

JOINT PUBLIC HEARING
on
Bill 22-776, District of Columbia Education Research Advisory Board and
Collaborative Establishment Amendment Act of 2018

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Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Mr. Grasso, and members of the Council.

My name is Michael Feuer, and I am the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University, a position I've held since 2010. It's a pleasure to be with you again and to share thoughts about Bill 22-776.

I support the bill, which articulates a continuing commitment to bringing independent research to bear on efforts to improve our public-school system. I say this as a 30+ year resident of DC, and as the proud parent of two DCPS alumni. Congratulations to Councilmember Cheh and co-sponsors for pressing forward with this bill, which lays the groundwork for an essential next step in the improvement of education in DC.

Throughout nearly four decades working at the sometimes dangerous intersection of science and policy, much of it related to education, I have seen – and helped advance – the role of credible, independent, and objective evidence in federal, state, and local policy-making. At the now-defunct Office of Technology Assessment of the US Congress I led a major study of educational testing in the US;

at the National Research Council of what is now the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, I was in charge of studies on many topics in education policy, and led the effort to design the mandated evaluation of the Public Education Reform Amendment Act (PERAA). In 2003 I was elected to the National Academy of Education (NAEd), and later served as its elected President for four years; the NAEd specializes in producing, synthesizing, and communicating research to improve education. At GW I brought the Center on Education Policy into our education school and led the formation of **EdCORE** (the Education Consortium for Research and Evaluation), which provided data and analysis to support the second phase of the National Academies' evaluation; key findings of the Academies' 2015 report are often cited by members of this Council and other proponents of rational policy analysis for DC education.

I would like to make four general comments based on my personal and professional experience and then tie them to Bill 22-776. I am an academic, but I'll try to get to the point.

- First, because Americans cherish education, rightly, as the most important determinant of the quality of life for themselves and their children, debates about the financing, governance, and content of schooling are fraught with politics and ideology. As long as we are a democracy, the debates will continue. The question, then, is whether and how scientific research can play a role. Why are we researchers invited to the policy table at all? What do we contribute to the public discourse? *The short answer is that in education, as in many other areas, Americans know that better decisions often can and should be informed by objective inquiry.* And although in some quarters education research is not taken seriously, there is mounting evidence of its contributions to the improvement of schools and schooling – examples from places

such as Chicago, Long Beach, Baltimore, and New York are well known. Even if today the appetite for factual evidence seems to be at a low point in the top reaches of the federal government, it is heartening to see robust affirmation of the idea here in our great city.

- Second, for research to be useful in policy it must be shielded to the extent possible from partisan or ideological influence. I do not mean to suggest naively that researchers are ever completely free of their own beliefs or biases. We aren't: researchers are only human, and most of us harbor wishes that our findings will validate our values and dreams. But we are trained to look for evidence that challenges our prior viewpoints, and we know that for research-based evidence to matter, especially regarding the most politicized issues, we must *aspire* to keep evidence ahead of advocacy. For research to be used, its users must be confident that the data – and interpretations of that data – on which they are relying represent honest efforts to examine the information neutrally and reach scientifically defensible conclusions. If scientific inquiry becomes just another voice in the cacophony of opinion, we jeopardize the invitation to participate and lose the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to complex and urgent decisions.
- Third, and related, *trust* is an important determinant of the utility of research. Researchers need to be transparent about how their work is conducted and paid for, where the data are maintained, who reviews the results, and how clearly those results are communicated. Transparency helps users determine the quality of research and its credibility for policy decisions. As DC contemplates new or improved arrangements to have research play an active

role in the future of our public schools, trust in data and its meanings should be a high priority.

- My fourth point concerns what we refer to in my business as “evidentiary standards.” Here is the challenge: on the one hand, good researchers apply methods appropriate to the questions they are addressing and aspire to the highest standards of empirical inquiry. On the other hand, for research to be useful to policy makers it needs to be timely, relevant, and cost-conscious. This means that holding out for pristine methodologies that might produce definitive evidence – letting ideal be an enemy of good, to paraphrase Voltaire – is not always rational. Good policy requires appropriate rather than exhaustive deliberation, based on a blend of foundational knowledge, experience, the will to experiment cautiously, a tolerance of risk and imperfections, and most importantly the pledge to refine and adjust programs based on rigorous and continuous evaluation.

How do these concepts translate to my position on Bill 22-776?

- 1) Whatever entity is established, whether as an offshoot of EdCORE or a variation on that model of a consortium, the researchers involved must remember that they are asked for input – but are not typically called upon to make decisions. That privilege is saved for our elected officials. Of course this does not mean researchers should be shy about expressing their views, only that they should acknowledge their role in the ecology of politics and policy.

- 2) For researchers to be respected and for their work to be relevant, they need to engage early, often, and systematically with policy makers, educators, and stakeholders. We need to hear their concerns and incorporate their questions and realities into our work. At the other end of the process, results need to be framed in clear language and accompanied by relevant statistics.

- 3) There is a difference between the kind of partnership that I believe Bill 22-776 seeks to establish and a so-called “watchdog” agency. The former enables and supports a cooperative approach to the analysis of complex problems and to the collective search for sensible solutions. A watchdog agency, on the other hand, would add another layer of institutional accountability in a system already awash in public criticism. We may agree that the city needs or wants more muscular oversight, but I would respectfully suggest that our current system also – and more urgently – needs to rebuild trust in data and the value of evidence-informed interventions. The word *partnership* connotes a culture of trust and communication: priorities of the new entity should be to validate existing data, make recommendations on what additional information would be useful, and, most importantly, facilitate mutually respectful discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of potential policy actions.

- 4) The credibility of the research and evaluations conducted through the new entity will hinge on the extent to which they are shielded from partisan ideological influence. Therefore, the word *independent* is central in debates about how and where this new enterprise will be governed. Although critics have already pointed to risks of placing the consortium in the Office of the DC Auditor (ODCA), I believe that is a good place to start – even if, within some

reasonable period of time, other options emerge that appear to be advantageous. Given the complexities of DC governance, placing the research entity *anywhere* would provoke legitimate questions and politically-inspired pushback. For its part, ODCA needs to be willing to view its role as perhaps temporary, pending evidence of how things work.

- 5) Meanwhile, I suggest that we continue to consider the advantages of a consortium based in a university in collaboration with local and national researchers. That may sound self-serving, but in fact, successful partnerships all around the country have universities as their hub. Part of the mission of universities (like mine) is to serve our community, and we have a good reputation for carrying out that mission as well as the capacity to focus on both the national and local contexts. University-based schools of education, such as the one I lead, have developed strong ties with local schools, educational agencies, and research organizations; and with our colleagues across campus we prepare students to become “citizen leaders” devoted to the improvement of education. In any case, today the residents of DC want responsive action, so let’s test the basic idea and prove that DC is ready for a sustainable partnership. Starting with ODCA makes good sense, even as we remain open to other options down the road.

- 6) Will ODCA oversee a process that assures independence? I believe that is the intent, and it therefore should be stated explicitly. A first step for the new collaborative and its advisory board should be to lead an informed discussion of mechanisms to ensure open communication and independent inquiry – at the same time. This discussion should include the perspectives of experts who have

studied and worked in policy-research settings; it should lead to protocols for report review, funding, dissemination, and other subtleties of academic inquiry; and it should provide guidelines for relations between the new entity and the many political and private interests in the city. Such discussion should not be delayed, nor should it become hostage to standards of perfection that rule out timely progress.

- 7) A determinant of the success of this venture will be the willingness of all the players – researchers, policy makers, community organizers, teachers, families, and the media – to eschew “silver bullet” solutions to our city’s education problems and aim for sensible options rather than seductive, but ultimately disappointing, “optimal” fixes. We have suffered enough in this town from wild pendulum swings between irrational exuberance about educational progress and despair about stagnation. Now we need to nurture a spirit of inquiry that promotes informed strategies coupled with continuous evaluation. We need to acknowledge flaws in the management and leadership of our schools and be willing to address them, to consider adapting evidence-informed programs that have been tried elsewhere, and to reject reforms that have proved to be disappointing or harmful. Moving ahead with Bill 22-776, we need to pledge to maintain an open, transparent, and trusting relationship between the research community and the general public.

8) To sum up, I recommend these foundational principles to guide what I hope will be the new entity:

- Data need to be as comprehensive and accessible as possible.
- The research and evaluation agenda needs to be co-created by educators, administrators, elected officials, other stakeholders, and researchers.
- The research needs to be conducted independently and to the highest reasonable methodological standards, subject to time and cost constraints.
- Results need to be made public.
- Researchers should avoid the temptation to advocate for policies or programs without the supporting evidence.
- The new entity should work assiduously toward the cultivation of trust, and avoid “gotcha” surprise attacks on practitioners or organizations.
- Funding ultimately should come from public and private sources.
- The overarching goal should always be to produce knowledge for the betterment of our schools and of the lives of our children and families.

Again, my compliments and gratitude to the Council for advancing this bill and its budgetary authority. Along with my colleagues at GW and around the city, I am eager to help us take this important next step into the modern age of research-practice partnerships.