



**Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab**  
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

A strategic research partner for government agencies and a bridge to the research community



# Promoting Evidence-Based Decision-Making in Colorado State Government

## From Vision to Implementation

### REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

Success is anchored to five defining features of an Evidence-Based Decision-Making (EBDM) culture:

- Common understanding
- Agreed-upon EBDM strategies
- Resources, skills, and time
- Ability to withstand change
- Iterative process of using and building evidence

Four strategic goals guide EBDM implementation over the next five years:

- Build a shared understanding of EBDM in state government
- Align and accelerate EBDM in the state budgeting process
- Align and accelerate EBDM in the legislative process
- Develop guidance for embedding evidence use and evidence-building into funding opportunities

A stable coordinating entity is critical to realizing the EBDM strategy:

- The coordinating entity provides boundary-spanning leadership across state government
- The Colorado Lab has received funding to support this work and is uniquely situated to play this role

### AUTHORS:

**Courtney L. Everson**, PhD  
Sr. Researcher/Project Director, Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab

**Kristin Klopfenstein**, PhD  
Director, Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab



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## Suggested Citation

Everson, C.L., & Klopfenstein, K. (2023). *Promoting evidence-based decision-making in Colorado state government: From vision to implementation*. Report No. 23-00A. Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab, University of Denver.

## Background

Nationally, there is a movement to make it the norm for policy decisions to be informed by data. Colorado has an important opportunity to continue leadership in using and building evidence to unlock data-informed solutions and address pressing social challenges. This long-term undertaking is both significant in scope and offers the possibility of far-reaching, meaningful rewards.

To accelerate progress, the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) received philanthropic support to facilitate development of a commonly accepted vision for Colorado’s approach to evidence-based decision-making (EBDM) in state government. As a result, the Colorado Lab developed a five-year [Vision for Advancing Evidence-Based Decision-Making](#) (EBDM) in Colorado Policymaking ([Appendix A](#)). The vision was developed in collaboration with members of the executive and legislative branches, including Joint Budget Committee (JBC) members and staff; the Governor’s Offices of State Planning and Budgeting (OSPB), Operations, and Information Technology; General Assembly members; several State Departments; and the Colorado Evidence-Based Policy Collaborative.

## A Holistic Approach

EBDM is the intersection of the best available research evidence, decision-makers’ expertise, and community needs and implementation context (Figure 1). EBDM recognizes that research evidence is not the only contributing factor to policy and budget decisions. Other equally important factors include resourcing, cultural values, community voice, professional experience, and feasibility of implementation.

EBDM is critical to driving smart state investments, continuous quality improvement, innovation, and outcomes for Coloradans.



Figure 1. Evidence-Based Decision-Making Approach

**Activating this vision requires independent leadership to advance Colorado’s EBDM culture and facilitate aligned structures across state government.**

**The Colorado Lab is meeting this need by developing and coordinating a strategic approach to implementing EBDM in state government.**

## Creating a Strategy Centered on *Culture Meets Structure*

Achieving an EBDM culture in Colorado requires cross-system support and alignment. Decision-makers will be more likely to contribute to an EBDM culture if provided shared knowledge, skills, and tools for using data effectively and efficiently. The strategy for implementing EBDM in Colorado is thus organized around both the *culture* we are striving to achieve and the *structures* necessary to support that culture.

Table 1. EBDM Cultural Features and Supporting Structural Components

Five Defining Features of a Successful EBDM Culture	How it Shows Up	Five Implementation Components of a Successful EBDM Structure
1) Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have a <b>common understanding</b> of EBDM and how to achieve it.		All parties use <b>shared language</b> when describing EBDM and can articulate the EBDM approach with confidence.  <i>Example:</i> EBDM glossary
2) Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff commit to and consistently <b>participate in agreed-upon EBDM strategies</b> , consistent with their role.		<b>Processes</b> are in place to support use of the best available research evidence during decision-making, in concert with professional expertise and attention to community needs and implementation context.  <i>Example:</i> evidence portfolios in the state budgeting process
3) Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have the <b>resources, skills, and time</b> necessary to contribute to EBDM strategies.		<b>Resources</b> to incentivize and sustain EBDM strategies are available and are aligned with roles and responsibilities.  <i>Example:</i> organizational theories of change to align strategic planning with performance management and budgeting
4) The culture of EBDM is <b>systemic and robust</b> enough to withstand changes in decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff.		<b>Structures</b> are in place to ensure consistency and alignment of EBDM implementation across branches of government and the policymaking process.  <i>Example:</i> template bill language for using and building evidence in legislative solutions; State Measurement for Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent Government (SMART) Act hearing prompts for legislative committees related to evidence use
5) Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff engage in an <b>iterative process</b> of using existing research evidence and generating new research evidence.		<b>Guidance</b> is available to strengthen meaningful investments in evidence-building.  <i>Example:</i> Evidence guide for funders issuing Requests for Proposals (RFPs)

Pairing culture with structure reflects our **application of systems-level thinking** to actualize the EBDM vision. In applying systems thinking, we attend to the interconnectedness of roles and responsibilities, promote the iterative process of evidence use and evidence-building, develop resources that cross-cut silos, cultivate shared mental models to visualize the whole, synthesize learnings for action, and prioritize relationships. We see Defining Features 1 through 4 as the necessary preconditions to achieve Defining Feature 5.

**Our conceptual logic is:**

**If**

Colorado builds a common understanding of EBDM across branches of government

**And**

EBDM-supportive processes and resources exist and are used locally *within* state agencies

**And**

EBDM-supporting structures are in place globally *across* state government

**Then**

Effective use and generation of research evidence can become widespread and sustained

**To Achieve**

Smart state investments and improved outcomes for Coloradans

**EBDM Essential Elements**

[Appendix B](#) outlines the essential elements of the EBDM strategy, or the core functions (“active ingredients”) that are necessary for Colorado’s vision of EBDM to produce its desired impact.

## Strategic Goals

The strategy we propose follows a five-year timeline and is based on initial collaborative visioning accomplished in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2023, which we refer to as the “planning year.” Below, we outline four strategic goals with activities prioritized for implementation years one through three (SFY24 through SFY26). Strategic goals and priority activities for years four and five will be revisited near the end of year three to remain responsive to progress made alongside emergent needs and opportunities.

### Strategic Goal 1: Build a Shared Understanding of EBDM in State Government

The first strategic goal lays the groundwork for culture-building and is focused on establishing a shared mental model for EBDM in state government.

**Addresses Defining Feature 1:** Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have a common understanding of EBDM and how to achieve it.

**Activities to Accomplish:**

- EBDM Trainings
- Glossary of EBDM-related terms
- EBDM Ambassadors

**Description:** Creating a culture of EBDM begins with a common understanding of what EBDM is and how to achieve it (Defining Feature 1). Holding EBDM as a shared value is necessary to ground Defining Features 2 and 3 and ensure systemic implementation of Defining Features 4 and 5. While it is tempting to focus on tactics like the development of concrete tools rather than the challenging work of building a common understanding, a shared mental model lays the foundation for a strong and sustainable EBDM culture.

**Why This Matters:** Without a shared understanding of EBDM, decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff will not be motivated to use the tools that are developed to support EBDM implementation. With a shared understanding, it will be easier for individuals across state government to identify and understand their unique role in advancing EBDM. Ideally, job descriptions will start to explicitly include EBDM as a central responsibility rather than a “nice to have” done off the side of the desk when and if time allows.

**Target Audiences:** Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff at all levels of state government; Researchers and other stakeholders supporting state government and the policymaking process.

#### Activity 1.1 EBDM Trainings

Trainings are needed to introduce the fundamentals of EBDM and build the fluency of state government leadership and staff to engage in the culture confidently. Typically provided to job-alike groups, the Colorado Lab facilitates introductory learning sessions to introduce the EBDM vision and provide participants an opportunity to unpack what the vision means for their agency or team in practice. Each session provides the what, why, and how of EBDM, and is tailored to meet the targeted needs of participants. From these foundations, groups are then equipped to participate in a more detailed training focused on effective leadership through data.

A wide variety of audiences can benefit from these presentations including, but not limited to agency leadership, program leads, performance managers, strategic planners, legislative teams, and budget directors. It may also be advisable to repeat presentations to audiences that have already received it due to changes in roles and turnover. Even among the same group of people in the same roles, perspectives change, and new questions arise as people gain experience applying EBDM in their specific contexts. As participants become more fluent in EBDM, these presentations will evolve so that they continue to meet participants where they are and move them forward in their understanding and application of EBDM.

### **Activity 1.2 Glossary of EBDM-Related Terms**

An EBDM Glossary of Terms is needed to support decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff in building a shared vocabulary. By promoting shared use of key concepts, the glossary has the potential to decrease misunderstandings, thereby helping people work together more efficiently and effectively. The Colorado Lab is facilitating development of this glossary, including processes to establish the glossary as a living document. Each definition is developed based on a literature review together with input from subject matter experts and practitioners. Collaborators in glossary development include staff from the Governor’s Office, JBC Committee, agency leadership, and members of the Colorado Evidence-Based Policy Collaborative and research community. The [glossary](#) is available online and updated with new terms and definitions quarterly. The goal is to provide a one-stop-shop for adoption and alignment of terms across current statutorily-defined, rule-defined, and commonly-used definitions in Colorado and across the nation. Some terms included in the earliest version of the glossary are “Best Available Research Evidence,” “Impact Evaluation,” and “Theory of Change.”

### **Activity 1.3 EBDM Ambassadors**

In addition to introductory trainings, informal conversations are needed to support an ubiquitous EBDM culture. Dialogue and relationships are essential for affecting the mental models people hold—often without even realizing it—about what EBDM means and how they see themselves participating (or not) in its application. The Colorado Lab is cultivating EBDM ambassadors who can help champion and actualize the vision through their spheres of influence, bolstering more formal communication efforts.

Researchers are an important target audience for conversations about EBDM and are well-positioned to serve as EBDM ambassadors. However, while many researchers believe that they are already responsive to decision-makers’ needs for timely and relevant evidence, in reality they focus almost exclusively on the best available research evidence portion of EBDM and are uncomfortable providing insights based on implementation context and professional expertise. Supporting the research community in using the EBDM approach during evidence-building will help to mitigate these challenges and maximize evidence use during decision-making.

When decision-makers engage with researchers in applying EBDM, researchers can learn what kinds of information decision-makers value and decision-makers can learn what kinds of research evidence are appropriate and possible for a given policy or practice. With EBDM as a common approach, decision-makers and researchers have the potential to build deeper, sustained relationships that meet both sets of needs: decision-makers’ need for the best available evidence that is responsive to immediate decision-making needs, and researchers’ need for longer-term evidence-building opportunities.

## Strategic Goal 2: Align and Accelerate EBDM in the State Budgeting Process

The second strategic goal equips state agencies with tools to embed EBDM in their budgeting approach and creates EBDM-aligned structures at major points in the budget cycle, across both executive and legislative branches.

**Addresses Defining Features 2 and 3:** Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff commit to and consistently participate in agreed-upon EBDM strategies, consistent with their role. Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have the resources, skills, and time necessary to contribute to EBDM strategies.

### Activities to Accomplish:

- Evidence Portfolios for State Agencies
- Explore Opportunities to Align Evidence Portfolios with Budget Instructions
- Build on the Evidence Review Process of JBC Staff

**Description:** OSPB collaborates with executive branch agencies to develop the Governor’s annual budget proposal, which it submits to the legislature’s JBC every year on November 1. It is critical to have structures that align EBDM at major points in the budget cycle, from state agencies choosing which programs and practices to put forward for inclusion in the Governor’s Budget, to OSPB’s decision-making process about which of these to prioritize in the Governor’s final budget, to which evidence legislative staff select for consideration by legislators serving on the JBC. Processes and tools must be in place that equip state agencies, Governor’s Office, and JBC staff with the confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary to activate these EBDM-aligned structures efficiently and effectively.

**Why This Matters:** Without aligned structures and supporting tools, state government risks inconsistencies and inefficiencies in applying evidence to drive outcomes, using evidence for compliance versus learning and action, and missing opportunities to build evidence on what works and for whom, while promoting innovation.

**Target Audiences:** Leadership and staff within state agencies and the Governor’s Office; JBC members and staff.

### Activity 2.1 Evidence Portfolio Process for State Agencies

State agencies have expressed a need for greater support in using data to inform budget and policy priorities and develop their budget submissions. In response, the Colorado Lab developed an evidence portfolio process that can be replicated and used by agencies to meet this need. The evidence portfolio process helps to align EBDM during budgeting, performance management, and strategic planning.

The evidence portfolio process was developed using existing literature and tools from the fields of implementation science and EBDM in policymaking and was informed by thought partnership from state agencies and the Governor’s Office. The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) partnered with the Colorado Lab to pilot a version of the evidence portfolios to meet CDEC goals around stimulus funding and sustainability decisions. Learnings from this pilot helped to strengthen the evidence portfolio process and assess its value for advancing EBDM during the budgeting process. Next steps are

to identify other state agencies interested in adopting evidence portfolios and working with the Colorado Lab to adapt the process for their unique structure, role, and function.

Replicating the evidence portfolio process follows a pipeline approach (Figure 2). A pipeline approach helps to ensure state agencies receive the technical assistance necessary to a) launch successfully, b) build fluency and embed into agency operations, and c) sustain the evidence portfolio processes over time. Upon first use case, the Colorado Lab supports adaptation of the tool to each agency's unique circumstances and provides technical assistance to support the integrity and efficiency of its use. Agencies are prioritized for the pipeline based on select readiness factors, top of which is whether leadership is poised and willing to embrace the EBDM vision. Strategically rolling out this work with agency volunteers—those with leadership who see the value of a statewide culture of EBDM—will increase broader buy-in over the long term compared to if agencies are all simultaneously required to adopt the process.

The evidence portfolio process uses a set of criteria tied to the three major domains of EBDM: best available research evidence, community needs and implementation context, and decision-maker expertise. The approach intentionally blends guiding questions for reflection with a numeric scoring approach. An evidence portfolio is completed for each budget item that involves a program/practice.<sup>i</sup> Multiple roles participate in the evidence portfolio process to break down silos and promote greater alignment of EBDM within an agency; such roles may include program managers, agency leadership, performance managers, legislative teams, budget teams, and strategy staff. More about the value of evidence portfolios and the process a state agency undertakes to adopt can be found [here](#).

### **Activity 2.2 Explore Opportunities to Align Evidence Portfolios with Budget Instructions**

Colorado has strong evidence-based processes in OSPB's budget instructions to agencies. OSPB has expressed interest in further supporting agencies in using and building evidence as part of the budgeting process. Evidence portfolios are a potential tool to meet this need. Evidence portfolios can act as source of information for efficiently and effectively preparing budget submissions. Exploring opportunities to align the evidence portfolio process with budget instructions is an important next step.

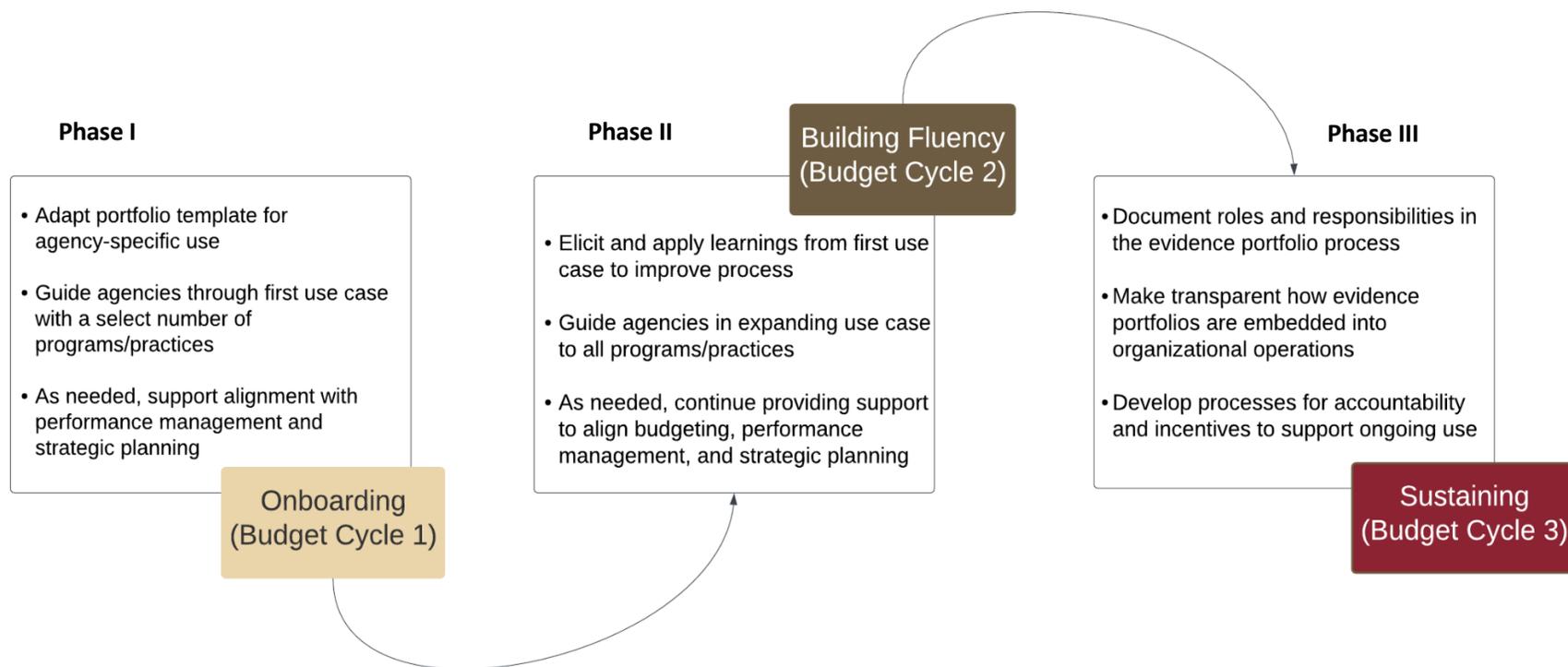
### **Activity 2.3 Build on the Evidence Review Process of Joint Budget Committee Staff**

In 2021, Colorado passed Senate Bill (SB) 284 (Evidence-Based Evaluations for Budget). SB21-284 defines the levels of research evidence to be used in the budget process. The bill requires OSPB and JBC staff to use statutorily defined terms and JBC staff to independently analyze the evidence information in the budget request. SB21-284 is a central use case for executing EBDM in state government. With two plus years of implementation, OSPB and JBC staff have sufficient experience with the requirements of this bill to inform possible changes to the statute. Goals of possible revisions to SB21-284 are to avoid duplication of effort by OSPB and JBC staff and build transparency into budget-related processes that leverage evidence to facilitate trust between the executive and legislative branches.

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<sup>i</sup> From the EBDM Glossary: Program/Practice means a program, intervention, or approach with explicitly defined and replicable elements that is hypothesized to improve specified outcomes for a defined target population.

Figure 2. Pipeline for Replicating Use of the Evidence Portfolio Process Across State Agencies



Note: an agency may move through a given phase in the pipeline within one budget cycle, or may need multiple budget cycles to fully accomplish a phase, depending on factors such as capacity, complexity of organizational structure, extent of budget, etc.

## Strategic Goal 3: Align and Accelerate EBDM in the Legislative Process

The third strategic goal equips members of the General Assembly with tools to activate EBDM during the legislative process and includes a focus on both effective evidence use and evidence-building.

**Addresses Defining Features 2 and 3:** Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff commit to and consistently participate in agreed-upon EBDM strategies, consistent with their role. Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have the resources, skills, and time necessary to contribute to EBDM strategies.

### Activities to Accomplish:

- Bill Template Language
- Fluency and Support for Legislators
- Cue Card for SMART Act Hearings

**Description:** Legislators are generally bought into the idea that use of evidence supports good government. However, they come from a wide array of backgrounds and tend to have little experience in interpreting evidence or knowing what steps are reasonable or appropriate to build up the best available research evidence. It is vital that legislators have access to credible resources and that systemic structures are in place to support them in building and using evidence efficiently and effectively.

**Why This Matters:** As key decision-makers, legislators constitute an essential part of the EBDM culture. Thus, it is critical to build legislator competence and confidence about when and how to draw on the best available existing evidence, as well as when to prioritize building new evidence. Importantly, EBDM applies regardless of whether legislators are drafting their own bills, deciding whether to support the bills of others, or responding to agency budget requests.

**Target Audiences:** Legislators; Legislative staff (e.g., JBC staff)

### Activity 3.1 Bill Template Language

New bills are a key opportunity to promote Colorado's approach to EBDM in state government. Bills should draw from existing research evidence to inform the proposed legislation and as needed, identify opportunities for future research, evaluation, and data use. In the Colorado Lab's discussions about a five-year vision for EBDM, legislators indicated the need for support in both instances. In response, the Colorado Lab is drafting bill template language that can be used in a variety of situations to clarify what evidence is being used and as needed, call for additional evidence-building.

EBDM can be a part of multiple types of bills; for example, those that adopt a new program or strategy, authorize or reauthorize a task force, or require implementation of a new policy. Existing evidence can demonstrate the rationale or need for a bill, the research evidence behind the proposed practice or policy, and how the research evidence fits with community needs and implementation context. When there are gaps in what is known and additional evidence is needed for decision-making, legislators can call for and provide funding to evaluate the implementation and/or effectiveness of state investments, collect or share data, or conduct research or evaluation. To complement the bill templates, consultation to legislators (and, as relevant, state agencies involved in the legislation) on feasibility of timelines, budgets, and scope for statutorily required evidence-building activities will be provided.

### Activity 3.2 Fluency and Support for Legislators

A major challenge for legislators interested in activating EBDM during policymaking is the ability to obtain existing evidence for programs/practices being proposed in legislation. This challenge is one of both resources and skills. For example, Colorado state government currently does not provide employees, including lawmakers, with access to academic libraries. Subject-specific research clearinghouses, such as the *What Works Clearinghouse* for education or *Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development*, are freely available but underutilized by policymakers—sometimes due to lack of awareness and sometimes due to legislators not knowing how to efficiently and effectively use them. Without access to credible sources and skills to work through technical research jargon, legislators are limited to what is available on publicly accessible websites—the reliability of which varies greatly.

As such, legislators and their staff need support knowing where to look and who to talk to about the best available research evidence behind the policy issues they encounter during the legislative process. This activity begins with identifying and developing systemic structures—along with potential funding sources to sustain them—that legislators can use in accessing relevant research and translating the evidence to action. Such structures may include partnerships with the National Council on State Legislatures (aligned with their evidence-based policymaking priority) and liaisons from research clearinghouses who can assist legislators in real time during session. It is also important to build the fluency of the research community to better serve the needs of state government at critical decision-making points (see Activity 1.3) and provide EBDM trainings (see Activity 1.1). The Colorado Lab is supporting this work by activating and coordinating partners that are positioned to advance these systemic structures.

### Activity 3.3 Cue Card for SMART Act Hearings

Each January, SMART Act hearings provide a key opportunity to demonstrate the value Colorado places on EBDM in state government. The tenets of EBDM become readily apparent when legislators ask agency leadership appropriate, targeted questions about their work and how evidence informs the decisions made when prioritizing programs and practices in the Governor’s budget.

In the Colorado Lab’s discussions about the five-year vision for EBDM, legislators made clear that they need support knowing what kinds of questions to ask during SMART Act hearings. In response, the Colorado Lab developed a [cue card](#) with a menu of possible questions legislative committee members can ask agencies during SMART Act hearings. The questions are designed to help legislators judge the quality of the research evidence being presented; understand how agencies are using research evidence alongside other factors like resourcing, cultural values, community voice, and feasibility of implementation; and identify opportunities to build new evidence. By thinking about evidence as a continuum, legislators can promote use of the best available research evidence to inform decisions on established programs/practices while also working to build new evidence on innovative and promising practices that can best serve all Coloradans.

With the cue card developed, the next step is to provide legislators the technical assistance necessary to meaningfully draw on this menu of questions during SMART Act hearings and elsewhere. Prompts embedded in the cue card will also help agency leadership and staff think more deeply about how EBDM is informing their decision-making (or not). Adopting the evidence portfolio process (Task 2.1) can directly support agency preparation and response. If there are specific questions that agencies tend to struggle to answer, those questions can help inform deeper opportunities for technical assistance.

## Strategic Goal 4: Develop Guidance for Embedding Meaningful Evidence Use and Evidence-Building into Funding Opportunities

The fourth strategic goal equips funders with guidance on how to incorporate data and evidence-building into RFPs, to create more meaningful and aligned requirements that can be feasibly achieved by grantees.

**Addresses Defining Features 2 and 3:** Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff commit to and consistently participate in agreed-upon EBDM strategies, consistent with their role. Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have the resources, skills, and time necessary to contribute to EBDM strategies.

### Activities to Accomplish:

- Funder’s Guides for Using and Generating Evidence
- Template Bill Language for Creating State-Funded Grant Programs
- Funder’s Toolkit for Building Data and Learning Capacity Among Grantees

**Description:** The Colorado Lab received funding from private philanthropy to explore the idea of revamping how funders—both private and public—approach the use of data and evaluation among their grantees. Drawing on the Lab’s experience supporting 10 of the Governor’s Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) Education Fund grant recipients in moving through the [Steps to Building Evidence](#), the hope is to leverage funding expectations to incentivize culture change around using and gathering data for learning over compliance.

**Why This Matters:** Grantees often view evaluation as a compliance requirement at best and, at worst, as a weapon used to punish and make their shortcomings visible. This type of mindset results in missed opportunities to use data for learning and continuous improvement that can drive sustainable change. By modifying what is required of those who receive grant funding, and making it the norm for funders and grantees to work together under the [principles of trust-based philanthropy](#), evidence use and evidence-building can become more meaningful, feasible, and sustainable.

**Target audiences:** State agencies; Philanthropic funders; Legislators

### Activity 4.1 Funder’s Guides for Using and Generating Evidence

The Colorado Lab is developing a set of recommendations for funders (both private and public) that can incentivize culture change around using and gathering data for learning over compliance. Key among the recommendations is the co-development of an evaluation approach by funders and grantees with goals and measures anchored to the needs of the community served. Rather than being held accountable to fundamentally arbitrary evaluation metrics, grantees should be held accountable to an authentic learning process that funders actively support.

Recommendations will be packaged into two “funder’s guides,” one for philanthropy and one for state government. Drawing on the principles of trust-based philanthropy, the guides will provide concrete recommendations on how to incorporate evidence use and evidence-building into RFPs. Education is the use case the guides are anchored to, but the guidance will be applicable across a range of topic areas. The funder’s guides will be developed collaboratively with philanthropic organizations (e.g., Philanthropy

Colorado) and state agencies (e.g., Colorado Department of Education). Specifically, an outline of the funder's guide will be shared by the Colorado Lab to gather early input on funders' appetite for reconsidering many of the current common data use and evaluation requirements of grant-funded projects, with the goal of moving them from primarily compliance-oriented to primarily learning and sustainability focused. Following this early input, the guides will be fleshed out by the Colorado Lab with ongoing co-development opportunities. Beta testing will occur with a voluntary sample to uncover what worked, the value-add of the modified requirements, and how the expectations helped overcome common pain points in data and evaluation, from the perspective of funders and grantees alike.

#### **Activity 4.2 Template Bill Language for Creating State-Funded Grant Programs**

To complement the funder's guide, template bill language is needed to support development of bills that create state-funded grant programs. The Colorado Lab is developing template bill language that better integrates principles of EBDM into the policymaking process and is consistent with trust-based philanthropy. The focus is on using data for systems-level learning, crafting more useful/actionable metrics, and helping to build practice-based evidence. Template bill language will be developed in collaboration with executive branch leaders (e.g., state agencies, Governor's Office).

#### **Activity 4.3 Funder's Toolkit for Building Data and Learning Capacity Among Grantees**

Producing the guide and template bill language alone will not change the culture of evaluation in Colorado. Modified expectations must be consistent across state and private funders, and funders must feel confident and equipped to support grantees in meeting the expectations. To address this need, the Colorado Lab is developing a toolkit that assists funders in supporting their grantees in successfully using data for learning. The toolkit will include trainings for philanthropic organizations, state agencies, and the Governor's Office Operations Team and OSPB, as well as targeted stakeholder meetings to introduce the tools and how they accelerate Colorado's vision of EBDM.

## Establishing a Coordinating Entity for the EBDM Strategy

Independent leadership is needed to advance Colorado’s EBDM culture and facilitate aligned structures for evidence use and evidence-building across state government over the next five years. A coordinating entity can provide boundary-spanning leadership at the intersection of science and policy to catalyze EBDM in Colorado. Boundary spanning includes convening cross-system partners to break down silos, facilitating sustained exchanges across system and community partners, and acting as an honest broker to help partners effectively translate evidence into action. By providing neutral facilitation and holding the shared vision, Colorado will have the support necessary to accelerate progress and achieve the shared tenets of an EBDM culture in policymaking: a) using data to drive better outcomes, b) using evidence to inform investments and resource decisions, and c) using a collective approach to reduce duplication and sustain change.

There are eight **essential functions** of the EBDM coordinating entity:

1. Holds the shared vision to advance a cohesive culture of EBDM in Colorado.
2. Provides leadership to coordinate and prioritize EBDM activities and align EBDM investments.
3. Facilitates dialogue to help people see themselves in the EBDM culture and empower them to leverage data to better serve Coloradans.
4. Collaborates with governmental partners to break down silos and align roles to responsibilities in the EBDM structure.
5. Co-develops, with state leadership and other stakeholders, reusable tools and processes that support EBDM implementation.
6. Collaborates with external research partners to build rigorous research evidence while promoting innovation aligned with decision-making goals.
7. Promotes opportunities for EBDM sustainability and cohesion across branches of government and over time.
8. Measures progress in developing and executing the EBDM vision over time to strengthen data-informed learning, action, and accountability.

### Relationship between the Coordinating Entity and EBDM Defining Features

[Appendix C](#) provides a visual of how the essential functions of the coordinating entity unfold through key activities (as identified in the strategic goals) and how they align with the five defining features of a successful EBDM culture.

## Why the Colorado Lab as the Coordinating Entity?

The Colorado Lab was created under the leadership of the Governor’s Office to unlock data-informed solutions to our most pressing social problems. As an independent, non-partisan research and policy lab, we work together across state government and community partners to leverage data for sustained change. From this position, we offer unique qualities (Table 2) that position us to meet this identified need for a coordinating entity to develop and implement a strategy for EBDM in Colorado. The Colorado Lab received the initial philanthropic support to facilitate development of a commonly accepted vision for Colorado’s approach to EBDM in state government, and has continued to secure the funding, partnerships, and resources necessary to move the vision into execution.

Table 2. Colorado Lab Qualities Critical for Effective EBDM Coordination

The What	Why It Matters	How it Shows up in the EBDM Strategy
The Lab is independent and non-partisan	We can withstand changes in administration, agency leadership, and staff. This enables us to serve the system of state government and stay the course on long-term risk-for-reward projects.	The Lab is able to hold the shared EBDM vision intact year over year, while allowing each stakeholder to maintain their unique needs within that vision.
The Lab is non-issue specific	We are skilled at making connections across players in different systems to find alignment in opportunity. In the last five years, the Lab has partnered with over 50 different agency partners to execute 44 projects, ranging from early childhood to criminal justice to older adults to behavioral health.	Within the EBDM structure, the Lab is able to coordinate evidence-building and evidence use across roles and responsibilities, within branches of government, and with non-governmental partners.
The Lab defines success through actionable data that drive sustained solutions	We focus on matching evidence-building approaches to the decision-making goals of governmental partners and the communities they serve. This means our deliverables are more than “words on paper”—they must have utility and longevity.	The EBDM vision is about culture change. The Lab is able to develop tools, structures, and best practices that meet partners where they are and build capacity for sustained change.

## Staffing the Coordinating Entity

The Colorado Lab takes an interdisciplinary, team-based science approach that leverages the complementary subject matter, methodological, and practice-based expertise of staff. EBDM is a growing discipline that demands unique skills, knowledge, and experience to move from theory to execution in state government. Coordination of the EBDM strategy is under the leadership of Drs. Courtney Everson (Sr. Researcher/Project Director) and Kristin Klopfenstein (Director). Dedicated time from additional Colorado Lab staff round out the internal EBDM team. Establishing partnerships and collaborations in implementing the strategy are key to building capacity for EBDM across Colorado and over time.

## Conclusion

The strategy outlined herein—and the need for independent leadership and coordination—helps Colorado to unpack and accelerate:

- How trusted partnerships among the Governor’s Office, agency leadership, legislators, legislative staff, and independent researchers can facilitate collaborative, strategic decision-making guided by research.
- Lessons learned and opportunities to use rigorous evidence to inform the sustainability, scaling, and expansion of services to maximize the public benefit.
- Guidance on tailoring evidence-building activities to support innovation as well as proven practices.

With this strategy, Colorado can build on the good work that has come before and accelerate progress forward in an aligned way to maximize impact for Coloradoans.



## Appendix A: EBDM Executive Summary

# Evidence-Based Decision-Making in Colorado: A 5-Year Vision

## Why a 5-year Vision is Needed

Evidence-Based Decision-Making is critical to driving smart state investments, continuous quality improvement, innovation, and outcomes. By making explicit Colorado's shared understanding of evidence-based decision-making and our approach to it, we can align roles and responsibilities, accelerate progress, and build on the good work that has come before.

## What is Evidence-Based Decision-Making?

Evidence-Based Decision-Making (EBDM) is the intersection of the best available research evidence, decision-makers' expertise, and community needs and context. EBDM recognizes that research evidence is not the only contributing factor to policy and budget decisions. Other equally important contextual factors include resourcing, cultural values, community voice, and feasibility of implementation.

Evidence-Based Decision-Making is not the same thing as evidence-based practice (EBP). EBDM is a more comprehensive, flexible approach to building and using research evidence across a wide variety of decision-making use cases, from operational to strategic. In contrast, EBP designations are given as a result of a rigorous review of existing literature on a replicable program or intervention. EBPs are a use case within EBDM. EBDM is about the larger culture and structure — it is the waters we swim in to drive sustained change.



## What Does a Successful EBDM Culture Look Like?

It is important to articulate how we will know when we have achieved a successful EBDM culture. By defining key features of a successful EBDM culture, we can build capacity for effective implementation, measure progress over time, invest resources in areas that are proving difficult, and provide the support necessary for every partner to meaningfully contribute.

### Five Defining Features of an EBDM Culture

- 1 Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have a **common understanding** of what EBDM is and how to achieve it.
- 2 Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff commit to and **consistently participate in** agreed-upon EBDM strategies, including evidence-building, consistent with their role.
- 3 Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have the **resources, skills, and time** necessary to acquire the best available evidence, make meaning of it, and apply it to the decision-making context.
- 4 Use of research evidence in decision-making is **systemic and robust** enough to withstand changes in decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff.
- 5 Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff **engage in an iterative process of using existing research evidence and generating new research evidence**, including ongoing measurement of outcomes and revisiting decisions periodically in light of new evidence.

## Why Using the *Best Available Evidence* is Critical to Success

When making decisions, it is critical that the best available evidence be applied. Using the *best available evidence* can help address challenges to successful evidence-based decision-making. For example, cherry picking data to back up an already made decision can introduce bias and limit the potential for data to drive outcomes. Using a best available evidence approach also helps inform priorities for evidence-building. For example, synthesizing the best available evidence can help identify where a practice or policy is at in the Steps to Building Evidence (<https://coloradolab.org/about-us/our-approach-to-building-evidence/>). Once known, more intentional decisions around future evidence use and evaluation can be made.

### Defining “Best Available Evidence”

“Best available evidence” refers to the weight of the research evidence from the most rigorous studies available about a practice or policy. “Research evidence” refers to empirical findings generated from the systematic and rigorous application of methods and analyses to help answer a question, hypothesis, or topical investigation. The best available evidence includes both number-based (quantitative) and narrative-based (qualitative) data.

## How a Collaborative Approach will help Colorado Achieve an EBDM Culture

Government and non-governmental partners alike have a unique role to play in creating — and sustaining — a successful EBDM culture. By aligning roles and responsibilities, we can better answer the question “what does my piece of the puzzle look like?” and together, drive collective action that benefits the lives of Coloradans.



## Learn More! Become Involved!

To learn more about this vision or find out how you and your agency can be part of co-developing an EBDM culture, contact [Courtney@coloradolab.org](mailto:Courtney@coloradolab.org)



Scan to read full memo



Scan to learn more

# Appendix B: EBDM Essential Elements

## Overview

Essential elements are the core functions (“active ingredients”) that are necessary for Colorado’s vision of Evidence-Based Decision-Making (EBDM) to produce its desired impact. The essential elements are described in three buckets: principles, context and structure, and EBDM coordination activities.

## Colorado’s Conceptual Model for EBDM

<p><b>Principles</b>  <i>What assumptions is Colorado’s EBDM Vision grounded in?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence can help inform smart state investments and resource decisions and, in turn, drive better outcomes.</li> <li>• Decision-makers will be more likely to contribute to an EBDM culture if provided shared knowledge, skills, and tools for using data effectively and efficiently.</li> <li>• Achieving an EBDM culture requires cross-system support and alignment.</li> <li>• Establishing an EBDM structure is a long game that builds over time.</li> <li>• Sustaining an EBDM culture and structure requires stable coordination and leadership.</li> <li>• Needs and contributions to EBDM implementation look different depending on individual and organizational roles.</li> <li>• Non-partisan, neutral facilitation is necessary to activate EBDM across state government.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Context</b>  <i>What does a successful EBDM culture look like?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have a common understanding of EBDM and how to achieve it.</li> <li>• Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff commit to and consistently participate in agreed-upon EBDM strategies, consistent with their role.</li> <li>• Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff have the resources, skills, and time necessary to contribute to EBDM.</li> <li>• The culture of EBDM is systemic and robust enough to withstand changes over time.</li> <li>• Decision-makers, agency leadership, and staff engage in an iterative process of using existing research evidence and generating new research evidence.</li> </ul> <p><i>What does implementation of an EBDM structure look like?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All parties use shared language when describing EBDM and can articulate the EBDM approach with confidence.</li> <li>• Processes are in place to support use of the best available research evidence during decision-making, in concert with professional expertise and attention to community needs and implementation context.</li> <li>• Resources to incentivize and sustain EBDM strategies are available and are aligned with roles and responsibilities.</li> <li>• Structures are in place to ensure consistency and alignment of EBDM implementation across branches of government and the policymaking process.</li> <li>• Guidance is available to strengthen meaningful investments in evidence-building.</li> </ul>
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**Coordinating Activities**

*What does the Colorado Lab do to provide coordination and leadership of Colorado's EBDM strategy?*

Eight Essential Functions:

1. Holds the shared vision to advance a cohesive culture of EBDM in Colorado.
2. Provides leadership to coordinate and prioritize EBDM activities and align EBDM investments.
3. Facilitates dialogue to help people see themselves in the EBDM culture and empower them to leverage data to better serve Coloradans.
4. Collaborates with governmental partners to break down silos and align roles to responsibilities in the EBDM structure.
5. Co-develops, with state leadership and other stakeholders, reusable tools and processes that support EBDM implementation.
6. Collaborates with external research partners to build rigorous research evidence while promoting innovation aligned with decision-making goals.
7. Promotes opportunities for EBDM sustainability and cohesion across branches of government and over time.
8. Measures progress in developing and executing the EBDM vision over time to strengthen data-informed learning, action, and accountability.

## Appendix C: Relationship between Coordinating Entity Functions and EBDM Defining Features

