

Research Conference:

IES/National Center for Postsecondary Research/Foundation

Keynote speech, New York Sept. 24th

Greetings. I'm excited to have a chance this evening to share some of my ideas at the launch of this conference.

Given the president's ambitious goals around college attainment and postsecondary reforms, this is truly a thrilling --and critical--time to be working together on this front. Perhaps you are a researcher studying whether dual enrollment programs in high school help students persist and succeed in college.

Or perhaps you are driving policy change at a foundation, trying to figure out which reforms hold the greatest promise for scalable and sustainable change. Or perhaps you are a college dean, for whom the prevalence of remedial math courses is not an abstract statistic but a reality that discourages far too many freshmen from their dream of a college degree.

There is so much we don't know about postsecondary reform--this field of study is so young, and policy is moving so fast -- but I know one thing for sure: We need each other. And we need to figure out how to work together on this formidable

challenge, not side by side in our little silos, but as partners sharing expertise and searching collectively for solutions.

Building partnerships among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners -- this is a theme I have returned to over and over during the dozens of speeches and appearances I've made in my first year as director of IES. This is a concept I have embedded in the mission of IES. And this was a reality that grounded my work in Chicago, where I devoted my entire career to analyzing data, researching reform and school improvement efforts, and working with members of Chicago's education community to make those findings useful. I spent 12 years at the University of Chicago, directing the work of the Consortium on Chicago School Research. This consortium's national reputation was built on the strength of a deep bench of top-notch researchers, who are committed to a very different model of education research. These Chicago researchers are not content to just publish reports and disseminate findings; they help principals, teachers and district leaders understand how to use the research to improve their schools.

What the Consortium created in Chicago – I guess that's what you would call a "solution-oriented research agenda." The agenda was both reactive and proactive, balanced by the needs of the school system and the talents and

interests of the researchers. The Consortium studied sweeping policy reforms and evaluated pilot programs. They conducted biannual surveys and built a comprehensive longitudinal data system -- long before it was fashionable. And sometimes, consortium researchers spent years puzzling over a jigsaw of relatively obscure findings – only to piece it together into a coherent research picture that could be shared with administrators and teachers, who would in turn puzzle through the best way to address the problems revealed by the research. The freshman on-track indicator was this kind of puzzle, as was the “five essential supports” and of course, the postsecondary “potholes” -- work that continues to draw attention nationwide.

Let me spend a few minutes talking about this postsecondary research and how it deepened the Consortium’s long-standing partnership with the school system. Since 2004, CCSR had tracked the postsecondary experiences of successive cohorts of Chicago graduates and examined the relationship among high school preparation, support, college choice, and postsecondary outcomes. The goal of this research is to help Chicago Public Schools, other urban districts and national policy makers understand what it takes to improve the college outcomes for urban and other at-risk students who now overwhelmingly aspire to college.

Several years ago, I had a rather uncomfortable discussion with Arne Duncan, who at that time was running the Chicago Public Schools and as you all know is now running our nation's education system. He had just seen a headline that screamed in giant type across the top of Page 1: "Of 100 Chicago Public School Freshmen, Six will Get a College Degree." It was about the worst news I've ever had to deliver to Arne during my time as executive director of the Consortium – and about the hardest challenge Arne faced as Chicago schools chief. But as tough as that headline was, it shined a new light on the issue of postsecondary access and success -- not only in Chicago, but across the nation.

After the shock of these early findings and glaring headlines, district leaders and researchers started tackling some of the unresolved issues identified in the first report; namely, why students tend to enroll in a limited number of colleges – especially ones with such low graduation rates -- and why college enrollment varies so dramatically across different schools and racial groups.

This work took about four years to complete, but some important findings started to surface early. Rather than wait until we were 100 percent sure of our findings, we decided to share some of these early results with Chicago school leaders—so they could react to them and give us feedback, and possibly start addressing the

problem. One such early finding was the importance of filing a FAFSA. Among students who were accepted into a four-year college, the analysis revealed that 84 percent of those who completed a FAFSA ultimately enrolled in college—compared to 55 percent who didn't fill out a FAFSA.

The research team shared this finding more than a year before the report was finalized, and the school leaders were able to respond with a proactive fix, creating a financial aid tracking system that allowed all Chicago high schools to get daily updates on their students' filing status. Schools started paying attention to this, and the percentage of students completing FAFSAs jumped from 45 percent in 2007 to 69 percent in 2009. College enrollment in Chicago increased from 48 to 53 percent in two years. Bear in mind—this wasn't a "program" they bought because some study showed that it "worked." This something created by the experts working on the ground to solve a problem identified by trusted researchers and customized to work in this particular school context.

You know, too often, we researchers do a study on something we are interested in, present the findings to schools and say: "Here's something good that you need to use." And if they ignore it, we're perplexed as to why they would disregard our great advice: "Well if those folks had only done what I recommended they would

be in great shape.” Or we give them the final results years after our study begins, highlighting problems they could have been fixing all along.

And too often those recommendations come in the form of “interventions”—new programs and new curricula that researchers have spent years studying in randomized control trials. As you probably know, IES has focused much of its research grants on developing and then validating programs or interventions, in the hope that these can then be scaled up to have broad impacts. Yet I am not at all convinced that good schools are the sum of discrete programs and interventions. Instead, good schools are learning organizations that value strong leadership; encourage and support innovation; use data for continuous improvement; hire good teachers, support and develop them, and encourage their collaborative efforts; and make good programmatic decisions and constantly change, tweak and revise. I mention these ideas in almost every talk I give and often refer to the work of my friend and colleague Charles Payne, whose book *So Much Reform, So Little Change* explores why even the most promising interventions fail at dysfunctional urban schools. These schools often think they can solve their problems by buying new programs. All too often, these “miracle” programs don’t produce a single miracle – because, as we have learned from all

these depressing failures, you can't string together a bunch of disconnected programs and call it a school improvement strategy.

One theme that I hear regularly at IES and elsewhere is that many of our disappointing evaluation results come about because programs are not implemented correctly or with fidelity. What this means, I suspect, is that we don't fully understand the underlying principles, processes and mechanisms that we are trying to enact and how important context and setting are for how these play out. That's why we also need to learn more about factors that facilitate or hinder development of schools as learning organizations. Learning organizations understand how to implement promising programs in a way that insures they can be embraced by staff and sustained over time. Going forward as we shape our new grant programs and priorities, we will expect our funded researchers and our evaluation contractors to better understand educational and learning processes and the mechanisms through which schooling policies and practices affect students. This means looking beyond what works and what doesn't, but "how?" and "why?" and "for whom?" and "under what conditions?" This will require supporting research on the effects of practices and programs on different subgroups of students, testing hypotheses regarding mediating processes and

mechanisms, studying the roles of classroom, school, and social contexts in moderating the effects of policies and practices.

One of the goals of this conference is to figure out how to draw new and different researchers willing to apply their expertise to the problems of postsecondary improvement. So I want to conclude by spending some time talking about how we did that in Chicago, and also a new model we're creating at IES that speaks to this very challenge.

One of the advantages of the Consortium being so geographically focused and so committed to mixed-methods research is that researchers there are able to touch on nearly every aspect of students educational experience in Chicago — the culture and organization of their schools, the trust among their teachers, the leadership skills of the principal, the level of crime and social capital in their neighborhoods. They delved deeply into the impact of transitions—not only the effect of moving from one school to the next because of sweeping policy changes, but also what happened to students as they transitioned from elementary to middle grades, then into high school, and increasingly, into college. When we talk about drawing new researchers into this field, we need to start thinking about postsecondary research as a knowledge base that begins in elementary school,

not as an intervention that pops up in the junior year of high school. We need to understand more about the kind of early schooling environments and experiences that predict college success—indicators that reach far beyond test scores. We need to dig deeper into what it takes to build a “college-going culture” in high schools with a lot of first-generation students where teachers – not parents—play that critical role in steering students to college.

At IES, one major project holds great promise for building lasting partnerships that cut across disciplines and expertise--and it could be a model for the way we fund research in the future. The new Reading for Understanding Research Network is a \$100 million commitment that will bring together 130 researchers working in partnership with teachers and school leaders to tackle a critical need: Improving reading comprehension for all students from preschool through high school. These six teams-- representing a range of disciplinary specialties including linguistics, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, reading, speech and language pathology, assessment and evaluation – will work together to rapidly develop instructional strategies, technology, curricula, teacher professional development, and assessments to enable all students to read with understanding.

Why do I think of this project a model? Because it is singularly focused on a big problem that teachers and administrators have a great stake in solving. Because

practitioners are going to be sitting at the table during this five-year project – from the beginning, as collaborators, not as study subjects – to contribute to the design and development of interventions, and to ensure they are feasible and practical for implementation within existing school structures. In the future, I would hope this project could inform the postsecondary research agenda – and encourage researchers, practitioners and policy leaders to break down some of the barriers that keep them from working together.

Ok, I know I am keeping you from your cocktails, so I want to thank you for your time and your commitment to this effort.