National Institute of Justice Conference on Translational Research

Easton comments, June 22, 2011

The Institute of Education Sciences is the Department of Education and the U.S. government's agency for objective, non-partisan education research, evaluation, assessment and statistics. Through four centers we collect education statistics and administer assessments, primarily but not exclusively the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Nation's Report Card. We award contracts to conduct large-scale impact evaluations of programs and policies, sometimes mandated by Congress. We also make grants to researchers, with the expectation that their discoveries will ultimately lead to programs, tools, processes, interventions and curricula that will promote improved student learning

With that limited background on IES, let me jump into the topic at hand: how to translate research into practice. Some education researchers talk about translating research in two ways: 1. Translating from basic or exploratory research that has defined principles and processes into interventions or programs, and 2. Translating interventions that are successful in a few settings into scalable interventions. This distinction was

made at a meeting I attended recently in San Francisco sponsored by the National Science Foundation.[1]

A new study from my former organization, the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, provides a good example of need for the first type of translation.[2] This is a study that I started before I left two years ago on students' and teachers' perceptions of school safety; this study did a beautiful job in untangling how a variety of factors relate to these perceptions. Student poverty, race, the crime and social capital in students' residential neighborhood, their incoming achievement level, and levels of peer support for academic achievement all work together to influence students' and teachers' perceived level of safety in their schools. More importantly, the study shows how these influences are mediated by the ways in which adults relate to each other in the school building and with parents. When these adult relationships are positive, both teachers and students feel safer in school, regardless of the external realities. The question of translation comes in how do we systematically change practices – in this case adult relationships -- to create these conditions that ameliorate the external factors that so strongly influence school safety? This is a wonderful study, using rich data sources and elegant analysis, but now what?

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[1] See http://ctl.sri.com/news/newsletter_july_2011/july_2011_news.html

[2] Steinberg, M., E. Allensworth, & D. Johnson (2011). Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools: The Roles of Community Context and School Social Organization. Consortium on Chicago School Research. http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=151

One answer that some researchers propose to the first translation problem that I just described is to conduct research that is actually designed up front to build in the translation stages. The NSF sponsored conference that I mentioned earlier focused on **Design-based implementation research** (also called improvement research, formative interventions and social design experiments).[3]   In these instances the translation is built into the research process itself. This work has several core principles.

- It focuses on persistent problems of teaching and learning practice

- The researchers are committed to an iterative, collaborative design process

- They are concerned with developing knowledge and theory through systematic inquiry

- They want to develop capacity for sustaining change in systems

The **Strategic Education Research Partnership** conducts this type of research.[4] In their own words "SERP stimulates innovation in education through sustained collaborations among distinguished researchers, educators, and designers. SERP partnerships expand the capacity for continuous improvement while remaining mindful of what teachers do, how schools operate, and how students learn."   One example of

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[3] Penuel, W.R., B.J. Fishman, B.H. Cheng (2011). Developing the area of design-based implementation research. SRI International.
http://ctl.sri.com/publications/downloads/ImplementationResearchWorkshopBackgroundPaper.pdf

[4] See http://serpinstitute.org/about/overview.php

their work is Word Generation – a cross subject instructional program for building the academic language middle school students need to comprehend subject area texts, develop and support arguments, and write persuasive essays. Word Generation was developed and tested collaboratively by researchers and educators.

Let me end by saying more about some specific efforts within IES to address this issue of translating research into practice – or avoiding this problem as much as can.

- I use every available opportunity to speak to researchers to encourage them to conduct research that is relevant and useful to both practitioners and policy makers. I say reduce the "research to practice" problem by increasing "practice to research" link. When practitioners and policy makers have a stake in planning research, there are double benefits: it is more likely to be useful and they are more likely to adopt it since they had a hand in creating it.

- Encouraging and fostering more partnerships between researchers and education stakeholders: examples include SERP; the Consortium on Chicago School Research; the Research Partnership for New York City; RAND and Pittsburgh Public Schools; and the new research partnership between the Michigan Department of Education, the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, which had its genesis in an IES funded grant to evaluate state policy initiatives.

- Encouraging these partnerships in our research grants.

- Finally, on a broader scale, we are requiring the next generation of Regional Education Labs to create research alliances with a range of stakeholders to conduct this sort of research.

In conclusion, my point is that research can be designed and conducted so that less translation is needed. We should encourage more practice-based and collaborative research that will require less translation.