

ROLE OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH¹

Mitchell Wade
Florida State Department of Education

The role that any organization should play can always be defined more eloquently by someone outside that organization. An individual within an organization, while he may recognize the role he should be playing, is apt to become defensive rather than definitive. In other words, it is easier to tell them what they should be doing than it is to define what we should be doing without becoming involved in excuses as to why we aren't doing it as well as we should.

I am certain that any one of you could tell me in detail what the State Department of Education should be doing--but isn't doing--in the field of educational research.

Ever since Mr. Bailey told Dr. Kirby how honored I would be to talk with you tonight I have been wondering what I could say to an informed group such as this that might be an improvement over silence. I am going to talk about the research role of state departments in general--but with our own State Department in mind.

Two factors practically force any state department of education into a position of educational leadership, however reluctant it may be to assume this position.

First, by constitution and by law, public education is a State function. At least it still was earlier this week. I haven't heard anything out of Washington in the last few days and it all may be changed by now. The Florida Legislature has delegated to the State Superintendent, and through him to the State Department of Education, responsibility for supervising and regulating the public school system. Obviously, this carries with it responsibility for improving education.

Second, the State Department of Education occupies a position that brings it into direct contact with all phases of public education in the State. It is the focal point, or bottleneck as you may prefer to call it, through which money

¹An address delivered at the ninth annual FERA testing conference, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, January 29, 1965.

passes on the way to the counties, where most regulations originate, and where most reports terminate. Naturally the State Department is responsible for all shortcomings and failures of the State educational system.

Thus we see that the State Department of Education has both a legal and a logical responsibility for the State's educational program. Concern with educational research is essential if this responsibility is to result in educational progress and not become a drag on progress through restrictive regulation and unimaginative leadership.

Typically, some amount of so-called research has always been carried out in state departments of education. It may have been limited to the collection, analyses, and interpretation of routine data in order to meet regulatory and legal functions; or, it may have been special projects conducted in a particular field of specialization by individual members of the state department staff.

Within recent years, more and more state departments have established research units or divisions. The form of organization and assigned responsibilities varies greatly from state to state. Frequently, the research section has other responsibilities as implied in titles such as: "Research and Statistics," "Research and Publications," "Research and Planning," and "Research and Administration."

In some cases a research unit is formed simply by changing titles of existing staff members, or by moving them from one budget to another, without adding personnel with the required research skills or changing orientation. In such cases, the research unit may find it necessary to continue to devote most of its energies to administrative functions far removed from research activities. True, these administrative functions may be essential to the operation of the department.

At least this is a step in the right direction. It is a recognition that a state department of education does have a responsibility for educational research. It does provide a framework within which a research unit may develop. This is a necessary step before personnel and financing can be made available.

Now to get back to the subject.

The identification of problems needing basic research has been left largely in the hands of those conducting the research. There should be adequate communication between

practitioners and researchers as to problems most in need of attention. The state department is in position to play an important role in the identification of such problems and in directing the attention of researchers to these problems.

There is no guarantee that the findings of basic research will soon, if ever, find their way into the public schools. Research conducted under laboratory conditions needs to be tried out in the field, evaluated, and adapted for general use. Therefore, we come to a second role of the state department in educational research--the bridging of the gap between basic research and educational practice, the application and testing of the results of basic research.

Probably the most neglected area of educational research today is the interpretation of research reports--translation, if you please. What does it say? And I am not downgrading the practitioners or being disrespectful to the professionals. Researchers write for other researchers using the language of research. Much of the writing simply is unintelligible to those who are not members of the club. The real substance--the guts of the research may be lost in a maze of statistical techniques, scholarly references, and technical terms. A role of research in the state department, as I see it, is to cut through this haze so necessary for academic respectability and produce clear, plain summaries that can serve as blueprints for action and application and to see that these summaries reach those who can use them.

I do not see the actual conduct of any great amount of basic research as a primary role of state departments of education. The range of skills and abilities and the time needed for basic research is too great to expect to be found in state departments. I feel that basic research lies more in the province of the university where sophisticated skills can be found and where, hopefully, with the help of outside funding, time can be made available.

On the other hand, there is another type of research activity, generally neglected, that has considerable potential. I am thinking here of the limited but related research activities, the bits and pieces of research, that can be carried out at the county, school, and classroom level. Technical guidance is needed, certainly, to help in research design, interpretation, and reporting. We have hundreds of people in our profession here in Florida who are capable of carrying out research projects at the operating level as a part of their regular job responsibility with little or no extra cost. Encouragement and some technical assistance is needed--mostly encouragement. This should be provided by

state department of education personnel or by university personnel under some sort of contractual or cooperative arrangement. This is not university research and local researchers would not be exploited as a tool to get legwork done cheaply.

It is difficult to stir up much enthusiasm for this type of local research among "Capital R" researchers. No research grants and very little in the way of professional recognition is involved. I may be way off-base in regards to the potential of this type of research. All of us recognize and pay lip-service to the need for bringing research closer to the operating level of the local school. I can think of no better way of doing this than by making researchers out of the people at the operating level. This eliminates the selling job otherwise needed when new information has to filter down from the university, through the state department, through the county, and through the principal to the teacher.

As pointed out earlier, all state departments conduct research to some degree in the course of their regular operation. I refer here to the bread-and-butter studies and evaluations concerned with administrative and regulatory responsibilities. While I may be using the term "Research" loosely here, these informal studies are an important aid in educational decision making. On the outcomes of such studies may hang the allocation of millions of dollars or the working regulations of thousands of teachers and millions of pupils.

Let's summarize. The role of the state department involves:

1. The systematic identification of problems needing to be researched.
2. Testing and evaluating basic research findings under normal operating conditions.
3. The interpretation and dissemination of research findings.
4. Research activities and encouragement of research at the local school level.
5. The conduct of studies and evaluations for administrative decision making within the state department.

I know that you can think of many more functions--but these are enough to keep us busy several years to come.