

INTRODUCTION TO THE POLICY BRIEF SPECIAL ISSUE

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As research on education policy has evolved, the most cutting edge research has become less and less accessible to policy makers. Inaccessibility stems from many causes, including the proliferation of policy topics, the diversity of disciplinary interests in education policy, and the existence of technical or methodological hurdles. Academic journals, however, rarely consider accessibility when deciding which manuscripts to publish, but the accessibility of the research may play a very important role in determining whether it actually affects policy.

This journal (EFP) is relatively unusual in that it includes among its objectives “[t]o aid in the deliberations” of “[o]ngoing public policy developments affecting educational institutions and systems” and to promote “understanding of the means by which global resources can be justly and productively engaged to enhance human learning at all levels.” In our role as editors of EFP, we consider the accessibility of research articles when deciding what to publish. Nevertheless, there remains a difficult balancing act between showing the technical merits of new research and making sure that research is accessible. Given this, many of the research articles published in EFP are still likely to be difficult for policy makers to understand. With this in mind, at the founding of the journal an effort was made to make policy briefs a critical component of EFP’s regular content. The intent was for these briefs to provide an explicit avenue through which the lessons from current research are distilled for policy makers. As such, policy briefs were

seen as a bridge between researchers and policy makers, two core elements of the membership of the Association of Education Finance and Policy (AEFP), the journal's sponsoring organization.

Although policy briefs have been an important part of EFP's regular content, no standard procedure has existed for generating new policy briefs. Nor have clear guidelines for prospective authors of policy briefs been established. As a result, although policy briefs have appeared regularly in the journal, not all of these briefs have been equally successful or equally timely. By developing a succinct set of guidelines for policy briefs and by highlighting exemplars of successful briefs, the journal could stimulate the submission of useful and timely policy briefs.

Developing guidelines for policy brief writing became, then, the first goal of this special issue dedicated to the policy brief. While ultimately we will craft formal style guidelines that will be made available to prospective authors of policy briefs, we see the content of this issue as providing both direction to prospective authors and examples of policy brief writing for scholars in the education finance and policy community. Thus, in this introduction we are not going to follow the traditional model of a special issue introduction and summarize the content of the included articles. Instead, our intent here is to highlight the lessons we think this issue offers to those interested in reading and writing policy briefs on topics in education finance and policy.

The special issue begins with two articles designed to assist policy makers and researchers hoping to generate briefs that will directly influence the behavior of policy makers. The first article, by Deborah Cunningham and Jim Wyckoff, reviews the history of New York's Education Finance Research Consortium (EFRC), a long-running collaboration between the New York State Department of Education and researchers in education finance and policy. The history of the EFRC helps highlight efforts that researchers and policy makers can take to create an environment in which briefs that will serve the often disparate needs of researchers and policy makers will be written. The second article, by Carrie Conaway, complements the Cunningham and Wyckoff piece by offering a policy maker's perspective on not just how to choose topics that will be of interest to policy makers but also on how to write and market the briefs so as to have the largest possible impact on public policy.

The initial two articles are followed by nine policy briefs that offer a variety of examples of how to craft briefs that bridge the divide between researchers and policy makers. Although the briefs vary considerably in their focus, certain common themes offer clear guidance to prospective brief authors. First, for a brief to be of value to its readership, its focus needs to be narrow. Briefs that attempt to cover broad topics risk losing the attention of their readers before critical lessons can be distilled. Second, briefs should not attempt to provide an

exhaustive review of the relevant literature. Briefs are not academic literature reviews. Targeted summaries of the relevant literature are sufficient to allow the authors of the brief to support the recommendations they want to make.

In this issue, some of the briefs use the targeted literature review as the basis for their recommendations to policy makers. Examples of this style of brief are those of Graves, McMullen, and Rouse; Dhuey and Lipscomb; Rice; and Hillman and Orians. Other briefs in this issue start with the targeted literature review but then draw upon a particular case to offer empirical examples that buttress the argument for the policy recommendations that follow. Examples of this style of brief include those of Brewer, Killeen, and Welsh; Baker et al.; and Conger and Chellman. Still others of the briefs are very nontraditional in their structure, offering appropriate models to only a limited set of potential authors. For example, Corcoran and Goldhaber offer an example of a brief that can highlight the consensus in a literature while also making clear to policy makers why that consensus has not led to uniform policy recommendations from the researchers working in that literature. The brief of Page et al. offers two examples of briefs that, although not of the style that appear in EFP, can be of immense value to policy makers because they hold true to several of the lessons that come out of the Conaway paper—they focus on topics of immediate interest to policy makers, they use data drawn from the backyards of those policy makers, they offer well-supported and actionable conclusions, and they explicitly reach out to the relevant policy makers.

The nontraditional nature of this final brief helps to draw out a second goal of this special issue, that is, to provide a resource for instructors of undergraduate and graduate courses with a partial or total focus on education policy. We certainly expect that some of these briefs will find their way on the syllabi of undergraduate and graduate courses that touch on education policy. But we hope that the briefs will also offer models to students who are asked to craft their own policy briefs. Further, the EFP style guidelines for policy brief writing should assist students in practicing how to translate complex concepts, methods, and findings for more diverse audiences than the academic community. Knowing both what traditional and nontraditional briefs look like will help students write briefs that are appropriate for their contexts.

Many of the briefs in this issue also help highlight one reality of policy making: Policy making is necessarily constrained by the best available information. The briefs of Conger and Chellman and Graves, McMullen, and Rouse offer nice examples of this reality. As a result, even the best briefs should not be viewed as the final word in many policy areas. Good briefs should not only provide direction to policy makers but they should also make clear the gaps in our knowledge. The existence of such gaps should not prevent authors of

briefs from providing direction to policy makers. As Conaway notes, “where the evidence merits, authors of policy briefs should not be afraid to draw conclusions; where the evidence does not support a conclusion, they should say so” (Conaway 2013, p. 295). And, as the gaps in our knowledge are filled and additional conclusions become supportable, we hope that new policy briefs will be written to provide better guidance to those in the policy realm.

Finally, we cannot help but conclude by highlighting one additional goal of this issue. By further emphasizing the centrality of the policy brief for EFP, we expect this special issue will stimulate the submission of strong policy briefs. This will serve to strengthen the journal’s ability to disseminate to policy makers the lessons from cutting edge research. Because, ultimately, the journal must serve the mission of AEFPP, which is “to promote understanding of means by which resources are generated, distributed, and used to enhance human learning.” By encouraging both cutting-edge research and thoughtful dissemination of the lessons of that research through carefully crafted policy briefs, the journal can ensure this mission is accomplished.