

Written Testimony

Kathy Christie

Vice President, Knowledge/Information Management & Dissemination

Education Commission of the States

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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). The Education Commission of the States (ECS) was created by states, for states, almost 50 years ago.

Since 1965, ECS has worked with state policymakers to improve America’s public P-20 education system. We provide unbiased knowledgeable advice to state leaders and help them to learn from one another’s experiences. What makes ECS unique in the crowded education policy arena is that we work with policymakers, researchers, thought leaders and practitioners across all levels and sectors of education—from pre-K to postsecondary—and across branches of government. We are the only state-focused national organization that brings together governors, state legislators, chief state school officers, higher education officials, and business leaders to advance policies that improve our educational system. To accomplish this work, we undertake the following kinds of activities:

- We help states learn what other states are doing, identify best practices, what new ideas in education 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.

- Our website is one of the best in the country to find information on hundreds of education issues. You can check out our website or call us directly; either way, we will provide the information that's needed.

Most people are not aware that it was ECS — the only nationwide interstate compact for education — which was responsible for the creation of NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It is this kind of state collaboration and state insight that makes ECS unique. The message I bring here today is about the power of state-level leaders to make a difference in the educational opportunities available to children.

State Leaders Influence System-Level Reforms

Policymakers at every level in states—chief state school officers, governing board members, legislators, and governors—all have a role to play in developing and implementing education initiatives. Very often these various policy actors have different opinions about how laws should be shaped. Consequently, evidence related to the hypotheses that underpin state-level policies and evidence on the relative effectiveness of state-level initiatives are critical to the success of the policy process.

They hope, and we do too, that the decisions they make will drive improvements in what can be a large, bureaucratic system. A constituent of ours once described the education system as a big pillow. You punch it—and make a big dent, but gradually that dent disappears and the pillow puffs out to its original shape. You punch it again, making another dent. But after a bit the pillow again puffs back out to its original shape. We all understand how tough it is to make real change.

State-level 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. Even when they have capable staff with sufficient time, it can be a challenge to gather and prepare evidence in a way that allows policymakers to quickly understand whether it is sufficiently robust to support the decision they will make.

When considering a hypothesis behind a bill, legislators routinely ask: What is the level of evidence supporting this proposal? Is it minimal, with a higher risk to success? Is there some evidence available, but it fails to highlight the most critical factors that need to be in the policy? Or is there extensive preliminary research and piloting, with interventions that have been aligned at all levels and across agencies —a sufficiently robust knowledge base on which to guide large-scale decisions?

And yet state legislators 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 in state-level education policy.

National Perspective

My role at the Education Commission of the States lets me sit in a national crows' nest, watching the horizon —across state boundaries—for the education problems states are struggling with and for what they are doing to solve those problems. ECS scans news clippings every day and pushes the most relevant

out via email – every day. We track the policies that state legislators are enacting, and we add them every week to the most extensive, freely- available database of its kind in the country. Every day we are culling from the professional and academic literature and pushing the best back out via our web site. But it is difficult to make sure that every chair of an education committee, every governor’s education policy advisor, every state superintendent, every state board member and every higher education agency head knows about those resources. We very much understand the difficulties of getting good research into the hands of those who can do something about it. And these challenges don’t even begin to touch the difficulty of reaching every legislator and agency head and governing board member across the country.

What I have learned in over 20 years with ECS is that we reinvent the wheel time and time again. Policymakers don’t pay enough attention to history. We might read the research and go, “oh, yeah, that’s right” but then we too often jump at some new shiny, glittery answer or lobby for a new research study rather than taking time to unearth the root cause of a problem or step back to analyze the existing research—the research that while there, might not be broadly available or is so incomprehensible, we don’t know what to make of it.

The Institute of 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. Past RELS seemed uneven in production of resources, particularly those that might remain relevant and useful long after individual instances of technical assistance or convenings. Resource development or projects 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 accessible program reviews and pointing toward interventions that work—and that don’t work. WWC has improved over time. Summaries are now less academic and easier to follow. Practice guides provide good direction for practitioners. Conclusions are presented in a more straightforward manner. Readers can easily access areas related to specific topics. IES might consider how to more clearly distinguish between 1) findings regarding whether studies meet standards of evidence and 2) evaluations of actual program effects on learning. Overall, however, the site has improved greatly. ECS is able to link to WWC issue areas via relevant topic areas (e.g., literacy) on www.ecs.org, so as studies are added to WWC, it is not necessary for us to add each new review to our site. This is efficient and immediately captures updates for our constituents.

Content centers that focus on topics that matter to states--turnarounds and state capacity, for example--can be spot on for meeting state needs. IES might review processes to ensure that vetting and review processes for activities and outputs of these new centers and for the new RELs does not inhibit the development of timely, relevant, digestible research and assistance.

The Best Evidence Encyclopedia is another excellent resource: a free web site created by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education's Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education (CDDRE) under funding from the Institute of Education Sciences. And my understanding of the new breed of Regional Education Labs (RELS) is that they are working to determine what states need and helping to establish research alliances across those states—with state leaders at the table. But like many education policy

organizations, including ECS, RELs may struggle to raise awareness of available resources and how they can support their states and school districts.

From my crows' nest, I seek out and cull research reports from the comprehensive centers and the content centers—although some are more prolific than others.

To put this comment in perspective, I'd like to highlight what's good about one of my favorite entities—the National Bureau for Economic Research. Every week I get an email summarizing the education studies they have completed. Every week. Not four per year. Not one per month. Every week. They're called Working Papers, so one's immediate assumption is that they are food for thought—not to be considered definitive, but findings to think about. Why are they so compelling? They are relevant to the problems I see states struggling with—like compulsory attendance, for instance. Does the age at which kids start school matter? Does the cut-off age (5 by September 1, for example) for attendance matter? Does the upper compulsory attendance age make a difference over the course of a lifetime? NBER studies are relevant and timely. They look at the types of issues that governors and state legislatures can influence via policy. They are prolific producers of what most would agree is quality research.

These studies are dense. Their titles are often just abysmal and if they were movies, no one would buy tickets (e.g. Interpreting the Evidence on Life Cycle Skill Formation), even though they have much to offer. They are so academic that most state policymakers—or their excellent staff—are not going to read them. The same goes for studies coming out of AERA. And for the most part, the studies are not openly accessible. But they have something to say to you. And to state legislators. And to governors. So ECS is working to translate studies like this and capture the key findings, recommendations, and implications for policy in its Research Studies Database. We organize them by frequently asked questions such as “Preschool: How prepared do teachers need to be?” or “High school curriculum: How important is rigor?” Since 2008, we have entered key findings and policy implications from 193 studies into The ECS Research Studies Database. We are very thankful to the GE Foundation for supporting this work.

The database could be easier to use. It could be “prettier.” We have created standards for inclusion, and an important standard is that studies need to have appeared in peer-reviewed journals. But we do make exceptions.

For example, I personally mined **Crossing the Finish Line**—a 2009 book by William Bowen, Matthew Chingos and Michael McPherson—names probably familiar to many in this room—that looked at what impacts student persistence and success across postsecondary institutions. Compelling, compelling statements built from statistical analyses are buried throughout, but they were most certainly read by more academics and higher education leaders than by policymakers. The authors' analysis supports, for example, the clearly articulated statement that “both parental education and family income are strongly associated with graduation rates even after controlling for related differences in student characteristics, particularly academic preparation. However, family income, not parental education, is primarily responsible for the overall relationship between SES and time-to-degree.”

If another credible, vetted resource emerges to counter such findings, ECS will not hesitate to include it in the database as well.

As exceptions to the peer-review rule, we include NBER studies, many of which eventually are published in peer-reviewed journals – but in the interim, they reflect the food for thought that state leaders need.

Do enough state leaders know about this resource? No. Have we been successful in marketing it? Probably not. We always include new studies in our weekly e-newsletter, e-Connection, and they always get the most hits; regrettably, we have not been particularly successful in marketing its availability.

The reason we acted, though, is clear. When a consistent element of questions is “what does the research say?” the response 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 in 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 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. In that regard, IES might want to consider a **coordinated effort to transparently evaluate** and hold itself accountable on a set of performance measures that are important to states.