New Research Initiatives for IES

Words of welcome, thanks to the introducer.

Last year, the IES research conference took place one week after I started my new

job and I needed to stand up here and say something coherent about my vision

for IES. And I had all of what? ... five days under my belt on the job? But I gave it a

shot, and focused on a theme I've echoed since then in dozens of talks I've made

across the country and to almost every professional association in Washington

over the past year. This is what I said during that first week: "Our greater

challenge is in working better with practitioners and policy makers to use the

research to make schools better places where students learn more."

Well, I still think this is one of our greater challenges—building partnerships that

engender relevant, useful research. But the good news is: We're starting to make

real and steady progress on that front. Some of that progress is the stuff of

headlines: Our work to evaluate the federal stimulus funds for education. Or a

new $100 million research network solely focused on reading comprehension. But

most of that progress is taking shape in dozens of small ways – creating new grant

programs, moving up deadlines, adding new language to RFAs, engaging

practitioners in more of our work inside the agency, writing more accessible

executive summaries, redesigning newsflashes. These are everyday decisions made by a staff committed to the idea that our work can make our nation's schools better places for children. As Michael Fullan describes school and district change, the change at IES is going to be about "… a small set of common principles and practices relentlessly pursued." In the same vein that the first generation of IES pursued rigorous methods, we are pursuing relevance.

You know I've spent most of my career working with or for an urban school district, so I've learned some lessons about patience when it comes to effecting change in giant bureaucracies. I think about some newly hired principals I've known, taking the helm at a school, brimming with big ideas and a vision of reform. Some come in and turn the place upside down in their first few months – tossing out the curriculum, revamping the staff, overhauling the discipline policy, restructuring the school schedule. Others come in with a different approach. They spend some time observing what is working and what is not, tapping into the expertise of staff and talking to students about their experiences. Only then do these leaders start to chip away at their challenges, zeroing in on the key changes that are both meaningful and sustainable. I identify with this style of leadership. I've only got five more years to make a mark here —and everyone reminds me how difficult it is to make change inside the federal government in five years. So

while I do want to see my vision of relevant, useful research become a reality—I want to do it in a way that's sustainable. I want these ideas to outlive my tenure here, to shape a new generation of education researchers.

So let me spend a little time talking about how we're relentlessly pursuing this small set of common principles and practices.

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This conviction -- that researchers can make a difference in schools -- was shaped by my experiences in Chicago. I devoted my entire career to analyzing data, researching reform and school improvement efforts, and working with members of Chicago's education community to make those findings useful. I worked with a university-based research group that was committed to a very different model of education research with a level of school engagement you rarely find among traditional researchers who sit inside academic departments. These researchers are not content to just publish reports and disseminate findings; they help principals, teachers and district leaders understand how to use the research to improve their schools.

Too often, we researchers do a study on something we are interested in, present the findings to schools and say: "Here's something good that you need to use."

And if they ignore it, we're perplexed as to why they would disregard our great advice: "Well if those folks had only done what I recommended they would be in great shape."

But we know that's not how it works. We should be inviting practitioners and policy makers to the table from the beginning, so we're studying the right problems of practice. When researchers listen to the voices of practitioners and policy makers throughout the research cycle – from planning and designing studies to interpreting findings and to working through the implications for policy and practice – those very people are more likely to respond to findings and adopt them in schools. We often use the phrase "from research to practice." We also need to think more about "from practice to research."

It is this commitment – supporting top-notch education research that matters to schools and improves educational outcomes for children – that will drive our work at the Institute of Education Sciences over the next five years of my term.

This commitment will be reflected in our new research priorities, which will be posted for public comment this week and will be up for approval by our board, the National Board of Education Sciences, later this year. The document is short—only a couple pages long—but it will guide the kind of work we fund, the methods we use, the questions we expect our work to answer, and ultimately, the

audience we want to reach with our research findings. I want to read you a passage because it cuts to the heart of what we're trying to do here:

"IES believes that effective education research must be guided by the voice and interests of education practitioners and decision makers. To this end, IES will encourage close partnerships between researchers and practitioners in the conceptualization, planning, and conduct of research and evaluation. IES will facilitate the use of education statistics, research, and evaluation both by including members of the practitioner community in the design and conduct of the work and by producing reports that are accessible, timely, and meaningful to the day-to-day work of education practitioners and decision makers. Further, IES will seek to increase the capacity of education decision makers and practitioners to use the knowledge generated from high quality data analysis, research, and evaluation."

The ink on these priorities isn't dry yet. But we just announced a major initiative that will bring these priorities to fruition.

The new Reading for Understanding Research Network is a $100 million commitment that will help bring together 130 researchers working in partnership with teachers and school leaders to tackle a critical need: Improving reading

comprehension for all students from preschool through high school. These six teams-- representing a range of disciplinary specialties including linguistics, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, reading, speech and language pathology, assessment and evaluation – will work together to rapidly develop instructional strategies, technology, curricula, teacher professional development, and assessments to enable all students to read with understanding.

I don't need to tell all of you why this is so important: We've invested billions of dollars teaching children to read, but many students still do not *understand* what they read well enough to succeed in school, college or the workplace. Recent NAEP results demonstrate the challenge we face; 1 out of 3 fourth-graders and 1 out of 4 eighth-graders and twelfth-graders cannot read at the basic level.

Teachers have a great stake in solving this problem, and that's why they are going to be sitting at the table during this five-year project – from the beginning, as collaborators, not as study subjects. Teachers and district leaders will contribute to the design and development of interventions, to ensure they are feasible and practical for implementation within existing school structures.   Each of the winning applications has a strong history of school-research partnership, and each clearly specified how their school partners will participate in the overall project.

Here's how it will work for one team. They will bring together reading specialists—based at both schools and universities, along with middle and high school teachers. The teachers will be engaged as co-researchers in ongoing professional communities as the team designs, implements, and refines curriculum units. Teachers will weigh in as the curriculum takes shape in the classroom -- offering valuable feedback on implementation challenges and student engagement.

Our commissioner of the National Center for Education Research-- Lynn Okagaki, who along with her team gets the credit for this project -- told us she was inspired by the work of NASA, which in its infancy set out to put a man on the moon. I can't tell you how proud and thrilled I am to see a project of this magnitude and ambition "launch" in my first year as director.

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Another project that signals change at IES is a major new initiative within the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance -- evaluating the impact of the federal stimulus funds for education. In addition to a larger study of changes in states and districts engendered by these funds, we will be conducting impact studies of school turnarounds and of the Teacher Incentive Fund

programs. We want IES to be a key player in learning more about school improvement and change processes and communicating our findings in a compelling fashion to those who need to hear from us the most. We cannot squander this incredible opportunity to learn from these reform strategies. With Rebecca Maynard as the new Commissioner of this center, we can trust that this work will be focused on the most significant policy questions and that our studies will be designed to provide robust answers to them.

We will provide ongoing, formative feedback internally to our colleagues in the Education Department, and regularly communicate with state leaders. We have planned multiple types of reports that will look at implementation and outcomes both at the state and district level, and it is our goal to turn these reports around more quickly than we have in the past, so we can help the department and states make mid-course corrections as needed.

How else are we inspiring these kinds of partnerships here at IES and more broadly at the federal level? Some of this is happening in other offices across the Department of Education—in new state/district/research partnerships proposed in Race to the Top applications and in innovation grants that offer money to districts that want to explore a promising reform idea and must partner with

outside researchers to study its efficacy. We will provide technical assistance to these researchers so that we can aggregate and generalize across these separate evaluation studies as part of our larger ARRA evaluation.

We are building language into our Request For Applications that explicitly encourage—and in some cases require—collaboration between researchers and schools.

As you may know, the contracts on our 10 Regional Education Labs end next year, so we are thinking hard about how we might re-direct the work of the labs. These 10 labs are our closest link to state and local education agencies, so we need to find a way to enrich the work they do around technical assistance and facilitating research and evaluation activities to best serve the needs of educators in their area.

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Going forward as we shape our new grant programs and priorities, we will expect our funded researchers and our evaluation contractors to better understand educational and learning processes and the mechanisms through which schooling policies and practices affect students. This means looking beyond what works and what doesn't, into "how?" and "why?" and "for whom?" and "under what

conditions?" This will require supporting more research on the effects of practices and programs on different subgroups of students, testing hypotheses regarding mediating processes and mechanisms, and studying the roles of classroom, school, and social contexts in moderating the effects of policies and practices.

This spring, IES announced a new grant program that attempts to dig deeper into the organization and management of schools and districts. Researchers who apply will study the organizational factors -- such as the coherence of the instructional program, the degree of trust in a school, or how teachers learn from one another -- that contribute to successful schools. And they will study how more schools and districts can become learning organizations that make good programmatic decisions, hire and develop strong teachers, and use and analyze data to tweak and improve their instructional programs.

Because we are asking our research and evaluations to answer more complex questions, it also means we must expand our repertoire of rigorous methods. So let me say a few things about methods, which are explicitly mentioned in my research priorities. IES has done a fabulous job over its short history in increasing the scientific rigor of our work, by demanding stronger methods and a greater

capacity to make causal inferences, and by training researchers across the nation in these rigorous standards. While not retreating from rigorous methods, we will assure that it is our research and evaluation questions that drive the methods, not the other way around.

We have an important study being released today – a large-scale RCT on Charter School impacts. This study did not simply say whether or not charter schools are improving student outcomes; it explored under which conditions charter schools could improve outcomes, and for which groups of students. It provides some context about where these new findings fit into a large body of research on this subject. And given the incredible interest in this subject, we took pains to write the executive summary in a way that is clear, succinct and accessible. We also created a four-page snapshot that distills the main messages for audiences not inclined to read 250 page reports. I suspect that there are also people here in this room today who would like to read a well written, jargon free, four-page summary.

Another project that will spark closer collaboration is our work around the state longitudinal data systems. Last month, our National Center for Education Statistics announced grant awards totaling $250 million to 20 states for the

design, development and implementation of these systems. These grants, funded through ARRA, will promote the linking of data across time and databases, from early childhood into career, including matching teachers to students. Up until now, the states' focus has been on *building* these systems, not *using* the data to drive improvement at the policy level and at the school level. So there will be increasingly robust and rich data systems out there that a lot of users simply don't know how to tap into. We want to play a big role in developing partnerships with district and state data experts -- perhaps through training grants or our Regional Labs—that will support their efforts to provide timely descriptive and analytic feedback to their schools. Educators in these systems have an abundance of questions that can be answered with descriptive longitudinal data. They will have even more with the expansion of these systems. And please note that we have a new research topic at IES for the analysis of data in these state longitudinal data systems.

CONCLUSION:

Let me conclude with a call to action.

Gathered in this room are some of the most influential education researchers in the nation. You are ones who are going to train the next generation of education researchers, many of whom are also here today. And I am going to implore you to re-think the traditional model that has governed educational research for too long. We talk a good game about wanting our work to help schools. But we don't create the kind of incentives for young academics to pursue the action-oriented research that we need to help schools improve.

Earlier this year I attended a meeting of researchers from partnerships and consortia who work directly with school districts across the country. They gathered in Washington to discuss their commonalities and differences in their work and their research and development agendas. One common theme was clear: the type of researchers they attract and develop. Catherine Snow from Harvard neatly summarized these commonalities:

- These researchers start with the needs of practice.

- They ensure that relevance is as important as rigor in design and analysis.

- They see building capacity in schools and districts as a major goal.

- They use their complex communication skills to engage with practitioners and policy makers.

- They seek to both generate longer-term knowledge while also providing short or long-term service to districts.

- They use their technical skills to design studies more so than to create research questions.

- And they begin their work with powerful descriptive data to explicate current practices and outcomes in new and useful ways, building a theory of action around the topic of concern.

So, I'm doing my small part to create these incentives for young researchers. We re-wrote the language in our post-doctoral grants to make it clear we are explicitly seeking trained scientists interested in engaging with practitioners and asking more of the relevant questions that really matter to schools and lead to lasting, meaningful improvement in student outcomes.

Far too much education research – including much that is done in universities – is driven by the interests and theories of the researchers' themselves and not the needs and problems of practice. This MUST change. And I need your help in changing it.