

Flying (Partially) Blind: School Leaders' Use of Research In Decision Making

There is a common perception that educational leaders ignore research when they make decisions about school improvement. But, Mr. Fusarelli suggests, when the research is relevant to practitioners' needs and when school leaders foster a culture of data literacy, the picture changes.

BY LANCE D. FUSARELLI



E DUCATORS are frequently criticized for not using research to improve schooling. Critics assert that educators seem “research averse” and point out that business, the military, and even such public sector organizations as the Internal Revenue Service and the U.S. Postal Service have applied research-based best practices to improve organizational performance. The stubborn persistence of the achievement gap between whites and minorities and the failure of many education reforms to improve schooling give the appearance that school leaders are

simply resistant to organizational learning.

Are schools, as currently operated, learning organizations? At first blush, the answer is obvious: of course they are; that’s what they are supposed to do. Well, yes, that is at least partially true; students learn, albeit unevenly, but it is much less clear whether adults in schools, particularly teachers and school leaders, also learn (and whether what they learn are research-based best practices or survival skills). It is assumed that educational leaders use research in making decisions about school improvement and that they don’t reinvent the wheel every time they make a decision about curricula or programs. Denis Doyle asserts that this way of operating is “so obvious and commonsensical it is hard to imagine why it is not the norm. Is there any other way to make decisions? Unhappily, the answer is yes.”¹ For example, a scathing report on problems in the Los Ange-

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les Unified School District, the nation's second-largest district, sharply criticized school officials for their failure to implement the recommendations of evaluations of programs and system performance and their failure to replicate successful programs throughout the district. Unfortunately, Los Angeles may not be atypical.

Surprisingly little research exists as to the extent to which educators use research in decision making. Undoubtedly, some school leaders use research, and many incorporate it into their professional practice.² In interviews with superintendents, Gary Huang and his colleagues found that nearly all of them reported that they “read reports of research studies and program evaluations at least occasionally.”³ Unfortunately, with some exceptions, instances of how research has informed decision making or improved schooling are relatively rare.⁴ This raises the question: Why hasn't research been used more often by school leaders to improve educational practice?

BARRIERS TO USING RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

Several barriers — some institutional and structural, others personal — have impeded the use of research in educational decision making. First, the research community rarely reaches consensus about which education policies work best and rarely conducts research on the practical problems faced by school leaders.⁵ School leaders are thus faced with a confounding mass of often conflicting research. A veteran superintendent remarked, “Honestly, nobody really knows what's going on in the area. . . . Today, you read reports about this and this, next day you read reports about just the opposite. There is no consistency. That's frustrating.”⁶ This situation makes it difficult for superintendents and principals to learn and leads to confusion and mistrust among educators. Learning is difficult, if not impossible, when the lessons themselves are unclear.

Educational research as advocacy. Many school leaders view educational research with skepticism, particularly when they are constantly lobbied by companies promising the latest “magic bullet” that will eliminate the achievement gap (at least according to the company's own research). Superintendents and principals are busy enough without having to sift through research spin and marketing hype. This leads some school leaders to mistrust statistics, research, and slick marketing gimmicks, viewing them “as blatant attempts to distort or manipulate an audience.”⁷

Others distrust research because it is frequently used to promote political agendas.⁸ A superintendent in Texas

questioned the meaning of research-based programs and observed, “When the [state-approved] list of ‘research based’ programs came out, companies owned by two

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former Commissioners of Education for the State of Texas were on the list.” The political nature of the educational process can mean that power, rather than data, rules in decision making. In such situations, data are easily distorted and organizational learning is difficult.⁹

Furthermore, decision making and program adoption in education are shaped — and often determined — by ease of use, good marketing, lack of threat to current practice, “philosophical commitments, political necessities, and the attractiveness or popularity of ideas” rather than research-based evidence of program effectiveness.¹⁰ One veteran principal who has led schools in New York and Connecticut stated that many superintendents and school boards he has worked for “pick research that meets their budget needs” rather than that which has the most credible scientific support.

Ideology and professional culture. The professional culture of many schools “in which the ‘good’ and the ‘popular’ [are] valued more than the effective” further mitigates the use of research in decision making.¹¹ Sometimes differences exist between the anecdotal professional experiences of principals and superintendents and what the research says is most effective. For example, in Los Angeles, the district's chief instructional official admitted that she did not examine the research on the Waterford Early Reading Program before recommending that the district invest nearly \$50 million to purchase the program. When asked why she ignored the research, she responded, “Every classroom situation is different. And nothing compares to L.A. I'd rather listen to my own teachers.”¹²

The ideological and professional beliefs of school leaders often hold greater currency than abstract statistics and often trump findings from meta-analyses of research. As an award-winning principal in North Carolina stated, “Anyone can find research to support what they are doing.” A veteran New York principal concurred, asserting that “principals try to find *Kappan* articles that support their views.” This clash between the professional culture of researchers and that

of school leaders explains in large part why research is so often ignored in school decision making.

Personal and professional barriers. In addition, several personal barriers exist that limit school leaders' use of research in decision making. The most common reasons why school leaders do not use research in decision making are lack of expertise, lack of time, cultural conflict, the questionable relevance to users' needs, and poor communication between researchers and practitioners.¹³

Principals are often so busy engaging in crisis management, administrivia, and the daily operations of schooling that they have little time to devote to thoughtful, reflective, research-based strategic planning and improvement. Principals seldom have time to collaborate, discuss the data and research, and plan interventions strategically.¹⁴ An award-winning principal commented that "one of the biggest barriers to effective use of [research and] data is [not having] *time* built into the work day of educators to understand, analyze, and use data." A Texas superintendent concurred and called on researchers to "highlight it for me. If what I read is the first page of the articles in administrator magazines, then give me a one-page, readable highlight of the most current research, and it will stick in my mind. If you want it read, then put it in the format that I consume."

DATA-BASED DECISION MAKING

Although school leaders are not frequent users of traditional academic research, they do use action research and data in making decisions. A growing body of evidence suggests that school leaders in districts across the nation are incorporating data-driven practices in-

to their decision making, often producing substantial improvements in student learning and achievement.¹⁵

For example, Connecticut mandated the creation of data teams in schools to ensure the use of data to drive instruction. Principals are required to indicate in their annual school improvement plans how data are being used to improve student achievement. In schools and districts that have institutionalized data-based decision making and action research and made them part of the organizational culture, data graphs and charts are displayed on classroom walls, in hallways, in principals' and district lead-

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ers' offices, and even in the rooms where the school board meets. In North Carolina and Connecticut, schools compete for the most effective "data walls." In Florida, the superintendent of the Jacksonville school district created a war room in which the district's strategic progress is con-

tinually reviewed and assessed. In Georgia, schools are creating data rooms in which officials analyze the performance of student subgroups and target interventions accordingly. Teachers and school leaders meet regularly throughout the year in various horizontally and vertically organized teams to disaggregate state and local performance data and decide what is working and what is not in their local context and with their students.

INCENTIVES TO USE RESEARCH IN DECISION MAKING

Superintendents must take the lead and create an environment in which evidence-based practices are implemented and valued. This requires providing release time for school leaders and teachers (during the school year *and* over the summer) to meet regularly to share and discuss data. Districts dedicated to data-based decision making have created district-level teams and study groups to review evidence of the effectiveness of various programs.¹⁶


However, research and evaluation are useful only when school leaders are willing to accept and act on the results. Evaluating data using building- and district-level teams is crucial. A former superintendent stated that using data teams in decision making encourages

innovation and engages “the creative power of practitioners.” To work in this way, however, school leaders must be trained well in principles of applied research, strategic planning, and evaluation, and they must be equipped with the technological expertise to collect, organize, and analyze student performance data. School leaders, school staffs, and school boards must all become data-literate.¹⁷ A veteran New York superintendent commented that in his experience, it is not always easy to get school boards to buy into using research and data as the basis for decision making. Leaders must justify the expenditure of limited resources, including time and money, to boards faced with competing demands, such as “putting up new curtains and fixing the boilers,” which are “more visible and easier to justify.”

To make research-based, data-driven decision making a reality in education, school leaders must spend time educating not only themselves and their staffs, but the school board and even the community. A school district in Ohio created a series of data classes for district administrators, principals, and teachers to help them develop competence and confidence in the application of statistics, the creation and management of data information systems, and data-based strategic planning.¹⁸

In addition, if research is to play a more prominent role in decision making, we must have greater collaboration between researchers, school leaders, and staff members in conducting research that meets practitioners’ needs.¹⁹ As one superintendent stated, “Researchers must take the practitioners’ perspectives and raise questions from the practitioners’ standpoint” rather than pursuing “their own interests and their own questions.”²⁰ A principal in North Carolina agreed, stating that researchers need to “ask school systems about their problems and needs” if they want school leaders to pay attention to and use research in decision making. By conducting collaborative action research projects using data-based decision making, researchers and school leaders will be able to discover “what works,” thereby making research more useful and relevant to practitioners’ needs.

In conclusion, school leaders do use research to inform decision making. But they don’t use it in the traditional way. Instead, they tend to rely more on applied, data-based, or action research than on traditional academic research produced by outsiders. Instead of constantly reinventing the wheel, making decisions through trial and error, or, worse, making decisions in the dark — an all too common practice — school leaders who use action research and engage in data-based decision making are able to promote more coherent and effective systemic reform.

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2. Tom Corcoran, “The Use of Research Evidence in Instructional Improvement,” *CPRE Policy Briefs*, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, November 2003; and Diane Massell, “The Theory and Practice of Using Data to Build Capacity: State and Local Strategies and Their Effects,” in Susan H. Fuhrman, ed., *From the Capitol to the Classroom: Standards-Based Reform in the States, 100th NSSF Yearbook, Part I* (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 2001), pp. 148-69.
3. Gary Huang et al., *Institute of Education Sciences Findings from Interviews with Education Policymakers* (Arlington, Va.: Synectics, 2003), pp. 13, 16.
4. Psychological research on children’s self-image and legal research on school finance have been cited by the courts in decisions ending de jure segregation and inequities in school finance, which have significantly influenced educational practice. Many useful insights have been gleaned from studies of teacher turnover, school choice, the value of phonics mastery in the early grades, and special education. Research on elements of effective schools and whole-school reform models has helped some schools and school districts to significantly improve educational outcomes, as has research on some early reading programs, class-size reduction, and value-added accountability systems.
5. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
6. Huang et al., pp. 17-18.
7. Lorna Earl and Steven Katz, “Painting a Data-Rich Picture,” *Principal Leadership*, January 2005, p. 19.
8. Steve Fleischman, “Moving to Evidence-Based Professional Practice,” *Educational Leadership*, March 2006, pp. 87-90.
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11. Ibid.
12. Todd Oppenheimer, “Selling Software,” *Education Next*, Spring 2007, p. 28.
13. Bruce J. Biddle and Lawrence J. Saha, “How Principals Use Research,” *Educational Leadership*, March 2006, pp. 72-77; Kerry Englert et al., *How Are Educators Using Data? A Comparative Analysis of Superintendent, Principal, and Teachers’ Perceptions of Accountability Systems* (Aurora, Colo.: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, November 2005); and Patricia L. Reeves and Walter L. Burt, “Challenges in Data-Based Decision-Making: Voices from Principals,” *Educational Horizons*, Fall 2006, pp. 65-71.
14. Englert et al., op. cit.; and Reeves and Burt, op. cit.
15. Kerri Kerr et al., “Strategies to Promote Data Use for Instructional Improvement: Actions, Outcomes, and Lessons from Three Urban Districts,” *American Journal of Education*, August 2006, pp. 496-520; Scott McLeod, “Data-Driven Teachers,” unpublished paper, School Technology Leadership Initiative, University of Minnesota; and Mike Schmoker, *The Results Fieldbook: Practical Strategies from Dramatically Improved Schools* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001).
16. Corcoran, op. cit.; and Massell, op. cit.
17. Earl and Katz, op. cit.
18. Leigh Burgess, “Data 101: Going Back to School,” *Principal Leadership*, October 2006, pp. 22-25.
19. Corcoran, op. cit.
20. The disconnect between researchers and practitioners leads to mutual feelings of disrespect and distrust. See Huang et al., p. 16. 

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