

Board of Advisors

September 16, 2010

MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Advisors of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy
FROM: Jon Baron
RE: Update on our work

We're pleased to report that valid evidence of effectiveness appears to be strongly influencing federal funding decisions in two major new federal programs -- HHS's Evidence-Based Home Visiting Program (\$1.5 billion over five years, enacted 2010), and the Department of Education's Investing in Innovation Fund (\$650 million, enacted 2009). To our knowledge, this is the first time this has ever occurred in U.S. social policy on such a large scale. Both programs incorporate the core concepts that we have promoted through our work with OMB, Congress, and the federal agencies -- and in some areas our specific input -- but it has been unknown whether these programs could withstand political pressures to dilute their evidence standards and allocate funds the usual way, with little regard to evidence. Early indications are that the programs are indeed being implemented with strong evidence standards:

- HHS's plan for its Home Visiting program includes (a) a competitive funding component that gives significant weight to evidence of effectiveness, and (b) strong criteria for what constitutes such evidence.**

As you'll recall, this newly-enacted HHS program is designed to fund home visitation program models for at-risk families with young children, based on strong evidence that certain models produce sizable improvements in participants' lives (e.g., the Nurse-Family Partnership, see evidence summary [here](#)).

HHS's proposed implementation plan, recently published in the Federal Register, includes an exceptionally clear and succinct statement of key principles for rating studies of program effectiveness, as follows, which is consistent with evidence standards articulated by the National Academies, Institute of Education Sciences, and other respected scientific bodies:

In brief, the high rating would be reserved for random assignment studies with low attrition of sample members and no reassignment of sample members after the original random assignment. The moderate rating would apply to studies that use a quasi-experimental design and to random assignment studies that, due to flaws in the study design or execution ... do not meet all the criteria for the high rating. To receive the moderate rating, studies would have to demonstrate that at the study's onset, the intervention and comparison groups were well matched on specified measures (i.e. baseline equivalence) Studies that do not meet all of the criteria for either high or moderate quality would be considered low quality.

The HHS plan also includes a process to competitively award most of the program funds based on criteria that "give significant weight to the strength of the available evidence of effectiveness" for the model(s) proposed by grant applicants. HHS's proposed plan is linked [here](#), and the comments we submitted on the plan are linked [here](#).

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2. The Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) Fund, which also includes strong evidence criteria, recently selected awardees for its largest grants that indeed have valid evidence of effectiveness.

As you'll recall, the newly-enacted i3 Fund seeks to expand the implementation of innovative and evidence-based K-12 program models. To qualify for the largest i3 grants (\$50 million for large-scale implementation), models are required to have strong evidence of effectiveness, with well-conducted randomized controlled trials recognized as the strongest method for establishing effectiveness.

The program recently announced the four models that it has selected for scale-up grants -- (i) Success for All; (ii) Reading Recovery; (iii) Teach for America; and (iv) the KIPP leadership development model. Based on our own careful reviews, we believe that all four models are backed by valid evidence. The strongest evidence, we believe, is for the grade K-2 component of Success for All, where studies show a sizable, sustained effect on schoolwide reading achievement (as summarized [here](#)). In other cases, the evidence appears valid but limited by short-term follow-up (e.g., one school year) or deviations from the randomized study design.

Importantly, all four of these models will be rigorously evaluated, as part of their grant award, in studies that include random assignment, so as to build more definitive evidence about each model's effectiveness.

3. The Home Visiting and i3 programs will also fund models backed by supportive -- but not yet strong -- evidence of effectiveness, with a requirement for a rigorous evaluation. We believe this is a key step needed to grow the number of proven models, and thereby evolve these federal initiatives toward greater effectiveness over time.

I'm also pleased to report that we recently published two op-ed articles, co-authored with Coalition board members:

- [Long-Term Deficit Reduction: Less Pain, More Gain](#), Robert Solow (Nobel laureate and professor emeritus at MIT) and Jon Baron. This op-ed, published in *The Fiscal Times*, proposes an evidence-based path to reducing chronic long-term U.S. budget deficits.
- [Federal Programs for Youth: More of the Same Won't Work](#), Isabel Sawhill (senior fellow at the Brookings Institution) and Jon Baron. This op-ed, published in *Youth Today*, proposes an evidence-based approach to evolving federal youth programs toward greater effectiveness over time.

I hope this update is helpful. Any thoughts or suggestions you have would be much appreciated. We're grateful to the MacArthur, William T. Grant, and Edna McConnell Clark foundations for their support of our work.