John Easton's address to the
National Board for Education Sciences
Institute of Education Sciences Headquarters
Board Room, First Floor
Monday, November 9, 2009

Thanks to all of you for being here. I'm going to cover three topics in this time with most of the time spent on the evaluation of the stimulus funds, where I'll do little talking but will introduce my colleagues, who will do more of the talking.

But I do have a couple of announcements, and I also want to give a talk that I call my "five-bullet talk," which I've given around town quite a bit the last few months. I figured, if I could give it every place else, surely you folks deserve to hear the five-bullet talk.

Just on the announcement part, I think you'd be interested in knowing that we've seen a real surge in applications for our grant program, and it has put quite a bit of pressure on us to respond, and I think we've done that very, very well.

In late October, Anne Ricciuti's office, the Office of Scientific Review, ran three different panel reviews--three 2-day panel review sessions, with a total of 16 panels that included 288 panelists, who reviewed 600 proposals. These are record numbers for us. So it was a great demand on our capacity, and by all accounts, these review panels went extremely well.

For the first time, we used electronic scoring, with only a few

very minor glitches. But in the long run, this added greatly to the efficiency of this process and will enable us to turn these around in a very quick fashion.

We have never seen this many applications, and we seem to have dealt with them quite well. Obviously, with a huge number of applications comes funding implications. At this point, we really don't know what this means for us.   We run two applications a year, and we'll be repeating this process again in the early winter with the same funding stream. So it's still unknown where we're going and what we can fund, but we met the surge in applications and look forward to seeing what kind of quality this brings and what we're able to fund.

Also, we're really in high gear preparing for new Regional Lab competitions. Our 10 Regional Labs are running under five-year contracts that expire in January, February, and March of 2011. We're in the process of deciding what we want the next generation of Labs to look like and preparing materials that will result in Requests for Proposals. We're in an information-collecting stage now. We're doing some internal thinking about what we think the Labs should be doing. We're working with our colleagues in the main Department of Education, who sponsor other similar centers such as Comprehensive Centers and Content Centers. We're trying to figure out how these should work together and how they can add as much value as possible.

At the IES side, a month or so ago, we sent out an open-ended letter to 12,000 school superintendents asking them to respond to what

they think these Labs should be doing for them and how they can be most useful. We've received quite a few responses, which we're now categorizing. We have invited a number of people to Washington to spend a day with us on December 16 at an open meeting to gather input on what they believe the Labs should be doing. So we're still in this information-gathering process, which will solidify in the winter as we prepare a statement of work and put out a Request for Proposals.

My final announcement is that Marsha Silverberg has become the Acting Associate Commissioner for Knowledge Utilization. This is the work that encompasses the Labs, the Clearinghouse, and ERIC. She's taken on this important responsibility at this transitional time.

I'm going to move into this little talk. It's a talk that I've given probably a dozen times in the last two or three months to anybody who will invite me to talk to them, and I'm very careful about what I call these. Some people call it the "five-bullet talk," but I call it "My Personal Goals for IES."

I'm very careful not to use words like "priorities" or anything like that, because they have very special meanings that you and the Board are involved in. But there are five big ideas that I would like to see move IES over my term here. Eventually that will translate into priorities and research topics, but at the moment, they're much broader. And again, I'm at a point where I'm trying to get feedback from people, thoughts on what these goals should be.

But I'm going to go through them as a list here. I always start

this talk by talking about what a fabulous job IES has done over its six-year history in increasing the rigor of the science of our work, and this is by demanding stronger methodologies and greater capacity to make causal inferences in our work. I'm not retreating from that. Almost single-handedly, IES has turned the tide in educational research across the country. And I'm not going to back off that.

But at the same time, I am very interested in the questions of usability and relevance. We've got to bring the same determination, the same effort, the same energy, to making sure that this work is more relevant, more useable. Actually one of the key ways to do that is to really engage practitioners and policymakers in our work at the ground level -- not when it's done and we want it to be translated, or we want it to be applied, but as we envision it, as we plan it. And I think a Board like this is one good place for that to happen, where we have multiple views that are really influencing the way work is done at IES.

And I sometimes also talk to the work of NAGB, the Governing Board for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which has a wide range of voices at the table, and I think that that group has really been very responsible for making NAEP responsive and making NAEP more useable. The NAEP reporting is really well done, and it's really sensitive to the needs of practitioners and policymakers. And I think that's the kind of a model that we could bring to IES in how to become more relevant and how to produce more useable knowledge.

Most of the discussion this morning is going to be about the

ARRA evaluation. And I see that as us really putting our money where our mouth is, because this is going to be a test for us, and we're going to try to conduct this ARRA evaluation in a way that maintains rigor but also is highly relevant, useable, and even timely.

The second point that I make is something that my own experience, my background, my own research really reinforces. I believe IES itself has to develop a greater understanding of schools as organizations, and how schools improve. This is a real shift in emphasis for IES, which has concentrated on developing and then validating programs or interventions, and is kind of a shift in how you think about school improvement.

When I talk about this, I often refer to a book by a friend and colleague of mine named Charles Payne, and the title of the book is *So Much Reform, So Little Change*. And he talks about really dysfunctional urban schools a lot. It's kind of a depressing book about schools in highly impoverished neighborhoods that have a lot of student turnover and don't have a lot of high-quality teachers or strong leadership. Their tendency for school improvement is to buy a new program. You know, schools are inundated with salespeople who are selling things, some of which have a good evidence base, a lot of which do not. But the tendency is to think we can solve our problems by buying programs. And I don't think that's right, and I don't think that's the way school improvement occurs.

So when I'm doing this talk, I also bring in some work by another friend of mine, a man named Dick Murnane, who is an economist at Harvard, and who has really written really thoughtfully and carefully about a number

of key issues. In fact, he was in town last week and gave a talk that I wasn't able to attend, but I heard all sorts of good things from my buddies who were there, who sent me e-mails, and said, you should have heard Dick's talk, "Educational Policy Research: Progress, Puzzles, and Challenges."

He makes a compelling and strong argument about the need to look at schools as learning organizations. What he means by that is that, well, yes, schools do need to adopt proven programs, and there are better ways of doing a lot of things that need to be done in schools. Good programs and good curricula can help move schools up a notch. It can help them solve very specific problems that they may have, but it's not going to get them to be a really good school. What is going to make them a good school is this idea of becoming a learning organization where leadership can use data to make good decisions about which of these programs to buy. What is particularly important is how to implement programs well, because our six years of research here at IES shows that this idea of implementation is key.

We need to learn how to engage our human capital in schools in implementing these programs in a strong way. This includes collecting data as you're going along and finding out: Is it working? Why or why not? Then let's make some changes. So this is an important possible shift that this Board will be engaged in and talking about more. But how do we learn more about how schools are organizations, how they are really more than the sum of the programs and interventions inside them?

The third piece that I talk a lot about -- which I know almost

nothing about, but I believe it's important -- is really understanding how the R&D cycle works better; how development, research, and innovation are linked together and how we support this in a better way. We have colleagues across the government who look at this differently, perhaps people at NSF who understand the development side a little bit better, where we're stronger at testing more fully developed things. How do we learn from this? How do we even build an infrastructure that brings rigorous methodology to the development end, not just to the validation end?

I've been influenced by my former colleague, mentor and friend, Tony Bryk, who has written really nice papers about how to look at the R&D cycle as kind of an engineering cycle. Well, how can we at IES learn from that? How can that influence our decisions about what to support and how we continue to build and build? So in this regard, I've begun a potentially fruitful set of conversations with Jim Shelton, over in the Department, who is in the Office of Innovation and Improvement. You folks know something about this. How can we together use federal resources to build an infrastructure that is much more thoughtful and deliberative? How can we encourage innovation, study it, and learn how to make it work better?

The next bullet is about what we call here our dissemination model for spreading our findings. I'd like to move away from a dissemination model to a facilitation model, so that we're not just dropping research findings out and saying, "Here's good stuff that you need to use."

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Instead, we're much more engaged with the practitioners and the policymakers. Again, it's important to have them at the table at the beginning, so it's not something we're doing *to* them, and so we're studying the right problems of practice. They're at the table, so they understand the work and are much more able and willing to adopt some of these things. So how do we move away from one-shot professional development to more sustained assistance around understanding, using, and adapting research findings?

We've actually taken some steps in this direction already. At the last meeting, you met our new Director of Communications, who couldn't be here today. We aggressively looked at how can we make our News Flashes easier to read, and how we can make our report summaries accessible? So I think some of these smaller steps are how we're going to begin, as we look more seriously at this idea of moving off a strict dissemination model into a facilitation model.

So my final bullet is one that I feel very strongly about. Rick [Eric Hanushek, chairman, National Board for Education Sciences], you and I actually started to talk about this before the meeting, but you didn't know it. I think that we have a major opportunity to help states and local agencies use all of these data that they're swimming in -- to use it better, more productively. You know that IES this year is putting out $250 million in new dollars to support State Longitudinal Data Systems, and this is following an equal amount that we've already put out. So there are increasingly robust, strong, and rich data systems out there that a lot of

users simply don't know what to do with. And I think that we can play a very big role through training grants, or some other way of developing partnerships with people in districts and states about solving some of their data needs.

I bring a lot of my own personal experience on how powerful longitudinal data analysis can be, even when it's just good descriptive data. Currently a lot of people don't know how to do this very well. Good descriptive data can be very meaningful, but I wouldn't want us to stop there. I would also want us to, in our training, help districts plan stronger evaluation designs and help them build research designs that can answer meaningful questions. The exact mechanism for us doing this is a little bit open, but it's something that I think is really needed, really important, and it's the right time. Again, as I said, I think IES could do this in multiple ways through training grants. An obvious question is, do the Regional Labs have a role in this? Can we support other institutions that have this kind of capacity?

So those are the five bullets. I wonder if you'd like to discuss or provide any feedback before we jump into putting our money where our mouths are.