

## **Director's Remarks: IES Research Conference, June 8, 2009**

Good morning. Thank you, Arne, for the generous introduction. Arne mentioned that we lived a couple of blocks apart in Chicago. In fact I walked past his house nearly every day on my way to and from work. We come from a neighborhood that not only takes its schools very seriously but also takes Halloween very seriously. Last Halloween on my way home from work I had the pleasure of seeing the Secretary of Education—then the Chief Executive Officer of Chicago Public Schools—in full vampire costume on his front steps passing out candy. I doubt that I'll ever see that again.

Arne, we at IES look forward to helping you and the nation understand how your new education initiatives contribute to student learning and school improvement. It is the work of all of us in this room to bring research evidence to bear on the critical issues facing both policy makers and practitioners across the country.

I am very excited about my new position as director of this esteemed organization. For me personally, it's a wonderful time in my life for this great new challenge – selfishly, I am eager for the personal growth that I expect in the years to come. But I also think that I have learned a lot in my long career working in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools that will be enormously useful in this broader context.

Both last year and the previous one, I attended this same conference as a participant and have specific recollections of many excellent panels and posters. It's wonderful place for all of us to get up to speed on pressing topics, interact with established scholars—the very best in their fields—and to meet young bright ones just launching their careers.

Until just a few days ago I was a Co-Principal Investigator on an IES grant that my colleague Elaine Allensworth is leading. That study is looking back more than a decade to a series of curricular reforms in Chicago Public High Schools. With rigorous quasi-experimental methods and a rich longitudinal data base, Elaine and her team are determining the effects of these policy changes on student outcomes, including course taking patterns, grades, test scores, and graduation rates. They are developing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the effects of some of these policy changes. Let me give you one small example. Several years ago the school district required entering high school freshmen with weak math skills to take a double period of math – one period a traditional algebra class and the second a support class aimed to strengthen basic math skills. The policy had the unintended consequence of tracking students – those lower ability students in the double periods and higher ability students taking separate algebra classes. The results are interesting and in some cases unexpected. Across the board, the policy lead to somewhat higher test math test scores, but not to better grades, especially among higher achieving students. And we found that the students with the very lowest skills did not benefit at all from the policy.

I mention this study not because it is unique, but because there are many like it. They are rigorous in methodology and they study important, practical, and timely issues. Double period classes, block schedules, and similar approaches are common in high schools across the country as school leaders and school districts search for ways to improve performance among struggling students.

We know that IES sponsors top notch research – IES has earned its reputation for high quality research and we will see much of it in evidence today and tomorrow and next year and the following. Our greater challenge is in working better with practitioners and policy makers to use the research to make schools better places where students learn more and have greater opportunities for success in life.

How do we do that? First, let me say that I do not think that researchers will ever have all the answers and be able to tell policy makers and practitioners what to do to solve their myriad problems. I think it means working in close partnership together, and creating new relationships where the influences are reciprocal, so that researchers are guided by the problems and concerns of the practitioners and policy makers. In the case of Elaine's study that I just mentioned, this means a continual back and forth between the researchers and the school leaders who developed the double period policy and the teachers and principals who implemented it. Together they can plan the next improved generation of this policy, which we researchers can continue to study in detail.

In a paper that my colleagues Melissa Roderick and Penny Sebring and I wrote about our work at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, we call this a “capacity building” approach to research, where researchers take on new non-traditional roles as interactive participants in building knowledge about improving student success in school. Let me add that this “capacity building approach” depends heavily on high quality data systems, on-going public reporting, and a commitment to transparency and openness.

I see a second challenge for us at IES as well. That is making greater meaning from our collective research studies. We researchers are often highly independent types and don’t engage in enough collective learning. I would like to see us at IES foster group learning across our various research grants, evaluation contracts, centers, and labs. Going back to Elaine’s study, what else do we know about double period high school classes as an approach to teaching algebra to students with weak math skills? There is plenty. How can we integrate these studies more usefully and provide the guidance that the field is so eager to hear? On a similar note, how can we build our research agendas that will result in greater coherence and a more unified knowledge base? Another way of asking this question is how do we move more of our goal one and two studies to goal three and four studies. I think that a good way to move down this path is to step back and ask “what are some of the major learnings from IES studies from the past several years?”.

As I said earlier, I’m really happy and proud to be here. As Arne said, this is a perfect storm for education reform. Along with that comes our opportunity and responsibility to help the

reforms succeed with our careful research, an effort on building capacity jointly among researchers, practitioners and policy makers, and a strong push for coherent, integrated learning from our work.

Thank you.