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Buyers and Sellers of Education Research

By J.E. Stone

Tim Foley for the Chronicle

For investors, buying shares in Enron turned out to be a bad choice. People who should have been giving investors accurate information about the company misled them instead, chiefly because of conflicts of interest. For federal, state, and local policy makers, investing in education has had equally dismal results for essentially the same reason. The Bush administration's new Institute of Education Sciences is an attempt to correct the problem.

The institute replaces the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement and joins two other new agencies -- the Office of Innovation and Improvement and the What Works Clearinghouse -- in an effort to increase the scientific rigor of the research that educators and policy makers rely on.

Improvement is definitely needed. But will the new agencies avoid the pitfalls that doomed the efforts of their predecessors? Policy makers need to understand why past research has served them so poorly.

Organizations like the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the regional education laboratories, the state education agencies, university research centers, and many other groups supported by public funds have been advising policy makers for decades, yet they have rarely detected programs that have proved to be badly flawed. On the contrary, they have rarely found fault with anything that someone was willing to pay for.

As a result, policy makers have invested in countless innovations and reforms, few of which have produced meaningful improvement, many of which have been conspicuous failures, and all of which have been supported by "research." Not only have policy advisors failed to challenge dubious proposals, they have rarely subjected the underlying studies to the kind of post hoc analysis that would bring to light the human and financial consequences of subjecting children to poorly tested educational schemes.

Why? Because most purveyors of research-based advice aim to serve both buyers and sellers. Buyers may want to know what went wrong but the sellers of failed initiatives prefer a polite silence – and that's where the matter usually ends.

Conflicts of interest have plagued education research for decades. The National Diffusion Network, a Department of Education program that was terminated in 1996, provides a classic example. The NDN was created to disseminate exemplary school programs to local school districts. In the late 1970s, it recommended several compensatory-education models based on the Follow Through Project, a set of rigorous, large-scale trials similar to those the new Institute of Education Sciences intends to promote. However, instead of recommending only those models that were found to be effective, the NDN followed the recommendation of another federal body called the Joint Dissemination Review Panel and disseminated both the effective and the ineffective ones.

The NDN was charged with disseminating the best programs, but the educators who set the JDRP's internal rules favored some of the less effective programs because they required fewer new skills and permitted more creativity on the part of the teacher. Faced with the prospect of political backlash from the JDRP's constituency and from developers of the ineffective models, the NDN quietly sac-

rificed the public's interest in improved student achievement. The Institute of Education Sciences will face similar pressures.

Conflict of interest was similarly at the heart of Enron's demise. In the Enron case, the brokerage houses that provided financial research to investors were also in the investment banking business. They encouraged their analysts to give Enron a "buy" rating; and in return, Enron placed lucrative stock offerings for sale through their other corporate divisions.

Investors were taught a hard lesson: Sellers and buyers have competing interests. Sellers benefit from rosy assessments, but buyers benefit from candid ones. With little risk of discovery, organizations serving both sides of the market will sacrifice buyers' interests for their own. It is a lesson that education's investors -- that is, policy makers -- need to understand.

The research provided to policy makers is characteristically portrayed as impartial and objective, yet the parties that produce and disseminate it frequently have conflicts of interest. NDN's decision to avoid displeasure among its education constituents at the cost of misleading the public is a good example.

Self-evaluations are another example of research that is commonly influenced by conflict of interest. If studies are supportive, they are publicized. If they are unsupportive, they are typically dismissed as flawed or ignored.

A less obvious but equally potent form of conflict exists when programs hire outside contractors to assess their performance. For example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards recently awarded $6.6 million to 22 organizations to study various aspects of its teacher-certification process. Exhibiting some sensitivity to the conflict issue, NBPTS asked RAND to vet the proposals. Still, the recipients of these grants will be more likely to benefit if NBPTS is validated. An NBPTS supported even by the most equivocal evidence will be making grants for years to come -- but not likely to skeptics. Neither will NBPTS skeptics be a likely choice for other programs seeking a self-evaluation.

The tendency of program evaluators to see no evil is reflected in the scarcity of studies that draw attention to questionable or failed programs. Instead, faultfinding reports typically come from independent foundations and think tanks.

An education industry with billions to spend has no reason to hire critics, but the public certainly does. If evaluations rarely find fault with policies and innovations, their worth to education's investors and consumers must be questioned.

Last year I carried out a study of 16 Tennessee teachers who are certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Tennessee has an accountability system that objectively measures the ability of teachers in the third to eighth grades to improve students' achievement. Of the 41 teachers in the state who have been certified by the NBPTS, 16 have scores in that system. All 16 were rated merely as average, not exceptional – as their certification implies.

The study was small, but it remains the only one to examine the relationship between NBPTS certification – which often results in substantial raises for teachers – and objectively measured student achievement. Moreover, it is the only one that suggests that the NBPTS should stop certifying teachers until it can clearly demonstrate the value of its credential.

Given my findings, I expected the NBPTS to be displeased. What I did not expect was a hurried announcement from an admirer of the NBPTS, the Education Commission of the States, that it would convene a panel of "unbiased, distinguished educators and researchers" to review my study.

That panel concluded that my results might not be widely applicable, yet the central finding remained: In 16 of 16 cases, NBPTS certification failed to signify high-quality teaching. The implication for policy makers who had invested in the NBPTS was obvious.

The conflict of interest faced by the ECS was obvious as well. In a letter accompanying the panel report, ECS President Ted Sanders acknowledged that there was no research showing that NBPTS-certified teachers are more effective than any others; yet he carefully avoided suggesting that the absence of evidence was any reason for policy makers not to spend millions of dollars on the NBPTS certification program.

By taking a wait-and-see approach, ECS appeared to be prudent and cautious. In truth, ECS was making a virtue of necessity. ECS serves both buyers and sellers, and it was attempting to straddle the line between them.

It is inevitable that education initiatives with millions of dollars to spend will attract lots of friends. Resisting their influence will be a tough challenge for the Institute of Education Sciences and its sister agencies.

What can increase the new agencies' chance for success is an increased awareness of conflict of interest's role in past failures, and a more sophisticated approach to finding investor-friendly sources of advice on education.

Like the now-chastened Enron investors, policy makers need to give greater weight to sources that have minimal conflicts of interest, and especially those sources that are demonstrably faithful to the interests of investors and consumers – that is, those sources that give both "buy" and "sell" recommendations.

Here are questions that a policy maker might ask when seeking a source for research-based advice on education:

- Have they questioned the merits of any of the unsuccessful education reforms of the last 30 years or so, particularly before the money to support the reform ran out?
- Have they endorsed or promoted any of those same reforms?
- Have they assessed the human and financial costs of failures, or taken steps to help policy makers (and themselves) avoid making the same mistakes in the future?
- Do they aim to serve both buyers and sellers?

Public education is a regulated monopoly staffed by professionals whose aims and priorities do not necessarily match those of parents, policy makers, and the public. It is simply a convenient fiction that the gap between the professionals and the other groups can be bridged by an overriding commitment to what is best for children, or to a balanced or unbiased view of education.

Policy makers need watchdogs that bark, not agencies whose desire for self-preservation overrides their loyalty to investors and prevents all but the most oblique criticisms. To find out whether the new agencies in the Department of Education are loyal to education's investors, policy makers will need to pay attention to their performance, not their rhetoric.

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