

Policy Update

U.S. House of Representatives Education and the Workforce Committee Hearing

“Education Research: Identifying Effective Programs to Support Students and Teachers”

Overview

Members of the U.S. House of Representatives Education and the Workforce Committee met on November 16, 2011 to discuss the role that education research plays in supporting quality teaching and learning, the appropriate level of federal involvement in research, and the ways to improve current law to provide more immediate and relevant data to parents and educators. The Education Science Reform Act (ESRA) of 2001 is up for reauthorization and the discussion highlighted that education research has been increasingly rigorous with quality standards and scientifically-proven methodologies because of this act. The following witnesses appeared before committee members to share their perspectives:

- Mr. Steve Fleischman, Director , Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, Portland, OR
- Dr. Caroline M. Hoxby, Scott and Donya Bommer Professor of Economics, Stanford University, Stanford, CA
- Dr. Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, Senior Fellow & Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Dr. Eric Smith , Former Florida Commissioner of Education, Florida Department of Education , Annapolis, MD

Dr. Whitehurst demonstrated the importance of the conversation: “Without good evidence on the condition of education, what works and what does not, fundamental processes of learning and instruction, and breakthrough instructional technologies we are destined to embrace education policies that move us forward, backward, and sideways without even knowing in which of those directions we’re heading.”

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) submitted questions to inform the discussion including how the federal government can provide more access to data that is collected at the state level and how the federal government can support the development of state education agencies longitudinal data systems.

Key Discussion Areas

Each panelist noted that we have learned quite important lessons since ESRA was first enacted, which created the Institute for Education Sciences housed at the U.S. Department of Education—including that teachers vary widely in effectiveness, “no excuses” charter schools in urban areas can do a dramatically better job at educating students to high levels than traditional public schools, and there is a very distinct difference between correlation and causation (Dr. Hoxby noted that prior to ESRA, there was a significant lack of scientific methods being used in education research).

The panelists warned the committee about using findings from research in program mandates. They cautioned that it is seemingly impossible for the federal government to accurately dictate how states and local education agencies should use research findings. Additionally, it was noted that there is a gap between the needs of the researcher and the needs of the practitioner; in order for research to be most effective, it must serve both interests. Collectively, the federal government, states and districts should think about how to centralize the best research and make it easier for practitioners to cull this data in their daily work.

Improvements to the law honed in on this question of how to disseminate research. While the idea of finding better ways to help states and school districts translate research into classroom practice was mentioned several times, no clear path forward was presented. Dr. Hoxby mentioned England’s system of school inspectors, who are researchers trained in connecting the data to practice in the classroom. She explained that these inspectors are provided the data on a specific classroom, spend hours (or days) observing the teacher, and then help relay best practices from research that could improve his or her practice. Dr. Hoxby stated, “We simply have not paralleled this in the U.S.”

Directly addressing similar questions that the NAPCS raised, in Dr. Whitehurst’s testimony, he noted that soon most states will have “data warehouses with longitudinal student achievement data linked to a variety of education input variables.” The trouble is, and all panelists agreed, that states need capacity to know what to do with that data, and need help with identifying further research from the data and that perhaps there is a role for the federal government to play. The federal government also has a role in offering incentives to states to use the data from research and the law can be updated to improve this work. Two categories were mentioned: a top-down approach as seen in regulatory incentives such as performance targets for schools; and a more market-based approach that will drive state and district changes. This can be accomplished by getting the data into the hands of parents and families to make more informed decisions for their children’s schooling.

For More Information

Visit the [Education and the Workforce Committee website](#) for the full testimonies of the witnesses and to watch footage of the hearing, or contact Chad A. Miller (cmiller@publiccharters.org) or Celia Alicata (celia@publiccharters.org).