This has been an eventful year. Maybe the movement toward evidence-based programs hasn’t been a national headline grabber, given all of the other headlines; but it has the potential to change social and educational interventions fairly profoundly.

And the move toward evidence-based programs has been deeply felt at the ground level. Many providers have been confused about what the focus on evidence means for them. They generally believe that their program works, and they generally seem to want to prove that it works; but some are uncertain about how to move forward and others are anxious about how and what to do next.

To illustrate the levels of evidence (and implicitly to illustrate the process of becoming evidence-based), Child Trends developed the simple triangle shown on the screen:
This triangle shows four broad levels of evaluation rigor. Experimental studies comprise the top two categories of the triangle. Well-done experimental studies are the most rigorous because eligible people, groups, or schools are randomly assigned to the study conditions, and the evaluation is not contaminated by pre-existing differences between the intervention and control groups.

Experimental studies allow us to make causal inferences about program impacts and, in turn, allow us to identify effective programs.

The third (and larger) category includes quasi-experimental evaluations, such as a pre/post study with a comparison group but no random assignment.

At the bottom of the triangle, by far the largest category, is what we would call evidence-informed studies, which are guided by child development theory and research, qualitative case studies, and practitioner wisdom, but which generally haven’t yet done a formal evaluation.

When people talk about evidence-based programs, they are typically referring to programs with a high level of evidence, particularly experimental evidence; but everyone has to start somewhere.

Last year, Philip Uninsky shared his experience implementing evidence-based programs at the county level. This year, the focus is on building an evidence-based program to improve schools. In fact, a thousand schools, and counting.

The story of Dr. Bob Slavin and the work he has done in partnership with his wife, Dr. Nancy Madden, is a really good example of how it’s done in the field of education.

And that’s why I asked him to do the Lecture this year: to share the history of developing, improving, evaluating, and replicating Success for All.

How they moved up the triangle. How they moved up the triangle to become a highly acclaimed, effective evidence-based program.

Dr. Slavin.