# The Politics of Knowledge

Educational research is growing increasingly important in policy debates. However, Mr. Hess points out, we know very little about how policy makers use that research.

BY FREDERICK M. HESS

IN RECENT years, the rigor and quality of educational research have drawn much attention. This increased interest has been driven by state efforts to collect student achievement data, the creation of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the explicit call for "scientifically based research" written into the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, professional interest in "data-driven decision making," and the refinement of sophisticated analytic tools and methods. Proponents have hailed these developments as the dawn of a new era in educational research. Meanwhile, more jaded observers have suggested that broader changes in the policy environment — including dissemination strategies of advocacy groups, the role of the Internet, the impatience of policy makers and foundations eager to spur rapid and dramatic improvement in measured student performance, and increasingly polarized political debate — have made it *less* likely that research — even when it is rigorous and reliable — will influence policy.

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Increased attention to educational research has primarily focused on the relative merits of various research methodologies, how to identify "best practices" or "scientifically based" methods, and how to encourage educators to make use of research findings. Far less consideration has been given to the frustratingly vague but vital challenge of understanding how research does or doesn't shape policy. In a new volume on "when research matters," being published this spring by Harvard Education Press, a team of scholars and I tackle that question, exploring when and why research influences policy; what role is played by intermediaries like scholarly journals, advocacy groups, and the press; and how these factors affect contemporary school reform. In this special section, several contributors to that volume — including Jeffrey Henig, Dan Goldhaber, Dominic Brewer, Lance Fusarelli, Richard Ingersoll, James Kim, and Andrew Rotherham — address the complicated relationship of research, policy, and schooling.

An emphasis on technical questions has obscured the reality that the impact of research on policy has as much to do with political behavior as with research design. In a democratic nation, where policy is the product of many competing interests, the influence of research and



*Image: Dynamic Graphics*

researchers will inevitably and appropriately be limited. Elected officials are rewarded for addressing the needs of their constituents. They may have valid reasons not to focus on the scientific merit of research — especially when "rigorous" research undermines a favored program or implies politically painful action. Appointees or career officials may be more insulated from popular sentiment, but they are ultimately funded by and accountable to legislators.

Meanwhile, researchers are isolated from the pressures that confront public officials. The logic of the research world suggests that financial, reputational, and professional rewards are ultimately distributed according to the importance, rigor, and genius of the scholar's work — rather than public popularity. The reality is inevitably more complex. Researchers can reap personal and professional rewards from "policy-relevant" scholarship and the dissemination of their findings, even when intermediaries misrepresent their work.

## IT'S NOT A QUESTION OF GETTING THE POLITICS 'OUT'

One frequent but ultimately unfruitful line of thought begins with the presumption that the primary goal for those concerned about the research/policy nexus is to keep "politics" from coloring the interpretation or use of research. This notion has strong historical roots that can be traced back at least to the progressive reformers of the early 20th century, who were fond of arguing that there "was no Republican or Democratic way to pave a road." Instead, they sought to base broad policy prescriptions on research-based "expertise." The reality, of course, is that expertise and research are contested terrains in a democratic nation.

When the progressives first brought social science to questions of policy in the early 1900s, they did so in unapologetically normative and political terms. The progressive tradition presumed that upstanding policy makers could turn to researchers, who would use objective criteria to identify optimal policies. Reforms typically involved regulation, new public spending, and the growth of government responsibilities, in the process aligning social science with what we think of today as "liberal" policy.

This state of affairs dominated the research/policy nexus until an aggressive challenge from free-market economists, ascendant conservative think tanks, and social scientists skeptical of what these effects had wrought began to question the cozy relationship between research and expansive progressive policies. Today, both the Right and the Left tout research to support their social policy agendas and to argue the merits of particular programs.

The modern era in educational research can be traced to the 1960s, when President Lyndon Johnson launched the first concerted federal effort to promote educational research and evaluation in his push for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. ESEA called for substantial new federal spending on education and educational research and sparked debates over how to measure the benefits of that spending.

In 1979, more than a decade after the enactment of ESEA and the same year that the Office of Educational Research and Innovation was created within the new Department of Education, Carol Weiss of Harvard University observed that policy makers were expressing increasing concern about the usefulness of publicly funded research. Weiss wrote: "There is mutual interest in whether social science research intended to influence policy is actually 'used,' but before that important issue can profitably be addressed it is essential to understand what 'using research' actually means."[1]

Weiss was perhaps the most prominent thinker tackling "knowledge utilization," a field that plumbed the relationship between research and policy during the 1970s and 1980s. The critical point made by scholars like Weiss and Nathan Caplan of the University of Michigan was that "using" research did not necessarily entail identifying simple answers that could translate into policy, but rather helping policy makers fully understand costs, benefits, possible unanticipated consequences, and challenges of implementation. Weiss noted that "governments don't often use research directly, but research helps people reconsider issues, it helps them think differently . . . it punctures old myths."[2] Research was valuable for its ability to change the way we understand key questions. Hampered by its ambiguous conclusions and limited ability to offer practical direction, "knowledge utilization" research was a vanishing presence by the early 1990s. Even as "evidence-based research" became a mantra for reformers, scholars of educational politics studied key questions in urban reform, accountability, and school choice — turning away from the question of why, when, or how their results might enter the policy debate.

This isn't to say that research has been ignored in the past 15 years — far from it. In fact, much energy has been devoted to two distinct but related issues. First, organizations like the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Education have assembled committees of leading scholars to provide guidance on the merits and limitations of various research methodologies. Second, much attention has been paid

to the challenge of translating "research into practice" so that findings are utilized by educators in classrooms and schools. These two issues are important in their own right, but they are not the focus here.

## THE UNEASY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY

Scientific research is typically a painfully uncertain and frustrating endeavor. As renowned biologist Stephen Jay Gould wryly lamented, "Over 90% of the day's work generally turns out to be for naught, and then you still have to clean out the mouse cage."[3] The desire to speedily identify "effective" educational interventions that will make a difference in a three- or five-year period yields a reluctance to accept the arduous realities of the scientific process. While researchers in both health care and education pursue advances with enormous personal stakes for individuals and for society, the health profession has won enough credibility that a substantial reservoir of support for basic research has developed, even though the benefits may not be visible for decades. However, lacking a similar history of successes, educational research has not earned similar trust or good will, and its advocates have been unsuccessful in making the case that research ought to be funded despite its painstaking pace and uncertain fruits.

In making the case for the creation of IES, Grover "Russ" Whitehurst, who now serves as its director, observed that the "world of education, unlike defense, health care, or industrial production, does not rest on a strong research base. In no other field are personal experience and ideology so frequently relied on to make policy choices, and in no other field is the research base so inadequate and little used."[4]

IES has the potential to change this landscape. The Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Reserve, and the National Institutes of Health are powerful examples of public institutions that have changed public expectations and the way that research informs policy. Their insulation from daily political imperatives, their protocols and rules of evidence, and their prestige have made it more difficult and potentially embarrassing for advocates or public officials to disregard rigorous research or engage in the research-related machinations common in education. While these institutions are not immune to the challenges confronting IES, and while their autonomy, prestige, and technical rigor have waxed and waned over time, their existence and design have profoundly shaped the relationship between research and relevant policy. NIH funding decisions, required FDA field protocols, and the Federal Reserve's data processes all have altered the incentives for researchers while establishing clear norms for the research that public officials use in their deliberations. Whether IES will ultimately play a similar role remains an open question.

## THE 'SOFT TISSUE' BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY

The contributors to this special section explore the various dimensions of the research/policy nexus and the "soft tissue" that connects these two worlds. They illustrate the crucial role that professional practices, informal incentives, and private actors play in determining how research is communicated and translated.

Among the key questions they address are: How have changes in technology, communications, and academe determined the quantity and quality of research entering the public square? How has research factored into various policy debates? How have institutional and environmental forces such as foundations, media outfits, and advocacy organizations affected the production and dissemination of research? And how do consumers of research — including elected officials, judges, educational leaders, and the public — understand and make use of findings?

Inattention to these questions has been, in part, a consequence of a reasonable desire to take advantage of newly available performance data and increasingly sophisticated methodological tools, both of which have enabled researchers to focus more concretely on what does or doesn't appear to advance student learning. A wave of valuable new research on the impact of various education reforms has resulted. The irony is that the issues of how research gets produced, disseminated, and utilized have been largely ignored at precisely the time when a quantum leap in the availability of data, the enactment of NCLB, the embrace of "scientifically based research," and the creation of IES have given these questions a new importance. While the contributions here propose no pat answers to thorny and complex challenges, their analyses may help prompt a new wave of thought, scholarship, and sober reflection.

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1. Carol Weiss, "The Many Meanings of Research Utilization," *Public Administration Review*, vol. 39, 1979, p. 426.
2. Fiona Graff and Miranda Christou, "In Evidence Lies Change: The Research of Whiting Professor Carol Weiss," *Harvard Graduate School of Education News*, 10 September 2001, available at http://gseweb.harvard.edu/news/features/weiss09102001.html.
3. Quoted in Gerald Holton, Introduction to "ERRORS: Consequences of Big Mistakes in the Natural and Social Sciences," *Social Research,* Spring 2005, www.newschool.edu/centers/socres/vol72/issue721.htm.
4. Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst, "Statement Before the Subcommittee on Education Reform, U.S. House of Representatives," available from http://ies.ed.gov/director/speeches2002/02_28/2002_02_28.asp. K

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