Title: “Increasing the Impact of Research Findings on Policy Decisions in a Time of Scarcity”

Abstract:

By some key measures, the quality of K-12 education in the United States has improved little over the last 40 years. The U.S. high school graduation rate peaked at 81 percent in the early 1970s, according to Census and state-level data, and since then has remained between 75 to 80 percent. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) long-term trend for reading and math achievement of 17-year-olds shows no overall improvement since 1973 – despite a 90 percent rise in public spending per student (adjusted for inflation) over that period.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Scientifically-rigorous studies have identified several educational interventions that produce sizable, sustained effects on important outcomes, such as reading comprehension and workforce earnings. Studies currently underway are likely to increase the number of proven interventions. Yet such findings generally have little impact on policy decisions or the allocation of government education funding.

What are the barriers to greater use of research results in policymaking? Researchers sometimes assert that research findings rarely influence policy decisions because policymakers are more responsive to politics and vested interests than evidence. Policy officials sometimes assert that researchers address esoteric topics that are not policy-relevant, produce ambiguous or conflicting research findings, and report their findings in jargon-filled papers that are accessible only to other researchers.

Budget constraints at all levels of government create an imperative to bridge this research-policy gap in a way that does not require substantial increases in spending, yet generates and applies credible evidence about “what works” so as to greatly improve the educational outcomes of American students.

In this session, current and former Congressional staff who play a central role in education policy will explore: (1) factors that prevent greater use of research findings by policy officials, and (2) concrete steps that policymakers, program managers, educational organizations, and researchers can take to bridge the research-policy gap, through –

- Improvement in the rigor and policy relevance of research, and reduction in its cost, so as to more rapidly build credible evidence about what works;
- Effective advocacy for the development and use of credible evidence;
- Effective dissemination of key research findings to policy officials;
- Modifying the award criteria within government grant programs to incentivize greater use of credible evidence; and
- Other appropriate means.