

EPSL | Education Policy Studies Laboratory

Let The Buyer Beware

**An Analysis Of The Social Science Value And Methodological Quality Of Educational Studies
Published By The
Mackinac Center For Public Policy (1990-2001)**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy has emerged as one of the largest and most prolific state-based think tanks in the United States, with a mission of enabling “Michigan citizens and other decision-makers to better evaluate Michigan public policy options ... from a ‘free market’ perspective.” Notwithstanding its description of itself as “non-partisan,” the organization supports market solutions for public policy challenges and opposes government intervention – positions that can be fairly characterized as politically conservative.

The Mackinac Center states it is committed to delivering “the highest quality and most reliable research on Michigan issues.” This report puts that claim to the test. An independent review of the Center’s documents is important because private think tank research often enters the mainstream of public discourse without being rigorously scrutinized.

The authors of this report obtained a list of all Mackinac Center publications on the subject of education from 1990 to May 2001 from the Center’s web-site. The 22 documents described as “studies” were sorted into four categories: Original research, interpretive research, opinion essay, and administrative and legislative guide. Only *Original research* – the collection of empirical data using social science methodology – and *Interpretive research* – primarily secondary analyses of research conducted by others – were included in this evaluation. The focus of this evaluation is the social scientific quality of these 14 documents.

Seven studies were classified as original research and seven as interpretive research. They were evaluated according to established guidelines for social science research. These guidelines are that research be original and important; that it use instruments demonstrated to be reliable and valid; that its outcome measures clearly relate to the variables studied; that the research design fully and unambiguously tests the hypothesis; and that test participants are representative of the population to which generalizations are made.

To rate the quality of the studies, evaluators developed evaluation instruments based on the applicable guidelines. A score of 3 points indicated that a study was judged to have achieved the standard of quality necessary for publication in a peer-reviewed social science research journal. A score of 2 points indicated that the study, in general, adequately met social science research standards. A score of 1 point indicated that a study did not adequately meet social science research standards. An average was then taken of scores on each of the applicable guidelines to derive an overall score for each study. The overall scores for Mackinac Center studies ranged from 1.14 to 3.0.

Findings

The evaluation of education related documents described by the Mackinac Center as studies found that:

- Many of the documents described by the Mackinac Center as “studies” do not represent genuine social science research.
- Overall, the quality of education studies published by the Mackinac Center that can be considered social science research ranges from inadequate to just adequate. Applying the rating system established in this evaluation, studies classified as original research received, on average, an overall quality score of 1.80 on a scale of 1 to 3, with 3 being the highest. Studies classified as interpretive research received, on average, an overall quality score of 2.09.
- Few Mackinac Center sponsored studies are of high quality and very few would be accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal. Of the 14 studies classified as original or interpretive research, only one was unambiguously of high enough quality that it would be considered for publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

Implications and Recommendations

Mackinac Center research is often of low quality and because of this it should be treated with considerable skepticism by the public, policy makers and political leaders. Indeed, much of the work of the Mackinac Center may have caused more confusion than clarity in the public discussion of the issues that it has addressed by systematically ignoring evidence that does not agree with its proposed solutions.

To better serve the public, a process should be established that allows the public, policy makers, and the media to become more discriminating consumers of research, so that political beliefs cannot so easily disguise themselves as social science. To that end, the Michigan legislature should work with education research organizations and provide funds to:

1. Establish a network of education experts with diverse expertise who are willing, in a timely fashion, to write reviews of privately produced documents and to allow those reviews to be distributed to policy makers and the public;
2. Create and maintain a system for monitoring the work produced by private think tanks to facilitate the timely review of reports they issue; and
3. Support a web-site containing a database indicating the social science reliability of the hundreds of studies being published by think tanks and policy centers. This web-site would allow legislators to assess the quality of the research that is being used to urge them to take a particular course of action.

For the citizens of Michigan it is important to understand that research supported by the Mackinac Center is often inadequate as a basis for formulating education policy.