Using ESSER funds for multi-tiered supports through Early Warning Systems. Districts across the country are implementing a growing practice called Early Warning Systems that can predict high school students who need additional supports toward graduation. Researchers found that “ABCs” (absenteeism, behavior referrals, and course failure) are highly predictive “early warning indicators” of students dropping out.

We’re offering guidance for districts looking to fund targeted academic supports sustainably, using ESSER funds to get programs off the ground and to lay the groundwork for long-term change. We also offer concrete examples of staffing examples and scheduling models that you can implement today and adjust along the way to enable continuous improvement over time.

See the other ESSER guides.

ESSER GUIDANCE
STAFFING • SPENDING • SCHEDULING

How can district and school leaders use stimulus funding to make “Do Now” investments that respond to urgent student needs, center equity, accelerate student learning, and also sustainably “Build Toward” long-term improvement?
DO NOW, BUILD TOWARD

covid recovery | federal stimulus funding | long-term vision

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What Does the Research Say?

Investing in Early Warning Systems Sustainably

“Do Now” Investments

Early Warning Systems in Action: Scheduling and Staffing Examples

Concrete Examples
What does the research say?
Recent studies focus on “Early Warning Indicators” to predict students who need additional supports toward graduation.

In the foundational study of Philadelphia Public Schools conducted by the Everyone Graduates Center, researchers found that “ABCs” (absenteeism, behavior referrals, and course failure) are highly predictive “early warning indicators” of students dropping out. The table and chart below illustrate how trends worsen as students demonstrate more indicators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>% Graduated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;80% Attendance</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Behavior Grade</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“F” in English Course</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“F” in Math Course</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Indicators</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Indicators</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Indicators</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For additional studies about other early warning indicators, see this meta-analysis.
In response, schools and districts across the country are implementing a growing practice called **Early Warning Systems (EWS).**

**What do Early Warning Systems do?**

- Schools that implement EWS follow a methodical process that uses local, historical student data and research-based early warning indicators to **accurately identify students** who are in danger of not achieving key educational milestones, such as on-time graduation.

- Students are then **matched with appropriate interventions**, and their progress is monitored so supports can be adapted over time.

**Who participates in Early Warning Systems?**

- Typically, schools identify one or more campus **EWS teams**, typically either a single team composed of a facilitator and designated instructional staff, such as teacher-leaders, or teams for each grade level.

- EWS Teams **meet at least monthly** to analyze data related to these student indicators and assign/adapt specific interventions.

Sources: American Institutes for Research
Given the impact of COVID-19, Early Warning Systems can help schools provide targeted supports to address intensified needs.

Disruptions caused by COVID-19 will likely lead to:

1. More students who exhibit these early warning indicators.
   - Especially in secondary schools, where students experienced high rates of absenteeism and course failure nationally during the pandemic.
2. An incomplete picture of students’ full needs.
3. Finite capacity at schools, despite increased student need.

Early Warning Systems can help direct scarce resources where they are needed most by:

- **Leveraging methodical processes**, like this one called Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring Systems (EWIMS).
- **Promoting up-to-date data** gathering and analysis.
- **Focusing intervention** efforts based on strategic, locally validated, and research-backed indicators.

Sources: EdWeek; the 74; the American Institutes for Research
Early Warning Systems (EWS) also provide a **strategic and data-driven approach** to building a multi-tiered system of supports.

There are important similarities and distinctions between early warning systems (EWS) and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and response to intervention (RTI). For more information, see this guide from Regional Education Laboratories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIMILARITIES</th>
<th>DISTINCTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Each uses data to identify and connect students to additional differentiated interventions.</td>
<td>• EWS rely especially on specific, locally validated indicators for identifying students at risk of not graduating: <strong>Attendance</strong>, <strong>Behavior</strong>, and <strong>Course Failure</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Like MTSS, these interventions span academic, social/emotional, and behavioral needs.</td>
<td>• Specific processes for implementing an EWS have been developed (as seen in the diagram on the previous slide).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most importantly, EWS can help increase the impact of MTSS and RTI practices by combining **data-driven identification processes with comprehensive tiered intervention systems** that target attendance, behavioral/social-emotional development, and course performance. In this way, schools can quickly provide just-in-time supports to address key drivers of students’ success in school.
Recent studies point to the success of EWS in supporting student achievement towards graduation...

American Institutes for Research

In 2017, AIR and the US Department of Education found that 73 Midwest High Schools, one year later those that implemented EWS had statistically significant lower rates of chronic absenteeism and course failure than those that did not implement EWS. (AIR; US Department of Education)

CT Rise

Through their work in embedding EWS across Connecticut, CT Rise found that in the first three years of partnership, grade 9 on-track rates have improved by nearly 10 percentage points (from ~70 percent - ~80 percent) with emphasized growth for English language learners and students with disabilities. (CT Rise)

Real-life Spotlights

... so long as the system is adapted to fit the local context to address acute student needs.

While the “ABCs” provide a starting point for districts and schools to determine indicator thresholds for identifying students, research suggests that thresholds for identification must be locally validated to ensure the right students are identified and supported.

- This is especially true for “behavior,” where policies vary greatly from district to district and can fall prey to both personal and systemic bias.
- Additional validation and threshold shifts will be necessary if district and school policies for attendance and course completion changed in response to COVID-19.

Check Out:
- This example of varied indicators from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- This guide for districts on creating locally validated indicators from the Regional Education Laboratory (REL) West.
By leveraging research and best practices, districts and schools should strategically invest in Early Warning Systems (EWS).

This guide builds on expertise from the field and focuses on how districts and schools can leverage their ESSER funds to start or improve Early Warning Systems, given intensified student needs as a result of COVID-19.

This guide will discuss “Do Now, Build Toward” investments for all aspects of the EWS process, except for Step 5: Assigning & Implementing Interventions.

For more information about the types of investments needed to provide flexible interventions, see the Targeted Academic Supports guide.
Many organizations in the education field have created guidance, protocols, and tools for implementing EWS effectively.
How can districts and schools invest sustainably?
Federal stimulus funds provide an opportunity to address students’ current needs and build toward lasting improvement.

To plan ESSER investments with long-term sustainability in mind…

**Size the full cost of implementing strategies over time.**
Consider all the cost components associated with implementing the strategy well, including those that address intensified needs and those that build long-term capacity. Understand which costs will need to be sustained over time.

**Plan out how spending and organization will shift to sustain critical investments over time.**
To avoid fiscal cliffs, have an exit strategy where possible. Carefully monitor and plan for what needs to be sustained.

**Invest in building bridges to new ways of organizing.**
Pilot and evaluate new approaches that lower future costs or redirect resources to sustain this strategy.

**Define success, measure, and adjust.**
Investing in a continuous improvement system is critical for ensuring that strategies evolve and improve over time. For more on this, see Uncharted Waters.
To invest sustainably, districts and schools will need to size the full cost of key components of their Early Warning Systems.

- **Early Warning System (EWS) Team Collaboration**
  Create time for teams to meet through staffing release time or, if needed, stipends for time outside of contract time.

- **Early Warning System (EWS) Coordination**
  Stipend staff or hire as needed for data management and program facilitation and oversight.

- **Educator Professional Learning**
  Develop or outsource professional development on effective data analysis, root cause analysis, intervention implementation and continuous improvement.

- **Integrated Early Warning System (EWS) Tool**
  Purchase or develop Early Warning System tool integrated with the SIS.

- For concrete guidance on implementing interventions, see the Targeted Academic Supports guide.
- For concrete guidance on developing supportive relationships among students and teachers, see the Building Strong Relationships guide.
ESSER investments should balance investing in immediate student needs with building lasting capacity.

- **EWS Team Collaboration**
- **EWS Coordination**
- **Educator Professional Learning**
- **Integrated EWS Tool**

**Address intensified needs**

- EWS Team Collaboration
- EWS Coordination

**Build system capacity**

- EWS Team Collaboration
- EWS Coordination
- Educator Professional Learning
- Integrated EWS Tool

- Investments in these areas increase the amount of small group instruction that is possible but can also build capacity if done strategically. For example, piloting ways to embed EWS team collaboration into the school day.

- Investments in these areas build the capacity of the system to be able to provide greater data integrity and tracking and coordination of high-quality student supports.

Plan out how spending and organization will shift to sustain critical investments over time.

ESSER investments should balance investing in immediate student needs with building lasting capacity.
Plan out how spending and organization will shift to sustain critical investments over time.

While some investments will decrease, other investments will need to be sustained in order to provide better Early Warning Systems after ESSER.

ESSER can fund larger investments in time for team collaboration focused on data analysis and response to intensified student need as well as far more professional learning and set-up and coordination. Systems should closely monitor to see which of these investments should be sustained post-ESSER.

Key Question: How can districts and schools sustain increased teacher collaboration — without increasing long-term costs?

Possibly reduce investments in these areas back close to baseline once data systems/tools are in place, depending on any ongoing licensing costs.

Illustrative investment needed

Pre-ESSER | ESSER | Post-ESSER

EWS Team Collaboration
EWS Coordination
Educator Professional Learning
Integrated EWS Tool

Schools Start Here: Early Warning Systems

Introduction | Context & Research | Sustainability | Do Now Investments | Scheduling & Staffing
For now, schools might...

- Stipend teachers and support staff to meet in EWS Teams before or after school.

- Stipend staff or hire as needed for campus EWS coordination, including responsibility for data management, program oversight, and progress monitoring for continued system improvement and changes in student needs.

- Hire more teachers in targeted areas (for example, 9th-grade) to embed more release time in schedules.

...while piloting and evaluating ways to provide more and better Early Warning Systems, even without stimulus dollars.

- Shift calendars, schedules, and teacher assignments (for example, creating grade-level teaching teams) to embed EWS Team collaboration time during the school day and decrease additional collaboration stipends or additional staff for release time.

- Build capacity to manage EWS data collection, analysis, and progress monitoring in existing roles and existing structures — reducing the need for maintaining dedicated positions. For instance, a special education lead’s responsibilities may shift so that they now use advisory time to check in on specific students and monitor their intervention-related progress.
Districts and schools should invest in rapid cycles of continuous improvement to answer questions, such as:

- Where is EWS being implemented with fidelity? Where it’s not, what barriers are in place that we can address?

- Which interventions are effectively meeting students needs? Which interventions need shifting or further adaptation?

- Which schools are bright spots where EWS is successful? What effective practices can we try at other schools?

- What challenges are arising, and how can we address them?
How can districts and schools target ESSER dollars now?
Investments in all components of Early Warning Systems (EWS) are strategic and allowable uses for ESSER dollars.

The CARES Act (ESSER I) includes allowable uses of funds related to preventing, preparing for, and responding to COVID-19.

Note that the ‘additional’ LEA allowable uses of funds under the CRRSA Act (ESSER II), such as addressing learning loss, preparing schools for reopening, and testing, repairing, and upgrading projects to improve air quality in school buildings, already are permitted under the CARES Act.

-US Department of Education
Districts and schools will need additional collaboration structures for EWS Teams.

What collaboration structures does the EWS Team need in order to frequently discuss indicators and assign and adapt interventions?

- Recommendations for EWS Teams vary and will likely depend on the magnitude of student need. One example suggests:
  - **EWS Point Person** if there are <25 students with early warning indicators.
  - **Integrated School Team** for example: administrators, counselors, instructional coaches if there are 25-50 students with early warning indicators.
  - **Distributed Teacher Teams** for instance: grade-level teams if there are >50 students with early warning indicators.
Continued: Districts and schools will need additional collaboration structures for EWS Teams.

What collaboration structures does the EWS Team need in order to frequently discuss indicators and assign and adapt interventions?

- The cost of collaboration will depend on the size and meeting frequency of the team. Ideally teams meet for at least 90 minutes 1-2x/month, though some may choose to meet more frequently (or weekly) to address intensified student needs. The system should allow all teachers to be part of the conversation and release time can be achieved in many ways:
  - Schedule shifts that create extended collaboration time during the school day (see Schedule & Staffing section).
  - Leverage support staff and community partners for coverage.
  - Provide stipends to teachers and staff to collaborate before or after school (in the short-term before making scheduling shifts to embed collaboration during the day for sustainability).
Districts and schools will need **personnel to oversee and coordinate** data collection, analysis, and progress monitoring.

**What new or existing roles are best suited to support EWS implementation and progress monitoring?**

- **Hire temporary FTE or restructure current responsibilities** to coordinate EWS, including: determining locally validated metrics (or research-backed thresholds), implementing protocols for data gathering and analysis, implementing interventions, managing communications, and monitoring system progress.
  - See this sample [job description](#) for an “On-Track Coordinator” from CT RISE Network.

- **Build capacity of district central office staff to provide future program management support and expertise** (for example, EWS Certification, as offered by Talent Development Secondary).

- **Stipend or repurpose two summer days** for EWS Core Team to reflect on past processes and plan for the upcoming year. Create a resource map of existing tiered interventions so intervention gaps can be identified and addressed.
Continued: Districts and schools will need **personnel to oversee and coordinate** data collection, analysis, and progress monitoring.

An EWS Coordinator should prioritize conversations with key stakeholders — including **school leaders, teachers, families, and students themselves** — throughout the design and implementation process to:

- Understand students’ experiences that can lead to identified indicators.
- Understand students’ experiences before, during, and after EWS and interventions.
- Inform other community partners’ work and additional approaches to embedding EWS-like supports.
Districts and schools will need additional **professional learning structures** to develop educators’ capacity.

---

**What start-up training and ongoing professional development do staff need?**

- The cost of start-up trainings will include **stipends for staff attendance** and can be provided by an external partner or new/existing central office or school staff.
- In addition to the training required for EWS Coordinators, all staff may need support in **developing skills for successful EWS** including:
  - Data analysis (for EWS Team)
  - Intervention skills (for staff assigned to implement student supports)
  - Implicit bias training (for all staff, to ensure locally validated behavior data is as free from bias as possible)
  - Grading practices and protocols (for all staff, to support accurate data)
  - Culturally relevant curriculum design (for all staff, to ensure coursework data is as free from bias as possible)
- Teachers should also have access to **ongoing observation and expert support** to ensure reliable data.
Districts and schools will need to invest in robust and integrated data infrastructure.

What additional data infrastructure do we need to support EWS?

- Purchase or build a **data management system and visualization tool** that ideally can be integrated with existing SIS.
  - *Note:* While demographic data should be present to filter and progress monitor, it should not be used as part of the prediction and student identification.
  - Some examples include: Infinite Campus, Panorama, BrightBytes, and PowerSchool.
  - For building internally, costs will also include local data warehouse, software, and other licensing.

- Purchase or build a **workflow tool** for tracking interventions.
  - Ideally, a workflow tool and data management system should offer multiple views for school leaders, teachers, and families.

- Hire **temporary FTE or restructure responsibilities** to gather, enter, and locally validate the research-based ABC indicators.
Investments in Early Warning Systems (EWS) will vary across districts and schools based on **student and staff needs and context**.

For more support in estimating the *true cost* of implementing EWS sustainably in your specific context, see our **EWS Cost Calculator**.

- This interactive tool allows you to see a breakdown of potential ESSER spending (SY 2021-22 – SY 2023-24) and the implied spending commitments post-ESSER (from SY 2024-25 and onward).

- **Note**: Google Sheets will prompt you to “Make a Copy” before using the tool.
Additionally, there are **district-level enabling conditions** that can either enhance or limit the success of EWS.

### Strong Central Processes

- Clear **student and staff policies** that are broadly communicated to ensure reliable and up-to-date student data indicators, such as attendance and grading policies.
- Transparent **accountability structures** that support schools and staff in meeting policies and strategic goals.
- Access to **high-quality, research-based interventions** for schools to implement after having identified students who need additional support.
- A **strong district data team** that offers clear technical support and leverages high-quality data tools.

### Sufficient, Flexible Resources

- The ability to develop **schedules** that allow varied shared-student teams to collaborate as part of an EWS process.
- Flexible **staff assignment policies** that can facilitate EWS teams and ensure strong instructors lead interventions for students.
- The ability to **contract with third-parties** (such as local organizations and community colleges) to provide release time for teachers or targeted localized interventions (like shared-identity mentorship).
What does strategic scheduling and staffing look like?
Scheduling and staffing will vary by the **scale of student need** and require **shared release time** for EWS Team collaboration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To create shared release time...</th>
<th>...that is embedded during the day</th>
<th>...with a stipend for before/after school time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>for a singular campus-wide EWS Team</strong></td>
<td>• Shift schedules for EWS team to allow for a common release period.</td>
<td>• Feasible only in the short run, with an exit plan for a more sustainable strategy in the long run.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Create staffing flexibilities to enable release and duty coverage for 1-2x/month EWS team meeting.</td>
<td>• Cost will vary depending on the size and number of EWS teams (may be cost prohibitive if EWS is done in grade-level teams, requiring stipends for all staff each meeting).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>...for multiple EWS Teams within one campus</strong></td>
<td>• Repurpose pre-existing shared planning blocks or staff meeting time to focus on EWS 1-2x/month, ideally in shared-student groups.</td>
<td>• Can be stacked with first or last period planning for EWS team members to decrease stipends needed to reach 90 min 1x/month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• See the Professional Learning and Collaboration for Teachers guide for other examples of schedule shifts that would allow teachers to meet 1-2x/month for EWS.</td>
<td>• Note: Avoid using out-of-building substitutes as this could add unnecessary disruption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If necessary, use in-building substitute coverage to provide release for teachers who share students 1-2x/month.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Note:</strong> Avoid using out-of-building substitutes as this could add unnecessary disruption.</td>
<td>• Schedule an “early release” 1-2x/month and leverage community partners to provide student programming while teachers meet in shared-student teams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Schedule an “early release” 1-2x/month and leverage community partners to provide student programming while teachers meet in shared-student teams.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following pages show **concrete examples** of scheduling and staffing decision points in action.

*Note: These examples are flexible — they can be scaled to provide more frequent EWS Team meetings and implemented for various school levels.*
Example #1

Shared grade-level EWS embedded in existing collaboration.

**KEY DECISION POINTS**

- In a 4x4x1 block schedule, assign all students in the same grade to electives during the same period to free up core content teachers.
- 1-2x/month, school-level EWS Coordinator leads shared-student teams through EWS process and assigns students to their appropriate intervention/enrichment block.

**KEYS TO SUCCESS**

- Teachers should primarily teach only one grade level of students and can therefore have shared release time.
- Students need to have enough elective options to be spread out across elective teachers during this time.

**TRADEOFFS**

- Elective teachers are unable to participate in monthly EWS meetings.
- Depending on the number of available electives, elective class sizes could be larger.
- Employing this strategy for shared release time for core content teachers in grades 9-12 reduces elective teacher planning to 30-min intervention block.

---

**Teacher (A Day)**

- Per. 1: World History
- Per. 2: English I
- Lunch
- Per. 3: Schoolwide Intervention & Enrichment
- Per. 4: Algebra I
- Per. 5: Elective

**Student (A Day)**

- Per. 1: 90 mins
- Per. 2: 90 mins
- Lunch
- Per. 3: 30 mins
- Per. 4: 90 mins
- Per. 5: 90 mins

In this example, all 9th-grade students have electives during period 5, which frees core content teachers to plan. Once per month, these teachers meet with the school EWS Coordinator to discuss EWS data analysis and just-in-time supports for 9th-graders. Some of these interventions are implemented during the 3rd period intervention/enrichment block.
Continued: Example #1

Shared grade-level EWS embedded in existing collaboration.

ALSO CONSIDER

- Leveraging in-building substitutes to free teachers who have shared students but not shared planning time on an as-needed basis. For example, substitutes could allow elective teachers to attend the 1-2x/month EWS meeting with the other grade-level teachers.
- Using an “all-hands-on-deck” approach to create small, differentiated groups during the schoolwide intervention block.
- Differentiating responsibilities and providing release time during schoolwide intervention “x block” to allow relevant teachers to meet in EWS Team.
- Targeting tiered social-emotional instruction (in addition to academic intervention) during intervention and enrichment blocks, similar to an advisory period.

SEE HOW OTHER SCHOOLS APPROACH THIS

- The Burke School in Boston Public Schools uses a 4x4x1 schedule to connect students to targeted interventions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Student (A Day)</th>
<th>Teacher (A Day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per. 1</td>
<td>World History</td>
<td>English I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per. 2</td>
<td>English I</td>
<td>English I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per. 3</td>
<td>Schoolwide Intervention &amp; Enrichment</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per. 4</td>
<td>Algebra I</td>
<td>English I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per. 5</td>
<td>Elective</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this example, all 9th-grade students have electives during period 5, which frees core content teachers to plan. Once per month, these teachers meet with the school EWS Coordinator to discuss EWS data analysis and just-in-time supports for 9th-graders. Some of these interventions are implemented during the 3rd period intervention/enrichment block.
Example #2
Early release for EWS Teams to collaborate.

KEY DECISION POINTS
• Create two half days per month. During these afternoons, students engage in programming led by community partners, while teachers have EWS for two designated grade levels (or collaborative planning time if they do not teach those grades).

KEYS TO SUCCESS
• EWS Coordinators should lead grade-level teachers in a 90-minute block of EWS time.
• Leverage strong community partners with staffing capacity to supervise all students at once, or multiple partners to divide students into smaller groups.

TRADEOFFS
• Course seat time is reduced with two half days per month.
• There are additional financial costs, including partnership contracts, transportation, and supplies.

On every other Wednesday, all students are released early to programming by community partners. During this time, teachers participate in the EWS process for two grades on a rotating basis. The first Wednesday is for Gr. 9 & 10, the second Wednesday is Gr. 11 & 12.
Continued: Example #2

Early release for EWS Teams to collaborate.

ALSO CONSIDER

- Supplementing community partners with teachers who are not in EWS because they do not teach students in that grade level (to provide additional staffing).
- Using students’ afternoon time for specific just-in-time supports — for examples, see the Tutoring guide and the Building Strong Relationships guide.
- Rotating early release days between grade levels. In this example, a school could keep students in grades 11 and 12 in class while students in grades 9 and 10 have partner programming so that 9th- and 10th-grade teachers can participate in EWS.

SEE HOW OTHER PLACES APPROACH THIS...

- **Dallas ISD**: Through their extended year opt-in, two middle schools have adopted a rotating half-day calendar model.
This guide was authored by Mark Heath (Associate), Eddie Branchaud (Manager) and Kristen Ferris (Partner). It is the result of collaborative efforts among numerous people, both within and outside of ERS. We would like to acknowledge the following ERS team members who contributed to this work: Crystal Chu, Gloria Samen, Gayatri Mehra, Torrie Mekos, Daven McQueen, and Karen Hawley Miles.

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We are grateful to all those listed above who inspired, informed, contributed, and reviewed this work.
For more tools and information...

See the full “Do Now, Build Toward” toolkit

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As your team weighs the possible tradeoffs associated with different approaches, makes decisions about how to organize resources, and plans for how to evolve and scale your approaches over time, we encourage you to adapt these guides to meet your unique needs and context.

To share your work or get help navigating your “Do Now, Build Toward” approach, contact us.