

Preliminary Framework for Review Standards for Evaluation Reports and Research Designs

This framework is based on generally acceptable standards for high quality research studies, and was developed to help ensure that any Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL) research reports would pass the required IES Standards and Review Office review.¹ These same goals are important for the MSP evaluations. Below, we provide the guidance as currently used to review and provide technical assistance to the REL research teams.

GENERAL FRAMEWORK AND BACKGROUND

- Does the report clearly describe the issue it is investigating and explain how the investigation relates to a regional need?
- Are the project questions and/or study objectives clearly stated early in the report, and relevant to the issue to be addressed?
- Are key terms defined early and then used consistently throughout the report? Are the definitions broadly accepted, and clear and understandable for a non-research audience?
- If the authors use prior literature to motivate the investigation, does the literature selected reflect the range of important approaches and findings? Are all points of view reflected? Are key findings presented succinctly, objectively, and accurately? Does the report cite original, empirical investigations and avoid citing opinions/advocacy/journalistic accounts about research? Does the report briefly acknowledge what appears to be known and not known about the subject?

DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

- Are the data sources and variables used to address each research question clearly identified and appropriate for the research questions?
- Does the report clearly explain how and why samples or sub-samples (of data or respondents) were selected, and are these samples/sub-samples appropriate for the research questions? Does it address the issue of representativeness? If a sample of respondents could not be drawn to represent a universe, is there acknowledgment and explanation for this?
- Are the data collection methods clearly described and appropriate for the research questions? Are the necessary data collection instruments or literature review protocols included for the review?
- Does the report adequately address protection of confidential data?
- Is there evidence that the data collection violated OMB guidelines?
- Are the analysis methods clearly described, and appropriate for the research question?
- Does the report clearly explain and justify key analysis decisions?

¹ This document includes a set of standards developed by Mike Puma and his colleagues at Chesapeake Associates for the review of what are called “fast response” studies under the Regional Educational Laboratory Program (REL).

- Are the key strengths and especially the key limitations of the data sources and analysis methods clearly described?

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND PLACING THEM IN CONTEXT

- Are the findings clearly aligned with the study's research questions, and are all the questions adequately addressed?
- Are the findings clearly supported by the data presented in the main report body?
- Are findings presented accurately and objectively without introducing a point of view?
- Does the report present the specific findings and avoid using unscientific adjectives to describe quantities, frequencies, extent, or significance without additional, more detailed description of the evidence?
- Are the findings presented clearly and in an organized and logical fashion for the intended audience (usually policy makers and practitioners)? Do the findings "make sense" and are they coherent? Are seemingly odd or inconsistent findings within the report acknowledged and addressed appropriately?
- Are any conclusions fully supported by the findings presented earlier?
- As appropriate, does the report make clear whether and how the findings confirm or disconfirm prior research cited in the background section, and offer a reasonable explanation of why this is the case?
- Does the report refrain from making recommendations for policy or practice? Are any suggestions for further research clearly supported by the findings and seem feasible?

REPORT SUMMARY

- Does the report summary accurately and succinctly portray the motivation for the study, the research questions, the data sources, and the findings in 400 – 1000 words? Can the summary "stand alone" and the study be clearly understood by the intended audience (usually policy makers and practitioners), who may not open the main report body or appendices?