

ECF Education Briefs

Issues in Public Education: Research and Analysis
from the Education Consumers Foundation

November 2002 • v2n11

**Bringing Evidence-Driven Progress to Education:
A Recommended Strategy for the U.S.
Department of Education
Report of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy**

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Found online at http://education-consumers.org/research/briefs_1102.htm



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Bringing Evidence-Driven Progress to Education: A Recommended Strategy for the U.S.

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Report of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy

J. E. Stone

Weak research is a chronic problem in education. It has yielded schooling practices founded on little more than pet theories and idealistic causes.

The enactment of the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) act, with its central principle that federal funds should support education reforms backed by “scientifically-based research,” inspired the authors of this report to suggest how the requirement should be implemented.

They note that over three decades, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that the United States has made almost no progress in raising student achievement, despite a 90 percent increase in real-dollar spending. By contrast, health care has improved enormously within the same time frame.

The Coalition links this academic stagnation to the use of classroom interventions which go in and out of fashion with little regard to sound evidence of whether they work. Their suggestion:

- Using randomized trials, build a knowledge base of proven educational interventions
- Provide strong incentives for the school-system-recipients of federal education funds to use them.

Randomized trials are urged because they are far more rigorous and accurate than the research designs typically used in education. They greatly lessen the likelihood of erroneous conclusions and, thus, are routinely used in medical studies of drug effectiveness.

Despite their superior credibility, randomized trials are not often used in educational research. Instead of well-tested interventions, schools adopt popular fads, which are eventually replaced by some newer fad. Coalition member Robert Slavin describes the problem in his 1998 book *Show Me the Evidence! Proven and Promising Programs for America's Schools*:

Change in educational practice more resembles change in fashion; hemlines go up and down according to popular tastes, not evidence. We do give lip service to research in education. Yet practices....go in and out of fashion, often in direct contradiction to well-established evidence, but more often in the absence of adequately rigorous and compelling research.

A recent example is the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program. Now nearly 20 years old, it sucked up millions of dollars before several randomized trials showed that it has little or no effect on drug use among students.

Taken at face value, the Coalition's recommendations are intended to align education's scientific knowledge base to more rigorous requirements. However, the fact that the professional education community has failed to make these improvements on its own suggests a deeper issue.

In truth, not only have few educational interventions undergone randomized trials, the few that have been thoroughly tested and proven are not extensively used. For example, the best-supported interventions funded under the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (1997) have not been chosen for implementation nearly as often as ones that are less well supported.

Left to their own devices, educators choose interventions that agree with their preferences, not the ones proven effective in producing student achievement. The true impediment to "evidence-driven progress" in education is not so much a lack of knowledge or convincing evidence; it is an active preference for teaching styles that fail to optimize achievement.

Until recently, minimal accountability, limited competition, and routine budget increases have given educators little reason to seek demonstrably effective approaches. Instead, they tend to choose interventions that are familiar and convenient—often the faulty practices of an earlier era labeled with a new name. For example, variants of child-centered instruction have been used repeatedly since the late 1800s.

Will the Coalition's recommendations make a difference in the quality of the research implemented by schools? Perhaps, but enduring changes in teaching practices will come about only if educator preferences are reshaped by the need to produce improved achievement.

The U. S. Department of Education's (USDOE) past attempts to improve educational practice through better research have mostly bounced off of the local schools. For example, *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning* (1986) contained well-validated recommendations but was largely ignored. Another example: In the late seventies, the USDOE's National Diffusion Network (NDN) ended up deferring to teacher sentiment regarding research it was asked to disseminate. NDN's mission was to promote the use of the most effective teaching models from the Follow Through project. Owing to pressure from educators, however, it funded and disseminated both the effective models and the more popular ineffective ones.

The Coalition's recommendations are a step in the right direction. Randomized trials will enable more certain and accurate conclusions about which interventions are best. A knowledge base that identifies both proven and disproven practices will be particularly helpful.

Yet without market conditions that make achievement the top priority, educators are apt to stick with what they know and find comfortable. Achievement outcomes will not improve until effective interventions are embraced and implemented.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com