Using Research in Policymaking

Over the past three decades, foundations and government have been supporting a veritable army of researchers and program evaluators to pin down what works in education—and what does not work. This has not been money wasted. In a great many areas we do know what works. A major challenge is to “scale up” these research successes by incorporating key findings into state policy.

Generally, research and program evaluations can be useful to state boards of education in several ways:

- Research can help identify real problems that need attention.
- State boards can use research to weigh and compare various solutions to identified problems.
- State board members can use such information to support or oppose a particular program or policy.
- Research findings that support a policy decision help to justify the decision to the legislature, the news media, and the general public and help to build consensus among people with different political views.
- Rigorous program evaluation is useful for making incremental improvements.
- Research findings provided by the state education agency help local school boards and administrators make good decisions about strategies for teaching and learning.

Some state board operations manuals explicitly express that the policy development process should take into account the best available data and educational research.

Challenges with Using Research

A significant challenge for policymakers is that determining whether research findings are sound can be a difficult and confusing process. As noted by Jay Greene in a recent Education Week commentary,

“When research results are countered with findings from another study, policymakers, the press, and the attentive public tend to fall back on their ideology, interests, and biases instead of trying to sort out the competing claims of researchers. Education researchers, many fear, are just paid liars. . . . Many studies are crafted to find desired results, or are so poorly crafted that their results should not be believed. . . . Interest groups have learned that they can successfully check research contrary to their goals by producing their own studies, no matter how lousy, to sow confusion among policymakers, journalists, and the attentive public about what to believe.”

If state board members lack hard data they can rely on, but feel pressure to act anyway, they may base their decisions on anecdotal information, simplistic media reports, or the winds of public opinion.

Characteristics of Good Policy Research

Lay policymakers can sort through competing research studies by asking several critical and pointed questions:

Objectivity:
- Is the research or evaluation organization considered credible within the research community? Is their research perceived as objective?
- Do the researchers show evidence of pre-existing bias or a policy agenda? If so, are they at least honest about their biases up-front?
- If the research was published, where? Was it in a scientific or academic journal? Did it come from a reputable policy organization such as NASBE or the Education Commission of the States (ECS)?

Study Design:
- Do the research questions address real problems?
- Is the research well-organized to find answers to the critical questions?
• Is the population sample studied large enough and diverse enough to justify drawing broad conclusions applicable to the whole state?

• Does the study include a “control group” that is equivalent to the “experimental group” except for the “treatment” being studied? Is assignment to the control and experimental groups made randomly?

• If a case study, is there an organized strategy for collecting information that assures consistency among different individual researchers? Are multiple methods used to collect and analyze information? Are the site selection criteria and methods for collecting and analyzing data consistent with the purpose of the research?

Review:

• Has the study been critically reviewed by other researchers not involved in the study (“peer review”)?

• Has the research been duplicated by other researchers?

Plausibility:

• Are the results convincing?

• Do the results make sense?

Using Research Findings

If research is to be useful to state board members, it must be presented in a “user-friendly” format. The state agency staff can be directed to assure that:

• Documents are as brief as possible without sacrificing accuracy or context.

• Research summaries are prepared on major policy questions that address disparate findings in a balanced way. (This information is also useful to news agencies.)

• Information is clearly written with a minimum of “academic jargon.”

• Clear charts and graphs are provided that illustrate key findings.

• Brief oral presentations cover only the most important points, accompanied by a written summary.

• Information is timely. Researchers can sometimes disseminate data at various stages of the research process, or in forms that are less than final but still reasonably accurate.

• Research findings present definite conclusions and policy options. As stated in a recent report of the US Department of Education, “Research aimed at policymakers and practitioners should have a clear, direct message that will counteract the misinformation, pseudo-research, anecdotes, and myths that sometimes characterize debates about education.”

If a research study that appears to be sound is nevertheless attacked or discounted, the opponents ought to be challenged to provide alternate data or research evidence that can then be subjected to the same tests of quality.

Commissioning Research

Many state boards have the authority to commission their own research and evaluation activities. Often this is not basic research, but rather is used to assess the effectiveness of a new policy or program.

• The most important aspect of initiating a research project is to ask key questions that get to the heart of the issue. The questions need to be measurable. They need to be able to assess program effects that can be realistically expected from the target population. The questions should not be phrased to produce only desired results or a preconceived agenda.

• Different types of research are best for answering different kinds of questions. Technical experts should be consulted as to the most appropriate research design. Case studies and other “qualitative” kinds of research seek to explore and understand issues in great depth. Experimental designs and other “quantitative” numbers-based research look for common effects across larger groups.

• Researchers doing the work need a rough idea about how results might be used.

The NASBE staff is highly knowledgeable about issues in education policy research. Contact the NASBE Clearinghouse for assistance in finding or interpreting research.