T
wel
e
F

elve

years
ago
received
a

call
from
my
local
NPR
affiliate
about
the
education
platforms
for
then
presidential
candidates
Al
Gore
and
George
W.
Bush.
I
suggested
the
journalist
take
another
angle
for
her
report
because,
after
all,
the
federal
government
hasn’t
much
say
in
education.
Education
is
primarily
a
state
responsibility,
and
federal
funding
constitutes
only
5–7%
of
the
money
spent
on
education.
The
2001
reauthorization
of
the
Elementary
and
Secondary
Education
Act
(ESEA),
more
commonly
known
as
No
Child
Left
Behind
(NCLB),
quickly
changed
my
perspective
on
the
feds’
reach
into
schools.

Fast-forward
to
March
2010,
when
President
Barack
Obama
released
A
Blueprint
for
Reform—his
plan
to
overhaul
NCLB.
The
plan
outlines
major
reform
initiatives,
including
new
standards
for
college
and
career
readiness,
enhanced
accountability
systems
that
emphasize
growth
over
time,
turnaround
models
for
low-performing
schools,
and
expanded
school
choice.
In
May
2010,
the
administration
published
a
set
of
research
summaries
to
serve
as
the
evidentiary
base
for
the
reforms
outlined
in
the
Blueprint.
The
six
summaries
attend
to
key
elements
of
the
Blueprint:
“College-
and
Career-Ready
Students,”
“Great
Teachers
and
Great
Leaders,”
“Meeting
the
Needs
of
English
Learners
and
Other
Diverse
Learners,”
“A
Complete
Education,”
“Successful,
Safe,
and
Healthy
Students,”
and
“Fostering
Innovation
and
Excellence.”
Each
summary
describes
a
key
problem
in
education,
proposes
policy
reforms,
and
offers
evidence
to
support
those
reforms.
The
book
under
review,
The
Obama
Education
Blueprint:
Researchers
Examine
the
Evidence
(Information
Age,
2010,
104
pp.,
$19.99),
offers
a
set
of
critiques
of
these
research
summaries.

Researchers
Examine
the
Evidence
is
a
product
of
the
National
Education
Policy
Center
(NEPC),
based
at
the
University
of
Colorado.
NEPC’s
mission
is
to
produce
and
disseminate
high-quality
peer-reviewed
research
and,
according
to
its
website,
is
“guided
by
the
belief
that
the
democratic
governance
of
public
education
is
strengthened
when
policies
are
based
on
sound
evidence.”
In
that
spirit,
NEPC
undertook
a
rigorous
review
of
the
research
summaries
intended
to
substantiate
the
Blueprint.

The
introductory
chapter
of
Researchers
Examine
the
Evidence
synthesizes
the
six
critiques
that
follow
in
chapters
2–7.
Researchers
with
particular
expertise
in
the
Blueprint
reforms
authored
the
reviews.
Credit
goes
to
William
Mathis
and
Kevin
Welner,
editors
of
Researchers
Examine
the
Evidence,
for
asking
respected
scholars,
such
as
Gene
Glass,
Diane
Ravitch,
and
Paul
Shaker,
to
conduct
the
reviews.

Researchers
Examine
the
Evidence
is
a
quick
and
pithy
read.
Each
of
the
six
reviews
follows
the
same
evaluative
framework.
An
abstract
is
presented
first,
followed
by
a
brief
introduction
to
the
material
under
review,
i.e.,
the
governmental
report
on
one
of
its
own
Blueprint
reforms.
Then
begins
the
heart
of
the
critique:
a
summary
of
the
report’s
findings
and
conclusions,
a
discussion
of
the
report’s
rationale
for
its
findings
and
conclusions,
a
review
of
the
validity
of
the
findings
and
conclusions,
and
a
review
of
the
report’s
methods
and
use
of
the
research
literature.
Finally,
a
conclusion
considers
the
report’s
usefulness
for
guiding
policy
and
practice.
This
format,
along
with
clear
writing
styles
by
all
the
authors,
makes
the
book
accessible
to
a
wide
variety
of
audiences.

The
reviews
are
unflinching
and,
at
times,
hard-hitting.
Across
the
board,
reviewers
reveal
a
disturbing
set
of
patterns
among
the
research
summaries:
over-simplified
solutions
to
highly
complex
problems,
flawed
or
absent
logic
based
upon
the
evidence
provided,
a
significant
lack
of
peer-reviewed
research
cited,
misused
or
misinterpreted
research
evidence,
and
an
overreliance
on
nonscholarly
documents
such
as
reports
from
the
media,
advocacy
groups,
and
organizations
with
clear
bias.
In
the
introductory
chapter,
the
editors
point
to
key
omissions
in
the
administration’s
research
summaries.
For
instance,
no
details
whatsoever
were
provided
to
legitimize
the
continued
reliance
on
high-stakes
accountability
systems,
standardized
tests
as
the
primary
measures
of
student
achievement,
or
the
new
genre
of
competitive
grants
for
federal
aid
(e.g.,
Race
to
the
Top).
Also
missing
is
evidence
to
justify
the
contentious
turnaround
models
for
consistently
low-performing
schools.
These
omissions,
along
with several instances of incomplete, misleading, and biased reviews of research, raise serious doubts about the evidence base supporting the Blueprint reforms.

All is not negative, however. Authors of Researchers Examine the Evidence reviews commend the research summaries for effectively describing many of the problems the Blueprint reforms are meant to address. Moreover, they hold up several Blueprint reforms as viable ideas worthy of serious consideration. Many reviewers also acknowledge the inclusion of at least some of the relevant research. But overall, the reviewers find that the research summaries fell far short of expectations. In critiquing “Great Teachers and Great Leaders,” which presents evidence in support of performance-based pay, a teacher and leader innovation fund, and clinically based educator-preparation programs, Shaker concludes that the research summary “is in fact a partisan political text that starts with a conclusion and then finds evidence to support it” (Mathis & Welner, 2010, p. 30). Many of the reviewers remain puzzled by the missed opportunities to reference research literature that could speak comprehensively to many of the ideas raised by the Blueprint. In their review of “College- and Career-Ready Students,” Diane Ravitch and William Mathis comment, “Overall, only about 15% of the references appear to have come from peer-reviewed, independent sources. On all these issues, high-quality research studies and findings are available. They just were not used” (Mathis & Welner, 2010, p. 13). Not surprisingly, political ideology appears to have had significant influence on the production of the research summaries.

This isn’t to say that the authors of Researchers Examine the Evidence are also void of an ideological bent. Indeed, it is hard not to sense a “gotcha” tone in this book, and a periodic violation of some of the very critiques levied against the research summaries. For instance, in some cases the reviewers criticize the research summaries because they overemphasize media reports and underuse peer-reviewed research, or cite dated research. These are valid arguments, and represent standards that should be upheld by reviewers as well. However in one instance a reviewer references a media outlet that cites a non-peer-reviewed research paper (p. 13), and in another a reviewer references a 1987 meta-analysis on learning supports that included computer-assisted instruction (p. 68). (One would think that instructional technology via computer has vastly changed since that time!) These criticisms are quite minor in the larger scheme, and should not detract from an otherwise powerful and valid critique of government-sponsored research summaries.

Researchers Examine the Evidence is meant to inform policymakers, educators, scholars, and the general public about the merits of the ideas—and their purported evidentiary base—proposed in the Blueprint. In this sense it serves as a very important “check and balance” to a potentially powerful government agenda. Its authors remind us that politics and ideology invariably shape interpretations of research, particularly when those interpretations are made by political entities. In Researchers Examine the Evidence, the editors revisit the “wary realism” offered by Gene Glass following his review of President Reagan’s What Works evidentiary document more than two decades ago. Glass observed, “What Works does not synthesize research, it invokes a modern ritual seeking legitimization of the Reagan administration’s policies; What Works does this, and lest one forget, previous administrations have done the same (1987, p. 9).” Glass’s observation is ever applicable to the present-day administration’s Blueprint research summaries.

Research should play a significant role in the formulation of policy. If the federal government is going to continue to play a role in public education, I would expect its policies to be based on sound evidence. The stakes are simply too high to force the widespread adoption of unsubstantiated programs. The government certainly has the right to propose or try innovative practices, but it should not justify their use with weak, limited, or biased information passed off as supported by research. Few are naive enough to believe that even sound research will always guide our policies or that research and research reviews are devoid of ideological bias. Researchers Examine the Evidence illustrates how politics can get in the way of decisions based on evidence, and contributes to the healthy debate of ideas based on scientific merit.

References
