

# Democracy and Education

## What School Board Candidates Need to Know About: **What Works in Education**

### Overview

For the past few decades, the federal government has encouraged educators, mostly in exchange for grants, to adopt “scientifically based” or “evidence-based” programs and teaching methods.

This is part of a recognition that for most of education’s history, teachers and other educators operated solely on training and tradition—what could be called craft knowledge. Although craft knowledge was and remains valuable, it doesn’t always serve all children well.

A common comparison was made to the field of medicine. Before medicine adopted standards for evidence-based practice, doctors often had a great deal of practical knowledge about treating certain ailments. But they had so few ways of systematically evaluating what works that ineffective practices like bloodletting continued for centuries. After scientific standards for research were adopted and standards of care were adopted, doctors became able to prevent and effectively treat a wider array of ailments.

Today a huge education research industry is dedicated to understanding what works in teaching and learning. And it has provided us with some solid information that we didn’t have before. Here’s one small example: For years many educators believed that children who didn’t learn to read in first grade didn’t need any extra help. They told parents that children learn at different rates and their children would catch up to their peers. And sometimes children did catch up. But too often children were left to struggle on their own until, in third or fourth grade, many were referred to special education classes. Extensive research by, among others, [Jack Fletcher](#) at The University of Houston has demonstrated that not only do children rarely catch up when allowed to languish in that way, but that early intervention when children begin to have difficulties is highly effective at helping children learn to read.

Several high-quality resources provide information about those kinds of evidence-based practices as well as programs. But it is important to note that initial hopes that research could establish the most effective programs, practices, and policies that “work” under all circumstances have proven elusive. Programs found to be effective in one setting are ineffective elsewhere; practices that work one year don’t always work the next. Context is important, as are the knowledge and skill of the practitioners involved.

And there is another question. It isn’t enough to ask “What works?” without being very clear about what we want schools to do. All societies have ways of imparting knowledge and skills to young people to prepare them for their future work and personal lives. Schools in democracies not only take on that task but an even more complex one: to help students become educated citizens. To do that, it is not enough to simply teach children to read and multiply; students must learn a great deal of science and history and to

be acquainted with a range of human thought as expressed through literature and the arts so that they can play active roles in shaping issues and helping our country become “a more perfect union.”

But the fact is that *how* people learn is a complicated subject and what we know about how to organize instruction around how people learn is limited. For school board candidates and members, it is important to be able to ask probing questions of professional educators about the programs and practices they use. If they cite a single study, especially one conducted by individuals with a stake in the results, be skeptical. Does the study measure the outcomes you care about? Is it situated in a similar context to your district? Does it evaluate the program or practice in a way that provides compelling evidence that if your district implemented it, you could expect to see improvement?

If there isn't an evidence base, or the research isn't compelling, that doesn't mean that educators shouldn't try something new, as long as they are: clear as to the purpose; know how they will measure its effect and evaluate whether it is doing what it was supposed to do; and be willing to change it or jettison it if it doesn't have the hoped-for results.

**Note: Although school board members do not choose programs or decide on teaching methods, they need to ask educators good questions about what evidence they are using in making decisions.**

## Questions to Ask in Your School District

**Ask district officials** what evidence or research they rely on when they choose programs, curricula, or teaching methods. If they cite a single study, ask if it represents the consensus of research. How do they monitor success and failure? **Ask teachers and principals** if they understand the research behind the programs or teaching practices they have been asked to put in place. Do they make sense? Do they fit with educators' experience? Are teachers gathering data to be able to evaluate them?

### For More Information:

Cognitive scientist Dan Willingham has written extensively on what we know about how people learn and how that knowledge can inform educators. One very readable book is particularly useful in this context: [When Can You Trust the Experts?: How to Tell Good Science from Bad in Education](#). He also has a number of short explanatory videos. One helpful one is: [Is Teaching an Art or a Science?](#)

Dan Willingham also collaborated on a [very nice summary](#) of what we know about learning from cognitive science and the implications of that knowledge for the classroom with [Deans for Impact](#).

The U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Educational Studies has a series of [Practice Guides](#) on a variety of topics that represent the consensus view of researchers on what constitutes good practice.

The Annenberg Center at Brown University hosts [Ed Research for Recovery](#), which brings together consensus views on how to help schools recover from COVID disruptions.

Johns Hopkins University hosts [Evidence for ESSA](#), which provides information about whether programs and curricula meet standards of evidence required by the latest iteration of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESSA.

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