

Speech at “Chicago Contributes,” a University of Chicago forum on health care and education in Washington D.C., Sept. 10, 2009

Good afternoon. Thank you, Arne and President Zimmer.

As many of you know, before I moved to Washington three months ago, I spent my entire career in Chicago--conducting research, analyzing data, evaluating school programs—highly technical work used broadly by the reform community and aimed at improving schools. The lessons I learned in Chicago will prove invaluable as I chart a new course in Washington as director of the Institute of Education Sciences in the Department of Education.

For 12 of those years I worked at the University’s Consortium on Chicago School Research, which has gained a national reputation for conducting research that speaks directly to the needs of practitioners and policy makers. CCSR views itself as a partner in Chicago Public Schools’ improvement efforts, studying the district’s reforms, initiatives, and programs, and tracking key indicators across the district. The Consortium served as a “critical friend” of the school district—or as Arne called it, an honest broker--conducting and widely reporting rigorous research, while also helping to build capacity for reform across the district in the use of data, analysis, and research.

Consortium draws its strength from a deep bench of strong researchers, who are committed to a very different model of education research. Stakeholders help plan the consortium’s research agenda, and as the work progresses, they carefully vet the

designs, analyses, findings, and especially the interpretations of the findings. Because the stakeholders shape the research, they have a greater stake in actually using the research. Consortium researchers are not content to just publish reports and disseminate findings; they help principals and teachers understand how to use the research to improve their schools.

My experience in Chicago convinced me of this: Effective education research must be guided by the voice and interests of practitioners and policy makers. Far too much education research – including much that is done in universities – is driven by the interests and theories of the researchers' themselves and not the needs and problems of practice. If researchers want their work to be relevant, they need to reach out to policymakers; they need to collaborate with researchers outside their expertise; they need to spend time in schools talking with administrators and teachers about the challenges they face.

The Institute of Education Sciences is the nation's engine for education research, evaluation, assessment, development and statistics. The Institute built its reputation over the past several years by conducting rigorous research, demanding high standards, and supporting and training researchers across the country. By doing so, it raised the bar for all education research and evaluation nationwide. That is not going to change. We got the "rigor" part right. Now it's time to focus on relevance and usability.

So, how can we bring some of the Chicago experience to the federal level? The first step is fostering research partnerships with both practitioners and policy-makers. As a first step in this direction, IES is offering millions in grants to researchers who work with school districts to improve reading instruction and reshape struggling schools.

We at IES, along with education researchers across the country, have a huge opportunity right now to become more useful and relevant as we plan to evaluate the use of federal education stimulus funds. What are we going to learn from all of these new efforts that will pay off in the long run? And, equally important, what are we going to learn in the short run to build on the successes and change course where we have problems?

As Arne said, we are in a perfect storm for school reform. Billions of new stimulus dollars will drive far-reaching changes in states and school districts nationwide. These reforms could change the way teachers are paid, the way principals are trained, the way schools are governed, the way data is collected and shared. Stimulus funds will encourage school districts, states and researchers to work together to better understand how these new initiatives are being rolled out, what effects they are having, and especially, what we can learn from them to stimulate school improvement across the country. These evaluations will be comprehensive, rigorous, timely and useful to schools.

IES, and researchers across the country, will be in the eye of this perfect storm as they study which reforms hold the greatest promise for American school children. I ask for your support as we work to make education research a field that fuels school improvement nationwide. Thank you.