conferences—as exhibitors or presenters—as their primary method for promoting their websites. Some clearinghouses also provide training for certain professional groups. For example, the What Works Clearinghouse conducted a webinar for faculty of pre-service teacher and principal training programs to showcase their resources for teachers and administrators. Additionally, the College of Policing in the UK, which leads the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction, has established related training programs for practitioners.

However, outside of conferences and occasional trainings, information from peer networks is not always explicitly tied to evidence on effectiveness. It is unclear how strongly or frequently professional networks and associations themselves promote the use of evidence or refer decision makers to clearinghouses or other resources. We have heard that while some networks and groups are well-versed in the topic, and potentially advocate for the use of evidence, others are less friendly to or knowledgeable about the subject matter. Even the sharing of peer experience with effective interventions is done on an ad-hoc basis across these various mechanisms.

If these trends continue, where decision makers are aware of but do not access or act on evidence on effectiveness, it will not matter if the other gaps are fixed and the supply of information is improved. Formal sources for effective interventions will be able to compete against informal structures only if they are more comprehensive and readily accessible, and if they actively reach out to decision makers.