**American Youth Policy Forum**

**Discussion Group I: Understanding the Use of Research in Policy and Practice**

**January 28, 2014**

*On January 28, 2014, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) hosted “Understanding the Use of Research in Policy and Practice: The Definition and Acquisition of Research,” a discussion group designed to expand participants’ understanding of research application in educational policy and practice. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners discussed how they each acquire, interpret, and use research. Supported by the William T. Grant Foundation, and inspired by the work of Vice President Dr. Vivian Tseng, the discussion was the first of an AYPF series dedicated to providing members of each profession the opportunity to express their experiences with research and pave the way for future collaboration.*

**Lessons Learned about Research Definition and Use**

What is research, and why is it worth conducting? While there are many possible answers, as evidenced by a gallery walk activity where researchers, practitioners and policymakers shared their definition of research and how they acquired it, research is undoubtedly valuable when it informs and improves policies and practices. By this measure, and based on findings from this discussion group, current education research has room for improvement. Research is often used to advise school teachers and administrators without soliciting their input; policymakers do not always use research evidence to shape conceptual understandings of education systems, and the means by which researchers communicate with practitioners and policymakers receives insufficient attention. While these problems abound, there are steps that professionals in research, policy, and practice can take to solve them:

* *Paving Two-way Streets between Practitioners and Researchers*

Communication between research and practice traditionally acts like a one-way street, with research informing practitioners. As a result, research communities often do not understand how practitioners use their work. A two-way street model in which researchers consider the needs of practitioners would heighten the relevance of research to practice, and ideally ensure that the research is appropriately used.

* *Promoting Evidence Integration*

The linear model of research directly informing policy is not always an accurate depiction of the actual policymaking processes; rather, policymakers interpret, contextualize, and analyze research to determine its relevance to the policies they are working on. A conceptual application of research that shapes a municipality’s understanding of its education system, or an instrumental use that balances evidence with other policy considerations would be more effective. Applying research in these ways ultimately strengthens policy solutions through evidence integration.

* *Creating Stronger Infrastructure*

The language and structure of research often render it difficult for policymakers and practitioners to understand. Long-term partnerships between school districts and researchers would improve communication between these entities. Additionally, investment in intermediaries that specialize in connecting and conveying needs between these professions would bolster the dissemination and application of research.

To gain a sense of how research could be acquired, participants had the opportunity to learn about work of Alan J. Daly, University of California San Diego and Kara Finnigan, University of Rochester, as they examine the importance of understanding social networks.

**Understanding Social Networks**

Daly and Finnigan’s work focuses on how low performing schools function under pressure, how ideas and practices flow within a school system, and how systems use and interpret research evidence. Daly and Finnigan conducted their study over a five-year period with support from the William T. Grant Foundation. They included case studies, surveys, and social networking analysis to examine what happens on a district-level when schools attempt to improve performance. 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.

After considering mid-sized and large school districts and involving more than 1200 educators, they presented five major findings:

* Ties between educators are sparse, and leaders are often isolated. Connections tend to be one-directional and rarely reciprocal, with some school leaders being completely disconnected.
* Systems undergo bifurcation, as the central office and principals connect with few people; without a trusted, centralized source of advice for research use, educators tend to cluster around multiple nodes of information dissemination.
* District-level brokers of information are crucial for the dissemination of research among schools. Superintendents are most apt to connect people because they communicate district-level information to school principals. However, other informal network members also facilitate informational exchanges between central offices and individual schools.
* While instrumental ties among people may improve, emotional ties may deteriorate, reducing the effective communication of information. As the study demonstrated, informal ties have a large impact on how research is shared among school leaders, and a decrease in emotional ties can inhibit improvements.
* Network churn and leadership turnover had a significant impact not only on the networks themselves, but also the study’s methodology. Changes in leadership and shifts in power have an impact on relationships, which in turn changes how practitioners communicate throughout the system.

**Revisiting Initial Impressions, and Contemplating Future Considerations**

To conclude the event, participants were invited to consider how the discussion affected their initial perception of research and evidence, what mindsets have held firm and which ideas have been challenged, and how the information shared will inform their work. Participants shared the following thoughts for future consideration:

* *Network Analysis*: Further study and examination of how relationships between people have an impact on the dissemination of research is important. Building capacity within social systems can positively influence learning and the use of research-based programs in education. School-level group dynamics can drastically change how research is interpreted and used, and a better understanding of these dynamics can improve communication between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.
* *Effective Policymaking:* Policymakers play a central role in putting research into practice. Effective policymaking comes from a sound understanding of research, but there are concerns regarding the misuse of data at the policy level. In order for effective practices to take place at the school level, decision-makers need to work towards de-politicizing the research evidence used in making policy.
* *The Role of Intermediaries:* Intermediaries play an important role in brokering information between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. It is through intermediaries that relationships and trust can be built in the dissemination and acquisition of research. It is through technical assistance and a good understanding of the research user that better policies can be enacted, and intermediaries can be influential in this process.
* *The Power of the Anecdote:* Despite researcher efforts to provide rigorous data, anecdotal evidence is often used to negate research evidence. Policymakers and practitioners are skeptical of research that contradicts personal experience. Thus, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners all must work towards using rigorous research while stillconsidering personal experience in order to establish effective education policies.