

Oral Testimony

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Education Commission of the States

Hearing on

“Education Research: Exploring Opportunities to Strengthen the Institute of Education Sciences”

Education and the Workforce Committee

U.S. House of Representatives

September 10, 2013

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kathy Christie. I am Vice President, Knowledge/Information Management & Dissemination for the Education Commission of the States (ECS). ECS was created by states, for states, nearly 50 years ago.

- We help states learn what other states are doing, what new ideas are emerging, and what the research says.
- We provide unbiased information. We don't advocate for certain education policies and we don't pick sides.
- We are the only state-focused, national organization that works across all levels and sectors of education—from pre-K to postsecondary—and across branches of government.

The strength of the evidence underpinning policy levers and initiatives is critical to the success of the policy process. But policymakers seldom know what the evidence says on every issue. Much depends on the quality of their staff and whether they know where to go to find an evidence base.

And yet they have to make decisions every day—whether they can answer these questions or not. That's why having timely, succinct and understandable research available is so important and why organizations like ECS play a vital role.

National Perspective

My role at ECS lets me sit in a national crows' nest, watching the horizon for the education problems states are struggling with and for what they are doing to solve those problems. But it is difficult to make sure that every education committee chair, governor's advisor, state superintendent, governing board member and higher education entity knows about our resources. We very much understand the difficulties of getting good research into the hands of those who can do something about it.

The Institute for Education Sciences has some entities available to attempt to address some of these needs, including Regional Education Laboratories (commonly known as RELs), comprehensive centers, and content centers. In the past, the production from RELs and centers seemed uneven. Resources seemed to take a long time to come to fruition, and by the time they did, sometimes the window of opportunity to inform decisions had passed. And decision-makers were not always at the table to set the agenda.

Today the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is building a strong base of easily accessible program reviews and pointing toward interventions that work—and that don't work. Summaries are now less academic and easier to follow. Practice guides provide good direction. Conclusions are presented in a more straightforward manner. Readers can easily access areas by topic. IES might consider how to more clearly distinguish between 1) findings regarding whether studies meet standards of evidence and 2) whether programs impact learning. Overall, however, the site has improved greatly. We link to WWC by issue area, which is an efficient way to immediately capture updates for our constituents.

In addition, content centers on issues of importance to states such as turnarounds and state capacity can be spot on for meeting state needs. But IES could work to ensure that vetting and review for activities and outputs does not inhibit the development of timely, relevant, digestible research and assistance.

The Best Evidence Encyclopedia, which has funding ties to IES, is another excellent resource. And my understanding of the new breed of RELS is that they are working to establish research alliances across those states—with state leaders at the table.

To put these entities in perspective, I'd like to highlight what's good about one of my favorite sources—the National Bureau for Economic Research. Nearly every week I get an message highlighting several of their new studies. These studies are relevant to the problems I see states struggling with—such as compulsory attendance. They are timely. They are prolific. IES could look to this model for improving relevance and timeliness.

Like most academic studies, these are so academic that most people are not going to read them. And for the most part, they are not openly accessible. So ECS is working to translate studies like this and capture the key findings, and recommendations in our Research Studies Database. We organize them by frequently asked questions such as “Preschool: How prepared do teachers need to be?” Since 2008, we have entered 193 studies. We are very thankful to the GE Foundation for supporting this work.

The reason for this effort is clear: When busy people ask “what does the research say,” any response to that question needs to be timely, relevant, digestible and trusted.

Here are the four final points I would like to make:

1. **Research matters** not only to those implementers in the field—the superintendents, principals and teachers—but to those who are committed to improving the system of education.
2. **The gold standard matters.** But while optimal, it is not always possible. The real world will continue to demand that policies be crafted based on hypotheses that are “relatively well” supported by evidence or where the early evidence is “promising.” IES could do a better job of ensuring 1) that topics fit with what matters to states; 2) that its research helps answer not only “which programs work” but also which **policies** or **state investments** hold promise--and **which elements** of those policies matter most so that state-level elected officials might act on them.
3. IES needs state leaders to perceive it as an **unbiased, honest broker**, so increasing the independence of IES could be key.
4. IES should consider a coordinated effort to **transparently evaluate and hold itself accountable on a set of performance measures that are important to states.**