THE PROBLEM WITH BRIEFS, IN BRIEF

Abstract
Policy briefs written by academics—the kind typically published in Education Finance and Policy—should be a crucial source of information for policy makers. Yet too frequently these briefs fail to garner the consideration they deserve. Their authors are too focused on the potential objections of their fellow academics, who are concerned with rigor and internal validity, instead of the objections of policy makers, who are concerned with generalizability, understandability, and utility. And researchers too often believe that simply publishing a brief is sufficient to communicate its results. By focusing briefs on topics on the policy agenda, helping policy makers see their constituents in the results, writing clearly, studying implementation and not just outcomes, weighing evidence and drawing conclusions, and reaching out to policy makers beyond publication, researchers have the greatest potential to see their work influence public policy.
THE STATE OF THE BRIEF

Let’s be honest: Major education policy decisions are rarely based solely on research findings. But academic research can and does influence the policy debate. Indeed, as Kingdon (2003) noted in his seminal work on the policy-making process, ideas from academic literature are regularly discussed by federal staffers, bureaucrats, and lobbyists, and often find their way into legislation and policy.

Policy briefs play a critical role by framing the relevant questions and distilling key findings. Briefs written by academics—the kind typically published in Education Finance and Policy (EFP)—should be a particularly crucial source of information, for in theory they offer just what policy makers want: the latest, most relevant findings and implications for policy, compiled by a party separate from the usual stakeholder groups. For policy makers barraged with information from competing, invested organizations, academic policy briefs should offer respite.

Yet too frequently these briefs fail to garner the consideration they deserve. The problem is two-fold. First, the researchers who write the briefs are often responding to the wrong audience. They are worried about the “yeah, but...” responses of their fellow academics, who are concerned with rigor and internal validity, when they should focus on the “yeah, but...” responses of policy makers, who are concerned about generalizability, understandability, and utility. This state of affairs is no surprise. Most academics have little exposure to policy making, whereas they have all suffered through the indignity of a seminar in which they have been lambasted for neglecting to properly cluster their standard errors. But the unfortunate consequence is briefs that are less useful to the audience for whom they are intended.

Second, too often academics suffer from the Field of Dreams delusion regarding research dissemination: “If we publish it, they will come.” Publishing a policy brief in EFP or elsewhere is a good start. But if the academic community aspires to influence public policy, it is obligated to do more.

As the associate commissioner with responsibility for research and evaluation at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, I straddle the two worlds of research and policy. In this essay I provide my perspective on the most common “yeah, but...” comments I hear from my colleagues as they review research. For each concern, I also offer strategies researchers can use to counteract policy makers’ complaints and examples of policy briefs that have done so effectively. I conclude with suggestions for how researchers can extend the reach of policy briefs beyond journal publication.
“YEAH, BUT THIS POLICY ISN’T ON THE AGENDA RIGHT NOW”
In the public sphere, nothing dooms research faster than irrelevance. If a state isn’t currently debating how to restructure its teacher retirement system, its lawmakers won’t be interested in the trade-offs between years of service and retirement payouts. If a superintendent isn’t considering implementing an extended school day, she won’t care whether the evidence illustrates a clear link to improved student outcomes. As Kingdon put it, “policy makers in government listen to academics most when their analyses and proposals are directly related to problems that are already occupying the officials’ attention” (2003, p. 56).

Herein lies a major disconnect between researchers and practitioners. Social science researchers—particularly those whose methodological preference is for causal analysis—tend to focus on answerable questions, but what is answerable is at best imperfectly correlated with what is on the policy agenda. For instance, 1.6 million students are enrolled in charter schools nationwide, representing 3.3 percent of student enrollment (NCES 2012a). Yet an ERIC search reveals 60 journal articles referencing charter schools published in 2011 alone. Compare this to 232 articles on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or 603 articles on accountability, both policies that affect all students. That’s about a 1:4 ratio for articles on charters to articles on NCLB and a 1:10 ratio for accountability, versus a 1:30 ratio for actual student enrollment. Why so much academic work on charters? Although some researchers may claim to be analyzing charter schools to identify innovative practices that could potentially be applied elsewhere, or to study the influence of education markets on student outcomes, in the end I believe it comes down to answerability. Charter school enrollment is done on the basis of a lottery—that is, random assignment. Much as the Sirens of Greek mythology lured sailors with their enchanting voices, researchers are lured to the possibility of a convincing causal analysis based on random assignment to treatment and control conditions.

Charter schools are certainly an important part of the education policy landscape and a topic worthy of analysis—indeed, my own office has sponsored several charter-related studies (see, e.g., Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009; Angrist et al. 2012). But are they worth this disproportionate attention? I would prefer to see equivalent attention given to other priorities, such as strategies for school turnaround. In Massachusetts, we currently have 43 turnaround schools, enrolling nearly 21,000 students statewide in 2011–12, as compared with about 31,000 students in charter schools. Yet whereas we have a good idea about whether and where charter schools are working in Massachusetts, it’s difficult for us to determine whether our state turnaround strategies are working. For ethical, legal, and practical reasons we cannot randomly assign students to
the schools, nor can we randomly assign some of these schools to implement turnaround strategies while others do not. More research in this area would be useful, but alas, the question of which turnaround strategies are most effective is not easily answerable with traditional causal analysis techniques. The Sirens do not lure researchers here.

The implication of this argument is not that researchers should work on unanswerable questions just because they are of interest to policy makers. Instead, I would like to see a broader notion of what constitutes an answer. In its search for causal perfection, the research community too often overlooks the opportunity to report other types of evidence—descriptive, correlational, qualitative, and so forth—that is relevant to the current policy agenda and could directly benefit policy making. For instance, in the area of school turnaround, it would be helpful to know if the rate of improvement in turnaround schools is similar to that in other low-performing schools not officially designated as turnarounds, or if any educational practices distinguish rapidly improving turnaround schools from those changing more slowly. Answering these questions may not definitively demonstrate that a turnaround designation improved outcomes, but these analyses are still quite valuable to policy makers wrestling with this challenging educational problem. As Randall Munroe said, “Correlation may not imply causation, but it does waggle its eyebrows suggestively and gesture furtively while mouthing, ‘look over there’” (Munroe, Undated).

The best guarantee that a particular piece of research is actually needed, of course, is to design a research agenda in collaboration with policy makers themselves to ensure that it is well aligned to the anticipated policy agenda. Organizations like the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research—where Chicago Public Schools staff work alongside academics devising and executing relevant research to identify what helps students succeed—and the Education Research Finance Commission in New York state, described elsewhere in this volume by Deborah Cunningham and Jim Wyckoff, rarely worry that they are producing information that will not be used, because the researchers are producing materials on topics and on a schedule tied directly to a local policy-making agenda.

These types of collaborations, however, are rare. And even if they were common, there would still be a need for the policy briefs published in EFP, which aim to cover a policy question from a national perspective and to inform a broader policy agenda. But then the relevance challenge for these broad-based briefs is even greater, for they must cover a sufficiently general topic to be pertinent to many policy makers, yet still be focused and timely enough to influence their thinking. An example of an EFP brief that meets this mark is “An Introduction to ‘Early College,’” by Brewer, Stern, and Ahn (2007). Six years after its publication, many states and districts are still considering or
implementing early college opportunities as a way of increasing the rigor of
the high school curriculum and to better prepare their students for college.
Although additional evidence is now available on the impact of early college
policies, I would still recommend this brief today as a starting point for policy
makers familiarizing themselves with this topic.

There is one exception to the relevance rule. On occasion, it is research itself
that makes a particular issue relevant for the policy agenda. For instance, a
report sponsored by my agency and the Boston Foundation (and later published
in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*) showed that Boston students who had
won the lottery to enter a charter school were performing in some cases close to
half a standard deviation higher on state assessments than their peers who had
not won the lottery (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009, 2011). The rigorous analytical
techniques used in the study, the fact that the researchers found similar results
across several methodologies, and the consonance of the results with those of
other recent studies of urban charter schools left little room for doubt that, on
average, charter schools in Boston were producing stronger student outcomes
than Boston public schools. This drew attention to the fact that the cap on
the number of charter school seats in Boston had nearly been reached, which
meant opportunities for students to enroll in these more successful schools
were limited. Ultimately, a charter school enrollment cap increase became one
of the education reform strategies featured in our state’s 2010 Act Relative to
the Achievement Gap. Although our study was not the only reason for this
policy change, having rigorous evidence available about the impact of Boston’s
charters certainly played a role.

There will always be room for new research that resets the public debate
and pushes an issue onto the policy agenda. And policy makers themselves
need to stretch occasionally beyond their immediate policy concerns to explore
research that can help them understand the broader context within which
specific issues arise and can spark ideas for future policy making. But if the
goal is increasing the influence of research on policy making, for nearly all
research work, greater attention to its relevance in the current policy debate
will increase the likelihood of it actually being used.

“YEAH, BUT THAT CONTEXT IS DIFFERENT FROM MINE”
Focusing on a relevant topic is a good start, but it’s not sufficient to convince
policy makers of the value of a piece of research, for context also matters.
Policy makers will draw inferences from national studies, to be sure. But most
convincing to them are studies with a local focus. Only local studies can fully
account for the context of the community they serve.

Policy makers wouldn’t state it this way, but this is essentially a question
of external validity—the degree to which the findings in a particular study are
generalizable to other contexts. Most recent advances in research methodology have focused on improving internal validity, that is, the degree to which a measure measures what we intend it to measure—for instance, in the case of causal analysis, the degree to which a measure captures a causal relationship and not just a correlation. The use of local, focal control groups or sophisticated statistical methods such as instrumental variables or regression discontinuity serve to increase confidence that asserted causal relationships are real. But they also work to undermine external validity because they make results less generalizable.

An effective strategy to defuse this “yeah, but…” is to disaggregate data. As the Sirens attract researchers to data supporting causal analysis, they also attract policy makers to data about their own communities. Why? Disaggregation facilitates comparisons, which put data in context and stir competitive spirits. State education policy makers eagerly await the release of the National Assessment of Education Progress results because the data allow them to compare their performance and progress against other states on an even playing field. More broadly, breakdowns of results by geography, urbanicity, or district or school, even if purely descriptive, grab policy makers’ attention by getting them engaged in examining the study’s findings for their communities of interest. Maps are particularly effective at this, as they provide a quick visual comparison across an entire geographic area.

Researchers can further contribute in this area by using their expertise in analytical techniques to help policy makers choose appropriate reference groups. Policy makers often have a general sense of which states, cities, or schools are similar to theirs, but input from researchers in this area can identify referents of which the policy maker might have otherwise been unaware. For instance, my office created a District Analysis and Review Tool that published simple-to-use, comparative data for every school district and school in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2012). As part of this project, we developed a method to identify the ten districts or schools most similar to the one of interest in terms of student demographics. This helped districts look beyond their geographic neighbors to districts or schools across the state that served similar students, some of which were achieving better results.

National and international journals like EFP may encounter trade-offs with disaggregation because of their broad scope. Too much focal detail may increase relevance for a small slice of the audience but decrease it for many others, so authors must tread cautiously. Nonetheless, some EFP briefs have used this strategy to good effect. Two nice examples are the pieces on the state role in teacher professional development and education and in teacher compensation by Loeb, Miller, and Strunk (2009a, 2009b). In both briefs,
most of the tables and charts present data by state to facilitate comparisons and provide context for the types of policies pursued in each state. The first thing I did when I read these papers was to look for Massachusetts in each table. Sirens, I hear your call.

“YEAH, BUT I DON’T UNDERSTAND THIS $@%* THING”

Perhaps the most common complaint leveled at the academic community is that it values a style of writing that leaves other human beings baffled. It is perfectly rational, though perhaps not desirable, for researchers to write this way for their fellow academics, who speak the same language. But it is inexcusable for them to use this style with policy makers, for it breaks a cardinal rule of writing: Know Your Audience.

Much of what there is to say about high quality writing in the social sciences has been said elsewhere, in my view most notably in economist and rhetorician Deirdre McCloskey’s wonderful little book, Economical Writing (McCloskey 2000). But writers of policy briefs who wish for their work to have influence with policy makers would do well to emphasize the following elements of style.

Most critical are a brief’s introductory and concluding materials. Timothy Taylor, long-standing editor of the Journal of Economic Perspectives, writes, “Introductions of papers are worth four times as much effort as they usually receive. The opening paragraph of each main section of a paper is worth three times as much effort as it usually receives. Conclusions are worth twice as much effort as they usually receive” (Taylor 2012, p. 32). Why? Readers tend to stop reading if they aren’t immediately drawn in by the content. If the summary materials are poorly written, no one will read anything further.

Summary materials should highlight the one or two facts—specific pieces of evidence or data—the author most wants a policy maker to remember. For example, a 2008 study by my agency found that 37 percent of Massachusetts public high school graduates who went on to Massachusetts public colleges or universities took at least one remedial course in their first semester (Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2008). This fact was not previously known and was featured throughout our report. It has since been cited frequently by the state’s secretary of education and the governor when speaking about the need for a stronger focus on college readiness, and it also contributed to a decision by our state’s Board of Higher Education to increase the entrance requirements to the state’s public four-year colleges to create a greater incentive for students to take a rigorous course of study in high school. By making this critical information available and easy to understand, our study influenced the public discourse and helped improve outcomes for our state’s students.
Next, avoid jargon. In briefs published in EFP, I have seen terms such as “counterfactual,” “value-added measures,” and “adequacy” (in the school finance sense) used with little or no explanation—often in situations where understanding that concept was critical to understanding the article itself. Even “standard deviation” is a concept that you cannot assume policy makers will understand. Further, including a sentence to define a technical term does not give you free license to then repeat that jargon throughout the brief. Describe the idea with simple, straightforward language that would be familiar to non-specialists, and use those words when you need to refer to the concept again. If you cannot resist the temptation to include technical details, put them in a footnote or an appendix.

Finally, no Greek letters. Enough said.

“YEAH, BUT THIS STUDY DOESN’T HELP ME FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO”

One of policy makers’ greatest frustrations with academic research is that it tells them whether something worked, but not why. In Commissioner Mitchell Chester’s introductory letter to the Massachusetts charter school report mentioned earlier, which also examined the impact of another type of school (pilot schools) that shares similar autonomies, he praised the research but highlighted the multitude of questions it raised:

The results of this study are both statistically significant and educationally important. But they also open many further questions. What is causing the differences in performance we see between charters and pilots? What is it about charter schools that allows them to achieve such strong results, and how can their effective practices be more widely disseminated? How can pilot schools take better advantage of the autonomy they already have to produce improved outcomes? When is more autonomy a good solution for improving student performance, and when might other strategies make more sense?” (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009, p. 2).

These are the types of questions for which policy makers crave answers, and ones that the research community is often not well positioned to answer.

More studies on implementation would help. In my office, we have deliberately shifted our focus to put a greater emphasis on frequent, early feedback from evaluators to program managers about how to improve and sustain their work. This ensures that our analyses stay relevant to their agenda. We combine this with causal designs when we can; for instance, our five-year study of our state Expanded Learning Time program, done by Abt Associates, included both implementation research and an interrupted time series design with matched
comparison schools for analyzing student outcomes (Checkoway et al. 2012). We’ve come to realize that it is more important to get useful data, even if imperfect, to our program offices quickly than to implement a strong research design that doesn’t generate timely, relevant information.

Equally as importantly, it would help if researchers would be more willing to use their judgment and experience to draw clearer conclusions about the policy implications of their work, particularly in the context of a policy brief. It is reasonable to be cautious about drawing too definitive a conclusion from a single study, especially one small in scale. But policy briefs by their nature typically review evidence from multiple studies, or from a single study with broad relevance. Briefs thus can push further with conclusions than might be legitimate on the basis of an individual study. They can emphasize points of consensus in a field, identify areas where the evidence is less solid, and put results in their proper context. Where results from multiple studies differ in their implications, policy briefs can help readers to appropriately weight the quality of evidence from each source. Thus, where the evidence merits, authors of policy briefs should not be afraid to draw conclusions; where the evidence does not support a conclusion, they should say so.

A recent study that drew out policy implications particularly well was the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) study from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. MET set out to determine how to measure effective teaching, to better provide teachers with information and support about their teaching practice. The research team conducted a large-scale study examining alternative practices for educator evaluation that could provide useful feedback to teachers. They produced technical papers documenting the research methodology and results—but that wasn’t the end of their work. They also produced a policy and practice brief specifically designed for practitioners and included actionable recommendations, such as, “Observers should be expected to demonstrate their ability to generate accurate observations and should be recertified periodically” and “When high-stakes decisions are being made, multiple observations are necessary” (Kane and Staiger 2012, pp. 2–3). These recommendations were drawn directly from the evidence generated by the study—and practitioners listened. Our approach to educator evaluation in Massachusetts has been influenced in substantial part by the results of this work. For instance, our state regulations include student feedback as one source of evidence on teachers’ performance, largely because the MET study convinced my commissioner of the importance of including student feedback as a measure of teacher practice.

THE FIELD OF DREAMS DELUSION
One last “yeah, but...” cripples the effectiveness of policy briefs, but this one is invoked by researchers themselves: “Yeah, but I published my findings, so
people must know about them.” While the “If we build it, they will come” strategy may have worked for Kevin Costner’s character in Field of Dreams, it is not effective for getting research findings in the hands of policy makers. Once a brief has been published, the work has just begun.

Policy briefs published in academic journals are particularly vulnerable to going unnoticed by policy makers, as most state agencies and school districts do not have easy access to those publications. If journals aim to have relevance for readers outside of universities, they should seek ways to expand their availability to those audiences. I commend EFP for distributing copies of this special issue to policy makers, as this is a useful first step in broadening access to this important work. But the research community needs to think beyond simply mailing copies of reports. A cautionary tale: Recently some researchers published a piece using Massachusetts education data in a major refereed academic journal. They asked the publisher to send my commissioner a copy of the issue—which he promptly forwarded to me without having read it. In states without research directors (the vast majority), it probably would have ended up in the recycle bin.

When researchers make themselves available as a resource to policy makers, it increases the likelihood that their research evidence will actually be used. Engaging directly with policy makers also has the advantage of addressing the previously cited concern that many studies don’t help policy makers figure out what to do. Rather than researchers merely guessing what a policy maker might conclude from their work, they can instead collaborate to determine the policy implications of the findings and what additional research might be needed.

Sustained collaborations like the Chicago Consortium of Public Schools and the Education Finance Research Commission mentioned earlier are one of the most effective ways to engage with policy makers, but other approaches can still reap benefits. Working with policy makers could take the form of in-person briefings, special analyses conducted for an agency or legislator, or participation as an expert in events where policy makers will be present. Sometimes this is as easily arranged as calling a commissioner or superintendent to request an opportunity to share a relevant study. Even better, offer a briefing ahead of public release to provide an opportunity to ask questions and prepare a response. This is particularly effective when the study is directly pertinent to his or her jurisdiction or when the findings are likely to counter commonly held beliefs. Other times it may be easier to gain policy makers’ attention by speaking at public events put on by organizations that serve educators, for example, associations of superintendents or mathematics curriculum directors, or the Council of Chief State School Officers. If you’ve obtained data from a state or district, use the connections you have made with their staff—whether
in program offices or in research, assessment, and data reporting—as potential conduits of results back into the organization. Once you establish yourself as someone who has deep expertise and can communicate your work effectively, you will quickly find yourself in high demand.

Not to be overlooked, however, is the role of independent research intermediaries, which compile secondary reports and briefs on findings published elsewhere and therefore give research findings a second chance at reaching a policy-making audience. Intermediaries often have the benefit of close ties to policy makers, as they typically have communications staff dedicated to disseminating findings through publications, events, briefings, social media, and other venues—a luxury for most academic journals. As a result, policy makers are more likely to pay attention to the work intermediaries publish. When our state convened a task force in 2010 to make recommendations to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education on a new framework for educator evaluation, we relied heavily on materials from intermediaries when we developed an annotated bibliography of the most pertinent recent reports on the subject for task force members. Materials from the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders (GTL Center, formerly National Comprehensive Center on Teacher Quality) alone composed ten percent of the reports provided to the task force, making it the single most common source of information we provided. Although the GTL Center’s work is strongly evidence-based, it does relatively little original research, rather reviewing and analyzing others’ findings to identify proven and promising policies, strategies, models, and practices (GTL Center 2013). It is incumbent on policy makers, of course, to distinguish independent intermediaries such as the GTL Center from others that are backed by organizations advancing a particular policy agenda. Thankfully, making these distinctions is exactly what policy makers do for a living.

Academic journals that aspire to reach policy-making audiences might consider collaborating on content and dissemination with a relevant intermediary, where one exists. The two could work together to agree on a research and publication agenda. Briefs could be concurrently published in both the academic journal and the appropriate venues from the intermediary, perhaps in different formats for various audiences. The researchers who produced the briefs could be available for events and briefings, giving them greater access to influence policy makers. And the intermediaries would gain the benefit of the credibility the experts bring to their communications efforts.

A CALL FROM POLICY MAKERS
Federal and state governments and local school districts have spent millions of dollars investing in data systems to “help states, districts, schools, educators,
and other stakeholders to make data-informed decisions to improve student learning and outcomes, as well as to facilitate research to increase student achievement and close achievement gaps” (NCES 2012b). In return for their investment, policy makers are increasingly demanding that the data they have invested so heavily in collecting be turned into evidence.

Policy makers want to know whether their policies are working, why, and what they should do differently. They are looking to the research community to use data to answer these important questions and to report the results in an accessible, relevant way. And they want help from researchers in using their evidence, understanding the caveats, and drawing appropriate conclusions and inferences.

Well-crafted policy briefs are likely to be the research community’s most effective response to this call from policy makers. By focusing briefs on topics on the policy agenda, helping policy makers see their community in the results, writing clearly, studying implementation and not just outcomes, weighing evidence and drawing conclusions, and reaching out to policy makers beyond publication, researchers have the greatest potential to see their work influence public policy.

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