

## **Districts' Use of Research to Support Struggling Schools**

### **A Forum**

**February 4, 2013**

The demand for research-based practices in education and youth development has increased over time as access to rich and rigorous data has become available. The No Child Left Behind Act and other legislation have gone as far as to mandate the use of practices supported by research, and billions of dollars are spent on research, yet much of this high-quality research has not made it into the hands of practitioners working to improve our nation's schools. There is an emerging body of evidence arguing that simply conducting rigorous research is not nearly enough. This forum addressed how educators define, use, and diffuse research evidence and the importance of social networks in mediating and disseminating evidence.

**Alan J. Daly, Associate Professor, Department of Education Studies, University of California, San Diego, and Kara S. Finnigan, Associate Professor and Director of Educational Policy Programs, Warner School of Education, University of Rochester,** discussed how information on education research is disseminated within districts and underperforming schools. Daly and Finnigan are engaged in a five-year longitudinal study of improvement under sanction in school districts. Their work includes interview and survey data from over 900 educators and has been supported by the W.T. Grant Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. The study involves analysis of educators' social networks to determine how ideas and practices, particularly those grounded in research, are accessed and disseminated through an educational system.

#### **Educators' Use of Evidence**

Through their study of underperforming systems, Daly and Finnigan have found that, in general, educators consider standardized test data and research interchangeably, often treating both with considerable skepticism. Educators in many of these systems rarely diagnose problems of low performance or consider evidence in support of improvement strategies. When evidence is at times used for improvement it is often superficial, with educators relying on what they considered less credible evidence. While educators analyze administrative data, they rarely have been equipped with skills, capacities, or knowledge necessary to translate this information into practices aimed at improving school-wide performance. Finally, Daly and Finnigan find that overall school and district organizational climates do not necessarily support the use of research or the type of collaboration necessary for organizational learning, particularly when these systems are faced with ongoing sanction. Although they do find these challenges with the use of evidence, they note that when a more "systems" approach is taken to the reform, as opposed to individual disconnected efforts, improvement under sanction is most likely.

#### **Social Networks within School Districts**

Through analyzing social networks within districts, Daly and Finnigan observe that up-to-date ideas and practices are often less likely to reach the lowest-performing schools due to a lack of necessary social ties or relationships with educators in other schools or the central office. While central offices play an important role in supporting (or constraining) the work of schools, movement of evidence is highly reliant on "brokers", who may actually filter information before

it is moved on to other parts of the system, much like the game of telephone. They also note that higher levels of trust between and among educators result in the exchange of best practices and the ability to bring about complex reform across a system. Unfortunately, the pressures of accountability policy sanctions often exacerbate weak internal connections and create high levels of distrust in struggling schools and districts. Overall, Daly and Finnigan find that understanding the social connections between teachers and administrators at all levels of the educational system is critical to understanding both the flow of research within districts and the limited improvement that has resulted from NCLB. This suggests that in improving educational outcomes systems must attend to the knowledge and experience of educators, while also simultaneously focusing on the quantity and quality of relationships between these educators.

### **Policy Implications**

Daly and Finnigan suggested a number of policy changes. First, while the ways schools undergo structural or instructional changes is important, it is also important to understand the relational aspects of reform. Second, districts must move from compliance-oriented to capacity building responses to facilitate improvement in the lowest performing schools and systemwide. Third, preparation and professional development of district and school leaders should focus on interpretation of evidence to develop leaders who are able to broker this information and increase the likelihood of appropriate strategies. Finally, a continued emphasis on consequences, with little attention to supports, may increase the distrust and fragmentation that already exists in low-performing school systems.

**Ron Rode, Executive Director, Office of Accountability, San Diego Unified School District,** discussed how San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has used Daly and Finnigan's research to inform the work in their district. This district has 132,000 students in 180 district-run schools and 44 charter schools authorized by the district. Approximately 30 percent of SDUSD students are English language learners and 67 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The district is organized with six "areas" with two to three high school clusters.

After many years of high turnover in district leadership, the SDUSD now has a superintendent going into his fifth year. This provides the stability needed to work on reforms that take time to implement. The school board has encouraged a change to community-based reform and is interested in considering ways to assess quality beyond test-driven accountability measures.

As a result of the research on social networks and educators' access to information about evidence, SDUSD has moved to P-12 alignment. Now, expertise can be shared across elementary, middle, and high school levels, making it easier to work together to prepare students across school levels. The district is actively encouraging this exchange of information across school levels. The district is also involved in a partnership to provide them with research. About ten years ago, SDUSD began a relationship with a University of California, San Diego professor which has now developed into the San Diego Education Research Alliance (SanDERA). The Research Alliance, formalized in 2010, is not an outside entity with an agenda of its own that wants to come into the district, but rather, an intermediary with full district involvement serving the policy and research needs of the district. SanDERA develops a research agenda for the

district and publicly shares progress and findings. In addition, it informs wider audiences by publishing and presenting findings and collaborates with other districts and research entities.

**Joshua P. Starr, PhD, Superintendent of Schools, Montgomery County Public Schools,** oversees the 17th largest school district in the United States. With nearly 150,000 students, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is growing by 2,500 students per year. The student population is 33 percent white, 26 percent Latino, 22 percent African American, 14 percent Asian, and 4 percent multi-ethnic. Thirteen percent of MCPS students are English language learners, and 33 percent receive free or reduced price lunch.

Starr suggested educators are faced with two gaps in their ability to use research evidence. First, the ineptitude gap: We know a lot, he argued, but we cannot apply it. As a superintendent he considers it his job to bring what is known together with strategies for applying it. Second, the credibility gap: Even with hard evidence, in certain areas it is hard to convince people about some things. His systemic implementation strategy involves taking what we know works and applying it, understanding the associated political and communication issues.

Starr discussed a number of MCPS initiatives and practices closely aligned with research, such as the district's long-standing support for wraparound services, early childhood education, clear focus on close attention to data, comprehensive professional development systems, and regular on-going assessments. He then posed the question, "How do we take all the work we've done, which is very research-based, and recognize that now we have a different challenge ahead of us?" The MCPS core purpose of educating children remains the same, but the mission changes because we are preparing our children for a different world. Children, he argued, need not only to continue to have very strong academic backgrounds, but also to have 21st century skills (creative thinking, problem-solving) and socio-emotional competence (how to fail, how to reflect, how to work well with others). How do you take an organization and suggest the architecture that took the district one place is not what is needed to go to a new place? In order for change to be possible, asserted Starr, it is very important to focus on the culture of the organization. Our focus must be on relationships, he argued, and the more we understand the research about organizational change and human change, the better off we will be.

### **Question and Answer Period**

*Currently researchers are the beneficiaries of federal policy (and sometimes state policy). But some of their findings are commonsense. How does the research community interact politically to influence what they are being asked to study?*

Finnigan answered that an assumption being made in our current policies is that change will happen if it is pushed on districts or schools. But actually there is a system problem that would need to shift if we are going to see changes, school by school. She and Daly are using their work to uncover some of the disconnects where support and help are needed.

*How can we get states to want districts to use methods of assessing student performance that cause us to want to teach students in ways that develop critical thinking skills?*

Starr suggested we should be crowd-sourcing standardized test creation. First, an incredible amount of money is used to develop standardized tests. In addition, more and more organizations

are moving to crowd-sourcing for problem-solving because it works. There are more smart people outside your organization than inside your organization, he argued. Schools and districts would get better assessment questions if we became the validators of good assessment questions developed by kids, teachers, and parents.

*How are SDUSD and MCPS using research to provide teachers with increased information and professional development?*

Rode expressed that SDUSD is working closely with the UCSD Department of Education Studies to better prepare teachers. In addition, SDUSD has six area superintendents who have a large role in being up-to-date with research and assessing how it applies to the schools they are leading. They then push this information down to principals, who relay it to teachers.

Starr related that teacher education programs, while working very hard, are not providing districts with the workforce they need. MCPS spends a lot on professional development for new teachers and the union is very involved in the development of teachers.

*It seems from the research presented that we know a lot about whether people are talking with each other. What about how they are talking to each other and using the information they are sharing?*

Daly acknowledged that the network maps show clearly what the quantity of relationships is, but that they do not indicate much about the quality of the data. Daly and Finnigan are also gathering interviews with a lot of district teachers and administrators to understand the quality of their relationships.