

A No Brainer? Knowledge Use as a Central Organizing Concept for School Improvement

by

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Amid the many ideas and initiatives that have emerged in K-12 school improvement over the past 30 years, perhaps one of the most self-evident, but least understood notions is the use of research-based knowledge in improving teaching and learning. Indeed it is now almost a cliché that data and knowledge can and should shape policy and practice in education as is done in other sectors like medicine and agriculture. It's a no brainer. So what's the problem?

Through an extensive literature review and a series of visioning discussions with leading experts during the past year, we at NEKIA have found that current approaches to knowledge use in K-12 education are frequently hampered by a number of impediments and flaws including:

- A serious disconnect among the research community, practitioners, developers and policy makers;
- Inadequate capacity at the local and state levels to facilitate the effective use of knowledge in school improvement
- A lack of cultural or institutional incentives to promote greater knowledge use.
- A lack of understanding of how knowledge can ultimately shape policy and practice

Clearly, in order to address the increasingly urgent demand for knowledge-based solutions to educational problems, new and better approaches to effective knowledge use are needed that can be sustained and expanded in significant ways over time. And, given the heavy emphasis placed on scientifically research by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA), education knowledge must be an essential factor in shaping policy and practice at all levels.

Consequently, it is our strong belief that effective knowledge use should be a central organizing theme of school improvement policies and practices across the country. Towards this end, NEKIA has developed four principles upon which approaches to effective knowledge use should be based.

1. **Useable Knowledge** --- Knowledge that is used to shape policy and practice should be derived from the best available empirical evidence and informed by sound professional judgment.

2. **Key Stakeholders** --- The effective use of knowledge in education requires the active participation of and the on-going collaboration among five key stakeholder groups:
 - **Practitioners** should be involved in all phases of the knowledge development and utilization process, not just as recipients of research.
 - **Policymakers** need to develop the capacity for integrating knowledge into the policy making apparatus.
 - **Researchers** should focus on rigor, relevance, and replication in addressing practical questions of effectiveness based on the needs of practitioners and policy makers.
 - **Developers and Providers** need to use the best available knowledge in developing and delivering their products and services.
 - **Intermediaries** are needed to facilitate productive collaborations and relationships among stakeholders, help interpret and disseminate findings, conduct applied research, and provide capacity-building assistance.
3. **Cumulative Process** --- Effective knowledge use depends upon dynamic on-going exchanges of data and information among the stakeholders and involves a continuous process of research, application and adaptation. As knowledge is used and adapted, new knowledge is created and applied in a cumulative, iterative fashion.
4. **High Priority Policy** --- School improvement policies at the federal, state, and local levels should focus priority attention on the effective use of knowledge and create incentives to stimulate greater demand for and increased supply of knowledge-based solutions.

We believe that we are on the threshold of a new era of knowledge use in education. In the years ahead we envision a robust “knowledge” market place with demand stimulated by increased federal investment and supply enhanced by a vigorous knowledge industry. In two subsequent columns in *School Improvement Industry Weekly* I will explore ways to foster education knowledge at the local, state, and federal levels, and discuss the exciting concept of “communities of knowledge.”