



Does Debunked Research Influence Governor Walker’s Education Reform Agenda?

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BOULDER, CO (April 7, 2011) – In its early goings, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker’s education agenda appears to rely heavily on shoddily researched reforms that have been misleadingly marketed by the ideological think tanks promoting them. Last week (March 31), Walker issued Executive Order #22, announcing the formation of a new “Read to Lead Task Force.”

The Task Force is charged with making recommendations for future legislation that would restrict schools in their ability to promote third-grade pupils who are deemed not able to read. In the executive order and in his announcement, Walker made passing reference to a claim that “in approximately ten years, Florida, through state reading law reforms, has improved from one of the lowest ranked states in the nation to one of the highest and in doing so achieved a much smaller racial achievement gap than Wisconsin.”

The statement itself cites no reference. However, it likely relies on the work of Matthew Ladner, formerly the Vice President of Research at Arizona’s free-market Goldwater Institute and currently a staff member at the Foundation for Excellence in Education, a policy-advocacy organization founded and chaired by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush.

This past fall, Ladner co-authored a report for the Heritage Foundation as part of his larger effort to tout the alleged success of Florida’s reforms and promote them as models for other states. However, a rigorous review has found that Ladner’s claims are not supported by the evidence. The Heritage Report, *Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: Learning from Florida’s Reforms*, was reviewed for the National Education Policy Center’s Think Twice think tank review project by Columbia University Professor Madhabi Chatterji, who identified and explained serious flaws. The flaws were so great that the NEPC subsequently awarded the Heritage Foundation a “Bunkum Award” earlier this year.

Ladner and his Heritage co-author, Lindsey Burke contend that Florida’s “far-reaching” education policies, including tax vouchers and grade retention, “caused” racial achievement gaps to narrow in the Sunshine State. In particular, the report focuses on fourth-grade reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Chatterji’s review concluded that the “report’s analyses are highly biased and of very limited value” and that the “major elements of Florida’s education reform policies are in need of continuing and more careful examination, individually and collectively, before they can be recommended for wider policy adoption.”

In awarding the ‘If I Say It Enough, Will It Still Be Untrue?’ Bunkum for the Heritage report, NEPC recognized



Ladner’s success in repackaging in many different venues and media his spurious claim on behalf of the Florida reforms. “Ladner’s prolific output isn’t really what sets this work apart. It’s his willingness to smash through walls of basic research standards in his dogged pursuit of his policy agenda,” according to our judges. “Nothing in the data or analyses of Dr. Ladner or the Heritage Foundation comes even close to allowing for a causal inference.” (See <http://tinyurl.com/3egm9bn> for a brief overview of Chatterji’s findings and see <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/learning-from-florida> for Chatterji’s full review.)

National Education Policy Center director Kevin Welner observed, “High-quality research can and should inform the education policies of Wisconsin, and it also makes sense for Wisconsin to learn from the experiences other states. But the research that Dr. Ladner has been marketing is far too flawed to be of use.”

According to NEPC publications director Alex Molnar, “Over the past two years alone, NEPC expert third-party reviewers have found one example after another of shoddy, ideologically driven, research published by advocacy think tanks as they attempt to sway public opinion and shape policy. It’s bad news for Wisconsin’s children if these folks have the governor’s ear.”

National Education Policy Center expert third-party reviews and original research are available on the NEPC website. Find information on charter schools (<http://nepc.colorado.edu/topic/charter-schools>), education management organizations (<http://nepc.colorado.edu/topic/education-management-organizations>), vouchers (<http://nepc.colorado.edu/topic/vouchers>), grade retention (<http://nepc.colorado.edu/topic/grade-retention>), and tuition tax credits (<http://nepc.colorado.edu/topic/tuition-tax-credits>).

The mission of the National Education Policy Center is to produce and disseminate high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. We are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence. For more information on NEPC, please visit <http://nepc.colorado.edu/>.