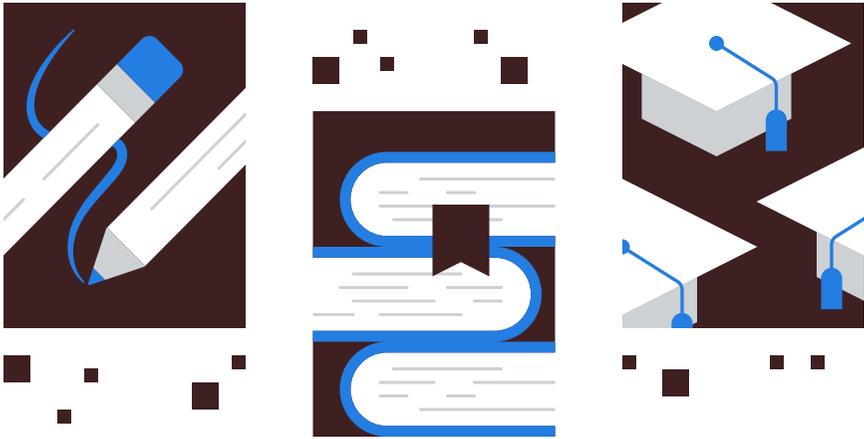# 19. SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK

Enhancing Educational Opportunities for Students

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Research only improves education when its lessons are put into practice. For 40 years, the U.S. Department of Education has sought to better understand what works in education and to encourage the use of evidence in educational practice and policymaking. As calls to improve education systems have quickened, the department has begun to explore new ways to accelerate the adoption of evidence-based practices and augment its existing approaches to build evidence. This case study explores a critical lever in that effort: the department's grant-making portfolio.

Each year, the Education Department invests in education through formula and competitive grant programs that support states, school districts, institutions of higher education, and other entities around the country. Nearly $50 billion is available for education each year from the federal government, excluding student financial aid. That is, on average, about 9 percent of all education funding in the country. Of the amount from the federal government, the department awards about $4 billion per year competitively. These competitively awarded funds are where the Education Department can readily shape how program designs through strategically developed policies that encourage the use of evidence.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Although how best to improve the education system is the subject of considerable national debate, most agree about the importance of doing so. To be sure, there are signs of progress. High school graduation rates are at an all-time high, for example, and many groups of students are going to college at near-historic rates.[1,2] But there is still work to do. When comparing internationally, students in the United States continue to lag behind their peers abroad in science, reading, and math literacy.[3]

Despite any disagreements about how to best support educational improvement, most policymakers can agree on one point: the funding, personnel, and time to address the challenge are limited. Because the available resources are finite, policymakers and educators need to know as much as possible about what works for students—and then need to use what they've learned—to use resources efficiently. Identifying what works in education is no easy feat. Learning is a complex process, as is defining what students ought to know and how-to best measure learning. The wide array of contexts in which teaching and learning happen further complicates the process of building evidence, making it hard to know if what is successful with one type of student, one type of educator, or one type of school will apply elsewhere. As a result, studying educational programs, policies, and practices with the most rigorous research and evaluation methods available is critical to the process of discovery and to increase the stock of evidence-based practices that educators can use to meet the needs of today's diverse learners.

EVIDENCE AVAILABILITY

In 2002, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act, with the goal that all students would be proficient in math and reading by the end of the 2013-2014 school year.[4] Weeks later, Congress passed the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, which established that the department would best meet its mission—improving student achievement and ensuring equal access to educational opportunity—by using research and evaluation to improve educational policy and practice. This law created the Institute of Education Sciences, including the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Centers for Education and Special Education Research, and the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE). Together, the centers within the Institute of Education Sciences support the creation and use of high-quality, independent, and unbiased evidence that is available to inform practices in education.

NCEE has a unique role in encouraging policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to use evidence about policies, programs, and practices that improve student achievement. NCEE's What Works Clearinghouse reviews and synthesizes research about education policies, programs, and practices. The Clearinghouse provides reviews of nearly 11,000 individual studies and 600 distinct interventions. Collectively, these reviews offer assessments of interventions' potential impact on a range of important educational outcomes as well as the strength of evidence underlying the assessments. Summaries and syntheses are widely available to prospective grantees, district and building leaders, and other stakeholders via the Clearinghouse's website. These data also are foundational to many of the technical-assistance efforts that NCEE and other offices throughout the department lead.

EVIDENCE USE

Today, three distinct efforts come together to support improved education practice and policymaking at the state and district levels. These include the Education Department's competitive grant program portfolio as a whole, the subset of that portfolio that includes

grants that use tiered-evidence standards to support innovation, and targeted technical assistance to encourage the use of evidence-based practices.

Competitive grants

When considering how best to use evidence in the department's grant competitions, an internal collaboration of experts—program, policy, and budget experts supported by a team of researchers and evaluators—discusses the evidence that supports policy or practice inside a given program area. Consider the case of a program that supports services for students in postsecondary institutions. Is there, for example, a strong sense of effective policies and practices? Does that include a small set of policies and practices, or are there many options for policymakers or educators to consider? Alternatively, are there no, or perhaps only a few, practices to choose from? To address program evidence considerations, expert collaboration over a series of meetings is essential to better understanding the goals of the program and its key mechanisms, relevant policy or budget constraints, what has been learned through prior research, and what questions remain. The result of that discussion informs the parameters of the next year's grant competition, including program priorities, grantee evidence requirements, and evaluation criteria.

Conversations such as these lead to a greater focus on evidence among both program staff and grantees. For example, almost a third of the department's new fiscal year 2017 grant competitions included evidence in their design.[5] In our work with grantees, we are exploring how best to support evidence-building, the implementation of evidence-based practices, and taking what is learned from grantees to the broader education community to maximize the department's impact. Notable examples of this work include collaborations between program offices and NCEE in helping grantees (1) better understand ESSA's evidence requirements and how to use the What Works Clearinghouse to identify interventions supported by strong and moderate evidence; and (2) develop rigorous plans to evaluate their work through quasi-experimental or experimental methods.

Increasingly, lessons learned from the competitive grant programs influence the department's work with programs that receive federal grants by formula. States and districts have the flexibility to use federal education funds in support of the evidence-based policies and practices that best meet local needs. To support those efforts and as a result of identifying the need for clearer guidance, the department issued guidance to explain the appropriate use of evidence in education as a resource.[6]

Tiered evidence grants

Both the i3 program and the newer Education Innovation and Research program are examples of tiered-evidence grant programs within the department. The purpose of the Education Innovation Research is to support the creation and testing of innovative educational practices and to scale-up those practices that demonstrate evidence of impact through field-initiated grants. Prospective grantees apply for early phase, mid-phase, or expansion grants based on the level of evidence that supports the policy or practice they propose to support with the funding.

Results of the national evaluation of i3 suggest the program largely met its goals of advancing evidence use, scaling effective practice, and building evidence.[7] About three-quarters of the 67 i3 evaluations reviewed by the program's national evaluator conducted a high-quality, independent impact evaluation. Practices taken to scale were also more likely to be effective (50 percent yielding positive impacts) than those in earlier phases, including validation (40 percent yielding positive impacts) and development (8 percent yielding positive impacts). Taken together, 12 of 67 grants (18 percent) yielded statistically significant positive impacts on student academic achievement. The Education Innovation and Research program and i3 offered the department a series of important lessons, including demonstrating how tiered-evidence programs can be used to support the discovery of promising practices, highlighting interventions for which there is a growing body of evidence of efficacy, and showing how to responsibly use federal resources to support scaling of practices with evidence of effectiveness.

Technical assistance

Finally, the department invests in a variety of direct technical-assistance activities to further amplify what it has learned across its portfolio of evidence-building activities. Two notable examples of this work include the Regional Educational Laboratories and the Comprehensive Centers.[8,9] Each year, these organizations work with thousands of education stakeholders across the United States, its territories, and freely associated states to bring evidence to bear as leaders work to solve local problems of policy and practice. The work of the Regional Educational Laboratories program emphasizes applied research and building educators' and policymakers' capacity to understand and make use of data and evidence. In fiscal year 2018, the Regional Educational Laboratories hosted hundreds of public events, trainings, and coaching activities for state and local educators and policymakers focused on the design, evaluation, or implementation of evidence-based practices spanning prekindergarten to postsecondary education. The Comprehensive Centers emphasize building the human and organizational capacity of state education agencies to design and implement policy related to ESSA through training and technical assistance.

LESSONS

As the department has increasingly used its grant portfolio to encourage evidence-building and use, it has identified several lessons that may be relevant to those who seek to do the same.

- *Promotion of collaboration is critical.* It is critical to support staff across the organization and promote collaboration. Evaluators and researchers benefit from learning more about the contexts and constraints that programs face. Similarly, program staff members benefit when they learn more about how evidence can inform program design and get more engaged with the evidence-building process.

The department's work to develop and use evidence through its discretionary grant portfolio depends on experts with diverse perspectives. The type of competition planning we describe above regularly include program staff, policy leadership, program attorneys, and budget analysts, in addition to advance consultation with evaluation experts.

- ***Partnerships for technical expertise and capacity can yield benefits.*** The Institute of Education Sciences, an independent agency within the department, is a unique resource that provides a critical perspective as the department sets policy, designs programs, and makes meaning of available data and research. Partnerships between the Institute of Education Sciences and the policy and program offices in the Education Department hold significant potential benefits for the field. Evaluators have an important role to play in building evidence through grantmaking. IES staff advises colleagues from across the department on how rigorous, project-level evaluations can be conducted and supported.

- ***Learning from grantees' efforts to use and build evidence is ongoing.*** Understanding and supporting the most important step—how evidence becomes a part of the approaches used by teachers, school leaders, non-profits, and institutions—is complex. Staff across the department work together to learn from grantees that have committed to using evidence in their programs and to building evidence through their activities. The department values the partnership of the teachers, administrators, and innovators who are asking tough questions, striving for results, and serving students in ways that have the best chance of improving their lives. ■

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