

Educational Research Centers: The Promise of Sound Research



The field of educational policy research has undergone a dramatic transformation. Just a few decades ago, policy analyses were almost exclusively conducted by government agencies themselves. Academic researchers slowly entered the field, but the relationship between academically-inspired policy research and policymakers was tenuous and haphazard (Sundquist, 1978; Weiss, 1995). Over the past twenty years, though, the rapid growth of nongovernmental and nonacademic organizations dedicated to educational policy reform has shifted the policymaking landscape. Advocacy groups, nonprofits, think tanks, consultants, and interests groups produce copious amounts of research with varying degrees of rigor and varying degrees of bias. The influx of research from these sources has been coupled with a simultaneous increase in the amount of policy research produced by academics and governmental bodies, and the sheer quantity of research is all the more overwhelming as the complexity and sophistication of policy analysis as a field continues to grow. Ironically, then, policymakers concerned with education find themselves in a notable predicament: they work in an environment where they have access to more research than ever before, but it may be more difficult than ever to find high quality and trustworthy research.

In 2006, the 79th Texas Legislature, 3rd Called Session, devised an innovative solution to this problem by providing for the

Abstract

Education Research Centers (ERCs), created by the Texas Legislature in 2006, are invaluable tools for getting rigorous and unbiased research into the hands of policymakers. Continued legislative support of these institutions is crucial for their future viability and capacity to inform the most vexing educational problems in the state.

development of independent Education Research Centers (ERCs). Regarded by the US Department of Education as “a model approach for the conduct of independent educational research in accordance with FERPA requirements,” the ERCs can be an invaluable asset to educational policymakers. Unfortunately, some stakeholders would prefer to see these centers disappear to ensure that evidence contrary to their ideological positions does not surface. This would be bad for informed policymaking but even worse for the nearly five million children in the state. The continued support of the ERCs is crucial to maintaining our state’s goal of academic excellence for all students.

Concerns with Educational Research

In order to fully understand the importance of the ERCs, it is beneficial to review the most common criticisms of educational research to see how the ERCs are well designed to overcome these shortcomings. Below are

of the most common criticisms of educational research:

Irrelevance: While thousands of academics across the country have built their careers on educational research, policymakers continue to lament that much of this research is not practically useful (Feuer, Towne & Shavelson, 2002). This may be an inevitable consequence of the current system of incentives at the university level. Academics are rewarded for publishing scholarly work in journals and contributing to the development of theory in their field rather than for contributing to the development of policy (Kirst, 2000). Because of this, some of the most respected research in the field of education is completely ill-suited to the needs of policymakers. The ERCs address this concern both by working closely with the legislature and other state education agencies and by conducting research specified by bills and riders passed by the legislature or required by the state education agencies. This facet of the ERCs ensures that they deliver timely and relevant research into the hands of policymakers.

Distance: Academics often criticize policymakers for not relying enough on research, but this may be caused more by the structures and networks of relationships between policymakers and researchers than the intent of policymakers themselves. A lack of connection between these disparate communities often prevents the effective utilization of research (Kirst, 2000). Lomas (2000) argued that “better links between research and decision making depends on the two communities [of researchers and policymakers] finding points of exchange at more than the ‘product’ stage of each of their processes” (p. 1). Two aspects of the ERCs represent improvements to this situation. First, the heads of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas

Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) serve on the advisory board for the ERCs, ensuring a close link at least between the ERCs and the governmental bodies responsible for responding to educational legislation and implementing policy. And second, many of the research projects conducted by the ERCs are managed by TEA and THECB, which then disseminates the findings directly to policymakers. Thus, the structure of the ERCs ensures a much closer connection between policymakers and the research community.

Bias: It is nearly impossible to definitively say that educational research today is more biased than it used to be. However, many researchers and policymakers alike have become increasingly concerned by research driven by ideology rather than evidence. Professors at the University of Colorado at Boulder were so alarmed they created the Think Tank Project, an expert panel of academics that critically reviews the “research” being produced by many of the nation’s leading think tanks. Their analyses led them to conclude that “many of the nation’s most influential reports are little more than junk science” that are “slickly produced—yet ideologically driven” (Welner & Molnar, 2007). Even government agencies that produce research may fall prey to ideological agendas given their connections to the political realm (National Research Council, 2002). While bias can never be eradicated from research, relying on independent, nonpartisan organizations such as the ERCs increases the likelihood that research will not be intentionally and systematically skewed to support a particular policy agenda, as is often the case.

Lack of Rigor: Another common critique is that there is a lack of rigor in the educational research that gets used in policymaking,

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both methodologically and in the quality of interpretations and policy recommendations (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Feuer, Towne & Shavelson, 2002; Nutley, 2003). As mentioned previously, the advances made in the field of policy analysis have increased the complexity of policy research, but many of the most prolific think tanks and interest groups appear to be unfamiliar with these methodological advances, resulting in suboptimal research quality (Welner & Molnar, 2007). The ERCs ameliorate this situation by relying on some of the most renowned researchers in the field to ensure that they produce research that is consistently rigorous.

Threats to ERCs

While the ERCs avoid some of the most important shortcomings of educational research and are a promising strategy for informing educational policymaking, they are threatened by two main factors. First, in the current budget deficit, some lawmakers assume that the ERCs are draining valuable resources from the core processes of teaching and learning and should therefore be shut down. This is simply not the case. The ERCs are designed to be self-sustaining organizations that use grant money and external funding to finance their own operations and allow government agencies such as TEA to recoup any expenses incurred from supporting the ERCs.

Second, while the ERCs are designed to be shielded from politics to ensure academic integrity and decrease ideological bias, the governance structure of the ERCs may not be perfectly designed to accomplish this goal. The Commissioner of TEA, who is appointed by the governor, currently serves as a voting member on the advisory board for the ERC which approves or denies all research proposals. The Commissioner of

THECB, who is appointed by the members of the THECB who are themselves appointed by the governor, also serves in this capacity. This governance structure of the ERCs has the potential to thwart research that may appear to be politically undesirable, even if it is extremely important to improve the success of Texas students.

Policy Recommendations

The ERCs are a promising strategy for bridging the gap between educational researchers and academics on the one hand and policymakers on the other. However, these institutions will become powerless to fulfill their purpose without the continued support of legislators and freedom from political interference.

The policy recommendations are straightforward. First, legislators should continue to support the ERCs by ensuring that legislation is in place that maintains the existence of the ERCs and requires state agencies to provide them with the data they need to conduct their research. As organizations that provide so much benefit without placing any additional financial burden on the state, the ERCs can continue to thrive even in an environment of deficit and budget crisis.

Second, the Commissioners of TEA and THECB should continue to serve on the advisory board that approves research proposed by the ERCs, but their status should be changed to non-voting ex officio members to ensure that they do not wield undue political influence. This is key to ensuring that high quality and relevant research is not stifled simply because the findings may not conform to the political whims of the executive branch. Academic freedom must be preserved for the ERCs to be truly independent and nonpartisan.

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