2012

A Path Forward: Evidence-Based Approaches to Educational Policy and Practice

Robert Balfanz
Johns Hopkins University, rbalfanz@jhu.edu

For nearly 30 years since the publication of "A Nation of Risk," it has been the goal of federal and state educational policymakers to both raise the overall performance of students in the United States and close achievement and performance gaps between low-income and minority students and their more advantaged peers. Some progress has been made, at least in some grades and some subjects, but much of the world has improved as well, and in some areas the performance gaps between more- and less- advantaged students are as large as they have ever been. Thus, the quest continues to find policy and practice levers that can raise overall performance and close achievement gaps[1]

The modest progress that has resulted from considerable effort and attention has prompted some to argue that improved schooling alone will not be the great equalizer.[2] It has led others to look for fresh avenues to improve educational outcomes.[3] A third approach is on display in this issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*. This approach argues that an evidence-based approach is needed to move educational policy and practice forward. Much past and present educational policy and practice are based on an intuitive or experience-based approach sometimes supported by success in a relatively small number of schools or classrooms. Examples of such policies and practices include the notion that smaller class sizes provide students with more attention, which in turn should lead to more achievement, and that large bureaucracies stifle innovation, which if unleashed through alternative governance systems, will result in better outcomes. Solutions that seem logical and which appear to lead to a few success stories are scaled more rapidly than their evidence warrants. This often results in either weak or compromised implementations, or the application of policies and practices to environments for which they were not designed. The predictable consequence is, at best, modest impacts, and the continual feeding of the notion that not much works.

One reason more evidence-based approaches have not carried the day is that, until recently, the tools and tactics necessary to gather sufficient evidence upon which to make more informed decisions have not existed or been supported sufficiently to gather widespread application. The collection of articles in this edition of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* takes a big step toward providing the tools and tactics needed for an evidence-based approach to educational policy and practice.

Four of the articles report on the development of analytic tools to produce evidence that can inform policy and practice in some of the most critical areas facing education today.

In their article, "Identifying High-Performing Charter Schools in Texas," Lori Taylor and Paige Perez, for example, take on the knotty question of how to identify high- and low-performing charters. As the authors point out, this is both critical—as the promise of charters can only be realized if low-performing charters are closed and high-performing charters are expanded—and complex, because to establish charter performance it is necessary to take into account the characteristics of the students they educate, as well as the resources at their disposal. Through their careful weighing of the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches used to evaluate the outcomes of charter schools in Texas, the authors show that much more informative analytic approaches are available than are commonly used.

Carolyn Kelley and Richard Halverson in their article, "The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning: A Next Generation Formative Evaluation and Feedback System," directly address a critical policy conundrum. Principal evaluation has been brought to the forefront through a number of recent initiatives from the U.S. Department of Education. The most far-reaching is the NCLB waiver process, through which the majority of states have received waivers from the NCLB accountability system in return for, among other things, initiating more comprehensive principal evaluation systems. At the same time, however, emerging evidence suggests that, at the middle and high school levels, distributed leadership is often central to success. This implies that the widespread adoption of principal evaluation tools that focus only on the actions of the principal and not also on the leadership team may in fact be counter-productive. That is why their paper, describing the design and validation of the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning, which focuses on distributed leadership but is designed to address current accountability requirements, is not only timely, but also important.

"Comparing Campus Discipline Rates: A Multivariate Approach for Identifying Schools with Significantly Different than Expected Exclusionary Discipline Rates," by Eric Booth and colleagues, demonstrates that the recent advent of student longitudinal data sets in many states should make it possible to use existing school records to identify schools with similar populations that have both significantly higher and lower exclusionary discipline rates. In other words, this data will make it possible to identify the schools that are doing better and worse with similar students and resources. This is important, because being suspended from school, especially multiple times, has been shown to substantially increase the odds that a student will not graduate from high school. Being able to identify schools that have lower than predicted disciplinary rates,

should provide information that others may be able to learn from. Identifying schools with high rates of disciplinary exclusion allows us to identify those that may need extra support and focused interventions to implement more effective practices.

Susanne Denham and colleagues, in their article, "Computerizing Social-Emotional Assessment for School Readiness," document the growing understanding that school readiness has both an academic and social component, and, as such, a key role for pre-school education is not only to get students ready academically but also to develop the socio-emotional skills they will need for school success. The authors then make the point that, for these efforts to succeed, teachers will need access to good assessments that are practical in pre-K. The authors then detail their ongoing efforts to design such assessments. The article thus shows how an evidence-based approach to tool making can provide educators and policymakers with the means to ground their actions in a clear understanding of what works, under what conditions, and in which circumstances.

Catherine Horn and Stella Flores, in "When Policy and Opportunity Is not Enough: The Complexity of College Access and Enrollment," and David Farbman, in "Expanding Learning Time in Schools: Considering the Challenges of Implementation and the Potential Impact," examine what could be called big policy plays—attempts to use legislation to bring about substantive educational improvements. As discussed in the first article, the Texas Top 10 Percent Plan was designed to increase college access for traditionally underserved students in a race-neutral manner. In the second article, efforts in Massachusetts to expand learning time are examined.. In both cases, the authors show that, when these policy prescriptions are put to an analytic test, the road from policy to practice and positive impact is mediated by the on-the-ground implementation challenges. This, in turn, argues that to be effective, big state or federal policy plays need to more firmly take into account the terrain in which they will be implemented. These two papers provide insight into how this can be done.

Finally, "For Safety's Sake: A Case Study of School Security Efforts and their Impact on Education Reform," by Rachel Garver and Pedro Noguera reminds us that in seeking a more evidence-based approach to educational policy and practice, it will be paramount to consider and integrate multiple measures and outcomes. In a careful case study of a school district's response to student security concerns at a multi-racial high school, the authors show that very different conclusions about the effectiveness of the response can be made, depending on what outcome data are considered.

Taken together, the articles in this volume present a robust means of moving forward with an evidence-based approach to educational policy and practice. Importantly, they report on the development of tools and tactics that can be employed by educators, schools, school districts, and communities. This is essential, because for an evidence-based approach to educational policy and practice to take hold, become commonplace, and offer a more powerful alternative to an intuitive and experience-based approach, it needs to be accessible to the people who are doing, organizing, evaluating, and supporting teaching, learning, and schooling on the ground.

References

1. Education Sector. Getting to 2014 (and Beyond): *The Choices and Challenges Ahead*. Washington, DC: Education Sector; 2012.

2. Rebell M. The rights to comprehensive educational opportunity. *Harv. Civ. Rights-Civ. Liberties Law Rev*. 47:1.

3. Mehta J, Schwartz R, Hess FM, eds. *The Futures of School Reform*. Cambridge, Ma: Harvard Education Press; 2012.