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Rebuilding Confidence in Educational Leaders through Evidence-based Practice and Policy

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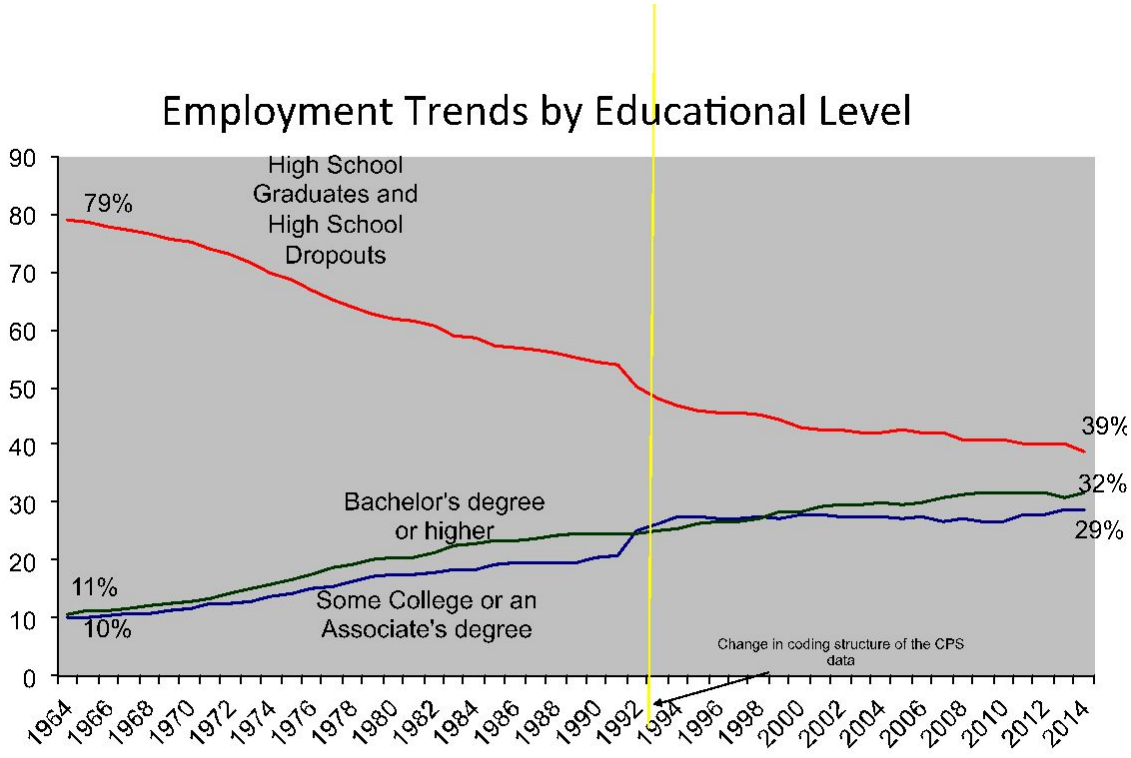
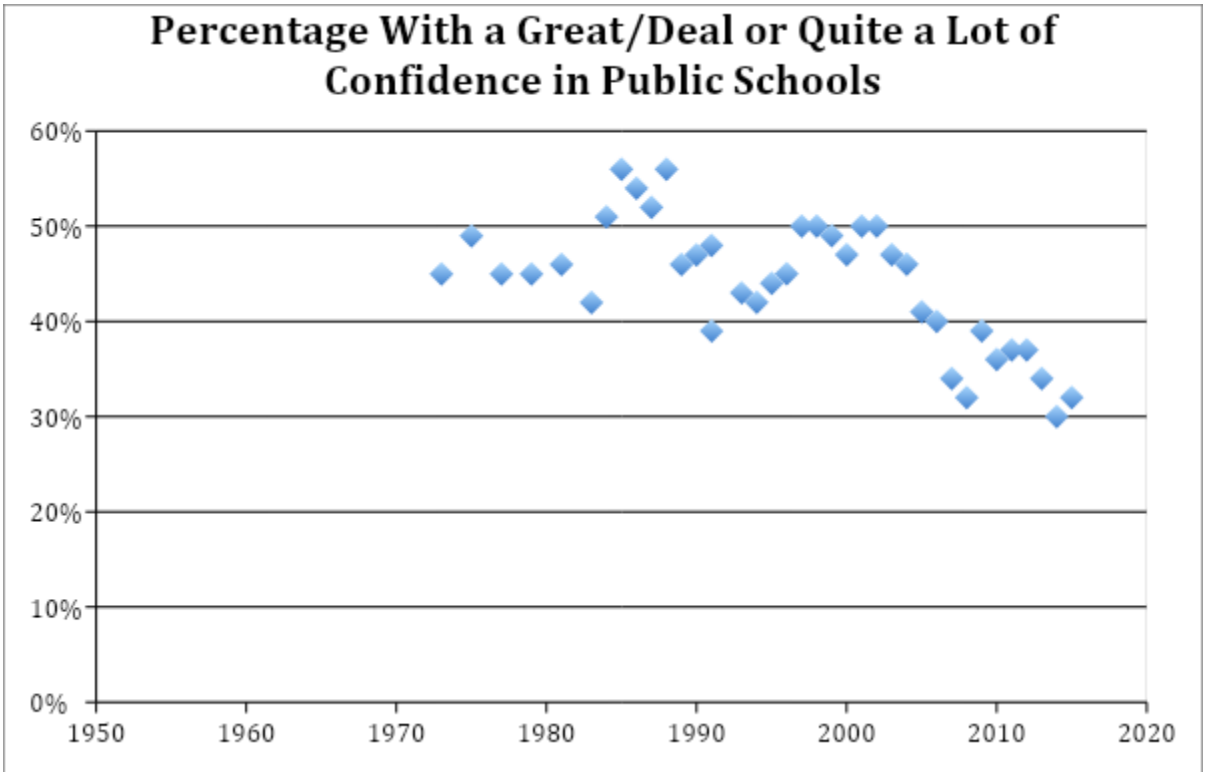
Public confidence in educators has declined in the face of dramatically growing needs for better educational results. Gradual improvement has not kept pace with growing aspirations for excellence and equity in outcomes. Political leaders, pursuing "silver bullet" solutions and turning to non-educators for leadership, have generated more instability and turmoil than real progress. Evidence-based practice can help educators improve educational performance and rebuild public confidence in their leadership.

Over the past fifty years a changing job market has caused the importance of educational attainment to skyrocket in the United States. In 1964 nearly 80 percent of employed people in United States had a high school education or less; by 2009 that percentage shrank to roughly 40 percent. Now more than 30 percent of employed people have a BA or above, and another 30 percent or so have some college or an associate degree. Projections indicate the demand for higher educational attainment will continue to grow.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of Current Population Survey, microdata 1964-2014.

Ironically, the rising value of education in the job market has been accompanied by a decline in public confidence in the ability of educators to do their jobs effectively. From 1973 to 1990 the Gallup Poll found that on average almost half of respondents said they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the public schools. From 1991 to 2004 those responding favorably declined slightly to 46 percent. But since 2005 the average response has fallen to about 36 percent, and in 2015 fewer than one third of respondents had "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in the public schools. Although Gallup does not specify a focus on either K-12 or higher education in this question, other surveys suggest this trend is similar for all levels of education.



Source: Gallup Polls

In 2015 Gallup reported that the public had more confidence in the public schools than banks, organized labor, newspapers, the criminal justice system, television news, and big business, which ranged from 21% to 28%. Congress bottomed out at 8%. Confidence in public schools, however, was lower than the Supreme Court, the presidency, the medical system, organized religion, the police, small business, and the military. Only small business and the military had over 60% registering "a great deal or quite a lot" of confidence.

Interestingly, organized labor has also lost public confidence in the past four decades. On average from 1973 to 1988 about 30 percent of Gallup respondents said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in organized labor. Since 2007 on average only 21 percent of respondents expressed that level of confidence. While public education has consistently garnered higher confidence ratings than organized labor, both have dropped substantially since the survey began.

Although many educators are not in collective bargaining groups, and organized labor is much larger than the education profession, it is striking how frequently the two are conflated in the minds of the

public. The growth of collective bargaining among professional educators in K-12 and also in higher education seems to be related to the loss of public confidence and the imposition of management practices that have devalued professional expertise.

Why the loss of confidence?

In *The Ordeal of Equality*, David Cohen and Susan Moffitt explain the loss of confidence in educators this way: "New policy aims of equality and excellence collided with weak capability, limited policy instruments, and unequal access to educational resources, to create unprecedented incompetence in educational practice." (Cohen and Moffitt 2009: 192) In short, increasing expectations of a profession without an increase in expertise and the resources to meet those expectations renders the education profession incompetent, the word used by Cohen and Moffitt and other education critics

Few policy aims stir the passion of educators more than equality and excellence, so assertions of inadequate competence are hard to take. In response to withering criticism from political and business leaders, educational leaders often point to the need for greater educational spending and for social policies to solve the underlying problems of poverty and discrimination that make successful teaching and learning difficult.

While the importance of money is obvious, it is not a panacea. Policy makers have been heard to say: "We don't have unlimited money. Exactly how will more money make a difference? Fix poverty? We've been told *education* is the way to fix poverty."

Educators have absorbed the harshest criticism in large cities, where poverty is concentrated and where achieving equity and excellence is most difficult. These also tend to be the places where teaching is most regimented and work-rules and policies negotiated in collective bargaining contracts have become the most rigid. I once heard Senator Michael Bennet, when immersed in labor negotiations as superintendent of Denver public schools, comment, "It is unsurprising we have restrictive work rules when we consider the command and control way we've traditionally run public schools." Poor management practices and labor-management conflicts and compromises have often obscured the talents and deep commitment of America's professional educators and created conditions that make it more difficult for the profession to become more successful.

Since education became a political football, policy makers have tried just about everything – choosing leaders from outside the education profession, testing, school choice, accountability, changing governance, for-profit management companies, performance funding, grading schools A to F, massive data bases, and many other strategies. Mayors have taken control of big city schools, and with increasing frequency, business, military, and political leaders have been selected for college and university presidencies, state school superintendents, and state higher education executive officers.

One cannot easily demonstrate whether "non-traditional" leaders are typically better, worse, or equally as successful leaders coming from education. It is clear, however, that being a policy leader in education is rarely a long-term job, which makes implementing and sustaining any reform strategy almost impossible.

For example, in November 2015 the median tenure of chief state school officers was 14 months. Of the 58 chief state school officers, 29 had fewer than 15 months in the job. Only 8 out of the 58 people holding such jobs have served five years or more. When I became CEO of the State Higher Education Executive Officers in 2000, governors directly appointed four members of the association. By 2013 governors acquired authority to appoint the state's postsecondary education policy leader in five additional states. The average tenure of a SHEEO in those nine states during the period 2000 to 2014 was 2.4 years.

The core problem is not the people. The core problem is that neither the profession nor political leaders have developed what it takes to meet the nation's needs and aspirations for education. More than 30 years of "school reform" since *A Nation At Risk* was released in 1983 have not yielded performance that reduces the risk. Political competition and turbulence have not helped; they have made things worse.

It is unrealistic to expect the political process to improve education. Instead, educators must develop the expertise required to meet the needs of the next generation and rebuild the confidence required for public support. Sustainable progress requires that educators develop stronger professional capabilities and practices, that policy makers implement policies that support effective practice, and that practitioners and policy makers work together more effectively in a partnership that respects one another's capabilities and limitations. Improving education especially requires better use of evidence to inform both practice and policy.

Building a partnership between evidence-based practice and policy

In the face of unremitting criticism educators often respond by launching spirited critiques of the latest "silver bullet" promoted by policy makers. But such responses do not address the fundamental problem, which is the need to find demonstrably effective ways of improving student learning. Fortunately, many efforts by educators to improve student achievement are beginning to make real progress.

The components of evidence-based practice

Improving educational attainment requires clearly defined, measurable learning objectives that emphasize preparing learners to manage the challenges of contemporary work, life, and citizenship. It requires assignments and assessments that simultaneously help students learn and demonstrate that they have acquired knowledge and skill in *transferring and using* what they know and can do to address real-life problems. It also requires that teachers collaboratively use the assessment of student achievement to evaluate their teaching and improve it based on what they have learned. This is evidence-based practice.

Effective evidence-based practice is *not* searching for "scalable silver bullets" identified through randomized clinical trials. Randomized clinical trials (RCTs) are well suited for what Donald Berwick, a leader in improving health care, calls "conceptually neat problems," such as addressing a disease with a single cause. (Berwick 2008: 1182) RCTs are poorly designed to improve the complex process of learning for students from different backgrounds with different levels of educational preparation who also are dealing with different life circumstances. Evidence-based practice must be experimental, rigorous, and disciplined, but it cannot yield conclusive knowledge that applies to all situations. The problem is not to find "what works" in general, across the board. Decades of experience have demonstrated that there are no single, simple, "blunt" solutions to complex problems of practice.

Examples of blunt policy solutions abound – restructuring governance, top-down approaches to school accountability, one-dimensional, test-based teacher evaluation, charter schools, vouchers, massive data systems, more transparency, performance funding, etc. Blunt policy

solutions have not produced, and they will not produce, significant improvements.

Blunt policy solutions fail because they are based on the wrong-headed theory that simple interventions can address complex problems. There are numerous examples of such solutions leading to dysfunctional policy making. (Scott 1998) Perhaps even more damaging, blunt policy solutions assume that good practice can be imposed from above. Only flexible, adaptive, interventions – skillful practice – can be effective solutions for complex problems. And such interventions require the skill of capable practitioners who know (or who can learn quickly from active experimentation) what works for whom.

The challenge for educational practitioners then is to learn "what works, when, for whom and under what sets of circumstances." (Yeager, et al, 2014)

Promising examples of educator-initiated evidence-based practice are springing up all over the landscape. The Degree Qualifications Profile, for postsecondary institutions and (yes, despite the controversies) the Common Core Standards for Collage and Career Readiness in the K-12 sector are initiatives to help focus attention on achieving clear standards of fundamental knowledge and the skills required to communicate, calculate, be creative, and solve unscripted problems. Multiple-choice tests that generate stress and gaming without advancing learning are beginning to be replaced by formative assessments and creatively designed assignments that develop and demonstrate knowledge and skill.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has applied the principles of improvement science (as employed in industry and health care) to achieve dramatic increases in the success rate of students taking developmental mathematics. (Bryk, et al. 2015)The Carnegie strategy taps practitioner wisdom, and helps educators to quickly create, test, refine, and implement more effective practices. It is the opposite of many typical studies of practice because this strategy aims at making small changes and learning fast, not making massive changes followed by expensive multi-year research projects to evaluate their effectiveness.

Many more examples can be found in the field. As documented by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, colleges and universities are increasingly assessing student learning outcomes and using what they learn to improve teaching and learning. (Kuh, et. al.

2014) The designers of computer assisted learning systems are exploring ways to study student interactions with the system to identify and efficiently surmount roadblocks to understanding. (Thille, et al. 2014) Institutions are analyzing their administrative data systems to monitor student behavior and respond constructively to indications of disengagement and failure to persist. (Milliron, et al. 2014)

In addition to the creative use of data to improve learning and student success, educational leaders have undertaken challenging reforms of teacher and school leader preparation, accreditation, and licensing. The full implementation of the revised Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards and state reforms of teacher licensing are taking longer than perhaps they should, but important, positive steps have been taken. A new vision of sophisticated, learner-centered teaching is gaining momentum in K-12 education. (CAEP 2013; CCSSO 2012)

Evidence-based policy

We also need more "evidence-based policy," and we need to cultivate an understanding that evidence-based policy and evidence-based practice are not the same thing. Policy and practice have different capabilities and limits. And experimental research can play only a limited role in both domains.

The test of effective policy in education is whether it enables and supports effective practice. More skillful, multifaceted evidence-based practice is the essential foundation for effectiveness. Policy needs to create the conditions that enable evidence-based practice to flourish.

A fresh, or perhaps a rediscovered approach to "evidence-based policy" will not seek to discover "what works" and then to push it onto practice in a top-down, compliance driven system. Decades of failed experiments demonstrate the limits of such designs. The objective of "evidence-based policy," should be to discover when and where social problems exist and then to apply appropriate *policy* resources to address the problems.

Examples of supportive policy might include providing enough student financial assistance to enable low income students to study full-time, financing professional capacity building (research and training for professionals), or establishing regulations to inform and protect consumers. The effectiveness of all such policies can be tested in

terms of policy level objectives such as increased participation, retention, and completion. When policy gets too involved in directing the work of practice three bad things happen: it decreases the flexibility and adaptability required for effective practice; it provokes practitioner resistance, rather than creativity; and it adds bureaucracy and cost without commensurate improvement.

An often-overlooked, but quite valuable approach to policy research is to document educational needs and barriers to effectiveness in *local jurisdictions* (state or school district) where a policy intervention could make a significant difference. Frequently "nobody really knows" significant facts about specific populations that could help mobilize policy support and lead to improvements. Studies based on samples can be quite persuasive to those disposed to agree with their findings, but they also are easily ignored or dismissed when the findings are inconvenient. A robust study of a particular population in a specific place is harder to ignore.

For example, educators and policy leaders in individual states and school districts should know how many of their academically capable students are not enrolled and succeeding in postsecondary education due to inadequate financial assistance. They should know completion rates and post-graduation rates for employment and graduate school enrollment for college students. They should know how many pre-schoolers have and do not have high quality pre-school services in the community. They should know the extent to which high school graduates are college ready, followed by work with teachers and school leaders for continuing improvement. They should examine teacher recruitment and retention in order to identify changes that would improve quality. And they should periodically evaluate their own teacher and school leader professional development resources in order to enhance the capabilities of their educators.

The *Measuring Up* series of studies released by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education from 2000 to 2008 are an excellent example of an effort to promote evidence-based policy. (National Center 2008) The unit of analysis was a state, not institutions, and the focus was on state policies that might improve outcomes. While the recessions of 2002 and 2008 generally distracted states from focusing on constructive higher education policy, a few states made real improvements in response to *Measuring Up*. Researchers might contribute more to policy and practice if they devoted more time in studying policy conditions and practice in specific places, and less in

futile attempts to establish more general causal inferences and findings that purport to apply broadly across all settings.

Rebuilding Educator Leadership, Establishing Supportive Policies

The experience of the past quarter century demonstrates that blunt policy instruments are no substitute for skillful professional practice. But it also demonstrates that educators need to improve performance in order to achieve shared goals of excellence and equity. Evidence-based practice is a means of improving performance, demonstrating competence, and rebuilding public confidence. Policy to support practice is much more likely to emerge when evidence is used to powerfully identify the communities and students most in need of supportive policy, *and* when professional educators demonstrate their ability to use resources and opportunities effectively.

The rebuilding of leadership roles for educators in policy and practice and the cultivation of genuine, trustful partnerships between practitioners and policy makers is unlikely to happen quickly or easily. It will take time and persistent effort to improve, and it will take time for bad habits inimical to flexible, evidence-based practice to fade. The LEAP States initiative of AAC&U and the Multi-State Collaborative, a cooperative project between AAC&U and SHEEO, are promising examples of practitioners taking initiative in cooperation with state leaders.

Finally, the corrosive relationships that have developed between educational collective bargaining associations and management are likely to be one of the most formidable barriers to progress. It will help if both managers and labor leaders come to realize that their own deepest interests as well as the interests of the nation require changing the current dynamic.

Regardless of the difficulty, it is essential for educational professionals and policy makers to deliberately create working relationships where policy respects its limits and provides necessary supports for practice, and where practitioners develop and employ the tools of practical experimentation and evidenced-based adaptation that can advance the profession of education to meet the challenges of our century.

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