



THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP?

By Rafael Heller | Mar 22, 2021 | Editor's Note

Writing in 1997, the historian Ellen Condiff Lagemann noted that since the field of education research emerged, in the early 20th century, “[it] has grown tremendously. . . and has undergone many changes in goal, method, focus, and definition.” The only thing that hasn’t changed, she added, is “the constancy with which the enterprise has been subjected to criticism.” Decade after decade, its detractors keep airing the same complaints: Much of the research is shoddy, and researchers make too little effort to share it with practitioners (which reminds me of the old joke: “Wow, the food at this restaurant is terrible.” “I know, and such small portions!”)

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and the creation of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in 2002, the federal government set out to solve both of those problems. Through Reading First and other programs, it ramped up funding for rigorous studies of teaching and learning in various subject areas. Through initiatives such as the What Works Clearinghouse, it invested in new efforts to share information about research-backed teaching tools and practices. And more recently, with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, it has required states and districts to spend their federal education dollars on programs and policies that have shown “evidence of effectiveness.”

But for all of its efforts over the last 20 years to strengthen education research and disseminate the findings, the federal government has done little to address a third problem that Lagemann identified back in 1997. Education researchers, she explained, have always been overly preoccupied with boosting their own professional status. Those who work in universities, especially, have given too much priority to publishing in prestigious journals, speaking at conferences, establishing graduate programs, and otherwise trying to distinguish themselves as having special knowledge and expertise. And in the meantime, they’ve shied away from the responsibility of working hand-in-hand with local educators, helping them to solve the urgent, everyday problems they face in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

In this month’s Kappan, we describe recent efforts to address this disconnect between the worlds of education research and practice. Over the last two decades, even as the federal government has invested in the production and dissemination of rigorous research, a grassroots movement has come together around the creation of research-practice partnerships and other efforts to build the capacity of local educators, district staff, community leaders, and others to design studies, analyze data, and make evidence-based decisions.

Researchers and practitioners have only begun to bridge the divide. As [Elizabeth Farley-Ripple](#) writes in this issue, they “continue to live in separate professional worlds, having few opportunities to interact, few communication channels that work in both directions, and few incentives to collaborate with each other.” But the “good news,” she adds, “is that more and more people and institutions are paying attention to these issues, working to answer these questions, and strengthening their understanding of what it will take to link research and practice, for the benefit of K-12 education.”

Reference

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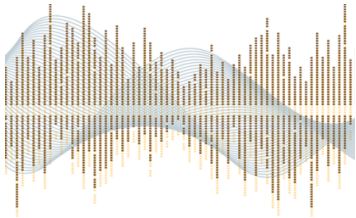
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