

Welcome to Institute of Education Science Principal Investigators Meeting.

John Q. Easton. March 5, 2014. Washington, D.C.

Good morning. Welcome to our never ending winter, right on the heels of a very challenging year. Last year we had sequestration and then a shutdown. We weren't able to fund all of last year's qualified applications. We were disappointed in not seeing our 2014 budget return to pre-sequestration levels. And it was a year of constant uncertainty. Both Tom Brock and Joan McLaughlin were brave souls to sign on this year.

But there was also plenty of positive activity. For a while we had high hopes for the reauthorization of IES's legislation – the Education Science Reform Act. We spent a good deal of time on the Hill last fall talking to both House and Senate staffers from both parties about IES and ESRA. We also spent a good deal of time talking to GAO staff about our work at IES as they prepared a report on us.

In our many conversations with Hill staff and GAO staff, we heard again and again that IES has earned and maintained a reputation for the highest quality work, for rigor, for objectivity, and for nonpartisanship. We should all feel proud of this – the initial work in establishing IES, in developing high standards and expectations, and for taking some risks. I personally feel a sense of pride we've maintained our reputation for rigor and quality even as we explore some new directions in our grant making.

At the same time that we heard these words of praise, we were questioned about the relevance and usefulness of our work. We and other spokespersons for IES were asked repeatedly to point to specific instances where our research made a positive difference. Have we helped to improve schools, to increase student achievement, raise high school graduation rates? Have we helped teachers manage their classrooms better, are we helping more students gain access to college? Are schools safer and calmer because of our work? Are special needs students having an easier or better time in school, learning more, making smoother transitions?

Among Hill staff and GAO, relevance and usefulness were the two most repeated words this past year.

You know that we've tried some new funding opportunities at IES designed to create relevance and usability. Last year we awarded six small researcher-practitioner partnership grants. This competition is based on the premise that when researchers and practitioners engage with each other, the researchers will conduct useful work, and that at the same time, the practitioners will act on the research. We hope that these partnerships will result in work that is relevant, and not just useful, but actually used.

Just last week a couple of hundred reviewers came to DC to discuss applications for Fiscal Year 2014. In addition to our traditional research programs and topics, we had a couple of new ones. Again we had partnership applications, and for the first time we reviewed applications for Continuous Improvement Research in Education, which also

required partnerships. We also reviewed applications for a Knowledge Utilization Center. This center is about learning more about how research can inform practice, how researchers can learn from practice and how researchers can conduct research that practitioners will want to use. It is not about studying why practitioners don't do what researchers say they should.

Promoting partnerships and studying knowledge utilization will not by themselves insure the kind of relevance and utility that our friends and critics on the Hill and at GAO are asking. They are a step in the right direction and may be necessary, but they are not sufficient.

I just read *Restoring Opportunity*¹ by Greg Duncan and Dick Murnane. This is a follow-up to the influential – and depressing -- volume *Whither Opportunity*² from a few years ago that starkly laid out the growing educational gaps between rich and poor students. *Restoring Opportunity* is a slim well-written book that describes several promising approaches to improving education for poor students. Duncan and Murnane describe Boston's pre-kindergarten program; a small cluster of charter schools operated by the University of Chicago; New York City's small high school program; and a social welfare program in Milwaukee designed to reduce family poverty. None of these are

¹ Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane. *Restoring Opportunity: The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press and the Russell Sage Foundation. 2014.

² Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane. *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. 2011.

silver bullet approaches. They are all complex and multi-faceted, built on nuanced theories of change.

One thing that the educational programs have in common is a focus on high quality instruction. This is not simple to provide: you need good teachers, they need lots of support and time to work together. Teachers need good materials, strong curricula, and good assessments to track student progress. They need strong leaders to guide the enterprise. The instructional and support systems must be surrounded by a sound accountability system that provides incentives for people to behave in the best interests of children. All of which needs to be embedded in a broader and more comprehensive view of schooling that recognizes that many children need more help than what a six hour school day can provide.

One thing that I notice about the educational programs described here is that they are not “packages.” Instead they are combinations and accumulations of evidence-based programs and practices that address levers to improvement identified by research. They rely on research to guide them, not to tell them exactly what and how to do it. These education programs also embed research and evaluation strategies into their daily work so that their progress is continually monitored and adjusted, just like they monitor student progress and make regular adjustments to instruction.

There are many times when educators need to know what works and then to apply it. But these are often discrete programs that address discrete problems. They

don't make for more holistic approaches to school improvement like the examples in *Restoring Opportunity*.

I think that this approach to school improvement also beckons us to think of new research paradigms to guide improvement regimens like those described in *Restoring Opportunity*. Our new program called Continuous Improvement Research in Education is one such attempt, but I think that there are many others.

For example, I think we could profit by stepping back and thinking differently about the role of RCTs in our research and development work. Often, the RCT is the culmination of a long process of development and is intended to establish efficacy or effectiveness. Perhaps the RCTs should play a bigger role earlier in the development of new approaches, testing the myriad of decision points in what we now call iterative development. There is the possibility for being systematic and disciplined in “learning by doing.” A few months ago in *Educational Researcher*, Heather Hill and colleagues³ argued that we could build better professional development programs by testing early in the development process, holding some aspects of the program constant (like content) and varying others (like delivery mode).

We can also improve our RCTs so that we learn more from them than “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” impact estimate. Lots of people say that we need to learn more

³ Heather C. Hill, Mary Beisiegel, and Robin Jacob. Professional development research: Consensus, crossroads and challenges. *Educational Researcher* 2013 42: 476-487.

than “what works.” We need to understand for whom, under what conditions, why and how. Many researchers and methodologists are taking these questions to heart. There is a surge of interest and activity in the field to help us understand variability in outcomes, as well as in “getting under the hood” to understand mediators and mechanisms. Some of these issues must be addressed at the design stage, where for example Cybele Raver called on us here at SREE last fall to make “bright contrasts” between treatment groups so that we can learn something about the whys of an effect. Similarly, Heather Hill calls on PD researchers to test PD programs component by component, so that we don’t end up with big complicated interventions and can’t tell what it is about them that is effective or not. Our colleagues at the Spencer Foundation are beginning a major new program to help understand variability in outcomes better. So I expect to see progress in how RCTs are designed, analyzed and perhaps also in their role in development activities.

So far I’ve talked about a couple of ways how we can improve our relevance and usefulness – first, by engaging with practitioners in collaborative research partnerships, and second by specifically building new improvement research strategies. There’s another task that we may be able to undertake more quickly. Our field – and you here today in particular – have conducted a large quantity of high quality research that is relevant and useful. But we have a communications problem.

At nearly every meeting, the IES board, the National Board on Education Science, asks me and the commissioners about our communication or dissemination strategies. What are we doing to make more people aware of the excellent work that you and we do?

This questioning has led to a flurry of activity at IES, though admittedly we don't have a well-planned strategy. Some of our RFAs now require a dissemination plan. We're working hard on a new easier-to-navigate website. Ruth Neild and her team have performed miracles with the WWC and the ERIC websites and have introduced a whole series of new informational products. The research centers have commissioned research syntheses that you will hear about later today.

We now Tweet and are about to blog. On a lot of this I'm feeling a little out of my own comfort zone, but I know that we've got to try these things or we'll be dinosaurs.

I wonder how many of you read Nicholas Kristof's column in the New Year Times⁴ a couple of weeks ago? The headline was "Smart Minds, Slim Impact." The first sentence goes like this: "Some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university professors, but most of them just don't matter in today's great debates." There are many reasons this happens, including our focus on publication in journals that no one but our colleagues read.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-professors-we-need-you.html?ref=nicholasdkristof>

I want to end by encouraging you to move out of your comfort zone. Work really hard to write a nice piece for a broad audience. Use jazzy visuals. Submit an op-ed piece to your local newspaper. Initiate a meeting with staff at your local school district or your state to share something important you have learned. How about a well-produced catchy video on you tube? Send these my way and I'll tweet them.

I sincerely believe that we can do research that is of the highest quality, that addresses key issues, and can make a difference. But it's going to take all of us trying something and moving a little out of our comfort zones.

Thanks.