

Evidence-informed Policy and Practice

(By 2020) ... There is a national Evidence Centre for Education, funded by endowment, feeding national and international evidence of best practice into the policy-making process at national level and into the professional practice of teachers and school leaders. This is independent of both government and the profession, and therefore necessarily separate from the profession-led Royal College of Teaching, but has a strong relationship with it.

Extract from ASCL's *Blueprint for a Self-Improving System*.

Analysis of the current system

- 1 OECD statistics indicate that member countries spend ten to fifteen times as much on health research as on education research, even though the health sector is, in monetary terms, less than twice as large as the education sector.
- 2 This section analyses the extent to which there is a body or function, independent of government and the profession, that feeds evidence into the policy making process and mobilises knowledge of effective practice in relation to the profession.
- 3 Currently, education policy is influenced by internal DfE research, research commissioned by the National College for Teaching and Leadership and other government agencies, external research and papers from think tanks and pressure groups. However, there is no single body, independent of government, that has direct responsibility for feeding the findings from research into the policy-making process.
- 4 In relation to practice, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), founded by the education charity the Sutton Trust, received a founding grant of £125m from the DfE to support the use of evidence-based practice. The EEF defines its purpose as being “dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement, ensuring that children from all backgrounds can fulfil their potential and make the most of their talents.”
- 5 The EEF share evidence by providing independent and accessible information through the Sutton Trust-EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit,¹ summarising educational research from the UK and around the world. The toolkit provides guidance for teachers and schools on how best to use their resources to improve the attainment of pupils. The toolkit currently covers 30 topics, each summarised in terms of their average impact on attainment, the strength of the evidence supporting them and their cost.

¹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/toolkit-a-z/>



- 6 However, the EEF relies heavily on randomised control trials (RCTs) in the projects it supports. While it is important to increase the rigour and scalability of evidence, RCTs are not the only form of evidence and should not be treated as such.
- 7 There are also substantial difficulties in moving from trial results to ‘evidence-based practice.’ Research on educational change, such as that by Michael Fullan and colleagues, tells us that it is not enough to simply communicate the results of research clearly to teachers as ‘end users.’ It is often not knowledge that we lack, it is implementation.
- 8 Ben Goldacre’s report, *Building Evidence into Education* talks about the need to make evidence part of everyday life for teachers: “I’m struck by how much enthusiasm there is for trials and evidence-based practice in some parts of teaching: but I’m also struck that much of this enthusiasm dies out before it gets to do good, because the basic structures needed to support evidence-based practice are lacking. As a result, a small number of trials are done, but these exist as isolated islands, without enough bridges joining the people and strands of work together. This is nobody’s fault: creating an ‘information architecture’ out of thin air is a big job, and it might take decades. The benefits, though, are potentially huge.”²
- 9 In his paper, *Evidence for the Frontline*, Jonathan Sharples looks at the elements of an effective evidence chain – production, synthesis, transformation and implementation – and suggests that the ultimate goal should be to “empower professionals with evidence ... integrating professional expertise with the best external evidence from research to improve the quality of practice.”³
- 10 Increasingly, with schools being given greater freedom to determine their own approaches to the education of young people, Sharples reasons, “the need for reliable and accessible evidence to inform decision-making becomes ever more acute. ... We are seeing a profusion of individual, small-scale approaches to finding and using evidence emerging, and without a coherent overall infrastructure, there is a real danger of duplication and confusion for practitioners.”
- 11 The NFER’s report: *Using Evidence in the Classroom: What Works and Why?* provides an excellent literature review of the translation of research into practice and the role of intermediaries. The review underlines that:
 - evidence needs to be transformed for use in practice, rather than simply summarised
 - there is no current system to support evidence transformation, nor is there an identifiable group of organisations or individuals with responsibility for mediation. Responsibility is dispersed and where transformation occurs, it is piecemeal
 - the development of an infrastructure supporting knowledge mobilisation across England and Wales would enable a more systematic approach⁴
- 12 In conclusion, we need an ongoing process and an infrastructure, what Goldacre calls an ‘information architecture’, for evaluating, synthesising and communicating existing and new knowledge, accumulated over decades of research to both government and the profession. We need an Evidence Centre for Education.

2 Goldacre, B. (2013) *Building Evidence into Education*: DfE: 13

3 Sharples, J. (2013) *Evidence for the Frontline: A Report for the Alliance for Useful Evidence*: <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/EVIDENCE-FOR-THE-FRONTLINE-FINAL-5-June-2013.pdf>

4 Nelson, J. and O’Beirne, C. (2014). *Using Evidence in the Classroom: What Works and Why?* Slough: NFER: vi.



Selective synopsis of practice in other government departments

- 13 The Department of Health funds the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), which directs health research across the NHS, connecting the work of the research councils with that of the department. There is also the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which has a wide range of functions, and the parallel Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE).
- 14 The Cabinet Office has studied the question of whether there should be a 'NICE for social policy', bringing together the research, policy and political communities to discern what works in contested social policy fields. In March 2013, it published *What Works: evidence centres for social policy*.⁵
- 15 The introduction to the paper, Danny Alexander and Oliver Letwin note that "it is a fundamental principle of good public services that decisions are made on the basis of strong evidence and what we know works." Noting that there is a long established culture of using robust evidence in medicine, Alexander and Letwin state their intention to expand this culture into other areas of social policy, including educational attainment, "to ensure that rigorous, high quality, independently assessed research shapes decision making at every level."
- 16 On the role of the Centres, Alexander and Letwin state: "The *What Works Centres*, independent of government, will collate published evidence on the effectiveness of interventions, assess these using a common 'currency', publish clear synthesis reports and share findings in an accessible way with practitioners and commissioners and policy makers. The *What Works Centres* will also highlight where it is possible to further the evidence base." NICE and the Education Endowment Foundation are the two established centres joining the *What Works* network of centres.
- 17 There are two weaknesses in the *What Works Centre* proposals in relation to education. First, the Cabinet Office paper says nothing about education policy apart from the limited field covered by the work of the Education Endowment Foundation, which works to influence professional practice rather than policy. Second, there is a wider disadvantage in that the *What Works Centres* are being set up with too weak a link to government and no strong links to practitioners.
- 18 The Treasury has an independent Office for Budget Responsibility, which produces forecasts for the economy and public finances, judges progress towards the government's fiscal targets, assesses the long-term sustainability of the public finances, and scrutinises the Treasury's costing of Budget measures. In support of these activities, it undertakes a variety of research projects through the year. It publishes regular briefing papers and data on public finances. It answers parliamentary questions on its forecasts and gives evidence to parliamentary committees. It published its first annual report in June 2012.
- 19 The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) is a possible model for an Evidence Centre for Education. It is funded by the ESRC, which co-funds some of the *What Works Centres*. The aim of the IFS is to promote effective economic and social policies by better understanding their impact on individuals, families, businesses and the government's finances. The IFS communicates its research findings to a wide range of audiences, with the aim of maximising impact on policy and public debate.

5 Cabinet Office (2013) *What Works: evidence centres for social policy*: HM Government.

An Evidence Centre for Education – specific proposals



- 20 An Evidence Centre for Education should be established to promote effective education policies by better understanding its impact on outcomes for children and young people. Its primary purpose would be to mobilise knowledge by researching, analysing and disseminating evidence to inform government policy making and professional practice. It would communicate its research findings to a wide range of audiences, with the aim of maximising impact on policy and public debate, as well as on classroom practice.
- 21 The Evidence Centre for Education should be independent of both government and the profession. It should therefore not be an executive agency of the Department for Education and nor should it form part of the proposed profession-led Royal College of Teaching. However, it should have a strong and formal relationship with the Royal College of Teaching as part of a comprehensive knowledge mobilisation strategy.
- 22 The Evidence Centre for Education could build on existing bodies, such as the EPPI-Centre, the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Two or more of these bodies could work together to establish the centre. The newly established Evidence Centre for Education must be set up to influence both policy makers and professional practice directly. This principle should be set out in its constitution and governing document.
- 23 The Evidence Centre for Education would need to have a significant place in the system in order to wield the influence and power to change the culture of policy making and professional practice. The establishment of a new body would create this clear place in the system.
- 24 Like the Education Endowment Foundation, the Evidence Centre for Education could be established with an endowment from the government instead of an annual grant. EEF is an interesting model in that it has charitable co-funding and an endowment from government, so that it is at arm's length from ministers. We need a body that is close enough to government to have impact, whilst also maintaining independence.