

Forward-Looking Alternatives on Critical Education Issues

Reference Publication:

[Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking](#)

NEPC Series Offers Research-Based Options for Policymakers

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Boulder, CO (June 13, 2013) – At a time of growing national recognition of the need for a policy shift to more successful approaches to school reform, the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) at the University of Colorado Boulder has published a series of ten policy briefs identifying affirmative, research-based options for reform in areas including teacher evaluation, early childhood education, and school choice.

“The task of reforming reform – of restoring balance and reason to education policies – certainly begins with a broad public awareness that our politicians have made some poor choices over the past couple decades, and we’ve certainly reached that point in the US,” said CU Boulder Professor Kevin Welner, NEPC’s Director. “But the next step is to turn to evidence about research-based best practices.”

The series of briefs, entitled *Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking*, addresses ten important policy areas and effective reform strategies. Along with the recently published book from Oxford University Press, [“Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance”](#), this series sets forth a forward-looking alternative to the current over-reliance on test-based accountability, privatization and school choice.

“We encourage policymakers to use these research-based strategies to help strengthen our education system,” said Dr. William Mathis, NEPC’s Managing Director and the author of the series. “The strategies are carefully grounded in the overall evidence base about policies and practices that truly benefit the nation’s children.”

The briefs cover the following topics:

Teacher Evaluation. A sound evaluation system provides teachers and their supervisors with timely, detailed and constructive feedback that is then used to identify areas of weakness and strength. The current push to place students’ test scores at the center of such a system is destructive on many levels, including poisonous incentives to narrow curriculum and teach to the

test. Researchers advocate balancing performance measures with observational approaches that directly focus on developing and improving teaching.

Common Core State Standards. While standards can provide a framework for curriculum and instruction and would help policymakers recognize the need for supports for teaching and learning, standards alone do little to change what happens in the classroom. If the move toward Common Core standards is just one more element of a test-based accountability system, it will likely do more harm than good. For the effort to truly benefit students, it will have to be accompanied by a political will to provide schools and students the professional support and learning resources necessary to increase opportunities to learn.

Preschool Education. When at-risk children are provided with at least two years of high-quality early childhood education, this additional support can close as much as half the achievement gap and is associated with a wide range of positive adult outcomes, including higher graduation rates, higher college attendance and higher employment. Yet overall preschool funding per child served is, in inflation-adjusted dollars, lower than a decade ago. An extended preschool day and year with universal access to enrollment and strong quality controls could make a huge difference for the nation's children.

Public Funding of School Choice. Pursuing school choice in an unconstrained way, as part of market-driven reform, has proven to be harmful – in terms of segregation and stratification as well as quality and financial abuse. But choice policies carry the potential to diversify options, stimulate innovation, and even to reduce segregation. The key is for school choice to be approached, designed, and implemented as a tool for accomplishing important policy objectives, rather than as an objective unto itself.

Dropout Strategies. This brief offers several research-based recommendations to address dropout concerns: academic support and enrichment for at-risk students, adult advocates for at-risk students, personalized and supportive learning environments, and instruction that is relevant to the student's post-high-school options. The NEPC document emphasizes that the majority of dropout risk factors are centered outside the school, and urges strong coordination between schools, and social and health agencies.

Effective School Expenditures. When increased spending is grounded in evidence of effectiveness, it will lead to positive outcomes. For example, money should be wisely and carefully directed to the following approaches: enriched learning opportunities after school and over the summer, increased availability of high-quality early education and full-day kindergarten, reductions of class size, and increased funding and program support for economically disadvantaged children and English language learners.

English Language Learners and Parent Involvement. The enrollment of English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools – most of whom are native born – has more than doubled over the last two decades. Opportunities to learn for these children will be enhanced by policies that help foster educationally supportive parenting skills, establish two-way communications, recruit families as volunteers and audiences, involve families with homework, include families in school governance, and collaborate with community organizations.

21st Century Skills and Implications for Education. The idea of “21st Century Skills” has been used to mean very different things. This brief supports efforts to blend two kinds of learning – the so-called soft skills of teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication skills and diversity awareness, and the so-called cognitive skills in science, technology, math and reading. Approaches such as “Linked Learning” prevent the narrowing of curriculum and promotes the expansion of authentic learning opportunities.

Addressing School Environment and Safety for LGBT Students. Schools must create healthy, welcoming environments conducive to learning for all students. Yet a 2011 survey found that more than four out of five LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, more than one in three reported physical harassment, and nearly one in five reported being physically assaulted. Through thoughtful, deliberate efforts directed toward students, teachers and others, schools can shape much healthier environments.

Moving Beyond Tracking. Rather than achieving its supposed goal – to tailor instruction to the diverse needs of students – tracking students by their perceived ability has been found to be harmful to those enrolled in lower tracks and to provide no significant advantages for higher-tracked students. The brief explains the research base supporting universal acceleration in untracked classrooms. When high-quality, enriched curriculum is provided to all students, the effect is to benefit both high-achieving and low-achieving students.

Find *Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking* on the NEPC website at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/options>. The website also links to NEPC’s reports and research on other education topics.

The mission of the National Education Policy Center is to produce and disseminate high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. We are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence. For more information on NEPC, please visit <http://nepc.colorado.edu/>.

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