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Private Sector Alternatives for Preventing Reading Failure

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Private Sector Alternatives for Preventing Reading Failure

Patrick Groff

The No Child Left Behind Act calls for greater reliance on rigorous educational research. But is a shortage of rigorous studies the real problem?

In 1987, Professor Patrick Groff reported that the U. S. was experiencing a literacy crisis brought on by faulty instruction in the schools of education. In agreement with a 1967 book by Harvard's Jeanne Chall, Groff found that research clearly favored the use of early, direct, systematic, and intensive phonics. By contrast, reading professors were teaching a popular theory that is now called "whole language." Groff suggested that schools of education were able to teach theory and ignore research because teacher licensure requirements insulated them from competition.

Thirteen years later, the National Institute of Child Health and Development's National Reading Panel found that Groff was right. It reaffirmed that phonics is critical to effective reading instruction and is still being ignored by the schools of education. Had Groff's assessment been heeded, the reform of reading instruction now underway might have begun a decade ago.

Why No Action in 1987

Groff's analysis was published by the National Advisory Council on Educational Research and Improvement and given wide exposure by an Education Week Commentary. Yet, instead of precipitating a closer examination of the issue, it was largely ignored.

Some scholars may not have agreed with Groff and others may have been avoiding controversy. But why did the numerous public and private organizations that advise policymakers and the public regarding educational research not follow up on the issue? If, for example, the U. S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), or the regional educational research laboratories, or the state departments of

education, or a number of the other entities that advise policymakers had publicly called for a review of the training given reading teachers, the problem might not have festered for another 13 years. The research on which Groff based his conclusions was available to all. And all of these agencies render opinions on other research and policy issues.

No Action on Follow Through

The inaction of research and policy organizations in response to Groff's report is not the only or even the most egregious instance of polite silence regarding a significant disconnect between educational research and practice. The Follow Through project of the sixties and seventies investigated nine methodologies for teaching disadvantaged children and found that an approach called Direct Instruction was clearly the most effective. Like phonics, Direct Instruction was at odds with the teaching practices taught in the schools of education; and like phonics, it was given its due many years later.

Follow Through was federally funded and still stands as the largest educational experiment in history. In the late seventies, a federally appointed committee of experts called the Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP) was responsible for recommending research-based practices to the schools through OERI's National Diffusion Network. However, instead of endorsing Direct Instruction, the JDRP concluded that all of the Follow Through models produced some positive effects (i.e., favorable attitudes) and, therefore, should be recommended and additionally funded--clearly a politicized and controversial outcome.

A Current Example of Inaction

A current example bears mentioning. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was launched 1987 for the purpose of setting advanced teacher certification standards. Currently over 15,000 teachers have been certified, many awarded substantial salary increases.

Remarkably, no one has shown that NBPTS certification is related to objectively measured improvements in student achievement. Yet the great majority of research and policy organizations--particularly the state departments of education--have been strongly supportive. In fact, when a recent study of state accountability data in Tennessee found only average achievement gains for NBPTS teachers, the Education Commission of the States questioned it on the grounds that it might needlessly delay implementation of the popular initiative.

Needed: Watchdogs that Bark

The cold shoulder given unwelcome findings is instructive not only because it shows how research is filtered on its way to policymakers but for what it says about the task confronting the federal initiative designed to correct the problem: The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC).

Over the last 20 or 30 years, education research and policy organizations have had numerous opportunities to caution policymakers about ill-founded fads or to urge the adoption of unpopular but promising practices. With exceptions, they have remained silent or blended their recommendations with prevailing educational opinion despite conflicting or absent research. The real problem has not been a lack of credible research but a reluctance to alert policymakers when research disagrees with educator opinion.

Will the WWC succeed where most policy and research groups fail, or will it become another JDRP?

Only time will tell. Good watchdogs bark--and not at the night watchman or only after the burglar is gone. If the WWC does its job, it will voice its observations even when they contradict orthodoxy and even when other authorities fall silent.

Ill-conceived policies and innovations have robbed children, parents, and taxpayers for decades. Attention to rigorous research will help, but watchdogs that will bark are what's really needed.

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