Evidence-Based Reform in Education: Promise and Pitfalls

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What Are Research-Proven Programs

- Compared to control groups
- Randomized or well matched
- At least 1 year
- Large scale
- Multiple studies
Government Support for Use of Proven Programs

- Comprehensive School Reform (CSR)
- Reading First
Comprehensive School Reform (CSR)

- Obey-Porter, 1997
- Required proven, comprehensive programs
- Grants per School: At least $50K/year for 3 years
- Total Budget: Up to $235 million/year
- At least 2500 schools funded
Comprehensive was important, proven less so
Many CSR models had little evidence of effectiveness
About half of grants were to home-grown programs
But, significant minority did use proven models
Many studies examined CSR outcomes, processes

What works: Externally introduced programs with clear procedures, student materials, extensive training

What doesn’t work: Programs redesigned in every school

CSRQ: Found 15 CSR programs with moderate evidence of positive effects or better
Reading First

- Part of NCLB
- $1 billion/year for grades K-3
- Focus on “based on scientifically-based research,” not research-proven
- Result: All traditional basal programs qualified.
- Proven programs pushed aside
Reading First: What Was Learned?

- Schools received professional development to implement traditional programs
- Overall outcomes disappointing
- Loose definition of “based on scientifically-based research”
- Allowed for cronyism, doomed program
How To Do It Right

- In competitive grants to schools, give extra points if schools choose proven programs
- Specify precisely what “proven” means
- Provide well-justified lists of proven programs
What Would Happen?

- Schools choose proven programs
- Research and development of innovative programs would expand
- Publishers, software developers would fund development, evaluation
- Virtuous cycle of reform
For more see:

- www.bestevidence.org
- www.evidencebasedprograms.org