

Detriment to Students: Education reformers take aim at flawed, incomplete research

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Susan Laccetti Meyers

We've all done it --- been bored to tears at conferences and skipped out on a few meetings to catch a bite to eat or visit the town hosting the convention. But this past weekend's two-day meeting of the Education Leaders Council was nothing to yawn over.

Reformers with guts gathered at the Renaissance Hotel to share their strategies on everything from accountability, testing, bringing noncertified teachers into the classroom to emancipating children at failing schools through charter schools or vouchers.

It's fair to say there wasn't a soul there who didn't wish it had gone on for days.

With a no-holds-barred approach to education, these honest reformers made one proclamation that was particularly startling. They pinned a lot of bad education policy not only on the usual suspects, such as teachers' unions and education bureaucrats, but on so-called education researchers. There are too many of them putting out far too many shoddy studies that result in a huge waste of taxpayer money and student potential.

One of the real impediments to true education reform is that many of the scholars either have preconceived ideas that they attempt to validate, or they have a predetermined agenda. Many researchers are funded by groups or liberal-leaning foundations that have

not warmed to reform. Many, too, are based at colleges of education and are loath to venture outside their personal experiences and training.

The result is that programs such as bilingual education, whole language reading and special education proceed with little empirical data to validate them. Other examples: Socially promoting a student is better than holding him back. Formal schooling at a very early age works. College of education graduates make the best teachers. A whole-language approach to reading is better than phonics. They set out to prove their theory instead of using scientific analysis.

The danger here is that these students hurt children by subjecting their schooling to education fads. A research paper released today is front-page news tomorrow and later a vote on a school board.

The Bush administration, thankfully, vows to bring more credibility to research efforts. Administration officials insist they will be more thorough in weeding out special-interest agendas and requiring researchers to use scientifically based, empirical evidence to support their conclusions. This will be part of the reauthorization legislation of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement next year. That office alone produces \$1 billion worth of education studies annually.

"The quality of education research in this country is sporadic at best," said Eugene

Hickok, the undersecretary of education at the U.S. Department of Education and former education secretary in Pennsylvania. "It's a system that is totally designed to protect itself forever."

Good research, whether it be for the Journal of the American Medical Association or scientific publications, uses random samples and large pools and has peer reviews. When it comes to education research, too often those rules are out the window. No one insists that researchers conduct objective analysis of how some state and federal programs affect student achievement.

G. Reid Lyon, chief of the child development and behavior branch at the National Institutes of Health, believes that 95 percent of education programs in this country are based on research that fails to test a program's effectiveness. That should alarm taxpayers. The public's attention has been focused on the president's effort to bring accountability to schools. But it's just as important to hold our academic world accountable for the data they provide educators. Students can only be better off for it.

Susan Laccetti Meyers is a member of the Journal editorial board. Her column appears occasionally.