National Conference, Developmental Education: What Policies and Practices Work for Students

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Thanks to introducer and welcome to audience.

Greetings. I'm so happy for the chance to join you as you have been talking about an issue that is so important to us, and so critical to our nation's future—offering students who have struggled academically a better chance at college success. The statistics demonstrate why improving developmental education needs to be a priority: About four of every 10 undergraduates have to take some remedial coursework, and the number is even higher at our community colleges, where more than half—possibly as high as 60 percent—are taking remedial courses. And we know from the work here at the Community College Research Center—led by our colleague Tom Bailey—these remedial courses, in large part, are not helping students succeed in college. Analyzing data from the Achieving the Dream database (which contains records from 250,000 students), some 70 percent flunk their remedial courses, withdraw, or drop out of college entirely.

Over the last two days you have heard from some of the top experts in this field who have shared key research studies—on assessment, course placement, classroom

practices—and that will continue to inform the policies shaping developmental education. But, as I'm sure these experts would agree, there is SO much we still don't know in this field—the body of research is so young, and policy is moving so fast. I'm gratified that IES was able to help with this conference, which offers us a chance to take this work to the next level.

I want to spend just a few minutes outlining some of my broader goals for IES, and then highlight where the Institute is taking postsecondary research in coming years. These goals were shaped by my work in Chicago, where 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. This work also convinced me that we cannot shape a school reform strategy—or a postsecondary reform strategy—around a set of programs, even programs established as effective through rigorous research. So I'd like to also explore what I've learned about the organizational context of reform, how we need to guard against a concept called "programmitis," and how we need to think more about how to foster learning organizations in our schools and colleges.

I've only got five more years to make a mark here. 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, to shape a new generation of education research and researchers.

I've spent some time over the past year across the country talking about five broad themes, issues I hope will inspire a new vision of the responsibility researchers share to better connect their work to schools and practitioners. The first is one I've mentioned over and over—the critical need to make our work more relevant to policy leaders and educators working on the ground to make a difference in the lives of school children. Another is one I just mentioned and will explore more deeply later in this talk—how we should move our work from a focus on developing and validating interventions and programs to understanding schools as organizations. I also believe we need to expand our repertoire of rigorous methodologies and create new measures that can help guide practitioners and policy leaders as they tap into an ocean of new data soon to be available under the expansion of State Longitudinal Data Systems. During my time at IES I also want to take on the burning research question of "teaching quality." Many believe that classroom instruction is the core of the schooling processes. Yet, the knowledge base regarding what constitutes quality teaching, how to identify it, and how to better train teachers remains thin, even as recent research has demonstrated the importance of quality teaching. That knowledge base around teaching at the postsecondary level is even thinner still—a problem I know all of you are thinking about as you consider how

to best reach students who need that quality teaching the most. Finally, I've spoken at

length about what it will take to train and inspire a new generation of researchers who

are trained as rigorous scientists but also are committed to asking more of the relevant

questions that really matter to schools. So how does all this shape IES' work around

postsecondary research?

As you know, we're supporting work at the National Center for Postsecondary Research,

here at the Community College Research Center, and you've already heard from center

researchers—Tom Bailey on developmental education effectiveness, Bridget Terry Long

on the variance of effectiveness by student qualifications, Heather Wathington on

summer bridges programs, Mary Visher on learning communities and Kathy Hughes on

assessment. I know these researchers did a great job explaining their work, so I won't

try. But I do want to thank them for their continuing contributions to our knowledge in

this area. I also want to mention some work underway at the Center that wasn't

explored in depth during this conference, and other IES studies.

Kathy Hughes is working on two studies related to dual enrollment programs—the first a

secondary data analysis of the links between dual enrollment and college outcomes on

measures such as college enrollment, completion of developmental coursework,

freshman year GPA, and first-year persistence. The second study tracks the outcomes of

students participating in California's Concurrent Courses: Pathways to College and Careers Initiative, a dual enrollment program that is delivered as part of a career/technical education program.

More broadly, Bridget Long is trying to unpack some of the financial barriers to postsecondary access. Her study on FAFSA mentoring points to some early results that look promising, and she's also looking at the impact of College Savings Plans and the outcomes of Florida students eligible for aid.

Outside the center, an IES-funded project by Isaac McFarlin at the University of Texas reinforces the findings discussed here at this conference. His analysis found that remediation courses at 2- and 4-year colleges in Texas did NOT improve degree completion, transfer to a 4-year college or earnings in the workplace.

Looking ahead, we've just solicited proposals for two new research centers that could build our knowledge in this critical area. The deadline for these centers just closed last week, so it will be months before we can announce final details on this. But we have outlined some ambitious goals. The Center on Cognition and Adult Literacy will conduct research on the underlying cognitive processes that contribute to or inhibit reading or basic math performance of adult learners. The Center will focus on research that

develops new methods of instruction for adult learners in selected populations, and evaluate classrooms and other educational settings to test the effect of the new interventions on student outcomes. The National Research and Development Center on Postsecondary Education and Employment will foster state-researcher partnerships that will jointly identify key issues linking postsecondary education and labor market outcomes, develop ways to maximize data use, and inform policy. This Center's research will focus primarily on topics affecting disadvantaged students and individuals with disabilities. The new center will track their path into college, their college choice, their experience and support in college, and what happens to them in the workforce.

Let's talk about a few programs we're studying.

One promising strategy to increase the college readiness of high school students is the SOURCE mentoring program, which targets low-income, college-eligible juniors and provides them with counseling, college information, and guidance on the college entry process. This includes guidance on admission tests, completion of college applications, help through the financial aid process, and advice on college course selection. IES funded a two year study conducted by Berkeley Policy Associates that found the SOURCE program had positive impacts on FAFSA form submission, college grant applications, four year college enrollment, and persistence through the first two years of

college. Additionally, these program effects were the strongest for Spanish- speaking students and students whose parents did not attend college, two groups that have long lagged in college completion rates.

We're also studying a California program aimed at addressing the college remediation problem by intervening earlier, in high school, when they can identify which juniors will likely struggle with college math and English. I understand you've already heard from Sonia Ortiz about the findings of the California Early Assessment Program from her team at the University of California-Davis.

Another program that has received significant attention in both college readiness and dual enrollment circles is North Carolina's Early College High School program. Under this program, Early College High School students go to high schools located on college campuses that feature a rigorous academic curriculum in addition to academic support services and work-based learning experiences for students beginning in their freshman year through at least their senior year. At the end of their senior year, students have the option of taking an additional year to earn n Associate's degree. Julie Edmonds and her team at Serve are conducting an IES-funded study of this program and preliminary findings have shown this program to have a positive impact on credit accumulation, graduation rates, and some student achievement measures.

Bob Balfanz at Johns Hopkins University is studying how to help first-generation students prepare themselves academically and socially for college. Many of you may know Bob from his work analyzing the high school dropout crisis. In this study, Bob uses some of the insights he gained from studying the high school persistence problem and applies it towards combating the college persistence problem. Researchers will develop two curricula—one an advisory strand for grades 10 to 12 and one a 12th grade course— that will provide support for first-in family college students. These curricula will, among other things, help students better understand how their college expectations match up with the actual college experience, build and reinforce skills expected in academic courses, and provide time and self-management tools necessary to complete college-level work.

In a three-year grant that was awarded earlier this year, Thomas Brock of MDRC will evaluate the Opening Doors Demonstration program, which is a compilation of programs that are designed to help community college students succeed on a variety of outcomes including degree completion. This study will look at two community colleges' programs and will be watched closely to see what kind of lessons can be learned and applied elsewhere.

OK, I've just spent time highlighting some intervention studies we're funding. But I have to tell you: I think this programmatic research can only take us so far. We need to move to the next level, to discover how research can best support colleges as they look to not only improving their remediation programs, but to strengthen the organizational supports needed to sustain and coordinate programs.

Clearly, IES has focused much of its research grants on developing and then validating programs, in the hope these can then be scaled up to have broad impacts. Yet I am not at all convinced that good schools—or good colleges—are the sum of discrete programs and interventions. Instead, they are learning organizations that value strong leadership; encourage and support innovation; use data for continuous improvement; hire good teachers, support and develop them, and encourage their collaborative efforts; and make good programmatic decisions and constantly change, tweak and revise.

I mention these ideas in almost every talk I give and often refer to the work of my friend and colleague Charles Payne, whose book *So Much Reform, So Little Change* explores why even the most promising interventions fail at dysfunctional urban schools. The analysis looks closely at schools in highly impoverished neighborhoods that have too much student turnover and too few strong leaders and high-quality teachers. These schools often think they can solve their problems by buying new programs, a concept

Payne calls "programmitis." All too often, these "miracle" programs don't produce a single miracle—because, as we have learned from all these depressing failures, you can't string together a bunch of disconnected programs and call it a school improvement strategy.

One theme that I've heard for years is that many of our disappointing evaluation results come about because programs are not implemented correctly or with fidelity. What this means, I suspect, is that we don't fully understand the underlying principles, processes and mechanisms that we are trying to enact and how important context and setting are for how these play out. That's why we also need to learn more about factors that facilitate or hinder development of schools as learning organizations.

Harvard researcher Dick Murnane argues that yes, good programs and good curricula can help struggling schools move up a notch. It can help them solve very specific problems. But it's not going to transform them into really good schools. And as Tom Bailey points out: "Good teaching in remedial classes won't have much of an influence if nothing changes in the rest of the college. Better assessments will be meaningless if the colleges are not set up to respond to this information about student weaknesses that the assessments can generate."

Struggling schools are transformed when they become learning organizations. Learning organizations understand how to implement promising programs in a way that insures they can be embraced by staff and sustained over time.

My research in Chicago about the organizational context of reform really focused on elementary schools, but I think this work can significantly inform the reform challenges faced by colleges, particularly community colleges.

My colleagues Tony Bryk, Penny Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu and I worked for about a decade on a research project in Chicago that culminated in a book called *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* that was published early this winter. Taking advantage of a natural experiment in the Chicago public schools that was created by school decentralization and by careful and consistent measurement of many variables over time, we identified a set of key factors that we assert are responsible for whether schools made consistent gains in student learning over time or not. We call the factors the five essential supports for school improvement. These supports include school leadership (which is the most critical ingredient here), professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, parent-community ties and quality instruction—and we use a range of variables to measure

them. Let me talk a bit about one of them, one of my favorites, called collective responsibility, which falls under professional capacity.

This highly reliable seven-item scale includes questions such as: How many teachers in this school help maintain discipline in the entire school, not just their classrooms? How many feel responsible to help each other do their best? How many feel responsible that all students learn? Schools that are strong on this variable in a base year improve student achievement gains compared with schools that are weak (by two-tenths of a standard deviation). Variables like this one are what I mean by a school-level organizational factor that is so vital to building a strong, robust school.

The work we did around the essential supports evolved over the years. But as we continued to refine the work and share the framework with Chicago administrators and principals, this model became a tool embraced by principals planning their school improvement process. Some stopped buying miracle "programs" and started focusing on strengthening their weakest supports and improving their organizational capacity. While this model initially took shape as a tool for elementary schools, we started to see how some of these key variables could be linked to student outcomes in high-school and even college.

The Consortium built its national reputation in part on its work around the freshman on-track indicator and other predictors of high school graduation, such as solid grades and attendance. But how do we influence these? Research pointed to a few measures detailed in the Essential Supports—for example, strong student-teacher trust, teacher personal support and classroom personalism are associated with fewer absences and course failures. Overall, the Consortium's findings around high school reform pointed to the importance of the same organizational factors: Strong relationships and trust produce higher student engagement; stronger academic culture and better grades are connected to higher test score achievement; weak classroom management and high teacher turnover impede high quality instruction.

These same factors play out in the postsecondary research. Across all analyses, the single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college-going culture—especially for first generation college students, where teachers and schools are a more significant influence in the application process. College-going culture, a component of student-centered learning, gauged whether teachers in a given school pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in supporting students in completing their college

applications. This was revealed in Melissa Roderick's groundbreaking work in the

"Potholes" study.

So moving forward, what type of research do we need to invest in for the future?

I know that Tom Bailey is asking some of the same questions about what makes a strong

college environment for student success. This research points to some clear reforms

that need further study: In the area of developmental education, there needs to be

consistent college-readiness standards and assessments that are administered early and

designed to diagnose specific areas of weaknesses that can be addressed with targeted

instruction. Colleges also need to think about how to align and reduce the redundancies

across remedial and credit-bearing courses. We also need to think more about how to

create quality online courses that engage students and target their academic

weaknesses.

More broadly, I think we need to consider an issue I mentioned earlier about quality

teaching. If we know remedial courses are not working for our struggling students, we

need to know why: how is this related to the quality of teaching in these classrooms?

Are these students being taught by some of the weakest or least experienced

instructors? If so, how do we change the institutional disincentives that make these classes the least appealing assignment on a college campus?

The developmental research agenda discussed during this conference also explores the question of whether high school grades should be used in combination with or in lieu of traditional assessments for remedial placement. We need to better understand the importance high school grades could and should play in admissions decisions. Recent research has reinforced that high school grades are better predictors of college graduation than test scores are. This fact was recently detailed in research revealed in *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*, by Bill Bowen, Mike McPherson and Matt Chingos. The authors found that the strong predictive power of high school GPA holds even when little or nothing is known about the quality of the student's high school. The authors posit that this predictive power "derives in large part from its value as a measure of motivation, perseverance, work habits, and coping skills, as well as cognitive achievements."

We know that the overreliance on test scores puts low-income and first-generation students at a disadvantage in the admissions process—and in remedial placement. This research is already encouraging colleges and universities to review their admissions

testing requirements. But why aren't more of them using this kind of information for placing students, given the many flaws of placement tests?

In the end, I want to leave here thinking about this:

The characteristics of effective colleges are probably a lot like the characteristics of effective schools—strong leaders, student-centered focus, coherent instructional focus, coordination, use of measurement and data for improvement, employee involvement and strong professional and academic culture. We need your help in better understanding what it takes to build these effective colleges—not program by program, but through strengthening these essential characteristics.

Thanks for your time. I'll be happy to take a few questions.