Working Out an Equation for Education Reform

Cutting-edge efforts to improve America’s education system

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Education reform prompts no shortage of heated policy debates. Do teacher incentives work? Are charter schools delivering better results than public schools? Will U.S. children fall further behind their global counterparts if we don’t push more math and science? And how important is the role of early childhood education?

Not in dispute is that education is a critical component of a strong economy. A wide body of research, including some by economists at the Cleveland Fed, shows that better educational outcomes contribute to greater individual earnings potential, a stronger workforce, lower rates of incarceration, and stable neighborhoods and communities—all of which drive a strong regional economy. That’s why efforts to improve America’s education system took the spotlight at the Cleveland Fed’s 2012 Policy Summit.

The big question is this: What public policies can best promote better schools and improved outcomes? As with many complex issues, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Budget constraints are among the many challenges facing school districts and education policymakers across the nation. Researchers at the Policy Summit delivered several messages, none clearer than the recurrent theme that “evidence matters.”

“It’s important not only to evaluate research, but also to engage stakeholders in using and generating evidence,” said Rebecca Maynard, Commissioner, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

Determining what’s most useful to educators and policymakers has been the work of IES, which in 2002 developed a database of educational research on policies and programs it evaluates based on stringent criteria. To date, some 6,500 studies have been reviewed; 6 percent meet IES standards. IES shares this scientific evidence on its
I want educators to be able to make evidence-based decisions about, for example, what content to teach,” explained Maynard.

IES also provides research-based training on tactics for classroom management, strategies for retaining and motivating teachers, and techniques for classroom instruction, all aimed at helping teachers and school administrators improve student outcomes. To ensure consistency and efficiency, regional representatives work with other government agencies to create a single portal for educators to learn about these opportunities.

But what works in one district or with one set of students may not work elsewhere. New programs are developed all the time based on research, anecdotal evidence, and the passion of educators and parents. Many show promise, but which ones are worth funding? Trying them is not a bad investment, said Maynard, provided there are clear measures built in to assess whether they work, and how well.

Kimber Bogard, from the Institute of Medicine at the National Research Council, shared evidence on the value of early childhood programs. She pointed to certain aspects of early childhood programs that research shows are working. “Quality of program matters,” she said. “Teacher quality matters. And mobility and absenteeism matter.” She also advocated for greater collaboration among researchers, social scientists, child development specialists, and economists. You can’t look at education policy from a single perspective — whether the child’s, the educator’s, or the taxpayer’s. “You need a more comprehensive approach to find out what’s really going on,” she noted, “and to learn what works. Quality research depends on it.”

Quality research, however, can sometimes be difficult to set up or conduct. Panelist Susan Dynarski, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, explained that one reason charter schools are such a hot-button issue in education reform is that it is hard to tell whether they are actually better than public schools. Nevertheless, the lottery system that many charter schools employ to enroll students provides researchers with a decent randomized trial sampling. The results from one study show statistically significant numbers that charter schools can make a positive difference. More research must be done, she added, before any conclusive assessments can be made. That goes for just about any program, she said: “Make sure you’re driving with the headlights on.”

One conclusive finding Dynarski pointed to is the growing inequality among students with a bachelor’s degree and those without. Where can policy changes help? And how? Maynard said policy ought to be driven by science, though she acknowledged that in reality it is driven by many other things, such as budget constraints, public sentiment, and competing political interests. “If I could change one thing, I would stop rolling out big things — like teacher value-add [a method of teacher evaluation] — without building in science to learn from it,” Maynard said. “Policy changes should be more incremental.”

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Timing is important, too. Noted Dynarski: “Invest in the right programs that work, of course, but it’s also important to know when — at what point on the timeline or education continuum.”

Finally, no policy or program exists in a vacuum. “It’s never just the classroom or the neighborhood,” the National Research Council’s Bogard said. “Families, too, are essential for successful outcomes.” Education reform is one piece of the puzzle, and it may be more effective when interconnections with other efforts are recognized.

“When you’re talking about schooling, you’re talking about kids, you’re talking about a school, you’re talking about teachers, you’re talking about a workforce, you’re talking about a system,” Bogard summed up. “Working together is going to give you the biggest bang for your buck.”

Want to learn more?
Check out the Institute of Education Science’s evaluations of thousands of education reform efforts at www.ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc

Watch video clips from this session
www.clevelandfed.org/Forefront/2012/summer/ff_2012_summer_07.cfm