September 5, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Advisors of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy

FROM: Jon Baron

RE: Update - Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy

We're pleased to report on the following developments in our work to advance evidence-based policy reform:

1. **Tuesday's New York Times had a valuable article – Guesses and Hype Give Way to Data in Study of Education – discussing the transformative role of randomized controlled trials in education research over the past decade, under the leadership of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).** The article, authored by Times reporter Gina Kolata, notes that: "*Until recently, there had been few solid answers [about what works in science and math education] – just guesses and hunches, marketing hype and extrapolations from small pilot studies. But now, a little-known office in the Education Department [IES] is starting to get some real data, using a method that has transformed medicine: the randomized clinical trial.*" The article includes quotes from Coalition Board member Bob Boruch and myself, as well as colleagues John Easton, Russ Whitehurst, and Bob Slavin. The article also cites a Coalition brief showing that many programs that had seemed promising in less-rigorous studies were found in IES-sponsored randomized trials to have no effect on student outcomes, underscoring the importance of rigorous testing. Yesterday, it was the second most-frequently emailed New York Times article, suggesting broad interest in the topic.

2. **A Coalition-convened panel, including evaluation experts Rebecca Maynard and Larry Orr, has provided recommendations to DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) for increasing the success of evaluation studies in building a body of effective, evidence-based programs – linked here** (two pages plus attachments). The panel, convened under a contract with ETA, developed the recommendations based on its review of large evaluations that ETA has sponsored since 2006.

   The recommendations were well received by ETA, and we understand ETA will shortly post them on its website. We also believe the recommendations may have broader applicability – to evaluations in other policy areas. As the panel notes, its recommendations "*flow from a recognition that the clear pattern in past experimental evaluations in workforce development, as in other fields (e.g., medicine, education, crime prevention), is that most interventions produce weak or no positive impacts compared to services-as-usual.*" In brief, the recommendations include (i) "*where feasible, fund impact evaluations in 'seamless' stages, using relatively low-cost methods in the initial stages*"; and (ii) "*in selecting interventions to evaluate in a given area (e.g. assistance for disconnected youth), strategically search the existing evaluation literature to identify the strongest candidates – i.e., those most likely to produce sizable positive impacts*."

3. **Coalition Board members Judy Gueron and Howard Rolston have authored an excellent book on the history of randomized trials in welfare policy – a history that has provided a critical precedent for the Coalition's work to advance rigorous studies across the range of government policy areas.** [Fighting for Reliable Evidence](#) is a comprehensive and compelling firsthand account, told by two individuals who pioneered the use of random assignment in social policy research and federal evaluation efforts.

We hope this update is helpful. Any thoughts or suggestions you have on our work would be much appreciated.

Jon