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Written Testimony for U.S. House of Representatives,

Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

Chairman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Dan Lips. I am Head of Policy at Lincoln Network. I respectfully urge the Subcommittee to conduct needed oversight of the Education Department's programs to identify ways to increase the nation's return-on-investment from education research and development (R&D) expenditures. Moreover, I encourage the Subcommittee to prioritize funding for R&D programs that focus on developing ways to improve student learning opportunities, including by fully funding the Biden Administration's proposed \$514 million in funding for the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program.

In 2022, the United States faces significant challenges in elementary and secondary education. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread school closures during the 2020-21 school year have resulted in significant learning losses and a widening of socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps.¹ In addition, renewed great power competition and ongoing technological innovations require the United States to increase the productivity of the K-12 sector for American economic and national security.

Since the 1950s, the United States has authorized and funded federal K-12 education R&D programs aimed at improving STEM education and learning opportunities for American children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As I explained in a recent Lincoln

¹ Dan Goldhaber, et al, "The Consequences of Remote and Hybrid Instruction During the Pandemic," Harvard University (May 2022), <https://cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/5-4.pdf?m=1651690491>.

Network report, the federal government has spent billions on research and development projects with a goal of improving the quality of elementary and secondary education; however, much of this funding went to program evaluations, academic studies, and collecting statistics.²

Decades of empirical studies have revealed ways to boost student learning and make tangible progress toward the nation’s long-standing goal of promoting equal opportunity in K-12 education. Scientific studies have also shed light on education strategies that do not yield the envisioned benefits that policymakers or educators who champion them hoped for. But even some of the most promising or important findings of federally supported K-12 R&D projects have been ignored. Instead, decisions about K-12 policy and pedagogy have been made based on other factors, such as the interests of adults in positions of authority in the nation’s public education institutions.

Despite frequent rhetoric by politicians on both the right and left that they favor evidence-based education reforms and programs, experience shows that prominent Republicans and Democrats have politicized K-12 education research or ignored the findings of empirical research studies when it contradicts their preferences. A review of the history of K-12 research and development funding and programs reveals significant missed opportunities to recalibrate federal and state policy to encourage promising instructional models and improve student learning. For example, a billion-dollar national study of K-12 instructional models singled out a proven strategy for effectively teaching low-income children. Its findings were broadly ignored and forgotten.³

² Dan Lips, “The Case for Strengthening and Reforming Federal Education R&D,” Lincoln Network (March 2022), <https://lincolnpolicy.org/2022/the-case-for-reforming-and-strengthening-federal-education-rd/>.

³ Cathy L. Watkins, “Project Follow Through: A Case Study of Contingencies Influencing Instructional Practices of the Educational Establishment,” Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies (1997), <https://www.behavior.org/resources/901.pdf>.

In 2022, the United States will spend less than \$1 billion on K-12 education R&D initiatives through the Department of Education and National Science Foundation, an amount largely unchanged over the past decade.⁴ As a nation, the United States spent \$864 billion on elementary and secondary education in 2019, or about 4 percent of Gross Domestic Product.⁵

Congress should take action to reinvent and strengthen federal K-12 education research and development. A first step is to review and evaluate, ideally through congressional or nonpartisan oversight, current federal K-12 education R&D programs to understand their value and impact, as well as to provide actionable recommendations for improving K-12 education and addressing current challenges. Second, Congress should prioritize funding for K-12 education research and development activities that create new and effective learning models with real-world benefits for students.

Congress should conduct additional oversight of education R&D programs

Congress should work to strengthen federal K-12 research and development activities by engaging in fact-finding and substantive reviews of current programs and their impact. Additional oversight will establish a common understanding of how current federal funds are being used and what impact they are having in the nation's schools. Specifically, the subcommittee and Congress should direct the Government Accountability Office to review:

⁴ This estimate is based on a calculation of K-12 education R&D activities included in the U.S. Department of Education and National Science Foundation FY2022 budget submissions. See: U.S. Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Summary (2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget22/summary/22summary.pdf>. National Science Foundation, FY2022 Budget Request to Congress (2021), <https://www.nsf.gov/about/budget/fy2022/pdf/fy2022budget.pdf>.

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics (2020), Table 106.10, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_106.10.asp?current=yes.

- The Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) program, which receives \$57 million annually, to better understand how and whether this work is improving student learning.⁶
- The Institute of Education Science’s What Works Clearinghouse to assess to what extent its efforts to highlight and disseminate best practices are informing and improving elementary and secondary education.
- The Education Innovation and Research program to identify to what extent funded projects are having an impact on improving learning opportunities for students.

Establishing a clearer Congressional and public understanding of the value of these federal expenditures and initiatives would be a critical step toward identifying future policy options to strengthen or reform federal education R&D efforts.

Congress should prioritize education R&D programs that focus on development

While additional oversight of existing federal education R&D programs is needed, policymakers do not have the luxury of waiting to shape federal education R&D programs in 2022 and beyond. During the FY2023 appropriations cycle, Congress should focus an increasing share of federal education R&D funding on programs aimed to develop practical applications and models that have a real-world benefit for American students, particularly disadvantaged children.

In 2022, the best existing vehicle for this kind of R&D spending is the Department of Education’s Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program. Through this program, the Department provides funding to “create, develop, implement, replicate, or take to scale

⁶ U.S. Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Summary (2022), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget23/summary/23summary.pdf>.

entrepreneurial, evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to improve student achievement and attainment for high-need students,” and to “rigorously evaluate such innovations.”⁷

The Biden Administration’s proposed \$514 million in funding for the EIR program, or an increase of \$300 million over the enacted FY2022 funding levels.⁸ Providing this funding to support the development and scaling of new evidence-based innovations has the potential to significantly improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students and spur innovation across the K-12 sector. Considering the nation’s long-term fiscal challenges, this additional funding could be offset by spending reductions in IES programs such as the REL program and others that do not appear to be significantly improving academic achievement.

Conclusion

For too long, the federal government’s spending on education R&D has yielded an insufficient return-on-investment. To achieve the nation’s long-standing goal of promoting equal opportunity in American K-12 education, Congress must rethink its approach to R&D spending. Rather than focusing on academic research and program evaluations that have done far too little to improve students’ learning opportunities, Congress should focus future investments on initiatives to develop and scale new learning models that will have a real-world impact. In 2022, Congress should conduct oversight of existing federal education R&D programs and prioritize funding for initiatives that focus on developing new models like the EIR program.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Education Innovation and Research (2022), <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/innovation-early-learning/education-innovation-and-research-eir/>.

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Summary (2022), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget23/summary/23summary.pdf>.