

Usefulness of education research questioned

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

The Education Department made big news last July when it released a long-awaited study that compared the test scores of children in more than 7,500 public and private schools. With most other things being equal, public school students often do better and sometimes a lot better than private-schoolers, the research found.

But four days later, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings stood in the expansive hearing room of the House Education Committee to unveil a \$100 million proposal to use taxpayer-funded vouchers to send public school students to private schools.

Spellings called the study irrelevant, saying it was small and flawed. Other advocates of vouchers, such as Harvard University researcher Paul Peterson, agreed. Advocates of public schools, including teachers unions, say the Bush administration chose to ignore a study that didn't support its agenda.

In the end, it was a pretty good metaphor for the state of educational research: More than five years after President Bush's No Child Left Behind law told educators to rely on "scientifically based" methods, the science produced is often inconclusive, politically charged or less than useful for classroom teachers. And when it is useful, it often is misused or ignored altogether.

A focus on practicality

As the 88th annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) takes place this week in Chicago, critics say the USA's huge community of education researchers — 14,000 are attending — often studies topics that do little to help schools solve practical problems such as how to train teachers, how to raise skills, how to lower dropout rates and whether smaller classes really make a difference.

"Some good work is getting done, but the balance of influence in AERA is not with people doing rigorous, carefully designed, obviously important research," says Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

Hess made waves last year when he and a co-writer plucked dozens of titles from AERA's conference program for a tongue-in-cheek National Review piece. It bemoaned the dearth of serious work on practical matters, noting papers with "utterly incomprehensible" titles such as "Postcolonial Reading of Classroom Discourse on the Imperial Rescue of Oppressed Hawaiian Women," "The Formation of the Subjectivity of Mail-Order Brides in Taiwan and Their Educational Strategies Toward Their Children" and "Vygotskian Semiotic Conception and Representational Dialogue in Mathematics Education."

"It seemed useful to kind of cast a spotlight on this and hope that it might urge the serious folks at AERA to pay a little more attention, to be sure that they're not being tarred unfairly by less serious work," Hess says.

Part of the problem is few researchers have the means to conduct large-scale, long-term studies, which usually require the cooperation of at least one school district. But districts often are reluctant to agree to trials that could cast them in a less-than-favorable light.

Grover J. (Russ) Whitehurst, who directs the Education Department's Institute of Education Sciences, says researchers are producing more large-scale studies that pose vital, practical questions. Five years ago, his agency financed 65 research grants; this year's budget finances 350.

But Hess has a point: "There's an awful lot that goes on that is off-target if your target is solving problems," Whitehurst says.

Others defend AERA's work and that of researchers in general but say the patchwork system of public schools makes it hard even for relevant research to reach the classroom.

"We have a separation in that some of us who do the research aren't running the schools," says William Tate, a math researcher at Washington University in St. Louis who will take over as AERA's new president this month.

No system for dissemination

Tate points out excellent research, for instance, on dropout prevention, released in February by Columbia University, which identified five cost-effective ways to boost high school graduation rates. The study should be in the hands "of every superintendent in America," Tate says. But they probably won't see it because, unlike in medicine, there's no systematic way for important research to be disseminated.

"We don't have that kind of infrastructure," he says. "It's just not there."

A few leaders go out of their way to take in the latest findings. Evelyn Holman, superintendent of Bay Shore Union Free Schools in New York, says she gathers her principals every other month for a day of training on the latest research.

"You need that incubation time to really reflect on, 'Where are we going, what are we doing, how could we do it better?' " she says.

Budget cuts do make it hard for many of her colleagues to take time for such sessions. "It's seen by the public sometimes as just a chance to go play, rather than a chance to stay up with the latest trends in your field," she says.

Research budgets limited

Funding also limits research. As with medical research, universities, foundations and corporations all underwrite education research. But federal support for education pales next to medicine.

Education Sciences gets about \$234 million for research on regular and special education, which is less than 1% of the \$400 billion spent each year on K-12 education, according to the non-partisan Aspen Institute. Aspen compares the funding with the \$27 billion received by the National Institutes of Health and recommends doubling Whitehurst's budget.

Tate says he foresees more researchers focusing on the effectiveness of programs, and cost-benefit analyses.

"We're putting a lot of money into this good called education, and people want to know what kind of benefits they're getting from the investment they're making."

In 2002, Whitehurst unveiled the What Works Clearinghouse, which uses a six-point scale to judge programs available to schools such as math and reading curricula and dropout prevention and character education programs.

In the process, it accepts or rejects prior research on each program. After 4½ years and \$23 million, it has rated about 50 products, finding 75% of studies unacceptable — and prompting education pundits to call it the "Nothing Works Clearinghouse."

But even this level of skepticism may not satisfy critics.

After the clearinghouse last month found the popular Reading Recovery program showed "positive effects" on student achievement and "potentially positive effects" on comprehension and fluency, critics weighed in. They zoomed in on the fine print and found the endorsement was based on four acceptable studies out of 78.

Whitehurst says progress is slow but steady: "It used to be that the glass was nearly empty, and now it's a quarter full."