Lawmaker Wages Lonely Crusade To Improve Studies

By Debra Viadero

Education Week

Washington, Del.

Education research is not what anyone would call a "hot topic" on Capitol Hill. It doesn't make headlines back in the congressional district or draw crowds to hearing rooms. It doesn't have the constituency that research on cancer or heart disease has.

Yet for three years, U.S. Rep. Michael N. Castle, the chairman of the House Subcommittee on Education Reform, has waged a lonely and diligent crusade for legislation aimed, he says, at making education research better.

Last week, he came a step closer to succeeding in that quest, when the House passed his "Education Sciences Reform" Act. The bill would set new standards for the education research the federal government underwrites and remake the U.S. Department of Education office that oversees much of it. ("Research Bill Clears House Without Fuss.")

Chances are, of course, that no one outside the education world much noticed. And that's OK with Delaware's only congressman.

"I'm more interested in getting it passed than making a fuss over it," the unassuming Republican said in an interview here last week. "I also work on the Intelligence Committee and we, as a rule, try to avoid the press like the plague, so I'm used to working on things that get no attention."

It's a strange sentiment to hear from a man who has been in public office for much of his life. A direct descendant of Benjamin Franklin, Mr. Castle first ran for office at age 27 as a tall, gangly Wilmington lawyer. To the surprise of many in his own party, he won a seat in the state House of Representatives from a mostly Democratic district here.
He also has been a deputy state attorney general, a state senator, the lieutenant governor, and a two-term
governor. Now 62 and in his fifth term in Congress, Mr. Castle is one of the First State's most popular
politicians; he won his last race with 68 percent of the vote.

Behind that impressive record, staff members and colleagues say, is a man who is pragmatic,
hardworking, and unpretentious—just the sort to embrace an unglamorous issue like education research
and stick with it through two sessions of Congress. Rather than take part in the Washington social scene,
Mr. Castle on most weeknights can be found taking the Amtrak train home to Wilmington, where he
lives with his wife, Jane.

"What I really like about Michael is he doesn't seek the limelight," said Jeffrey A. Dayton, the longtime
director of Mr. Castle's district office here. "He tries to get things done behind the scenes, and that's so
rare in this industry."

Search for Answers

Mr. Castle does indeed cut a less flamboyant figure than U.S. Rep. Major R. Owens, his predecessor as
the chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees education research issues. Mr. Owens, a
Democrat from the Brooklyn section of New York, is an outspoken liberal with a penchant for
publishing his own rap poetry on his Web site.

But as different as the two men are in political philosophy and personal style, the lobbyists who have
long watched them work say they share an apparently genuine commitment to improving studies on
schooling. (Mr. Owens himself wrote parts of the 1994 bill reauthorizing the Education Department's
office of educational research and improvement.)

Most of their colleagues don't—even now, as "scientifically based research" is fast becoming a catch
phrase of education policy under President Bush's administration.

"It's much more difficult to promote education research in the ways we've been able to promote scientific
and medical research," said Steve Gunderson, who was one of Mr. Castle's Republican colleagues in the
House before retiring from office after the 1996 elections. "Yet Mike Castle understands that, until we
better understand the science of teaching, we have to make a better commitment to education research."

For his part, Mr. Castle traces his interest in education and education research to 1980, when then-Gov.
Pierre S. DuPont recruited him as his running mate for a successful re-election campaign. Asked what
issues he wanted to work on as Delaware's lieutenant governor, Mr. Castle chose small business and
education.

He formed a coalition with business groups and educators that started a school improvement campaign,
ultimately leading to the development of state education goals, a common set of curricular standards, and
a system for testing.
During his tenure as governor, a post he first won in 1984, Mr. Castle visited all 160 public schools in Delaware.

"As you did these things, you could start to see the deficiencies with respect to education," he recalled. "And there didn't seem to be a lot of research for what had to be done. I talked to a lot of teachers in schools, and they would constantly tell me how different teaching is from the learning preparation they had in college."

"I've never heard anything good about education research from Delaware educators," he added.

That impression reverberated for Mr. Castle in Congress, when he learned that only 10 percent of the 100,000 studies reviewed by a national panel on reading met the group's criteria for scientific rigor—a statistic he often repeats.

"I'm sure that when he reflects on the past in education and the resources that have been spent in education, he would say, 'Why don't we know more than we do?' " said C. Kent McGuire, who directed the Education Department's research office as an assistant secretary in President Clinton's administration. "It turns out to be nowhere near that simple but, from where he's sitting, it's a fairly legitimate question to be asking."

"Whatever anybody thinks about the details of his bill," Mr. McGuire continued, "what you can't assume about Mike is that he isn't serious about it— because there are a lot of other things he could be paying attention to."

Besides the education reform subcommittee and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Mr. Castle sits on the Financial Services Committee. He also sponsored the 50-state commemorative-quarter program.

**Hugging the Middle**

As a legislator, Rep. Castle is best known for his skills in building consensus on contentious issues. Those abilities, which Mr. Castle honed during his time as governor, helped him forge bipartisan agreement on the education research bill that passed the House last week. Politically, Mr. Castle is considered a moderate.

"He's got the heart of a liberal and the fiscal conservatism of a conservative," said Mr. Gunderson. The former Wisconsin congressman was a member, along with Mr. Castle, of the "Tuesday Group," an informal lunch gathering of Republican moderates.

Mr. Castle is also the president of the Republican Main Street Partnership, a larger group of moderates from both the House and the Senate.
The former governor, however, would rather avoid labels altogether.

"When I became governor, I never thought of myself as a moderate or a conservative," he said. "When you get to Washington, everything becomes politically ideologized."

Now that his education research bill has passed the House, Mr. Castle wants to interest his Senate colleagues in its provisions. Looking to drum up publicity, he held a press conference here in his district office last week. Two reporters and a cameraman showed up.

The apparent lack of media interest didn't faze the representative, though. He bid goodbye afterward and left to make a lunchtime speech to a local group. Alone.

Coverage of research is underwritten in part by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

On the Web

Congressman Castle posts a press release about the education research bill he sponsored.

The Subcommittee on Education Reform held its hearing on the reauthorization of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement on Feb. 28, 2002. In his opening statement for the hearing, Rep. Castle said that he sought to "insulate our federal research, evaluation and statistics activities from partisan or undue political influences, put the needs of our teachers and students first, insist on the use of rigorous scientific standards to identify and disseminate effective strategies and methods, and ensure that program evaluations are impartial."

PHOTOS: Despite the issue's low profile on Capitol Hill, U.S. Rep. Michael N. Castle, R-Del., has spent the past three years doggedly putting together legislation to improve education research. His bill was approved by the House last week.
—James W. Prichard/Education Week

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