

News from the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University

MICHIGAN THINK TANK'S EDUCATION RESEARCH OFFERS LESS THAN MEETS THE EYE

*Contact: Joseph A. Reaves
Editor/Publisher
Education Policy Studies Laboratory
Arizona State University
Phone (480) 965-1886
Fax: (480) 965-0303
e-mail: epsl@asu.edu*

TEMPE, Ariz. -- A new study examining 11 years worth of education-related research produced by the Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy finds most of it to be of poor quality and unreliable as a guide to sound public education policy.

The study, "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)," concludes that education-related studies produced by the center do not live up to widely recognized standards for social science research.

The study was conducted by Peter W. Cookson, Jr., Ph.D., of Teachers College, Columbia University; Alex Molnar, Ph.D., of the College of Education, Arizona State University; and Katie Embree, Ed.D., of Teachers College, Columbia University. It is being published by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory, located in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the College of Education, Arizona State University.

"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," the study concludes. "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."

Specifically, the study found that:

- Many of the Mackinac Center's documents that it describes as "studies" do not in fact represent genuine social science research.
- The quality of those studies produced by the center that can be considered genuine research ranges from inadequate to barely adequate.
- Of the 14 reports Mackinac Center reports that were examined for the study, only one was unambiguously of high enough quality to be considered for publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

The examination of the Mackinac Center's reports sought to put to the test the center's claims that it is committed to delivering "the highest quality and most reliable research on Michigan issues." Such an independent review is important because private think tank research often enters the mainstream of public discourse without being rigorously scrutinized.

To conduct the review, the researchers examined each document produced by the center and identified a total of 14 that qualified either as original or interpretive research. Each document was then scored against guidelines for social science research developed by the American Psychological Association.

The guidelines require 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.

For each of the applicable guidelines, researchers scored each study on a 3-point scale. A score of 3 points signified a study achieved the standard of quality necessary for publication in a peer-reviewed social science research journal; 2 points indicated that the study adequately met social science research standards; and 1 point indicated that the study fell short of social science research standards. The scores then were averaged to produce an overall score for each of the 14 studies. Original research sponsored by the Mackinac Center scored 1.8 on average, short of the 2-point score indicating adequacy, and interpretive research scored 2.09, slightly more than adequate, but short of the 3-point score signifying that work would meet the standards required for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

The poor quality of these studies is important because of the weight of influence that private think tanks now wield in the discussion of education policy, the authors note. "By flooding the media with 'studies,' organizations such as the Mackinac Center attempt to influence the public agenda," the report's authors write. "When the media pick up these reports and pass the 'evidence' on to readers or viewers uncritically, it undermines the public's ability to understand the issues confronting public education."

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Peter W. Cookson, Jr. teaches at Teachers College, Columbia University and has published widely in the area of school choice and school improvement.

Alex Molnar is Professor and Director of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, College of Education, Arizona State University.

Katie Embree holds an Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration from Teachers College and an MBA in Finance from Seton Hall University.

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at ASU offers high quality analyses of national education policy issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens. It includes the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), which examines public school reform issues and proposals, and the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), which examines trends in commercialism in public schools. The EPSL and its two research units are directed by ASU Professor Alex Molnar.

You can visit the EPSL on the Web at: <http://www.educationanalysis.org>

You can direct further inquiries to Professor Alex Molnar, director of EPSL, or Joseph A. Reaves, editor/publisher of EPSL, at (480) 965-1886