

Written Testimony
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“Education Research: Identifying Effective Programs to Support Students and Teachers”

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Chairman Hunter, Ranking Member Kildee, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony as you consider how education research can help to promote the identification and use of effective programs to support students and teachers.

I am Steve Fleischman, the deputy executive officer of Education Northwest. We are a nonprofit organization created in Oregon more than 45 years ago to apply research to improve education in the Northwest, and across the country. Some of the projects that we conduct on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, and which provide part of the experience base for my testimony include the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northwest, Northwest Regional Comprehensive Center, and the Region X Equity Assistance Center.

I have been involved in the promotion of evidence-based education for more than 15 years. In the last decade, with different organizations, I have participated in a variety of U.S. Department of Education projects to provide educators better evidence, including serving as the first communications director of the What Works Clearinghouse, director of a project to provide education decisionmakers with consumer reporting on the quality and effectiveness of school reform models, and senior leader of the Doing What Works project. Currently, I serve as director of REL Northwest. These and other projects in which I have been engaged have given me insight into the need for better evidence in education that helps identify and implement effective programs and practices. This need led to the passage of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) in 2002, and the creation of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

I believe, however, that my most important qualification for offering testimony is that I am a former middle and high school teacher. When I entered teaching as a second profession in the mid-1980s I did what most other new teachers do: scramble desperately for any support to help do my job. One of the places I turned to was research literature on best practices. There was almost no evidence I could find to help me manage my class better, teach my history lessons more effectively, improve the writing skills of my students, or do any of the other things I needed to do to be a good teacher. This experience has been the single most important one in helping to guide my actions for the past 15 years, as I've been increasingly involved in the

education research enterprise. Although the situation is much better today than a quarter of a century ago, we have a long way to go before education research fulfills its promise as an engine of educational improvement.

Before going further in my testimony on the topic, I would like to clarify how I will use the term “education research.” My experience is that when making decisions, educators in the field are focused on “evidence use” which can include formal research, program evaluations, reviews of bodies of research, and various data. That is, educators turn to many sources of “evidence” when searching for guidance on policy and practice, formal research being only one of them. In this testimony, I will use this more expansive conception of “education research” that encompasses the sources just mentioned.

Start with the consumer

Before becoming a teacher, I was a business person, and I often think in market terms. To me, the challenge in building an effective education research enterprise is to create a market that has mechanisms to supply high quality research, create demand for it, and ease its use. Peter Drucker, the revered management thinker, often observed that there is no business without a customer. Simply put, I believe that we will not have an education system in which reliable evidence is widely used to drive decision making unless and until we provide educators the research that they want and need.

The past decade has seen advances in increasing the supply of rigorous education research as well as some closing of the “research-to-use” gap. In my testimony I will suggest ways that federal investments and action can help to further close this gap.

Recent studies on research use by educators point to this ongoing challenge. For example, in a 2009 study that my organization and others conducted for the William T. Grant Foundation, a wide ranging group of education practitioners and policymakers observed that:

- There is a gulf between research design and real-world practice, which often results in findings that have limited applicability.
- They are challenged to apply research because of their own lack of knowledge and skills in acquiring and interpreting research.
- Numerous obstacles exist to research use, including “time constraints, the volume of research evidence available, the format in which it is presented, and the difficulty in applying research to their own situations.”
- They are often skeptical about research and concerned that it is conducted and reported for ulterior motives or can be shaped to “say anything.”
- Research is often not timely.

Most troubling is the fact that none of the study participants could identify any “breakthrough” research or “cite any findings that they feel had a dramatic effect on practice or policy.”

Principles for increased research use

Our study cited above and others point to current gaps, but also to ways to improve the connection between research and practice. Three findings from our study suggest important principles to narrow the “research-to-use” gap:

1. **Research should be contextualized.** The observation that “all politics is local,” has its education research equivalent, in which “all research is local.” Participants in our study expressed a strong preference for research evidence that is linked to local contexts. Thus, for research to be seen as useful and to be used, it must be contextualized. One way to accomplish this is to involve education research consumers in studies from the very beginning: in setting the questions, designing the studies, and writing reports that answer questions of local interest.
2. **Research should be easy to read, absorb, and apply.** Participants expressed preferences in how studies should be presented, including that reports should be brief and written in non-technical language. This principle suggests that much more attention needs to be paid to communicating research effectively. Otherwise, potentially important research findings might not be read at all.
3. **Research often requires “translation” and “transmission” by intermediaries.** Intermediaries were identified by the participants as “unbiased organizations and individuals that can help locate, sort, and prioritize the available research.” Among examples identified by participants were “research institutions, professional associations, partners, coalitions, peers, networks, and constituents.” A key implication is that it is important to find ways to strengthen the role of intermediaries by making sure they have the knowledge, skills, and resources to play this important role.

The IES track record on promoting research use

Since the passage of ESRA nearly a decade ago, IES has taken significant strides in promoting an increase in the amount of rigorous evidence available to education decision makers. It has improved the quality of quantitative research and data through various mechanisms including grant competitions, sponsored research, and the operation of the National Center for Education Statistics, Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) system, and the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). While some of these mechanisms have focused largely on increasing research and data rigor others, particularly the RELs and the WWC, have begun to move forward the relevance and usefulness agenda necessary to meet consumer needs and desires for evidence.

Some of the promising practices and developments initiated by IES, working with other program offices of the Department of Education, include:

- **The production of *Practice Guides*.** These guides, currently numbering 14 and largely produced by the WWC, offer practical recommendations based on the best available evidence. Developed by panels of nationally recognized researchers and practitioners, they offer actionable recommendations, strategies for overcoming potential practice

roadblocks, and an indication of the strength of evidence supporting each recommendation. Topics range from turning around low-performing schools and reducing high school dropouts, to using data to support instructional decision making and structuring out-of-school time to improve academic achievement.

- **The holding of REL *Bridge Events*.** These are in-person or webinar events held for education stakeholders across the nation by the 10 RELs to share and discuss the recommendations of the Practice Guides and other rigorous and relevant evidence. The events have proven to be highly popular and represent a key mechanism to link educators to the “best available” research-based guidance on critical topics of regional or local interest.
- **Ask A REL information services.** Every REL offers this free service that allows education stakeholders to call or e-mail with their questions of practice. These questions are posed by state officials, school board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and others seeking to find out “what the research says” on particular topics. The requests, which are turned around quickly, often result in research literature reviews that are then shared with other stakeholders.
- **Coordination across the U.S. Department of Education research, development, and technical assistance infrastructure.** Centers and projects sponsored by various Department program offices have come together more regularly than in the past to hold joint activities that provide stakeholders needed information. One example was a series of regional events on School Improvement Grants (SIG) jointly sponsored by the RELs and Comprehensive Centers this past year. In another recent example, REL Northwest worked together recently with two regional comprehensive centers and the Center on Innovation and Improvement to bring together state officials and leaders from rural SIG schools in five states to learn about effective practices to turn around their schools.
- **An increased focus of the REL system on meeting the improvement needs of education stakeholders.** In a highly encouraging development, the current IES competition for new REL contractors that will launch a new five-year cycle of REL activity beginning in January 2012 is focused on the creation of research and data-use partnerships with educators and policymakers in the field. These so-called “research alliances” will be long-lasting, help to set the research agendas for the RELs so that they concentrate on real world “problems of practice,” and provide capacity building so that alliance partners are increasingly able to conduct their own research and data-analysis projects. Without sacrificing rigor, these alliances will go a long way in deeply engaging consumers of research in its production and use.

Considerations for ESRA reauthorization

Discussions in the education research community regarding how ESRA can be improved in its next reauthorization have been ongoing in the field for several years. For example, Knowledge Alliance, a trade association of leading education research and development (R&D) organizations that I currently chair, has engaged its members and experts in the field in this

discussion. As well, my own organization's Board of Directors composed of nearly 30 education stakeholders across the states of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, has been discussing this issue over the past two years. The considerations below are suggestions that have arisen from these conversations. As Congress considers reauthorization of ESRA, I recommend that you keep in mind the following goals which might result in new mechanisms and practices or the strengthening of current ones to better connect evidence and practice:

- **Engage consumers.** The most powerful way to increase research use is to engage the prospective consumers of evidence in defining the practical problems that should be analyzed, designing the modes in which findings will be presented, and supporting ways for the evidence to be applied effectively in the field. This should include building consumer capacity to find, judge, and apply evidence that is provided at the federal level and beyond. Key consumers on which to focus capacity building efforts might be state education agency and local district staff who lead research and data analysis tasks. Finally, this effort might include studies and other efforts to determine how to better serve education consumers' evidence needs.
- **Pay attention to implementation.** The identification and sharing of effective programs and practices represents only part of an effort to promote an evidence-based education system. Research consistently demonstrates that even the best programs fail to provide their intended benefits if poorly implemented. Therefore, greater focus should be devoted to learning more about how strong programs and practices can be implemented well.
- **Support intermediaries.** As noted above, research consumers often turn to intermediaries who serve as trusted sources that help sort through the evidence to find that which is most relevant for consumer decision making needs. Many of these trusted sources represent projects and individuals either directly supported through the current federal research, development, and technical assistance infrastructure or that interact with this infrastructure. Examples of the latter are associations of state education officials, school boards, administrators, principals, teachers, and education journalists. These intermediary organizations must be engaged and supported systematically if we are to improve the connection between research and practice.
- **Promote the coordination of U.S. Department of Education program offices.** There are notable examples of how program offices such as IES, the Offices of Elementary and Secondary Education, Innovation and Improvement, Special Education Programs, and others work together to promote evidence use. However, there is much more that can be done to promote this coordination. Taking the point of view of consumers, education stakeholders should have a much clearer idea of who to contact and what services are available to meet their evidence needs. Applying this customer-based approach would require the U.S. Department of Education to structure its information and support activities in a more coordinated way to promote an evidence-based system.

Federal investments in education research can pay dividends

This testimony has focused largely on the supply side of the research use equation, in the hopes that if research can be made more timely, relevant, and useful, it will more likely factor into decision making. However, there other aspects of “market building” that I have only mentioned briefly in this testimony that require a federal role. For example, ongoing federal communication regarding the importance of evidence use sends a powerful signal in the system to promote its use. Emphasis in federal education technical assistance that increases the capacity and support provided for evidence use increases the likelihood that research and data will be used effectively.

In the early 1950s, parents in this country had to worry about their child contracting Polio, the dreaded disease of the day. In 1952, the year before I was born more than 3,000 children, a record number, died from the disease. Today, thanks to significant investments in scientific research and effective public health campaigns, Polio no longer exists in this country. However, what does still exist in America are far too many crippling conditions such as students who cannot read by grade three, drop out before completing high school, or reach college unprepared for success. Like Polio, these conditions demand a substantial investment in research and then translation of that research into practical action.

I believe that when Congress passed ESRA and created the Institute of Education Sciences, it had a vision that science, properly conducted and effectively applied, could be a significant engine in improving education in this country. Further, as Mr. Holt, a member of this subcommittee, has argued, recent history “demonstrates that investments in R&D can drive the economy forward.” Yet, the Department of Education spends less than 1 percent of its budget on R&D, one of the smallest investments of any federal agency.

Ongoing federal investment in the education research enterprise will be required if we are to achieve the promise that all students will receive a quality education that prepares them for fulfilling lives as contributing citizens in our society.

In closing, thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony today.

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