Evidence-Based Policy: Moving Beyond Data Dissemination to Increased Evidence Use

Book Launch and Panel Discussion
Summary
March 25, 2019

Overview

With the recent passage of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, the federal government has taken an important step forward. In addition to strengthening privacy protections and improving secure data access, the Act directs agencies to develop evidence-building plans, establish Evaluation Officers, and coordinate evidence-building activities across agencies.

On March 25, 2019, the American Youth Policy Forum, in partnership with the William T. Grant Foundation, hosted *Evidence-Based Policy: Moving Beyond Data Dissemination to Increased Evidence Use*. The event served as a book launch for Annette Boaz's new book, *What Works Now?: Evidence Informed Policy and Practice*, and as an opportunity to hear from researchers and practitioners about their insights on the use of research evidence.

Vivian Tseng, Senior Vice President of Programs at the William T. Grant Foundation, further emphasized the importance of centering the conversation around the use of evidence. Tseng explained that building a larger body of research evidence will not reach its full potential if it is not used to inform policy and practice.

Presentation: *What Works Now?*

Annette Boaz, Faculty of Health, Social Care, and Education at Kingston University, London provided an overview of *What Works Now?*, her new book compiling insights from researchers and key thought leaders. This book follows the seminal book on evidence-based policy and practice *What Works?* (2000). The update reflects on the progress made both in the United Kingdom as well as internationally and how the field can move forward.

Boaz explained that the field has spent a lot of time tied up in the semantics of what it means to be evidence-based, rather than focusing on what information is available to policymakers and practitioners and ensuring that information is *used*. While, currently, less time and energy is spent determining what is "evidence-based," Boaz encouraged attendees to continue to pressure the field to consider how evidence can be infused in policy and practice. Boaz made an analogy between how the field has grown and a three-layered cake, with the layers representing three approaches and generations of how evidence is used and shared among policymakers and practitioners.

The first approach focuses on dissemination, and how evidence is shared with the public. This includes how evidence can be more accessible, organized, and understandable. The What Works Clearinghouse and recommendations or guidance provided by the federal government about how evidence can be used are examples of the dissemination of evidence. The second approach focuses on relationships. This approach acknowledges the importance of connecting with others within research, policy, and practice when producing, using, and sharing evidence. Boaz sited the National Network for Education Research Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), a network that seeks to connect education agencies and research institutions, as an example of this relational approach. The third approach is systemic, and is not used as frequently. This approach requires leaders in public service to consider how systems and institutions support the use of evidence. Boaz cited the William T. Grant Foundation, a foundation dedicating time and resources to studying the use of research-evidence in policy, and the Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) at the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, an initiative that connects leaders in healthcare and Veteran Affairs to implement evidence-based programs and learn from those implementation efforts, as examples of systemic support of evidence use.

Presentation: Partnership between the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), US Department of Health and Human Services

Lauren Supplee, former Director of the Division of Family Strengthening at OPRE at the Administration of Children and Families (ACF), and Charisse Johnson, former Branch Chief of OFA at ACF, shared the important elements of the partnership between their two offices related to a portfolio of research on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood. Johnson explained that as a new staff member at OFA, she began asking questions about why they were operating in a certain way and what OFA hoped to accomplish. She realized that many staff on her team were not confident in the how and why of their processes. Although OPRE and OFA had a strained relationship prior to Johnson joining OFA, Supplee and Johnson had worked together previously and were able to establish a mutual relationship based on trust.

Johnson and Supplee shared that there were various stakeholders involved in their partnership including federal research staff, federal program staff, grantees, and technical assistance providers. Supplee explained that, from the research perspective, establishing desired outcomes and metrics to measure those outcomes was essential. The offices spent six months determining what outcomes were appropriate to use to evaluate the grantees. They discovered the importance of asking questions about what behaviors they hoped to change and how that could be measured. Both expressed the importance of building a culture of curiosity among all stakeholders. Some grantees and OFA staff felt as though researchers were not telling the complete story with their findings, and previous large-scale evaluations that found a lack of impacts further supported distrust between both parties. Through the partnership, both offices came together to build a joint learning agenda and establish how evidence could be built and shared in a way all stakeholders could agree upon. All parties agreed about the importance of the funding for the project and that collaboration between the offices was essential to effect change in the field.

To close, Johnson and Supplee reflected upon the systemic impact of the partnership. The partnership led to the creation of federal implementation teams: groups of program, research, and technical assistance staff that work collaboratively together to understand the work and progress of grantees. This established infrastructure could survive leadership changes. They also shared that they learned the importance of not only getting staff to buy-in to the research agenda, but also ensuring that all parties were held accountable for what they said they would do. Additionally, Johnson emphasized the importance of investing in leadership during implementation efforts. The partnership invested in the program directors who led each grant, ensuring they had the capacity to fully implement their program and effectively be evaluated by OPRE. Supplee added that Johnson's leadership of OFA was essential to the successful collaboration between all stakeholders.

Presentation: Research-to-Policy Collaboration Model

Taylor Scott, Research Assistant Professor and Associate Director of the Research-to-Policy Collaboration at Penn State University, Max Crowley, Director of the Research-to-Policy Collaboration and Assistant

Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Penn State University, and Emily Douglas, Professor and Head of the Department of Social Science and Policy Studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute shared their experience as researchers interacting with policymakers and the policymaking processes.

Scott began the presentation by providing context for the creation of the Research-to-Policy Collaboration (RPC) Model. In 2015, a group of researchers identified the distance they felt between research and the policymaking community. Both communities seemed to function within their own silos and adhere to their own norms. The RPC Model seeks to bridge those communities and train researchers in how to navigate the policy environment, with a particular focus at the federal level. Scott provided some examples of how researchers engaged in the RPC Model have been able to interact with policymakers and shift the typical relationship between these two parties. For example, researchers approach meetings with Congressional staff as knowledge brokers, responding to policymakers' existing interests and needs for using evidence to inform policy developments. Scott shared that by creating relationships with leadership in caucuses and committees related to child welfare, she has been contacted to answer questions and used as a resource to connect with other experts in the field. To close, Scott shared that in 2019 the RPC Model hopes to develop more relationships with Congressional offices and continue to identify research experts and train them to communicate with policymakers.

Douglas, a former Congressional research fellow, built upon Scott's remarks with additional ways researchers could involve themselves in policy. Douglas explained that in addition to research providing a new idea for a bill, research can also be used to better understand a problem raised by a constituent, included as evidence in a letter to a committee, used to gain support from other Congressional members for co-sponsorship, and inform voting and debate. From her experience on a committee, Douglas shared that many staffers use research and seek advice from well-established and trusted sources, such as professional associations. Given the pre-existing relationship between staffers and these associations, Douglas suggested that the research community consider how to create connections with groups that have pre-existing relationships with Congress.

Key Takeaways

Moving Across Settings and Silos

Many presenters explained how movement beyond their traditional professional communities allowed them to gain better insight into how research evidence can be used more effectively. The RPC Model supports researchers as they collaborate with federal policymakers, and the partnership between OPRE and OFA encouraged strategic planning and teamwork between program staff, researchers, technical assistance providers, and grantees. Scott, Supplee, and Johnson demonstrated how communication between research, policy, and practice resulted in better-informed policymaking.

Relationships Matter

A key theme throughout the forum was the importance of relationships in developing closer ties between the research, policy, and practice communities. Supplee and Johnson shared how their previous relationship helped reduce tension as the two offices worked together, and Douglas provided examples of how Congressional committee staff have trusted relationships they rely upon for research and insight.

Messaging and Communication are Key

The presentations highlighted that communication between colleagues within research, policy, and practice is essential to ensuring effective evidence use. In the partnership between OPRE and OFA, researchers explained their findings with program staff to ensure everyone fully understood outcomes. Together, they were able to construct a collective narrative to share with others. Comments from the audience also touched upon not only *what* evidence is shared, but also *how* it is shared. A critical part of collaboration between research, policy, and practice is understanding how evidence can be explained across fields and to the public, even if that evidence supports undesirable findings or challenges conventional wisdom.

Investment in Leadership and Sustainability

A key question that the presenters kept returning to was how to keep the established partnerships and relationships going after their departure. This point related to Boaz's comments regarding how evidence use and circulation can be systemic. While leadership is key, the presenters shared that establishing infrastructure, like a working group or model, allows partnerships to continue despite leadership transition.

Evidence Use for Continuous Improvement

The presenters all referenced why the increased use of evidence is a priority. The group acknowledged that accountability is one reason for collecting and using evidence to inform decisions. Yet, it was agreed that the discussion of evidence use was more broadly about continuous improvement, and how research, programmatic, and policy processes and outcomes for children and families can improve based on better use of evidence.

What Can We Learn from the International Community?

Chapters within *What Works Now?* provide insight into learnings from countries around the world. One particular learning that Boaz shared with the U.S. audience was how other countries have reflected upon what knowledge or evidence the research community has traditionally valued. She encouraged the audience to think about how increasing the use of evidence can be inclusive of marginalized communities, such as indigenous communities.