

Questions and Answers About WWC Review Protocols: What's the Point?

The purpose of this document is to provide answers to questions submitted before and during the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) technical assistance webinar, “WWC Review Protocols: What’s the Point?” The webinar was hosted on May 14, 2020.

This document is meant to serve as a companion to the webinar slide deck and webinar recording, which can be found [here on the WWC website](#). We combined similar questions and rephrased others for clarity while preserving the meaning of the original questions. If additional questions arise, please contact the WWC Help Desk at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/help>.

1. How do I know under which protocol my study will be reviewed?

The choice of protocol for a study review depends on several issues. The most common reason a study is reviewed is for an intervention report. Studies reviewed for this reason are identified in systematic literature searches used to identify studies meeting specific inclusion criteria relevant to that intervention report, such as an intervention type (for example, middle school mathematics) or a population (for example, students with disabilities). Studies also may be reviewed for use in a Practice Guide and will follow the same logic as Intervention Reports. In addition, the WWC may review studies when they are submitted to support grant applications that require research evidence aligned with the WWC standards, when they are funded by the U. S. Department of Education (ED) or because they have received significant media attention. The WWC applies the Review of Individual Studies Protocol (RISP) in these cases.

2. What protocols are used for grant competitions?

The WWC uses the RISP to review studies submitted as evidence for grant applications. Submissions for 2020 grant competitions will be reviewed under the RISP 3.1 protocol and the 3.0 standards and procedures. ED will use Version 3.0 of the standards because a regulatory update to move to a later version of the standards has not yet been released.

3. Are reviews conducted for grant competitions under the RISP published on the WWC website as evidence for a specific intervention?

Reviews conducted for grant competitions can be found on the WWC’s Review of Individual Studies searchable website:

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/ReviewedStudies/#/OnlyStudiesWithPositiveEffects:false,SetNumber:1>. Results from these reviews are not incorporated into existing intervention reports or practice guides.

4. When will version 4.1 of the protocol template be available, and how should I use it?

Version 4.1 of the protocol template will be ready by the end of summer 2020. The template will give protocol authors a useful guide on what to include in protocols. It will standardize

the order in which the information appears in the protocol and will increase the consistency of information included in each review protocol. The guidance document will provide default approaches specified in the handbook with references and page numbers.

5. Why does the WWC allow certain sections of protocols to be modified for topic-specific criteria? Is there any concern that this modification may introduce bias? Is there any concern that this approach means that not all studies are reviewed by the WWC using the same standards?

The WWC protocols specify the key definitions, eligibility criteria, evidence standard parameters, and literature search procedures for intervention reports, practice guides, or single study reviews. The *WWC Standards Handbook* sets the evidence standards parameters; however, some of these parameters, such as reliability of outcome measures, boundaries of allowable sample attrition, characteristics on which baseline equivalence should be established, and risk of bias from joiners in cluster design studies, are more accurately specified by the protocols written by topic area experts. For example, the *WWC Standards Handbook, Version 4.1*, sets the minimum reliability for internal consistency of an outcome at 0.50 (page 84). However, the protocol authors of the Adolescent Literacy Review Protocol set the minimum reliability at 0.60 to reflect the acceptable minimum more accurately for this topic area.

Relative to bias, one of the purposes of a WWC protocol is to reduce reviewer bias when applying the WWC standards. All aspects of the protocol, including the evidence standards parameters, are established a priori and approved by ED's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The protocol is then published on the WWC website to ensure that WWC reviewers apply the review criteria consistently across all studies included in a WWC product (e.g., intervention report, practice guide, or single study review).

6. Are studies reviewed under old protocols updated when a newer protocol is released, which may change the study rating?

The WWC does not automatically rereview studies when a newer protocol is released. However, in some instances a study will be rereviewed, especially if it has been reviewed previously using *WWC Standards Handbook, Version 2.0* or earlier. Studies may be rereviewed for use in an Intervention Report, Practice Guide, or when cited as evidence in a grant application. The *Version 4.1 WWC Procedures Handbook* outlines specific scenarios detailing when a study is -rereviewed.

7. How can I ensure that my study will meet the WWC standards?

The WWC does not have a recommended approach that can guarantee a study will meet the WWC standards. At a minimum, however, eligibility to receive a WWC rating requires your study to use one of the designs eligible for a WWC review: a randomized controlled trial, quasi-experimental, regression discontinuity, or single case design. In addition, the chances that your study will be deemed eligible for review will be greater if you report your study findings using the WWC reporting guides available on the WWC website:

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Document/235>. Study authors interested in ensuring that their studies meet WWC standards also may benefit from reviewing the online group design training modules and completing the WWC certification examination. Finally, the WWC has created numerous additional products, videos, infographics, and briefs that study authors may find useful when developing a study's design. Users can find all these products on the WWC's new Resources webpage: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Resources>.

8. Socio-emotional learning, or SEL, has emerged as an important topic in education with research accumulating. I don't see a protocol for SEL studies though. Does the WWC plan to release it?

For intervention reports, SEL studies are reviewed under the supportive learning environment review protocol, which includes social, behavioral, and academic outcomes:

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Document/285>. In addition, SEL studies can be reviewed for grant competitions using the RISP, which provides a broader range of outcomes. Protocols are updated and revised to align with the most recent versions of the standards and procedures.

9. Is there information on the WWC website where a user might find which protocols can be used to review a specific outcome?

All WWC review protocols can be found on the Handbooks and Other Resources—Review Protocols website: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/protocols>. Each protocol lists the outcome domains that are eligible for review by that protocol. Some outcome domains, such as reading and mathematics achievement, are eligible for review under many protocols. Other domains, such as SEL, are reviewed under a few protocols. Currently, no document exists that links outcome domains to protocols.

10. The RISP download page says that there is a version 4.0 from 2019 and a version 3.1 from 2020. Is this a typo? Which is the current version?

This is not a typo. The RISP 4.0 is the current version of the RISP. However, a regulatory update to move to the more recent 4.0 standards version has not yet been released, and studies reviewed for 2020 grant competitions cannot be reviewed under the 4.0 standards. Therefore, submissions for 2020 grant competitions will be reviewed under the RISP 3.1 protocol, which follows the 3.0 standards and procedures but has an updated set of eligible outcome domains.

11. How are topics chosen for protocol development?

Protocols are developed for several reasons. If IES determines that the creation of a new Intervention Report, and if an existing protocol is not available, then the WWC will create a new protocol. Similarly, new Practice Guides teams may create new Practice Guide protocols.

12. Does the protocol approval apply to the Review of Individual Studies Protocol (RISP)?

Yes, the same protocol approval process is applied to each update and version of the RISP.

13. What can be done to have the WWC review a particular intervention?

Program creators or researchers can recommend a study or intervention for WWC review by contacting the WWC Help Desk at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Help>. Recommending a study or intervention for review does not guarantee that it will be reviewed. When making decisions about reviews, the WWC uses recommendations from the public to the WWC Help Desk in company with other important criteria, such as an intervention’s potential to improve key outcomes, its applicability to a broad range of students or to particularly important subpopulations, policy relevance, perceived demand within the education community, and the availability of rigorous research. Detailed information about how the WWC prioritizes reviews is available in Appendix A of the *WWC Procedures Handbook*, Version 4.1.

General Resources

In addition to the webinar and this Questions and Answers document, the following resources provide guidance about the WWC’s standards, procedures, and review protocols. These include resources shared in the chat box during the “WWC Review Protocols: What’s the Point?” webinar.

- *WWC Standards Handbook, Version 4.1:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/WWC-Standards-Handbook-v4-1-508.pdf>
- *WWC Procedures Handbook, Version 4.1:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/WWC-Procedures-Handbook-v4-1-508.pdf>
- *WWC review protocols:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/protocols>
- *The supportive learning environment review protocol:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Document/285>
- *WWC reporting guides:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Document/235>
- *WWC’s Resources webpage:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Resources>
- *WWC’s Review of Individual Studies searchable database:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/ReviewedStudies/#/OnlyStudiesWithPositiveEffects:false,SetNumber:1>
- *Institute of Education Sciences news briefs:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/newsflash/>
- *WWC Help Desk:*
<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Help>