

**Written Testimony of
Dr. Neal D. Finkelstein
on
“Protecting Privacy, Promoting Policy: Evidence-Based Policymaking and
the Future of Education”
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Good morning – I am Neal Finkelstein - a Senior Program Director at WestEd, an education research, development, and service agency. WestEd is based in San Francisco and has offices across the country. I thank the members of the committee and your staff for the opportunity to testify on this important topic.

Over the past twenty-five years – nearly 15 years of them at WestEd – I have worked on a wide variety of important education research questions – school finance, transitions between high school and college and careers, math education, teacher preparation and retention. It is a privilege to have an opportunity today to share with you today some of my experiences as a researcher, the mechanics of conducting high quality research to build evidence in our field using primary data, and highlight the role that the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) program has played in developing partnerships to conduct and use research –with a strong emphasis on the *development* and *use* of evidence.

I also serve as WestEd’s Director of Research Integrity and have responsibility for the oversight of our Institutional Review Board and research compliance functions. For those of you who may not be familiar with this structure, Institutional Review Boards, or IRBs, are responsible for overseeing the ethical conduct of research in medical research, and social science research. To that end, I’ll be pleased to talk about how our internal structures operate to support researchers and, most importantly, protect data for the students, teachers, and families with whom we work.

Role IES has played in improving the rigor of education research

Over the past 15 years, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has made significant strides promoting and increasing the amount of rigorous evidence available to education decision makers. I have been privileged to have played a role as one of the many researchers who have contributed to the way we conduct studies, review them for quality, aggregate evidence patterns, and disseminate findings to a broad range of audiences – including policymakers, school district leadership teams, teachers and parents.

The work sponsored by IES has been in partnership with several offices within the US Department of Education – a coordinated effort to improve the quality of quantitative research and data support and facilitate a wide range of effective dissemination strategies. These offices have included the National Center for Education Statistics, the What Works Clearinghouse, and the Regional Educational Laboratory network.

This concerted effort has moved education research much closer to the caliber of research conducted for decades through the U.S. Departments of Defense, Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and National Institutes of Health. Not only have education researchers applied methods from these fields to questions in education and social science, but we are now conducting studies with greater precision and speed than ever before.

Background on the RELs

I have been a researcher and manager with the Regional Educational Laboratory in the western states – Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah – for more than ten years. The Regional Educational Labs serve a critical role in supporting the use of evidence by educators and policymakers across the country.

As background, the Regional Educational Labs are authorized under the Education Sciences Reform Act, and administered by the IES; the Labs are a

network of contractors, each serving the needs of a number of states in 10 regions of the country. Each is governed by a board that represents key constituencies in the states in its region. These include the chief state school officer (or his or her designee) from each of the states served.

The role of a Regional Educational Laboratory is to serve as a **bridge between research and practice**, by understanding the distinct needs of the region, providing access to high-quality research, and assisting with the interpretation and application of research findings. RELs, of all federally-supported entities in education, are *uniquely charged* to provide the link between education research and practice.

A key focus of the current Regional Educational Labs is to **build the capacity** of state and local education agencies to access and use data and evidence. Some state departments of education and our larger school districts have small research departments, but these are often under-resourced, and focused on routine regulatory functions of assessment, accountability, and reporting. By working with them collaboratively to provide analytic support, Regional Educational Lab staff can fill gaps in expertise or knowledge of relevant research (which may vary over time), support the articulation of research questions and the design of appropriately rigorous studies, assist with data analysis, and disseminate findings. Partnering with a Lab on a priority project provides state or local agency staff models to build on, analytic procedures they can repeat, and access to “on call” assistance when needed.

Research **partnerships** are the primary structure through which the Regional Educational Labs carry out their work. A partnership of a Lab with one or a group of organizations is always focused on a **priority need**, often lasts for several years, and allows for a process of understanding the needs more deeply, drawing on relevant existing research, analyzing descriptive data, conducting

rigorous research, and assisting organizations to apply research findings in the design of their policies, programs, and processes.

In addition, strategic **dissemination** of information provides access to a wider audience, in the region and nationally. Through newsletters, print products, information graphics, video training materials, and the like, Regional Educational Labs get the word out about their research findings. Labs also facilitate events (on-line and in person) and provide tools that help people understand and apply research findings in their local contexts.

The **network of 10 RELs** across the country provides for useful access and great efficiency. Work groups have been established across those Labs working on a similar topic. Recent examples are instructional support for English language learners and postsecondary readiness and retention. The Lab network readily accesses new and relevant research through their contacts in their sister organizations, and they plan joint research projects and dissemination activities to meet common needs. Because the research quality and review standards are common across the national Lab program, research publications from all parts of the country have provided a rich repository of resources for widespread and effective use.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has requirements for the use of evidence, and specifically mentions the Regional Education Labs as a source of assistance. For example, REL West is the lead agency in a cross-REL working group that assists IES in administering an initiative through which RELs conduct reviews of research studies to determine their evidence level. In 2016, REL staff developed a guide that includes six tools that states and districts can use to move through the process of reviewing research, making decisions, and building a stronger evidence base over time through local evaluation – as set out under ESSA.

An Example of our work

Perhaps a brief example will highlight the interaction between the research endeavor and its engagement with our education systems. Educators on the east side of San Jose, California, have a shared common goal to improve mathematics preparation for their students. This is a section of San Jose with significant poverty and student mobility. Analysis of assessment data indicated that students from the multiple feeder K–8 districts entered the local high schools with varied preparation in algebra, and many students lacked strong foundational skills in mathematics; many of these students were asked to repeat algebra readiness courses in high school that they had previously taken in middle school.

REL West has partnered with these districts, the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, and other support organizations over the past five years to tackle this problem through a combination of formal research studies and technical assistance addressing several key questions that included examining the extent to which a summer math program for rising 8th graders improves algebra readiness. In total, four formal published research studies – all now available through IES – demonstrate the interaction between researchers and local education partners.

There were a number of positive outcomes in policy and practice, for districts, schools, and individual teachers – real impact in the region and beyond as the challenge of math preparation resonates with educators nationwide. For example, one study equated diagnostic assessments with traditional standardized assessments and yielded a tool to support improved course placement. The diagnostic test is easy to administer, inexpensive to score, and more predictive of math outcomes than competing assessments. Through our partnership, we began to look carefully at the summer supplemental program, “Elevate,” and planned for a randomized controlled trial (RCT) – a formal experiment – conducted in the summer of 2015. Findings – positive impacts for students – were reported and disseminated in June 2016, before the next cohort

of students began the program.

What did we learn? The frequency with which our research staff were able to be on-site communicating with partnership members was critical: a deliberate combination of ongoing development, technical assistance, and collaborative research. We also learned that the focus on a topic of continued interest to the group — math performance — and the ability of REL West to design and re-design specific projects that were timely and responsive to that topic – were central to the success of the research partnership.

Focus on evidence dissemination and increased research use

As this example illustrates, states and school districts are learning how to use rigorous research in policy and administrative decisions with increasing frequency and success.

To this end, IES continues to focus the work of the Regional Educational Labs on meeting the needs of education stakeholders. In my view, the U.S. Department of Education in general, and IES in particular, should continue to support this work by requiring the Labs to focus in the following areas:

- **Ensuring that research is contextualized.** For research to be seen as useful and to be used, it must be contextualized. One way the Regional Educational Labs have met this objective is to involve education research consumers in studies from the very beginning: in setting the questions, designing the studies, and writing reports that answer questions of local interests.
- **Making sure research is easy to read, absorb, and apply.** RELs have given much more attention to how research is communicated to the consumer. They have recognized that end-users have preferences in how studies are presented, including that reports be brief and written in non-technical language. In addition, “Ask-a-

REL” is a reference desk service that provides annotated research summaries to educators quickly, with attention to evidence levels.

- **Providing translation and transmission of research.** Education decision makers often need help to locate, sort, and prioritize available research, and RELs have played a significant role successfully filling this function. As Congress considers reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA), the following goals might result in developing and sustaining mechanisms and practices that continue to connect evidence and practice:
 1. **Engage end-users on the front end.** Engage the prospective consumers of research in defining the practical problems that should be analyzed, designing the modes in which findings will be presented, and supporting ways for the evidence to be applied in the field.
 2. **Support intermediaries.** Education decision makers often turn to federally funded intermediaries like the Regional Educational Labs to help sort through the evidence to determine what is most relevant for consumer education needs.
 3. **Focus on implementation.** Greater attention should be given to determining how the federal education research enterprise might learn more about how strong programs and practices can be implemented well in different contexts. This advance could occur through the replication of studies with investments in understanding not only what works in education, but, as importantly, why.