

SOME FLORIDA NEEDS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH¹

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The topic of my talk is "Some Florida Needs in Educational Research." My remarks are limited to just three of them, although the list is almost endless. I regard the three as urgent but recognize that had another person identified a set of three most urgent needs, then his list and mine might be totally different. I attempted here to take the whole view but probably cannot escape the particular vantage point from which I have witnessed Florida educational research for more than a decade. The needs I shall discuss are complex. They cannot be adequately described nor can complete solutions be advanced in the limited time available. I will merely identify and describe them in enough detail so that you know what is of concern to me. Should I be successful, then we might work toward their solution later. The three needs are: the need for a state-wide research dissemination service; the need for state-wide research; and the need for improving graduate training programs in educational research.

Need for a State-Wide Research Dissemination Service

One major need in Florida is for a state-wide research dissemination service. In this respect, Florida is no different from other states.

The need for a dissemination service springs from many bases. One base is heightened research activity and interest on the national level. Educational research is in a period of transition and elaboration. There is an awareness that national welfare hinges on education and that the quality of education hinges on the research which undergirds it. This recognition is revealed in the increasing funds which the Federal government devotes to research. The increased funding of research has produced a mass of undistributed and unassimilated research results. Putting them in the hands of consumers is a monumental problem which must be solved quickly and effectively if the quality of educational practice is

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to be improved.

Another base is increased research activity in Florida. For six years I served as editor of your Florida Journal of Educational Research. During that time, I received many research reports for publication and became a kind of research sounding board for hundreds of Floridians. From that position, it was unavoidable to note the scores of Floridians who were studying the same problem, yet were unaware of each other; to note the great amount of completed research whose results were never made public and consumable; to note the highly significant research which might have been done had the investigators from several counties merged their problems and worked cooperatively; and to note the vast wastage of time, energy, and money caused by many investigators simultaneously studying virtually identical problems.

All of these factors--the augmentation of the Federally sponsored research program, the accumulation of a mass of research results, and observation of the Florida scene--cause me to suggest the establishment of a state-wide research dissemination service. Responsibility for it should be placed on the State Department of Education owing to its central role in the State educational system. Possibly the State Department might choose to contract parts of it to universities and county school systems, but leadership and the bulk of the work resides there. Initially, the State Department might engage in three dissemination activities.

Dissemination of information about Federal educational research funding programs. At the present time, not less than twenty-five Federal Government agencies conduct grant and contract programs for educational research. Public school based researchers might participate in any or all of them and, in my opinion, would attempt to participate in all of them if they knew about them. The State Department of Education might routinely distribute information to school personnel, especially researchers, about the nature of each of these funding programs, the kinds of research in which each agency is interested, the kind of applications which are wanted, the names of officials to whom applications should be addressed, the criteria for judging applications, deadlines for receipt of applications, etc.

Also, because the State does not specifically earmark money for educational research, the State Department of Education might consider encouraging researchers to participate in these Federal programs. After all, it might be the only way to obtain money with which to solve the State's educational problems.

Dissemination of research results. A second activity is the dissemination of research results. A bridge must be built between the research producer and the research consumer. The mass of undistributed research results is approaching iceberg proportions. Research is useless unless the results are integrated in educational practice. Again, the State Department can play a vital role by deliberately attempting to put in the hands of its approximately 35,000 employees information which will aid them to do their work more effectively. Frankly, I can't imagine an employer not taking a few simple steps that might significantly augment the efficiency of his employees and the productivity of his enterprise.

A significant first step would be to install "research middle-men" in the State Department of Education. Each "middle man," comparable in a sense to an agricultural agent, could be responsible for an area of public school instruction, e.g., reading, science, social studies, mathematics. His task would be to devour every bit of new research literature in his area, then to translate it into a language which can be readily understood by consumers. (Anyone who has read research literature realizes that researchers have a unique language; they habitually write to each other, and the "outsider" is probably able only to follow the page numbers of the research report.) When translated, it could be submitted in loose-leaf form to all teachers in the relevant instructional area. Perhaps distributions could be made four times a year.

A service of this kind would be expensive to operate. However, its cost might be substantially less than the cost of not doing it. It is likely that the annual cost would be just a fraction of what the State unhesitatingly spends if a citizen reports that he believes he saw a Mediterranean fruit fly.

Dissemination of information about research in progress. Another dissemination activity for which the State Department is admirably suited and situated is conducting quarterly or semi-annual surveys of educational research in Florida. Regularly gathering and distributing such information would lead, I believe, to diminishing duplication of research, fostering cooperative research programs, making school personnel more receptive to adopting research results, and promoting a variety of attacks on a particular problem which, in aggregate, will constitute whole solutions to problems. FEPA has recognized this need, attempted to meet it, and failed because of lack of resources.

Need for State-Wide Research

The second major need is for a State-wide program of educational research. Florida has no such program and it

shares that distinction with virtually every state in the Union. However, some states are establishing the structure for such programs.

Several factors prompt me to regard it as a critical need. First, we have gone too long without executing state-wide research which would furnish minimum information on which to make decisions about whether we are spending our educational funds wisely. It is true that the Florida State-Wide Ninth- and Twelfth-Grade Testing Programs do supply some relevant information, but the amount is clearly less than what is minimally needed. I am merely suggesting that we need a continuing research program simply to learn how well we are doing. The program would be analagous to that which any business conducts several times a year and which it calls an inventory. Without "inventory information," we operate on faith and good will.

The information which would be collected for judging coarsely the overall adequacy of our state-wide instructional program could serve as the basic data for a second state-wide research program. The information could be deposited in a data bank, for which the State Department has admirable electronic facilities. Eventually the information in the data bank could be used in systems analyses research. Systems analyses would yield results helpful in educational planning, the disbursement of resources to schools, the identification of instructional areas in which more attention is needed, etc. The State is capable of moving almost effortlessly into such a program because the State Department of Education personnel has farsightedly established data processing facilities second to none in the country.

Another factor which causes me to regard a State-wide research program as an urgent need is the tendency of Federal agencies to award grants to state-level and regional-level applicants. This trend might be partially attributed to the recognition by Federal agencies that many of the new curricula and courses, e.g., physics, mathematics, and science, are being installed on a wholesale basis. The old is scrapped in favor of the new, for no other reason, it seems, than because the new is new. The majority of new curricula seem to be brilliantly conceived, developed by outstanding scholars, highly acclaimed, and, unfortunately, largely un-tested and untried. It is imperative that state-wide research be conducted on the new programs to discover the most efficient mode to implement them, whether students who are exposed to them do appreciably better than did students who were exposed to the up-rooted counterpart courses, whether the courses tend to repel students, and whether the courses cause students to abandon that particular line of study after the

first exposure. These are important questions for which there are virtually no answers. I believe a State-wide series of pilot studies of new courses and curricula are needed to determine their merit prior to the time the State begins extensive installation of them.

A third factor which prompts me to regard State-wide research as important is the opportunity it would provide for conducting penetrating investigations of educational problems. Should the State be divided into regions on an educationally sound basis, it would then be sensible to engage in monolithic studies of problems wherein each of the regions might study a facet of it. At the completion of the regional studies, the results could be synthesized into a whole which could not be reached by synthesizing the results of as many independent, but unorganized, inquiries.

This technique is admirably fitted to some problems. For example, school drop-outs constitute a serious educational problem. There is no reason to believe that five counties could not study the problem of early identification of drop-outs; twenty-five counties in groups of five each might inaugurate unique experimental programs for retaining potential drop-outs, etc. After a few years, the bulk of research results might be sufficient to warrant installing a sensible and effective State-wide program for coping with drop-outs.

I am merely suggesting that techniques which have proven to be effective in dealing with problems in the State's cattle, agricultural, and citrus industries might also be effective in dealing with its educational industry.

There remains the question of who should be responsible for such a program. Undoubtedly the universities, the public schools, and the State Department would have to conduct it as a joint enterprise. That these groups can work together has been established repeatedly and the willingness of them to work together is apparent. Consider the nationally known Pinellas County studies of air conditioning of school buildings which was executed by county, State Department of Education, and university personnel. Consider the success of J. B. White of the University of Florida in establishing a cooperative research council of county systems and the University of Florida. There can be no doubt that there are precedents and willingness. I believe we ought to look to the State Department of Education for leadership in establishing the undertaking. The State Department of Education occupies a central and influential position, and, furthermore, it is legally charged with responsibility for the State system of public education.

Need for Improved Training Programs in Research

A third need is for the State universities to establish a variety of training programs in educational research at the master's and doctoral levels. At least three rather distinct kinds are needed. One of them would provide training for the person destined to become the theoretical scholar. This program would emphasize research methodology and the fundamental disciplines from which education draws knowledge on which to build professional practice. A second kind would provide training for the person who wishes to conduct research on the potential application of theoretical knowledge to educational problems. This program would emphasize research methodology and high-level knowledge of the entire educational enterprise. The third kind of program would provide training for the person who wishes to conduct research on the evaluation of new educational practices and their integration in the on-going educational program. This program would emphasize research and evaluation methodology, curriculum theory, and development of great mastery in a particular instructional area.

Presently operational training programs in the State emphasize the first two of these--theoretical and applied--and give little attention to the third, implemental or engineering research. Although a need exists for all three kinds, a strong demand exists only for the first two. This fact is surprising when one considers the great stress which is placed on public school research, the great need for it, and the fact that the research specialist in implementation is ideally fitted for such service. However, it is not surprising when one considers that there is simply no career pattern for educational researchers in the public school system of the State. Until the career pattern is established, there is no sense in establishing training programs for research specialists in educational implementation. No one wishes to take extensive and expensive graduate training to prepare for a position which does not exist. It is for this reason that the Florida Educational Research Association has requested the FEA Program Action Committee to include in its recommendation the establishment of research positions in each county, the cost to be underwritten by the Minimum Foundation Program.

You can be certain that the installation of training programs will accompany or closely follow the establishment of public school research positions. Perhaps ten years from now it will be possible to make a statement different from the one which follows: since the formation of the Department of Educational Research at the Florida State University no

doctoral graduate has taken a position in the public schools of Florida.

Summary

Three needs in educational research were discussed: the need for disseminating research results; the need for a state-wide program of educational research; and the need for improved training programs for educational researchers. The first two--need for disseminating research results and for establishing a state-wide program of educational research--are ones for which we rightfully expect the State Department of Education to assume leadership. The State Department of Education can seek Federal research funds, should State money not be available, for every project that I mentioned and for every professional staff member whose services would be needed in conducting the projects. The third need is to improve graduate training programs. The universities are aware of present deficiencies, but can do little until a market exists for the kind of graduates who ought to be produced. The development of the market, i.e., the establishment of public school research positions, awaits county system action, particularly, and State Department action, generally.