

# The Politics of Knowledge

## Why Education Research Does (or Does Not) Influence Education Policy

Frederick M. Hess

The American Enterprise Institute

May 21, 2007

The collected papers from this conference are available online  
at [www.aei.org/event1455](http://www.aei.org/event1455).



# “Truth vs. Partisanship”: Structure and Science in Federal Education Research

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Andrew Rudalevige  
Dickinson College



## The Three Envelopes... (just since 1965)

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- Bureau of Research consolidated in Office of Education, 1965
- National Institute of Education (NIE), 1972
- NIE placed under Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), 1980
- NIE eliminated, 1985
- Major reorg of OERI in 1994 reauthorization
- Institute of Education Sciences (IES), 2002





## The (Bipartisan) Grail: “Science”

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- Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002



- We want to “insulate our federal research... from partisan or undue political influences”  
– Rep. Castle (R-DE)



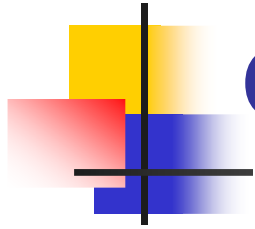
- “We want to look to this Institute when we have education questions in the same way that we look to the NIH when we have medical questions.” – Sen. Kennedy (D-MA)



## “Truth vs. Partisanship”: Evidence-Based Interventions, 1931

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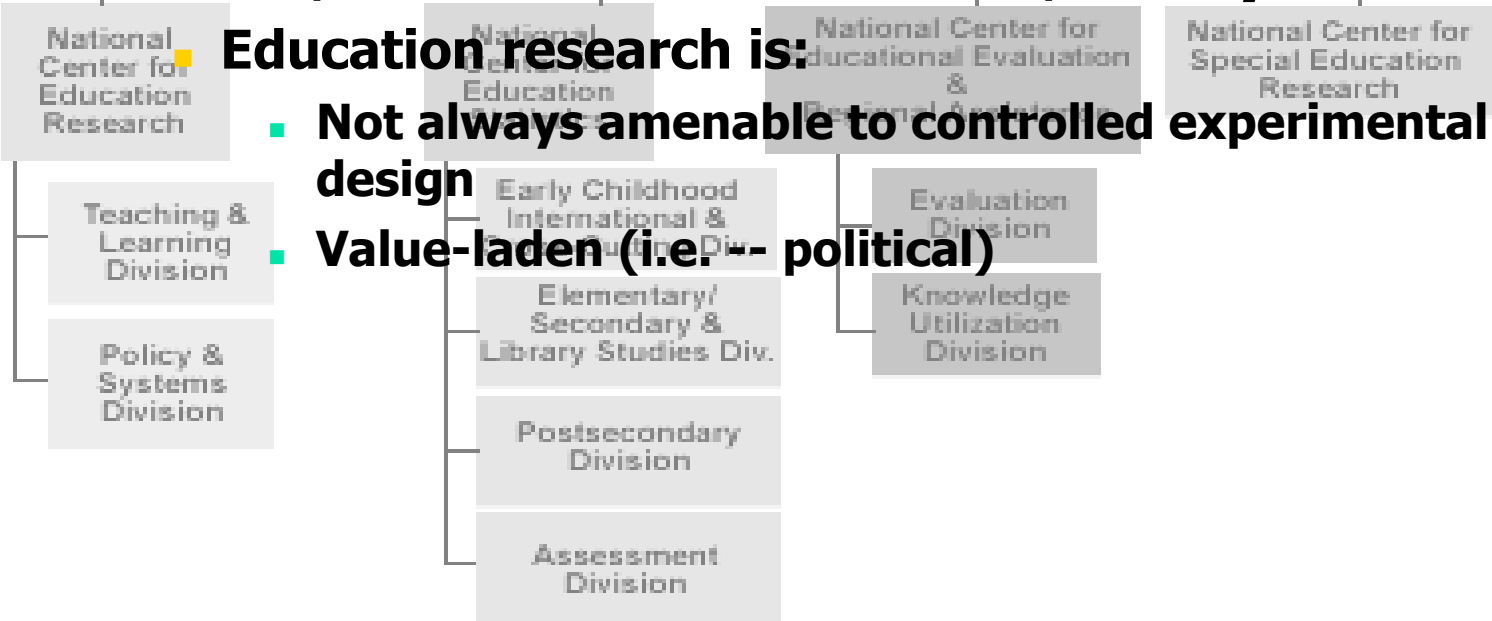
- “Governmental policy cannot hope to rise above partisanship to unified American aims unless mere differences of opinion, tenaciously held, are dissolved by revelations of pertinent facts established by scientific method and presented in understandable terms.”
- Research function requires “adequate status” to “present [those facts] forcibly both to Congress and to the President.”
  - Report of the National Advisory Committee on Education to President Hoover



# INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES

## Can structure serve science?

- The “Politics of Bureaucratic Structure”
  - When will these produce incentives for insulation and autonomy?
    - So far, in education research, rarely



# Research and Reindeer



- Collecting “statistics and facts” has been national education function since 1867
- But overwhelmed by extraneous tasks: e.g., Alaska territory’s “reindeer service”



## The modern era: OE/NIE/OERI...

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- A vicious cycle:
  - Incentives to politicize, not insulate:
    - Lack of organized interest support
      - Except for regional labs and R&D centers
    - Legislative interest sporadic, except for earmarking opportunities
    - Lots of turnover
    - Research seen as political arm of administration,
    - And as “unscientific”/“obvious”/etc and thus not worthy of respect (or \$\$)

# Institute Envy

- Repeated desire is for NIH
  - Insulation from partisan buffeting
    - Non-politicized appointments
    - Prestigious, buffering advisory boards
    - Rigorous peer review
    - Lots of time, and cash
- But more like NH?





# The Politics of Insulation?

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- Desperation:
  - three strikes (NIE, OERI, ?) and you're out...
- Dividends of education research (e.g., phonics)
- Salience of measurement, standards
- Political window: election of President Bush
- NCLB stress on "scientifically-based research"
- ESRA, uniquely, as bipartisan vehicle for credit claiming towards accountability

# Creation of IES



- Still within ED, but:
  - Science, in statute
  - Fixed term for presidentially-appointed Director, NCES commissioner, board
    - Director: Level II on executive schedule, same as NSF
  - Advisory board with majority of researchers (plus NSF and NIH officials) with approval power over research priorities and peer review process
  - Technical assistance removed from organizational tasks, evaluation included



# So far, so good?

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- A “tipping point”?
  - Independence vis-à-vis administration as to “what works”
  - Peer review revamped
  - Separation of implementation from evaluation
- Or tipped over?
  - Too much science (narrowly defined)?
  - Too much centralized control (NCES, labs, centers)?
  - Too little departmental support (in prospect)?
- Key questions looking forward:
  - Do incentives match needs of research community?
  - If structure is in place, will politics continue to support it?



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