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BASE FOR *A BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM***

William J. Mathis and Kevin G. Welner
University of Colorado at Boulder
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National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: 303-735-5290
Fax: 303-492-7090

Email: NEPC@colorado.edu
<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

Kevin Welner

Editor

Alex Molnar

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Erik Gunn

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INTRODUCTION: ASSESSING THE RESEARCH BASE FOR *A BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM*

William J. Mathis and Kevin G. Welner, University of Colorado at Boulder

In March 2010, the Obama administration released *A Blueprint for Reform*,¹ setting forth its proposed revisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). If enacted, the *Blueprint* will shape the curriculum, standards, assessment and accountability systems of schools throughout the nation. It will also determine how and where federal education funds will be targeted. It will further increase federal control over K-12 education and help fund a greater private-sector role in the operation of public schools. Mirroring the administration's *Race to the Top* competitive grant priorities, the *Blueprint* pushes states to adopt its preferred policies and practices.

In advancing this agenda, President Obama and education secretary Arne Duncan maintain that the administration's recommendations are grounded in research. President Obama, speaking about *Race to the Top*, said, "This competition will not be based on politics, ideology, or the preferences of a particular interest group. Instead, it will be based on a simple principle—whether a state is ready to do 'what works.'"² The administration has recently reprised this assertion, saying that the proposals presented in the *Blueprint* were chosen because they work. The *Blueprint* reiterates: "Priority may be given to programs, projects, or strategies on the strength of their evidentiary base" (p. 41).

Two months after the release of the *Blueprint*, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) issued a set of six documents, presented as summaries of "the research that supports the proposals in the blueprint," in order, it said, "to inform conversations around ESEA reauthorization and the reforms that research shows are necessary."³ The six reports roughly paralleled sections of the *Blueprint*:

- **College- and Career-Ready Students**
- **Great Teachers and Great Leaders**
- **Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners and Other Diverse Learners**
- **A Complete Education**
- **Successful, Safe and Healthy Schools**
- **Fostering Innovation and Excellence**

As an extension of our ongoing *Think Tank Review Project*, the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) asked prominent scholars to examine the administration's six research summaries and assess how well they represent the full body of knowledge in these areas. We are

grateful that such accomplished researchers were willing to devote their time and effort to these important reviews, and we thank them for their contributions.

Learning from History

In 1986, President Reagan’s secretary of education, William Bennett, released a report, *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, with the stated purpose of distributing accepted research findings nationwide to education policymakers. Prepared by the assistant secretary of education for research and improvement, Chester Finn, with the help of Herbert Walberg and several others, the *What Works* report set forth clear, definite findings such as, “Children get a better start in reading if they are taught phonics” (p. 21).⁴

Gene Glass, writing in 1987 in *Educational Researcher* – the flagship publication of the American Educational Research Association – analyzed *What Works* and reached conclusions similar to those reached by our reviewers of the Obama administration documents:

Nearly all of what has been included in *What Works* is ideologically consistent with what was evident as the policies of the Reagan administration in its early years (before *What Works* appeared). One can imagine that the contents of *What Works* were determined more by this political ideology than by a pluralistic reading of the body of educational research. (p. 8.)⁵

Professor Glass concluded with an observation that helps us frame today’s set of reviews:

Many people’s first reaction to the content of *What Works* is to rail against what they regard as the small-mindedness of its compilers; to claim dishonesty, stupidity, or madness; or to charge the administration with censorship or at least manipulation. But outrage blinds one to the larger lesson to be learned: the lesson of how politics (of all types) uses research. The selection of research to legitimize political views is an activity engaged in by governments at every point on the political compass. ... [What Works] is not an encyclopedia of findings of research on school teaching and learning, nor is it a pluralistic and neutral taking stock of the corpus of educational research; it is, *mirabile dictu*, a political document. *What Works* does not synthesize research, it invokes it in a modern ritual seeking legitimation of the Reagan administration’s policies; *What Works* does this and, lest one forget, previous administrations have done the same. (p. 9.)⁶

As we see in the following reviews, little has changed. The wary realism that Glass articulated in 1987 remains just as appropriate today.

Clear Patterns

The six reviews were independently undertaken. While each review has its own specific findings, it is striking that strong overarching themes emerged from the individual reviews:

The Research Summaries Are of Inadequate Quality

Each of our reviewers concluded that the overall quality of the summaries is far below what is required for a national policy discussion of critical issues. Each of the summaries was found to give overly simplified, biased and too-brief explanations of complex issues.

Clive Belfield finds in his review that “it is unclear why the administration would not choose to present a truly comprehensive and rigorous empirical defense of its *Blueprint* priorities.” Other reviewers were more forceful in their condemnations. Paul Shaker writes, “It offers itself as a targeted review of teacher education knowledge when it is in fact a partisan political text that starts with a conclusion and then finds evidence to support it.”

Vital Omissions

Although the U. S. Department of Education’s six research summaries cover the majority of the proposals in the *Blueprint*, critically important proposals are ignored. Given their importance, the failure to address them is deeply troubling. Among the critical omissions are:

The Accountability System Is Missing.

The accountability system, which determines how schools will be evaluated, is arguably the linchpin of the entire *Blueprint* proposal. It is simply absent from the research document.

Intervention Models.

The section of the *Blueprint* describing the controversial “intervention models” (p. 12) for low-scoring schools is not developed, much less supported in the research document.

Competitive Grants Not Addressed

Although the federal education budget is basically level-funded, some old appropriations and all new appropriations are to be allocated through competitive grants. How the proposed competitive grant procedure is supposed to improve the current system is left unaddressed. It is not explained how the *Blueprint* goals will be accomplished under such fiscal constraints, nor is any research foundation provided to demonstrate how competitive grants will leverage improvement for both the winners and the losers of the competition for these funds. The possibility that this process will increase the financial inequity of the public education system is not considered.

“*Equity and opportunity for all students*” is hailed in the *Blueprint* (p. 5) but is reduced to “English learners and other diverse learners” in the research summaries. Neither equity nor opportunity is substantively addressed. Although President Obama decried the underfunding of *No Child Left Behind*,⁷ the issue of adequate funding is not addressed in his proposals.

A Focus on Problems, Not Research-Based Solutions

The research summaries typically begin with an introduction of the problem, buttressed by descriptive statistics, and then present the administration's proposal in a few short paragraphs. The summaries generally do an adequate job of documenting the problems, but the policy proposals – presumably the *raison d'être* of the research summaries – receive short shrift. Often, as with the sections on standards and charter schools, for example, there are adequate descriptions of the nature and causes of low achievement in economically deprived areas, but the proposed solutions do not logically or effectively match or resolve the problems. These missing connections are all the more important given the substantial research base that exists for most of these issues.

The Extensive Use of Non-Research and Biased Sources

While the six summaries vary in their use of sources, there is a general neglect of peer-reviewed research and an over-reliance on information gathered from special interest groups, think tanks, government documents, and media reports. While each of these sources may be of value as advocacy or descriptive documents, they generally cannot be reasonably described as research. The overall result is the advancement of unproven, ideologically based solutions. In the “Great Teachers, Great Leaders” section, for example, only about 10 percent of the 80 or so sources could be considered peer-reviewed research.

The Over-Reliance on Standardized Test Scores

Throughout the research summaries, test scores are the ubiquitous measure of schooling quality and success. While test scores are of some value, they cannot measure the broader purposes of schools, either academically or as key institutions in a democratic society. The administration has given lip service to the need for more comprehensive evaluation measures, but these summaries offer little or nothing beyond test-based evaluation.

What Works versus What's Best

The research summaries appear to have been written with the goal of finding some research that supports the administration's policy proposals. While our reviewers point out that the summaries often fail even when measured on that limited yardstick, the basic framing is problematic; showing that something *works* is not the same as showing that something is *the best available alternative*. If an intervention results in some positive outcomes, it can be argued to “work,” but this is a very low standard. It does not ensure that either the most cost-effective or the greatest possible amount of progress is being made.

Conclusion

Research should play a role in the formulation of policy. But it must be used to enlighten our discussions and not as selective, *post hoc* justification for pre-determined ideological positions.

For many of the nation’s educational problems, such as those catalogued in the *Blueprint*, there is a well-developed, informative, scientifically valid and independently established body of research. For those areas where our knowledge base is not yet mature, the wisest approach would be to actively seek new knowledge through pilot programs before mandating unproven “solutions” as national policies.

If our goal is a more educated citizenry, our policies must be based on our best knowledge and experience. Otherwise, we risk weakening our educational system as well as our civic, economic, and social institutions. Sadly, it appears that the Obama administration is poised to continue the political misuse of research identified by Professor Glass 23 years ago. The federal government can contribute to improving our schools most effectively when policymakers in the Department of Education seek and embrace research-based solutions—even when the research contradicts the politics or prevailing ideologies of the day.

Notes and References

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