

A review of *The Obama Education Blueprint: Researchers Examine the Evidence* Edited by William Mathis and Kevin Welner

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TWELVE YEARS AGO I 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 policy-makers, 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

- Glass, G. V. (1987). What works: Politics and research. *Educational Researcher*, 16, 5–10.
- Mathis, W. J., & Welner, K. G. (Eds.). (2010). *The Obama education Blueprint: Researchers examine the evidence*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.