Panel To Define Scientific Rigor In Schools Research

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Looking to "make a science out of education," the National Research Council has convened a panel of experts to define what constitutes scientific quality in education research.

Researchers and policymakers have long complained about a lack of common standards for federally financed studies in the field. Such concerns, in fact, prompted members of the House of Representatives last year to draw up their own definition for "scientifically based education research." That definition, which proved controversial, was plugged into an unsuccessful bill aimed at reauthorizing the federal Department of Education's primary research operations. ("House Plan Would Create Research 'Academy,'" Aug. 2, 2000.)

"There's clearly a recognition that we'd better do something about this," said Kenji Hakuta, the chairman of the National Educational Research Policy and Priorities Board, a federal panel that advises the department. "I think it's been very good medicine for the field of education to have that kind of legislative mandate proposed."

The board is footing the bill for the new panel, which operates out of the congressionally chartered National Academy of Sciences, the parent organization of the National Research Council. The hope is that the Washington-based panel's work, representing the consensus of 17 prominent academics and practitioners inside and outside education, will lead to a more widely accepted definition of scientific quality and improve the credibility of studies in the field.

The panel is scheduled to complete its work by early fall, before Congress is expected to consider any new measures for reauthorizing the Education Department's office of educational research and improvement. The OERI oversees much of the research that goes on under the department's umbrella.
The Committee on Scientific Principles in Education Research will also make recommendations to the OERI on ways to support studies that meet the newer, better research standards it hopes to outline.

Many Voices

The panel is the second formed by the national academy to focus on education research. An earlier committee issued a report in 1999 with a 15-year strategy for making education studies more useful. That group is now hatching more concrete plans for mobilizing that vision, and the new panel will work closely with it. ("NRC Seeks New Agenda for Research," April 14, 1999.)

"A lot of the difficulty of this whole issue stems from the fact that education is viewed from a lot of disciplinary perspectives," said Lisa Towne, the senior program officer overseeing the new panel for the National Research Council. Besides education specialists, others conducting studies on schools and learning include psychologists, anthropologists, economists, statisticians, and historians.

Headed by Richard J. Shavelson, a former dean of Stanford University's education school, the new panel represents a similarly diverse mix.

Among its members are: Margaret Eisenhart, an educational anthropologist at the University of Colorado at Boulder; Jack M. Fletcher, a child neuropsychologist from the University of Texas-Houston Health Science Center who has conducted education studies for the National Institute of Child Health and Development; Eric A. Hanushek, an economist who is currently a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution; and Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, an education historian and the president of the Spencer Foundation in Chicago, which supports education research, including articles on the subject for Education Week.

Critics of education research on the panel include Robert F. Boruch, a statistical expert from the University of Pennsylvania.

On the Web

The National Research Council operates out of its parent organization, the National Academy of Sciences.

NRC's new panel hopes to complete its work in time to make recommendations to the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement.