

What Works Clearinghouse Recognized by Supplemental Publishers as the Most Potentially Damaging Component of NCLB During the Association for Education Publishers (Ed/Press) Summit

A Technology Monitoring and Information Service (TechMIS)
SPECIAL REPORT

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During the annual Ed/Press Summit, several hundred publishers of supplemental and related materials heard two presentations on scientifically-based research provisions and the What Works Clearinghouse. The conclusion: the lack of flexibility regarding the benchmarks and standards currently in place could be devastating to sales and/or could dramatically increase costs to firms if they are required to conduct randomized trial evaluations. The two presentations by USED officials crystallized a new immediate focus of AEP --- namely to increase its lobbying efforts.

In his presentation and subsequent answers to questions, Assistant Secretary Grover Whitehurst encouraged supplemental materials publishers to conduct “randomized trial evaluations” and/or “matched comparisons,” arguing that if they don’t (and none in the audience indicated they had conducted such evaluations), their competitors would, which would provide them a distinct competitive edge in the marketplace. On the other hand, he implied that supplemental publishers may be able to meet a lower “standards bar” rather than the “gold bar of randomized trials” by pointing to findings of truly randomized trial evaluations which support the components or practices addressed by their products. Here, he pointed to the five “essential components” of reading identified by the National Reading Panel. He suggested that products that are proven to be effective under the “gold bar” of scientifically-based research are more important the higher their level of use and the mandate for use. For example, in a state adoption which requires all students to use certain materials, meeting the “gold bar standards” would be much more critical than instances where individual districts evaluate and recommend a number of supplemental products to be used by teachers and students within the district. Whitehurst also noted that if a product helps facilitate the implementation of a “practice which has been proven to be effective,” then this type of alignment is important as evidence supporting the vendor’s claim.

Whitehurst also faulted USED in terms of the quality of evaluations it supported in the past, noting that only one out of 84 USED-sponsored studies over the last decade would have met the “gold bar” standard of randomized trial evaluations. He also noted that only 15 percent of articles over the last decade in American Education Research Association journals could be classified as randomized trial or matched outcome evaluations.

Whitehurst also referred to the recent Mathematica study of 21st Century After-School Programs (see

May Special Report) calling it a randomized trial and quasi-matched outcome study noting that there were no significant differences between treatment and comparison groups; these findings were used by the Administration to propose a cut in 21st Century programs from \$1 billion to \$600 million for FY 2004 because “it doesn’t work.” After his session, I asked him how there could have been randomized assignments, if the pretest scores for middle school comparing students were higher than the treatment group’s student pretest score. He acknowledged there existed “that problem at the middle school” which they tried to adjust for statistically. Seven of nine research advisors to the study, in their minority statement, bluntly stated that the research design was flawed (see April Special Report). Whitehurst was reminded that this is a concern of many publishers, i.e., that school districts may use flawed research study findings to justify not purchasing their products or practices their product facilitates. In his presentation, Whitehurst also claimed that the Policy Studies Associate study of the New York City After-School Corporation (also in May Special Report), which found that students who participated actively in the after-school program over three years did significantly better in math than those participating less frequently and for a shorter time period, was flawed. He indicated that when one considers other variables such as students “who volunteered and stuck with the program” using another approach might have resulted in similar findings.

Both Whitehurst and his key staff, Marty Orland and Becky Herman of AIR (the What Works Clearinghouse prime contractor) addressed the status procedures and objectives of the What Works Clearinghouse in separate sessions. Before the CEO roundtable component of the conference, Orland appeared to be arguing that the “gold bar” standard of evaluation would be applied to any type of instructional product -- including supplemental materials -- in developing the first “evidence report” this Fall on early childhood reading research. The question-and-answer period was once again very adversarial as was the case during the SIIA Fly In (see May TechMIS). In light of articles over the last month in Education Week, pointing out the limitations of the National Reading Panel 1999 study findings, Herman, who was aware of the limitations, deflected an attendee’s question to Orland, i.e., “will similar procedures used by NRP be used in implementing the What Works Clearinghouse?” Orland described a number of checks and balances procedures that would ensure certain protections against political influence and ideology. On that point, Whitehurst also agreed the following day as he argued that there are a number of tools and checks and balances already in place which would remove the “human bias,” noting that even if he wanted to he couldn’t interfere with the process in any way to influence the findings of any report. Both emphasized that the clearinghouse would not be endorsing any products, noting that USED is prevented from doing so by several provisions in NCLB.

The types of evidence reports he noted would be similar to a Consumer Report on, for example new automobiles, but it would not include any of the Consumer Report-type recommendations, but only findings from actual testing. During the AEP meeting the Assistant Secretary appeared to be more flexible regarding the types of evidence supplemental publishers would have to provide and the quality of research conducted by them than he was at the SIIA Fly In this year and certainly the one last year. In fact, during the conference he noted that widespread use of the medical model took almost 50 years from the first use of randomized trials and stated that it may take 50 years to achieve “gold bar” standards of scientifically-based research and evidence-based claims for all types of instructional products in the field of education.