

Government-Sponsored Research on Education: The Evaluation Brief on State Capacity for “Turnaround”

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Another government agency down the partisan drain, it seems. On May 5, the *Washington Post* reported on the results of a survey by the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the US Department of Education (USDE). The “Evaluation Brief” issued in May 2015 “documents states’ capacity to support school turnaround as of spring 2012 and spring 2013. It examines capacity issues for all states and for those that reported both prioritizing turnaround and having significant gaps in expertise to support it.” This Brief was based on structured telephone interviews with administrators in all state departments of education (DoEs) to find out if they had enough expertise to address the problems of “failing schools” in their state. No recommendations were included in the Brief, but they really weren’t necessary. If the state DoEs don’t have enough expertise then, maybe just maybe, all these DoEs need more money from the USDE to hire that expertise for an office within the state DoE to carry out USDE policies. (Even not-so-smart readers could infer that from the purpose of the Brief.)

What is the actual problem on the ground not explicitly spelled out in the Brief? The real problem is the failure of the “turnaround” policy itself—one of four choices suggested by the Bush administration (but mandated by the Obama administration) for schools that don’t meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for a number of years and that can be judged as “chronically low-performing.” Most “turnaround” schools have not turned student achievement around, it seems. Low-performing schools, for the most part, are still low-performing schools despite the amount of money the federal government has sent to state DoEs to turn them around. Since 2009, the amount of money flowing to state DoEs is well over 4 billion dollars, chiefly as School Improvement Grants (SIG). But by asking if the state DoEs had enough expertise to do the job, the IES survey lets the policy itself off the hook. Would any administrators in state DoEs say they had enough expertise to turn chronically low-performing schools around, in the context of a massive national failure of the policy itself—or criticize the policy itself?

So, what could the IES survey have told us, given that it was only a quick survey? For starters, the interviewers could have found out (at least asked for) how much of its SIG and other grant money each state gave to the “intermediaries” competing for this money. But the Brief doesn’t tell us how much these various “intermediaries” received from whatever work they did with low-performing schools or even how many low-performing schools in each state were able to move out of the category in which they had been placed with the help of whatever “intermediaries” they had partnered with.

It was an accepted fact that these “intermediaries” (all categorically listed on page 8 of the Brief) had the expertise for turning around low-performing schools. It was also widely recognized that state DoEs never had the capacity for addressing all the problems in the public schools (most staffers have limited experience as teachers or administrators in the public schools), and the purpose of most of this federal money **was to enable state DoEs to partner with some of the “experts” available.** These partners include: federally supported centers or labs, such as comprehensive centers, regional education laboratories, equity assistance centers, or content centers; institutions of higher education; “distinguished” educators; other external organizations; and regional/county offices.

How to evaluate the work of these different kinds of partners on a state-by-state basis is the major task for a future study by the IES, as well as how much money these “intermediaries” made from this federal grant (as suggested by an excellent report in 2012 by the Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research). It is clear to anyone who knows state DoEs that no matter how much money they receive from the USDE or whom they hire, it is not possible for any state agency acting for a federal agency to bring about the kind of changes needed on a large-scale for long-term academic gains by the students in these schools.

We also need to ponder how much in SIG or in other grants the USDE under Secretary of Education Arne Duncan will want to give state DoEs for turning around low-performing schools, without any reasonable justification for this policy or further research by the IES on the quality of the “intermediaries.” In the final analysis, these “intermediaries” may be the only winners in this political game, as implied in the report by the Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research. Moreover, they have had no accountability on their way to the bank.

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