

A Research Agenda to Support Public Schools

Keynote Address to the N.C. Association of Researchers in Education

Karen Banks, March 22, 2000

Thank you for that introduction. This is my first time to address the NCARE members. I'm honored to be asked, and hope I will say some things this morning that make you think and reflect. I've developed some passionate beliefs over my 20 years in this business. The risk in sharing them is that instead of making you think, I'll merely make you angry, although that is not my purpose. My intent today is to challenge you. I believe we need to develop a collaborative agenda to support public schools if we expect public schools to survive the current press towards vouchers, higher standards with the same low funding, a looming shortage of teachers, and the frequent lack of public and political support. We need to develop a collaborative agenda that supports classroom teachers, if we expect them to succeed and to continue to teach in a society that doesn't always seem to value their professional contribution and in an economy that offers them many alternatives.

By definition, a collaborative agenda means I won't unilaterally provide you with a list of research studies that I decided you should conduct. I will, however, make some very specific, pointed comments. My hope is that those comments will start a dialogue that leads us all to better research.

If you are based in a university, non-profit organization, or a think tank, I'm going to suggest that you pay more attention to three issues that I'll enumerate.

If you are based in a school system, I will have some suggestions for you, too.

For all of us: I'll focus a little bit on what's already working in our current collaborations, but I'll talk more about what's needed.

Before I get into research issues, I'd like to ask you to pause for a moment and imagine that it's August. You are an 8th grade classroom teacher. You've been assigned to a four-teacher team and you teach social studies to 112 students each day. The classes in your school are heterogeneously grouped.

Over the summer, you attended workshops on enhancing reading skills through social studies, multiple intelligences, and applying total quality management principles to the classroom.

Over the summer, your students were busy, too. Four of your students experimented with drugs for the first time. Two more became sexually active. And 30 of your students went to summer camp for the last time. As the year starts, 24 of your students are on free or reduced priced

lunch, over half are from blended or single parent families, and 34 are in at least one soccer league.

By October, your classes are generally progressing well, but some students are struggling. Even as you apply quality principles, multiple intelligences, and reading enhancement strategies, many students lack the basic reading skills to access the rich materials you've woven into the instruction. You've arranged for each struggling student to be paired with a volunteer tutor/mentor. But some of the tutors have become frustrated because the kids don't make progress very fast. You've wondered if there is a fool-proof training program for tutor/mentors out there, and if so, why it isn't being used at your school. And your days are getting awfully long. There's so much administrative paperwork and so many sets of tests, homework, and papers to grade. Most nights, you don't get through until after 10 o'clock.

Now it's Friday and it's been a long week. You stop by the school office to pick up your mail and discover there's a letter in your box from a researcher. Let's stop for a minute and imagine what that research is likely to be in the current environment, and then we can envision what it might be, in a better world.

First, a little straight talk. I may not look like it, but one of my jobs is to be a great, big roadblock. Specifically, I approve or deny permission for every research project that is conducted in my school system. My task is to weed out the studies that will take too much staff or student time, that ask questions that are too personal, or that aren't likely to *substantially* contribute to improving public education in *my* school district. Here's a sample of three kinds of research projects that cross my desk, and presumably could end up in our teacher's mailbox on that Friday afternoon.

- A survey or some focus groups about teachers' opinions towards a high stakes accountability program.
- A study of how students' self-esteem is correlated with achievement test scores and high risk behaviors, such as alcohol use.
- A large-scale survey about how teachers use technology and how much access they have to technology tools.

Let me be blunt. Most of these studies shouldn't be done in our schools. I'm not *trying* to make you angry now, but I'm going to call it like I see it. At the same time I'll try to explain what types of studies might be worth doing.

Let's start with the survey of teacher attitudes about high stakes accountability and use North Carolina as a specific example. Ostensibly, such a study could point out areas in which a high stakes accountability program that focused only on language arts and mathematics was creating unintended negative consequences, such as less instructional focus by teachers on subjects like science and social studies, or excessive amounts of time spent on test taking skills or test preparation.

What's wrong with this? This study illustrates the first issue I want to talk about: research done in our schools, and in support of schools, should be likely to lead to change or improvement. At first glance, you might think this study is very relevant and will provide an important impetus for change.

I contend that it probably won't. Part of the reason has to do with politics. Has anyone noticed that the state legislatures across the country aren't interested in a dialogue with educators on this issue? We're considered to be part of "the problem." In North Carolina, SAT and NAEP scores are going up, and the N. C. General Assembly and State Board of Education think this is a good thing. In spite of some time they've recently given to listening to teachers, a survey of teachers is not going to change the political forces that led to high stakes testing in the first place. Remember, these are the same folks that are basing grade level promotion on an EOG test that has a standard error equal to about a full year's growth. Legislators will simply view teachers' concerns about ABCs as stemming from teachers' attempts to avoid being held accountable.

So one of the issues I'm suggesting you focus on in designing your research is to ask "How can I design this study so that it *is* going to make a difference?" Frankly, a survey of *parents'* attitudes towards high stakes accountability programs might have more impact on our narrowly-focused policy makers. Parents were part of the original pressure to raise standards without raising taxes. I also have some other suggestions for a study with more impact, as you'll see when I describe the second issue I want to address: quality.

Even if you disagree with me about whether this study of teacher perceptions is likely to make a difference by leading to changes in policies, I would also argue that—unless this is the first part of a larger study—this is not very good policy research. For example, a one-shot survey is useful for generating hypotheses, but without comparative data over time, the study is much weaker. Moreover, we have much better and less *subjective* ways to measure the impact of educational policies. But those ways of doing research take more time. If teachers report that all they do from March through May is teach test taking skills and test preparation, then verify this claim by getting into those classrooms and doing the observations you need to do, instead of relying on self-reports. How is what teachers do in April different from what teachers do in September?

Do we believe that science instruction may have suffered from too much focus on reading and math? Then let's look at what's happening with science achievement. Have Biology End-of-Course test scores for 9th graders declined? How are North Carolina students doing in Advanced Placement science classes, compared to prior cohorts? What's happening with participation rates in advanced high school science classes like Chemistry? (ABCs has been in place for many years now, and yes, these students are already in high school.)

If you'll allow me to briefly return from the quality issue back to the relevancy or make-a-difference issue I mentioned first, if schools claim they are mostly teaching test preparation and

test taking skills rather than content, can you design a study that shows whether this practice actually harms or helps student achievement test scores? Teachers must believe this test preparation helps test scores, or they wouldn't do it. Let's give them some answers. While you're at it, can someone design an objective study of all those test preparation products like Test Blaster, to see whether they work at all, and whether one works better than another? So-called research by the vendors doesn't impress me.

In short, figure out a better way to measure the impact of high-stakes testing—one that is not so subjective and that might seem less like whining to a member of the General Assembly. As that 8th grade teacher looks in her mailbox on a Friday afternoon, rather than ask her to fill out a survey, ask if you can observe her classes. Consider following her students' progress as they enter higher grade levels. It's less of a burden on that teacher and it's better research.

Let's turn to the next proposed study—the one examining the correlation between students' self-esteem, student achievement, and high risk behaviors. In various forms, this study has crossed my desk many times. It always raises some quality issues, but it also raises the third issue I want to ask you to do a better job about: redundancy. Sometimes this proposed study uses fancy terms, like “academic self-efficacy”, or uses special populations to give the study a special twist; for example, self-efficacy of minority students in inner-city schools. What the researchers want from our 8th grade teacher is precious class time for collecting data on students—time for surveys, collection of parent permission slips, etc., and they also want time from the teacher to report on achievement and other data.

This is what I call a “so what” study, because it won't help anyone except the graduate student who does the study. What's wrong with it?

At least four things. First, it's been done a thousand times. Second, in the current climate, we can't afford to ask very many personal questions about self-esteem or high risk behaviors. Parents believe it's none of our business. My school district over-ruled my recommendation on a very personal survey last fall, and the news articles and “letters to the editor” lasted eight days! I doubt Wake County Public Schools will allow any personal surveys for several years!

Third, if schools don't have time to teach science and social studies, who on earth thinks schools are going to do anything about self-esteem? The people doing the research are not usually offering to stay around to do anything by way of intervention.

Fourth, and again I don't want to be condescending, but correlation is not causality. Low self-esteem might be caused by low achievement, instead of the other way around, as most of these proposals hypothesize. We won't know anything **useful** after we do this study. Let me also say the same criticism applies to many of the proposals to study achievement and climate, or achievement and leadership style, or some permutation of those variables.

If you really want to know whether higher achievement or even higher self-esteem causes lower rates of risky behavior, design an experimental study that provides academic support to half the students and follow up on what happens to their achievement and risk-taking. Did the groups differ in achievement? Rates of risky behaviors? Within the experimental group, did increased achievement show the predicted relationship to lower rates of risky behaviors? While you're at it, maybe you can see if raising achievement leads to higher self-esteem, instead of assuming the path goes in the other direction. And while you're at it, let's use some path analyses instead of straight correlations.

By the way, you can't do the type of research I'm asking you to do in one semester.

A third type of proposed study—the example was a large-scale, time intensive survey on technology—usually comes from a nonprofit organization or directly from a state or federal agency, although sometimes from other researchers. If you're our 8th grade teacher and standing at your mailbox, imagine your reaction to that 26-page survey. How will it help you?

Sometimes my district will participate because we believe such studies are worthwhile—particularly if student time is not involved. But sometimes we still say “no.” For example, various folks want to know how many computers we have in our schools. These surveys range from gross but quick measures (the number of students and the number of computers in schools, regardless of whether the computers are in labs, classrooms, or on teachers' desks) to fairly complex indicators (the number of computers by grade level, by age of hardware, by type of setting such as a lab or regular classroom, separately for each of our 115 schools).

Now, we know that the people conducting these studies are basically trying to document the level of need in public schools, and in the case of technology, they may help document the digital divide between affluent and poor schools, or affluent and poor children. They are trying to collect data that may directly help us help kids. But during one three-month period early in 1999, we received three different technology surveys from three different agencies or government contractors trying to “help us”.

This doesn't count the Schools and Staffing surveys, the National Longitudinal Study, and all the other surveys we probably received in the same time period. Each technology survey would have required us to tabulate the data in different ways, including data we did not have centrally and would have had to ask schools for. Since we had already asked schools to complete similar surveys the *previous* year—in great, excruciating detail—we finally had to say “no” to some of the requests. Such redundancy must be addressed if schools are going to ever welcome researchers with open arms.

Now, these surveys definitely had the potential to make a difference; some of them were well designed, but folks, if you are that middle school teacher checking her mailbox on a Friday afternoon, how would you feel about a request from your principal to tally the computers used by

all students and teachers on your four-person team, especially if you had just tallied them a month ago, using a different coding scheme for a different researcher?

For any state or federally-funded folks here today, and their nonprofit colleagues and contractors, you need to coordinate and plan your efforts together and talk with LEA staff about what is feasible. We may be able to help *increase* your return rate if you can live with slightly simpler data structures. We might be able to give you some of the data, but not all of it, if you'll try to accommodate that option. But you have to be willing to have a dialogue about these issues *before* you finalize your plans. In other words, you'll have to collaborate.

Now, in case what I've tried to say has gotten lost in the details, let me sum up: We need higher quality research, with results that will be useful and lead to change, and research that doesn't replicate the data collection of other agencies or researchers. And don't ask students personal questions about sex and drugs, please.

Well, now that the graduate students, think tanks, nonprofit contractors, and university folks are mad at me, I'll turn to the school district folks. I have three challenges for you, too. I'll start with one more example about a real professor, but there's a happy ending to this story.

One day, an assistant professor at an un-named North Carolina university wanted to do a survey of Asian and White parents in our district to see if they had different parenting styles. I called her and said, "Heck, no", and we had a rather heated discussion in which she accused me of not supporting "basic research." I said, "Even basic research should have some slight chance of making a difference if you want to do it in our schools or take one minute of our staff members' time to identify parents for your sample. Do you seriously expect that American parents will change their parenting style, even if you could show that Asian parents had 'better' or different approaches to parenting? The next day, I got a follow-up letter mailed several days prior to my phone call by the same researcher indicating that she also wanted to do the same type of study with Arab-American parents! At that point, I called her, we had a good laugh about the slow U.S. mails, and I asked, "How about I send you a list of things we need someone to do for us?" She said, "Great. I have a doctoral student looking for a topic." I already had a list. It was in the mail to her that same day.

This story had a happy ending. We jointly designed a multi-part study on at-risk middle school students. Because my district had a list of studies we needed someone to do for us, a doctoral student got a dissertation, another master's student got a thesis topic, and we even provided some financial help from my school system with data collection and data entry.

So, to my school district colleagues: How many of the school district folks in this room have such a list? Can you open your Franklin Planner and hand it to the university person sitting next to you? Can you beam it to someone from your Palm Pilot?

When's the last time you called the local university and asked to meet with them about your research needs? Where is it written that *they* should be the ones to initiate the call? So, my first challenge to you is to be proactive.

Second, I would challenge you to provide better information to the faculty of the universities nearest you on the types of data you *do* have available, including the data structures and file layouts, and how to access that data. Be honest: we can strip off i.d. numbers and other identifying information fairly easily and make incredible amounts of information available to researchers, but we haven't gone out of our way to do this because we are busy. Data mining may help us relate our data to census data, for example, but we need university collaboration to pull this off.

Related to this, many university folks (and here I mean students and even some faculty) would like to develop more expertise in the types of assessment data we use in North Carolina and the psychometric characteristics of those data. We haven't shared much of our time or expertise with them. And then we complain that some graduate students think their master's theses should involve more surveys on climate or principal leadership. Come on, folks!

Let me state this even more strongly. If we provide a hostile environment for outside researchers, they will continue to request permission to swoop in with one-shot surveys so they can get in and get out, minimizing contact with us and with the schools. If we spend more time working with them, rather than ignoring them and hoping they will go away, they'll do better research.

Finally, I would challenge you to provide more cross-training opportunities for researchers. In North Carolina, we provide internships for principal fellows. We provide student teaching opportunities for teachers. How do we expect future researchers to understand what we are faced with in the field if they get all of their research training on the university campus. I'm told that there is usually a stipend provided for the speaker at this conference, and in the spirit of the challenge I'm making to other school districts out there, I'll pledge to use that stipend, plus a match from my school district's funds, to provide a research internship experience for a graduate student this summer. If you are interested or know a graduate student that might be interested in earning \$1,000 this summer, I've got a large number of business cards with my email address, and I'd like to hear from you in the next few weeks. We've got to help people understand our needs, and the more opportunities for cross-training we can provide, the better. Now, when you go back to your districts, see if there is anything you can do to try to create some similar opportunities.

To sum up the challenges for school districts: be proactive, provide information on the data you already have available, and provide field experiences to colleagues and future colleagues based in other settings.

Now, let me touch on some emerging research issues which I see needing some attention. These are issues that would benefit from collaborative research. The one getting the most attention right now is the achievement gap between white and minority students, between poor and affluent students. Is there research you could do that would help us address this gap? Related to this, we need help preparing students for the new promotion standards.

Teacher recruitment and retention are critical issues. Within very limited resources, is there any way to help new teachers make it through those tough first three years? We're losing them before they have even reached the tenure stage.

We need help evaluating our technology programs. In the midst of varying types of programs, are there common strands that seem to be making any difference in achievement?

Let me mention a specific need we have in Wake Count—I anticipated it but hoped my instincts were wrong about when it would come up. Nevertheless, it finally landed on my desk yesterday and we could use some help because we're swamped and it's a tough problem. We've been requested to design an evaluation that shows whether improving the facilities in which students are educated has any impact on the educational process. Does it make a difference if you tear down an old building and replace it, or can you just keep patching the roof and get the same educational results? We have climate data, achievement data, discipline and attendance data, going back almost a decade, but what we don't have is the external credibility a university connection would bring, nor the time and staff to address the request we've received. An adequate research design will be complicated and difficult to develop. So if you have any interest in this topic and want to talk about how to help us, please come talk to me at the break.

Friends and colleagues, some good things are happening out there. But our jobs exist solely to make things better for kids. Some of us do that by training teachers, other by doing policy research or work in a content area like mathematics. But our work is not always as useful to the classroom teacher as it might be.

My hope is that we can all go forth from this meeting today with renewed dedication to improving the quality of educational research in our state, and that we are more proactive about our work with each other. Pick up the phone. Construct some bridges. The kids of North Carolina will be the beneficiaries.