

The American Youth Policy Forum

The Use of Research within State Education Agencies

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The drumbeat to improve student achievement in the United States, especially student achievement in perennially low performing schools, is spurring the quest for research-based evidence of ways to reach this policy goal. Federal policy and now state policy increasingly feature both carrots and sticks to spur school improvement. Whereas tradition and political pressures once maintained the status quo in the education system, disruptive innovation, technology, and new sources of data have changed the equation for education policymakers. State and federal report cards now highlight school and student performance that was heretofore unavailable. In this environment, policymakers are turning to research to seek effective practices in order to build a basis for sound policy. What school leadership practices are most effective? How can scarce resources be leveraged most effectively to support student achievement? When traditional approaches do not meet targets, policymakers must seek new answers. This discussion of how state education agencies use research to support policy and practice is part of a broader effort supported by the W.T. Grant Foundation. The three speakers focused their remarks on research related to school improvement efforts at the state level.

Dr. Margaret Goertz, Professor Emerita of Education Policy at the University of Pennsylvania and Senior Researcher at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education discussed ways that staff in state education agencies (SEAs) access and use research to inform their work and how external partners support dissemination of research within the agency.

Goertz emphasized that while evidence from research can be a key influencer in public policy decision making, policy is buffeted by many headwinds, including political pressure from interest groups; tradition; available resources; and public values and opinion.

Goertz et al. conducted an exploratory study¹ to determine how state education agencies incorporate research findings into policy and practices. The study focused on access and use of research findings related to school improvement. The researchers collected data from three state education agencies. They focused primarily on research-based knowledge, while also including evidence-based knowledge and practitioner knowledge. The research yielded five findings.

Finding 1: SEA staff are receptive to research and not only reach across the agency but also use external sources to enhance their knowledge.

Finding 2: Seventy percent of the SEA staff searched internally on research related to the research question at hand: school improvement. One SEA formed cross-divisional teams to develop school improvement policies. A second agency acknowledged that the Race to the Top grant program had stimulated further collaboration across departments. The third state formed agency task forces that involve staff from various departments to help monitor and achieve major agency goals.

Finding 3: SEA staff seek research information on school improvement from external sources. The number of external sources sought ranged between 37 to 44 for the three SEAs studied. External organizations provide a range of assistance, from research-based knowledge to implementation assistance (for example, hiring research organizations to develop valid assessment indicators). Often, the external organizations are sources of "research designed for use" that include tools, models and/or practice guides. It was interesting that much of the external search was driven by personal connections and prior work

histories with related organizations, confirming the power of human social networks to facilitate action. Federal government agencies, followed by professional membership organizations, universities, and research organizations were the primary external sources of research knowledge on school improvement.

Finding 4: Broad networks of individuals with many different connections to knowledge sources facilitated the flow of new ideas. However, a small number of influential SEA staff actually ensure that research is incorporated into school improvement strategies. These knowledge leaders, who have succeeded in integrating appropriate research knowledge into policy and practice, are critical influencers in their states.

Finding 5: The study indicated that in the three agencies being studied, SEA staff use research-based knowledge to inform the design of school improvement frameworks, tools, and strategies. SEA staff look for research that is relevant to their context and administratively feasible. Research-based knowledge designed for use is highly valued. SEA staff combine research designed for use with practitioner knowledge and evidence-based knowledge (data from outcomes, for example) to design and refine policies and practices. Goertz highlighted extensive networks that involve multiple staff from various agency divisions, external organizations, and practitioners as the agencies gather and use information.

Policy Implications

Goertz concludes that SEAs routinely draw on internal and external sources of research for decision making and make use of existing social networks to gain research-based knowledge, evidence-based knowledge, and practitioner knowledge. SEAs place a high value on research designed for use versus pure academic studies. Technical assistance centers, professional organizations and universities could aid SEAs by synthesizing research studies, serving as brokers of research to develop more packaged research designed for use, and increasing dissemination and outreach.

Within agencies, key influencers ensure that research is incorporated into policy and practice through networks that span external organizations and practitioners. SEAs need to connect knowledge brokers in their agency and external organizations who work on common problems.

Finally, SEAs must be able to assess the quality of research they access, and must be able to evaluate the impact of policies and practices that they choose to implement. SEAs need to build their capacity to broker research, assess research quality, and strengthen evaluation efforts. Thus, the research function within the SEA is critical to the agency's success and to meeting agency goals.

Carrie Conaway is Associate Commissioner for Planning, Research, and Delivery Systems in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Conaway discussed how research is shared within the state agency and the way that staff utilizes external research groups to ensure a comprehensive approach and successful project or program outcomes. She framed the discussion around an overview of the way that Massachusetts developed its new educator evaluation system, which was completed in 2011. The system is a key part of school improvement efforts statewide. The 'case study' demonstrates how research is integral to major policy initiatives in Massachusetts.

The first step in system development was the creation of a 40 member task force on educator evaluation; the task force was charged with making recommendations to the state board of education for the new state policy on evaluation.

Research informed the process from start to finish. The SEA research team conducted an extensive literature review for the task force. The team also brought in experts to testify before the task force and hired policy analysts to develop models of evaluation designs.

To gather data on the current evaluation system, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education commissioned a study conducted by the National Center for Teacher Quality. The study indicated that half of educators in the Boston Public Schools were not evaluated at all in the two years of the study, and a quarter of the schools did not turn in evaluations of anyone. The study also indicated that just 41 out of 4,800 teachers were rated as unsatisfactory.

A key element in the state's new system was including student growth as one measure of educator performance. The state had developed a student growth measure, but it was applicable to less than 20 percent of educators. The state had to develop a new system for the majority of educators for whom there is no growth measure based on existing state assessments.

The system had to be not only valid and reliable, but fair to those who are subject to it. Designing such a system required decision makers to approach the design as a research question to be answered. It was a question whose answer was not preordained by the task force. State leaders were committed to using research findings to build the evaluation system. How should impact on student learning be factored into the evaluation? How much weight should it be given in the new system?

In addition, the SEA research team examined not only existing but new research and data on educator effectiveness. They found that the Measures of Effective Teaching survey conducted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation confirmed the validity of using student feedback in educator evaluations; the Gates study demonstrated the correlation between student feedback and student growth. Massachusetts may be the only state to date that requires inclusion of this new evidence-based data source in its educator evaluation system.

Key research components that influenced the new educator evaluation policy in Massachusetts included the extensive literature review; existing research on Massachusetts schools and students; and large scale studies involving external organizations providing a national perspective.

Having existing data from evidence-based research made a difference in how the research team proceeded. The staff was also receptive to new ideas from research and conducted significant outreach to external organizations. The primary focus was on research-based knowledge designed for use.

Policy Implications

Conaway stressed that the research team's freedom to investigate all sources of research knowledge and data -- both internal and external -- and the task force's openness to research findings (emphasizing that there was not a preordained outcome) helped ensure the success of the initiative. Conaway reinforced Goertz's finding that increased support for partnerships between states and external sources of research knowledge would aid state research teams. She also emphasized that states should require evaluations of major policy initiatives that examine both implementation and outcomes.

Jennifer Davis, Interim Director, Innovation Lab Network, at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), discussed ways that research partnerships can be scaled up and ways that external organizations can promote social networks within state agencies to encourage research-based practices.

Study of Member Needs

In 2010, CCSSO launched an initiative to determine the role it could play in bridging the gaps between research and SEA use of research to aid policy and practice. CCSSO staff conducted extensive interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and opinion leaders. Recommendations are contained in the study,

Catalyzing State-Level RD&D: Recommendations for Research, Development, and Dissemination Service at the Council of Chief State School Officers, published in Spring 2011.

Project researchers concluded that a new state-level research, development, and dissemination (RD&D) paradigm was needed to better serve members' needs. Resource-strapped environments and stagnant student performance on assessments have spurred many SEAs to look for all available research that bears on the issue of improving student and school performance.

The study found both the research supply and demand to be fragmented. Research on key topics was not housed in a searchable, accessible database for SEA staff. Further complicating the landscape, on the demand side, practitioners and policymakers often pursue research in response to of-the-moment needs and generally lack a coordinated research agenda. In addition, state procurements are often written in a way that precludes cutting edge innovations and new research. Although the Goertz study found that key influencers within SEAs ensure that research is accessed and used, this approach by itself does not guarantee that relevant research will be examined or utilized, since its use is dependent upon knowledgeable individuals. Davis' study of CCSSO members indicates that due to budget cuts and constraints, as well as lack of knowledgeable staff, some SEAs are not always able to avail themselves of current research or cutting edge innovations.

Major study recommendations include (1) connecting research supply through a research hub, (2) group common problems of practice and translate them into research questions and opportunities for development, and (3) spur collaboration between researchers and practitioners through various types of networks.

Through CCSSO's 'Discovery Project,' the research team developed a methodology to accomplish those goals. They surveyed members to determine common interests (e.g. the need for a shared understanding of college and career-readiness knowledge, skills, and dispositions); explored partnership with the National Association of State Boards of Education's Center for Evidence-Based Policymaking; and reorganized CCSSO resources into a hub for states to use to locate available resources. While these steps proved helpful, the staff experienced difficulty sustaining a research hub internally. They found that they also needed a method to actively facilitate communication and sharing among members in order to stimulate them to incorporate research and pilot test new conceptions of student learning.

Innovation Lab Network

Also in 2010, CCSSO launched the Innovation Lab Network

The [Innovation Lab Network](#) is a network of state agencies, districts, and local schools focused on sharing knowledge and spurring states to scale up successful student-centered innovations within and across states. Ten states are currently in the network-- California, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, West Virginia, , and Wisconsin. A major focus is developing a shared understanding of college and career readiness and operationalizing this shift across policies, practices, and structures within the state..

The findings from the study helped inform what would become the Innovation Lab Network's research agenda and helped structure the way the Network operates to draw states together with experts in smaller groups around focused topics.²

The Innovation Lab Network is partnering states with universities doing research in relevant areas as well as with other states in order to develop tools, models and guides to effective practices. States are learning

from others in the network and building policy based on their shared learning as well as established research-based knowledge.

The Innovation Lab Network process for using and co-creating research includes (1) agreement on common goals, (2) a common understanding of the changing expectations and levers for transformation, (3) entry points for study, (4) activation of networks to plan, do, study, and act, and (5) facilitate scaling up promising practices and sharing knowledge.

In terms of agreement on common goals, a major focus of the Network now, as noted above, is working with the states to develop a shared understanding of college and career readiness, since most of the states have adopted college and career-ready standards for students. Within a shared model for describing the change landscape, states select their 'entry points.' Some are focused on performance assessments while others are concentrating on teaching practices or building responsive accountability systems. The Network then works with states to support them as they engage in cycles of experimentation, prototyping, and evaluation of their efforts. The Network includes an online collaborative platform that engages groups around specific topics of interest. A 'knowledge capture' project is ongoing that ties effective practices to quantitative data showing how the practices are being implemented.

Policy Implications

The networked learning community concept is an example of a systemic, focused collaboration with multiple stakeholders that furthers common goals of states and CCSSO. Inviting all stakeholders to the table through the networks creates active participation in research and the use of research. The process bridges the gap between state needs and potential external partners in the research arena. The system captures trends across states and is a vehicle to share as well as create and use knowledge. It develops engagement between regional education labs and centers and influential brokers of research to policy. However, funding for research is tied to specific initiatives. Little funding has been allocated to promote an infrastructure of research-to-policy brokers.

With the policymaker emphasis on raising expectations for students and educators alike, and an intense focus on identifying effective policy and practice, it becomes imperative to ensure that evaluations of major policy initiatives are built in to expectations from the inception of the initiatives. In a rapidly changing environment, new expectations and assessments can have unintended consequences. Thus formal evaluation designs will aid policymakers in making decisions based on data and outcomes.

Questions and Answer Period

What are the obstacles to using research effectively?

Conaway and Goertz noted that funding for research offices is often cut. Conaway related that as a result of the new assessments coming online on college and career readiness, many research resources are now becoming dedicated to data analysis that support new accountability structures. This has led to a dearth of research in many 'content' areas.

Conaway and Davis said that most states do not have a robust research capacity, and that translating research for policymakers is a necessity. It is thus critical that SEAs maintain an office that understands and can use research, at a bare minimum.

Is the use of evidence in policy making and use of evidence in practice and innovation a fictitious dichotomy?

Research must focus on state and practitioner needs in order to be useful. The current environment makes it incumbent upon researchers to focus on improving student achievement and improving teacher and leader effectiveness, so research that bears on these themes is that which will be utilized.

Too, budget realities require policymakers to find the most efficient ways to achieve their goals. Leveraging resources can be a way to help mitigate funding constraints. As an example, Comprehensive Centers have worked with SEA staff on school improvement projects that are free to the SEA. In another example, a SEA turned to a regional education lab to conduct a literature review on effective practice which in turn was shared with districts. Conaway noted that contracting with RELs involves some administrative burdens which should be streamlined. She also suggested SEA-higher education partnerships in which states exchange data from new state longitudinal data systems for research findings on key areas of need.

How can the research community step up to coordinate with SEAs?

The SEA needs to know what questions it wants to answer. That requires research capacity on staff within the SEA and close coordination with practitioners.

What recommendations would you have for increasing research on rural schools?

First, state universities in rural states need to step up; they are the entities that could conduct needed studies. Second, research brokers could create networked learning communities with active rural school district partners engaging with university researchers and states. Davis noted that CCSSO does have a formal group of rural chiefs who meet on common issues, and suggested universities and the chiefs could commission a study together in which universities in rural states work together on the design, implementation, and evaluation of studies on effective policies and practices for school improvement in rural areas.

Reference

¹ Massell, D., Goertz, M.E., & Barnes, C. (2012). State Education Agencies' Acquisition and Use of Research Knowledge for School Improvement. *Peabody Journal of Education*. 87: 609-626.

Notes

²The CCSSO model is an excellent example of Bryk and Gomez' [Networked Improvement Communities model](#), in which communities of multiple stakeholders with similar challenges share their problems of practice, experiments, quick-cycle prototyping, and results. The structure facilitates scaling up promising practices as a result of the continuous cycle of experimentation, gaining data, and using the data for continuous improvement in future iterations.