

Turning reading research into policy

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doi:10.1598/RRQ.42.3.4

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Since becoming president of the Alliance for Excellent Education in February 2005, I have learned a great deal about the vital role that high-quality literacy research plays in improving teaching. I am now aware of the gratitude felt by curriculum designers, principals, and other school and district leaders for the practical advice provided by the literacy research community that allows them to design or adapt programs to improve student outcomes based on proven or demonstrably promising practices. And I know now that, while much more research is needed (in particular, to address comprehensively the many and varied literacy needs of adolescents), it is thanks to the good work that has been conducted thus far by the research community that educators are already well enough informed to be able to help struggling students read and write more competently.

Education researchers know how critical it is that they serve the needs of these educators. But as a former governor of West Virginia and member of the U.S. House of Representatives, I want to challenge the adolescent literacy research community to become much more aware of another critically important audience for your work: the local, state, and national policymakers whose actions—or lack of them—affect millions of students and their educational opportunities.

But merely becoming more intent on educating the policymaking community about research results won't be enough. Like it or not, the *way* that research findings are communicated to policymakers is as critical as the research itself. These men and women want to do the right thing for kids, and they welcome the valuable information and insights that researchers can provide. But they are bombarded with competing demands for their time and attention.

My observations should not be interpreted as in any way diminishing the importance of the research. As Sternberg, Kaplan, and Borck point out in these pages, there is an urgent need for research into “new literacies,” or the intersections of adolescent literacy and new technology. Similarly, Hunsberger's essay calls for an important expansion of the research agenda, specifically to give more attention to racial and cultural differences in the classroom and to take into account the ways that students do or do not “connect” with the texts they read in middle and high school.

I heartily endorse these recommendations. However, my own contribution to this issue of *Reading Research Quarterly* has to do not so much with the topics that researchers should study but, rather, how research and researchers can influence the development of good policy and support effective education reform.

So I ask you to consider the following: What determines whether a piece of research makes it into the policy arena? How do certain studies or findings end up providing the underpinnings for policies around program development or accountability, for instance, which will affect thousands, or even millions, of students? To whom do policymakers listen, and why?

Plan your public presentations carefully

Let's be candid: Most policymakers do not understand education research and are often confused by the complexity of the issues you study. State legislators and members of Congress don't read *RRQ* or *Educational Researcher*, and they don't follow the ins and outs of the scholarly debates that have been going back and forth in the academic journals for many years, such as whether the "awful reputation" (Kaestle, 1993) of the research can be improved by emulating the hard sciences.

However, policymakers and their staff members do pay attention to major publications like the 1999 report from the National Research Council that predicted it would take 15 years and a lot of determination to create the sort of high-quality, dependable education research infrastructure that's needed to support sound policymaking (Committee on a Feasibility Study for a Strategic Education Research Program, 1999). And policymakers do pay attention when high-profile projects like the What Works Clearinghouse become the butt of jokes—I've heard it lampooned by critics as the "Nothing Works Clearinghouse." In short, state and federal policy leaders have heard enough to know that in many areas the knowledge base remains thin.

But while policymakers may be disappointed that research has not yet produced more definitive answers, what really bothers them is the quality of the public presentations they hear from researchers. Policymakers are rarely in a position to judge the reliability and validity of particular studies. They have neither the time nor the inclination to read journals, and review of methodologies is outside their expertise. Ultimately, policymakers are interested in legislation, and legislative language does not lend itself to nuance or scholarly depth. Rather, a piece of legislation is a black-and-white statement, subject to the least subtle of responses: namely, a vote "yes" or "no."

In short, what policymakers want from researchers is a clear message that seems to be universally accepted by the research community. Preferably,

it will tell them that the evidence shows what works, but if—as in the National Research Council report mentioned above (Committee on a Feasibility Study for a Strategic Education Research Program, 1999)—the unambiguous conclusion is that researchers need more time and resources, they can live with that message, too.

What policymakers cannot tolerate is listening to scholarly hemming and hawing or bickering. The reality is that they have neither the time nor any interest in figuring out what is nuance—much less who is right—and if presented with conflicting or confusing information, they are likely to ignore it altogether. It is critical that education researchers provide policymakers with clarity, not a public airing of arcane disagreements over research methods, interpretations, and agendas. Think of how you'd react if you went to a garage for a new muffler only to have the mechanics get into a fistfight over the relative merits of Japanese and American automobiles!

Many education policymakers vividly remember the reading wars of the 1990s, and some can be quick to assume that literacy researchers still are fighting those battles and fall into one camp or another—either phonics ideologues or whole language partisans. That suspicious attitude is a reality with which reading researchers must contend.

Yet, bearing in mind these cautions about *how* to communicate, there are terrific opportunities right now for literacy scholars to inform the deliberations of policy leaders. Over the last several years, the report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) has gained almost mythic status in state houses and on Capitol Hill. Today, the report is held forth as a shining example of what useful, policy-friendly scholarship can be and, given its influence on the Reading First legislation, what it can accomplish.

Those of us who spend our days advocating for more resources and better policies on literacy instruction have found it extremely important to be able to tell elected officials that the authors of that report set aside their differences, took a hard look at the available evidence, analyzed and discussed it in a reasonably sober, serious manner, and came to a consensus (more or less) around several specific, useful principles of effective reading instruction.

In 2004, Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Alliance for Excellent Education pursued a similar strategy when developing recommendations for educators and policymakers who were struggling with decisions about how best to develop effective programs to improve adolescent literacy. Carnegie Corporation and the Alliance assembled a group of

well-respected, senior-level researchers and encouraged them to determine where there was consensus, rather than disagreement, about how to improve the literacy of students in secondary schools. The resulting publication, *Reading Next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), represents some of the best thinking about adolescent literacy based on research available at the time, and although it is likely that some of the conclusions will be revised as more is learned and understood, the report offers a set of reasonable recommendations that have been embraced by a large and diverse audience of policymakers and school practitioners. (As of November 2006, when this article was first drafted, the Alliance had shipped out an unheard-of 80,000 copies in response to requests from schools, districts, and state and federal officials, and another 200,000 copies had been downloaded from the Alliance website.)

From the Alliance's perspective, the lesson is unmistakable: Policymakers may be skeptical of educational researchers; some may even be quick to dismiss them as "eggheads" and "ideologues." But when researchers take special care to present themselves as reasonable, serious-minded experts, and when they choose to focus on points of agreement—holding their professional debates in private, off to the side—they can indeed convince policymakers to listen and act.

My advice, and my sincere hope, then, is that literacy researchers continue to avoid any major public flare-ups of the reading wars, and that they refrain from starting any new wars in the area of adolescent literacy, where things have been relatively peaceful so far. Local, state, and federal policymakers will be loath to invest in new programs and research if they think they will be undermined by academic infighting.

To be sure, this advice does make things difficult for those of you who take a minority position on the findings of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), or whose research falls outside of the "gold standard" of quasi- or randomly controlled experimentation that now holds sway. But frankly, those practicing qualitative research of one kind or another should know that policymakers comprise an extraordinarily skeptical audience today.

In the end, though, my point isn't that any scholarly disagreement should be buried. I simply hope that the research community in the United States will continue to bear in mind how fragile are the public policy movements that all of us—researchers, reformers, and policymakers—hope to build into a significantly expanded Striving Readers initiative, greater support for the National Writing Project, new state- and districtwide literacy plans,

and other resources for and attention to adolescent literacy instruction.

Insofar as you do enter the public arena, I hope that, rather than hashing out disagreements in public, you will continue to engage policymakers around important areas of consensus—such as the need to teach literacy all the way through the primary and secondary years; the importance of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments; the need for high-quality, well-implemented interventions for struggling readers; the importance of teaching writing as well as reading; the need for more and better literacy instruction in the content areas; and the need for stronger support for English-language learners and students with disabilities.

Encourage college- and university-based literacy researchers to serve the schools

I was serving in Congress in 1990 when the Boyer Commission—a blue-ribbon panel created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching—issued a major report calling on higher education leaders to rethink the roles and responsibilities of college and university faculty, encouraging them to focus more effort on teaching and public service rather than rewarding only research and publishing (Boyer, 1990).

I remember thinking then that the recommendation made good sense. Like many of my colleagues on Capitol Hill, I had the impression that a lot of academic research was produced solely to meet "publish or perish" tenure requirements, and I saw no reason why faculty at public colleges and universities, especially, should put more stock in the number of articles they produced than the amount of good they could do for their students and communities. So I was glad to see that in subsequent years there seemed to be a lot of national buzz around this topic, with some universities (Syracuse being the most prominent) going so far as to decide that teaching and public service would count as much as research does for the granting of tenure and promotion.

However, while the idea continues to be debated in higher education, it never seemed to catch on entirely. Today, higher education appears to be as committed as ever to rewarding faculty for their publications over and above their teaching and service, perhaps even more so now that the distinction between public and private universities has begun to blur.

In calling here for a greater commitment to public service, I may be preaching to the choir. Literacy scholars frequently work in local schools as teacher educators, consultants, and evaluators. You are probably as deeply involved in your communities as anybody on campus.

However, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has increased the pressure on states and districts, and certain needs for outside support have grown exponentially. Most obvious is the tremendous pressure for states to hire psychometricians and test designers, in order to cope with the current federal requirement to test students in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. But there's also considerable need for help in evaluating and selecting textbooks, materials, and adolescent literacy interventions; choosing diagnostic instruments; designing formative assessments; interpreting assessment data of all kinds; designing and providing professional development for teachers and administrators; evaluating programs; and serving as partners in research studies.

To some extent, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences has taken up this challenge. Since 2002, it has become extremely active in translating research and disseminating it to states and districts via its network of education laboratories and comprehensive centers. However, school systems continue to face enormous demands to which they cannot respond because they lack necessary technical expertise and resources—and this is true nowhere more than in the area of adolescent literacy, which has been so deeply neglected. In most states, then, college- and university-based faculty can play invaluable roles in supporting literacy instruction in the local middle and high schools, should they make it a priority to do so.

At those universities that do reward disciplinary research above all else, this would be a good time to revisit the old Boyer Commission report (Boyer, 1990). Faculty need to be rewarded, not punished, for providing service to local and state agencies. And college- and university-based literacy researchers do possess knowledge and skills that really matter to the school-improvement process.

Conducting and publishing new research on literacy remains critical, of course—again, from listening to researchers, I've become aware of a whole laundry list of topics that need studying. But I do hope that more college and university faculty will be encouraged and rewarded (by their colleagues, tenure committees, and institutions) for setting aside a portion of their research time to the service of their schools, districts, and states. I suspect that nothing will do more to help literacy researchers gain the trust

and respect of policymakers and, in the long run, nothing will do more to elevate the quality of literacy research and make it more useful to the public.

Visit a policymaker and share what you know

The major professional organizations in literacy appear to be much more involved at the federal level than they used to be. For instance, the International Reading Association (IRA) has become more active in the U.S. federal policy arena than ever before. In fact, and along with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, IRA has been a frequent partner of the Alliance for Excellent Education in helping to educate federal policymakers and in calling for new federal resources for adolescent literacy instruction.

Likewise, the National Writing Project has cultivated some powerful relationships with key leaders in the House and Senate, and it continues to be involved with the College Board on the National Writing Commission. Further, recognizing that its presence has been minimal in federal policy circles, the National Council of Teachers of English has recently opened a Washington, D.C., office, joined with IRA in launching the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, and seems to be making efforts to develop a more prominent voice in national policy debates.

All of this is for the good. The challenge remains, though, for adolescent literacy researchers to continue to translate new findings into terms that will resonate with policymakers. And even then, the best research and the most plainspoken of researchers will be heard in state houses and on Capitol Hill only if relationships have been developed, cultivated, and maintained.

So let me urge you to consider taking an active stand with your own elected and appointed officials as a way to communicate your rich understanding of what the research community knows about improving middle and high school students' literacy and to ensure that vital information informs policy decisions. Here are a few methods to consider:

- Become knowledgeable about the issues being considered by your local school boards, your mayor, your state legislators, and your federal representatives that would be informed by your work or that of the adolescent literacy research field.
- Write letters to these officials that succinctly outline the way you might be helpful to them

and the kinds of information you could share, and request appointments with their staffs to discuss these issues in more detail. You don't have to be in Washington to inform your representative in the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate; each has state and district staff who will be very receptive to hearing what you have to say.

- Submit written testimony to legislative committees at all levels of government that have scheduled hearings on relevant education issues.
- Author an op-ed in your local newspaper that addresses the literacy needs of adolescents in your community, state, or across the nation. Elected officials are more influenced by what appears in their local papers than by what's printed in *The New York Times*.

The research you produce is critical to improving educational practice. But please, don't keep it to yourself or share it only with teachers, principals, and superintendents. Policymakers need to know what you know in order to make informed decisions that will benefit all of our students.

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