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UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY

by Aaron McDonald

The Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) is funded by the state as one of five Centers of Excellence located at the University of Memphis. The mission of the center is to implement a research agenda associated with educational policies and practices in the preK-12 public schools of Tennessee and the nation and to disseminate research findings to inform decisions made by educational practitioners and policymakers. Since 1989, the center has served as a mechanism for mobilizing community and university resources to address educational problems and meet the university's commitment to primary and secondary schools. Functioning as a part of the College of Education, the center seeks to accomplish its mission through a series of investigations conducted by center personnel, college and university faculty, and graduate students. The center's research agenda is developed through analysis of persistent or emerging issues in schools and their communities, changes occurring in teacher education programs, and recommendations from educational authorities. In order to plan and conduct inquiries relevant to issues associated with public schools, the center supports research reflecting the following characteristics: potential for contributing to the solution of educational policy and practice issues; an applied research and development focus; collaborations and partnerships with schools and other external organizations; interdisciplinary research teams; multiple modes of inquiry; immediate and long-range planning; and creation of databases to foster secondary analyses. Research outcomes are intended to provide a knowledge base for use by educational practitioners and policymakers by providing insight into the complexities of educational phenomena and offering recommendations for action.

Through work in schools for more than a decade, the center has contributed to Tennessee policy decisions regarding teacher preparation and licensure, school governance and site-based

decision-making, and public school reforms. Additionally, the center has gained national recognition for its contribution to discussion of issues such as reform of teacher education, educational equity, educational technology, school reform and restructuring, urban and multicultural education, interventions for at-risk students, and using formative evaluation methods for school improvement decision-making.

Implementation of the center's mission, with its local, state, and national focus, is illustrated in the following overview of recent projects.

Local Projects

Working with local schools and educational organizations remains a priority for CREP. Accordingly, the center is currently involved in 13 separate research projects with the Memphis City School District, Shelby County School District, and other area schools, as well as community outreach/development programs involving Goals for Memphis, Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association (MIFA), Les Passees, the Orange Mound Collaborative, Junior Achievement, the Hyde Foundation, and the Assisi Foundation. These projects examine areas including school restructuring, classroom instructional methodology and practices, literacy instruction, family resource centers, implementation of the KIPP program in Memphis, early childhood education, teacher education programs, and community leadership development.

State Projects

To inform state-level educational policy decision-making, the center currently has five evaluation contracts with the State of Tennessee. The resulting evaluations, conducted in more than 300 Tennessee schools, address diverse areas including literacy instruction, classroom technology use, professional development for principals, and teacher education and retention. Recognition of the quality of research and eval-

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uation produced by CREP is evidenced by its recent designation by the Tennessee Department of Education as the evaluator for three major federal grants: the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund Grant, which provided \$200,000 to 26 Tennessee schools during the 2001-02 school year; the \$28.6 million Reading Excellence Act Grant, which will provide funds for literacy instruction to 70 schools; and the recently funded Transition to Teaching Program, aimed at developing and implementing a comprehensive teacher recruiting, training, and retention program.

National Projects

Through numerous projects, the center is expanding its national leadership position in the evaluation of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). This is evidenced through a partnership agreement with the Appalachia Educational Lab (AEL), in which the center is conducting formative evaluation in approximately 150 CSR schools in the four-state AEL region (Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia). Further evidence is reflected in that the Georgia Department of Education has contracted with CREP to evaluate all three cohorts of CSR schools (150 schools) in the state. Similarly, the Illinois State Board of Education selected CREP to evaluate more than 90 restructuring schools. Additionally, center representatives have been invited to facilitate CSR symposiums in numerous states, and as a result are providing evaluation services to more than 250 schools in eight states in addition to those previously mentioned.

Along with assisting schools and states during the restructuring process, CREP is currently conducting research that is expected to have an impact on school reform decisions made at the national level for the next decade. The center is

conducting a comprehensive study of school restructuring by investigating full CSR program school samples and matched control school comparisons in numerous states. This in-depth analysis of school reform will likely affect future state and national policy decisions regarding funding for school reform. The study uses individually administered reading tests as the primary measure of achievement, thus providing a common measure across states in addition to the various state-level achievement measures. Along with this, case-study research with restructuring schools is being conducted collaboratively with SERVE in the six southeastern states served by that regional educational laboratory.

In addition to national recognition for work with school reform, the center has assisted schools with improvement planning through the use of school climate audits for more than a decade. At the state level, use of school climate data to assist in decision-making has become an integral part of leadership training through the Tennessee Department of Education Beginning Principals' Academy. Additionally, during 2001-02, school climate audits were conducted in more than 700 schools in 21 states (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia).

The center is also helping to address policy issues associated with the anticipated teacher shortage by studying employment decisions made by 2001 teacher education graduates in Tennessee. Funded by the Tennessee Department of Education through a Teacher Quality Enhancement in Tennessee supplemental grant, this study is unique in that it enlists these graduates as research partners through direct and personal contact and involves a determined effort to track their employment decisions for two years after graduation. The unprecedented data set that is being created will identify not only the decisions themselves but also the rationales behind those decisions and provide a research base for policy decisions regarding such important topics as teacher salaries and benefits and mentoring for beginning teachers. Additionally, the center is working with the National Education Association and eight universities to examine employment decisions made by teachers who received pre-service training at professional development and non-professional development schools.

Future Research Initiatives

The center will continue to expand and refine successful research and evaluation initiatives



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currently underway and undoubtedly have ample opportunity for continued growth. Issues affecting Tennessee and the region will remain a priority, as will the accountability and evaluation implications of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Working relationships with the Tennessee Department of Education, local community outreach programs, regional educational laboratories, and other partnerships will be maintained and enhanced through continued high-quality research addressing educational issues of both local and national importance. Longitudinal studies underway will be maintained and new inquiries considered in selected areas. Research with implications for educational policy and practice in Tennessee and the nation will remain a center priority.

In order to accomplish the center’s mission, topics have been identified that reflect state and national priorities for fiscal year 2003 and beyond. They include the following:

- national policy implementation studies, particularly associated with comprehensive school reform, including impact on schools and communities;
- educational policy issues and needs in Tennessee;
- school environments and the use of climate audits for school improvement;
- school capacity building, including school improvement strategies and staff development;

- students considered at risk of school failure;
- literacy instruction;
- school leadership development and support;
- early childhood and family education;
- reforms in the professionalization of teachers; and
- creating and sustaining schools as learning organizations.

With projected external funding of more than \$2.5 million during the next fiscal year (2003), CREP has clearly earned a position of respect at the national, regional, and state levels. In the field of educational policy, the University of Memphis is gaining credibility as a research institution through the center’s work. Clearly, this center exemplifies the stated foundational goal of the General Assembly and the governor that led to the creation of the state’s centers of excellence: “to focus the capabilities of public higher education on service to the people of Tennessee by expanding the state’s research base, thereby increasing its national and international stature and its economic competitiveness” (forward to *A Decade of Excellence: The First Ten Years of the Centers of Excellence Program in the Tennessee Board of Regents Universities*, published by the TBR in 1995). ■

Aaron McDonald is project coordinator of the Center for Research in Educational Policy at the University of Memphis.

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