

# KEY QUESTIONS in EDUCATION

Schools, teachers and parents are regularly introduced to new measures to improve education. Do they work? Here are the important questions to figure that out.

## Why ask questions about education?

Education has a finite budget and time and focus, so all schemes come with a cost. Schools have different priorities and contexts, and not everything is equally suitable. Education interventions can have unintended effects.



e.g. Do teen drug education programmes reduce drug use? Or unintentionally create networking spaces for users?



### 1) What problem is the programme designed to solve?

We should clarify whether there is a **real issue** that justifies the proposed change, with **clearly defined goals** – versus just trying something new for the sake of it.

#### ► Check:

- A Whether we are all defining the problem in the same way.
- B What specific outcome we are looking for.
- C How much difference the programme is expected to make – when, and for whom.

**Example:** Systematic synthetic phonics instruction was introduced to improve literacy. But what aspect of literacy? Phonics instruction has been shown to improve word decoding skills better than other approaches. But this doesn't mean it improves comprehension. Decoding and comprehension are two different outcomes. People continue to argue about phonics because they don't have a shared definition of the outcome.





## 2) What evidence is it based on?

Not every classroom decision needs to be tested, but when an intervention is claimed to be evidence-based, we should be able to evaluate that evidence.

### ► Check:

- A** Whether the evidence is relevant to the problem and desired outcomes.
- B** Whether it is convincing enough to assure those outcomes. Is it anecdotal, observational or experimental? These have different strengths and limits.
- C** Whether it is independent and unbiased.

**Example:** Many people assumed that giving teenage girls infant simulator dolls would show them how hard parenting is and therefore reduce unwanted pregnancies. Early research, in which a small number of girls were given dolls, had shown that this changed the girls' attitudes about teen pregnancy. After the programme was rolled out, a later study with over 1,500 girls looked at actual pregnancy rates and found they were not reduced. Comparing teen pregnancy rates between girls who were given the dolls and girls who weren't, it found that the girls who had been given the dolls had higher rates of pregnancy.



**By asking good questions we promote better decisions.**



## 3) What is its expected impact in *this* context?

The proposed intervention will be implemented in the real world. This is different to the world of studies, pilot projects and education programme marketing material.

### ► Check:

- A** How we know it will work with these children, with these teachers, in this school with its current systems and resources.
- B** That assessment considers the alternatives and the opportunity costs.

### Education pilot projects often **succeed**



because people are enthusiastic to do something new and the pilot conditions are optimal. Sustaining this over the long term is harder.

### **Opportunity costs** are the



things we can't do as a result of doing something new. In education, there is a tendency not to count them, and only think about what we expect to gain with a new policy or scheme.

**Example:** Introducing a universal free school meals programme could ensure all children have nutritious lunches. However, the scheme would cost billions: what other school programmes would have to stop to pay for something that most people don't need?



**Example:** A new individual reading assessment programme will mean teachers have less time for whole-class teaching. This is an opportunity cost that should be considered.

