Responses from the Education and Policy Communities

The Committee on Learning Research and Educational Practice invited members of the teacher, administrator, policy, and research communities to come together for the purpose of providing feedback on How People Learn and discussing ideas regarding the potential for, and the barriers to, bridging research and practice. The December 1998 conference provided exposure to the report and an opportunity for panel members, as well as members of a diverse audience, to comment. The smaller January 1999 workshop provided the opportunity for groups of teachers, education administrators and policy makers, teacher educators, and researchers to suggest ideas regarding the research and development that is required to link the findings in How People Learn to classroom practice. They also noted areas in which additional research on learning is required. In what follows, we highlight many of the responses the committee heard. More specific ideas regarding research and development are incorporated into the agenda in Chapter 4.

RESPONSES FROM THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY

The teachers involved in the conference and workshop came from schools that were both urban and suburban, public and private. They serve children from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds (see Appendix A for the list of participants). Collectively, they represent vast experience in teaching, and some now serve, or have served in the past, as school administrators. They uniformly agreed that How People Learn provides knowledge that is impor-
tant and relevant for classroom teaching and that is not now reflected in most teaching practice. But they also agreed that it was only a start. They provided a number of suggestions for next steps.

- **Research findings need to be organized and communicated to teachers and other educators in a way that is easy to comprehend and to integrate into their current thinking.** To accomplish this, the language and examples used in communicating research ideas must be familiar.

- **The model of how people learn needs to be presented as a standard, stable model** that rests on solid research that will not alter dramatically in the 5 or 10 years it will take to implement. The report, *How People Learn*, is seen as a start in the direction of building such a model of human learning. But more needs to be done. The model needs to make sense of areas in which current practice is effective, it must ring true to the everyday experience of teachers, and it must suggest changes to current practice that is ineffective. It must allow practitioners to use the model to guide solutions to their problems, not merely to explain successes after they occur.

- **Teachers need curriculum materials and support to adopt new teaching methods.** A clear discussion of how people learn will not be adequate to influence teacher practice. Teachers need the research to be elaborated in the form of many examples that are relevant to their own teaching and in the form of curricula that they can use in their classrooms. There is consensus among many of the educators that simply providing a curriculum, however exemplary, is not enough. Teachers need visual models of practice, and support over an extended period of time as they attempt to use the curriculum. They need to have questions answered, and they need feedback when what they observe is different from what they expect.

- **Collaboration between teachers and researchers will require a change in the relationship between the two groups.** To achieve more fluid communication between those who teach and those who do research, a level of trust must be in place that does not currently exist. Teachers often feel that researchers are unaware of the realities of classroom teaching, and that research does not address the questions that they need to have answered. If teachers are to buy into research-based changes in teaching, they must be part of a collaborative effort that makes use of their knowledge and insights and that responds to their needs. If they are invested in a research effort from the beginning, they will be more open to its results.

- **Teachers need time and incentives to reflect on their practice, as well as opportunities to use that time to learn about new research**
and curricula. There appears to be widespread consensus among educators that time limitations are an enormous barrier to bridging research and practice. Teachers’ days are so tightly scheduled that they barely have adequate time to think about their lessons for the next day. Many have too little time to reflect on their own practice and to engage in reflective dialogue with their colleagues. Fewer still have the additional time and motivation to investigate relevant research. If that is to change, time outside the classroom needs to be scheduled into a teachers’ work week and work year.

- **For teachers to change their practice, they need professional development opportunities that are in-depth and sustained.** In the words of one workshop participant, a one-shot workshop simplifies complex ideas until they become “meaningless mantras sold as snake oil.” Many of the learning opportunities provided for teachers and other professionals violate the principles for optimizing learning. Teachers need opportunities to be involved in sustained learning, through teaching that models the methods that they are being urged to adopt. Again, time must be scheduled for teachers to engage in ongoing opportunities to learn. And arrangements with those who provide professional development opportunities must incorporate ongoing opportunities for contact between those who teach the professional development courses and their teacher-participants.

- **The communities that interact with teachers on a regular basis, including parents and administrators, must be persuaded of the value of change.** When educational practices change, parents who had a very different type of education—particularly if that education was successful—will be skeptical. When parents are dissatisfied, they take their complaints to administrators. For the teacher to have the freedom to use research-based ideas in classrooms, those ideas need to be effectively and persuasively communicated to parents and administrators.

- **Changing teaching practices will require an alignment with assessment practices.** Both parents and administrators tend to judge the value of new initiatives in terms of student achievement as measured by test scores. For parents and administrators to support research-based curricula, success in producing measurable achievement must be demonstrated.

**RESPONSES FROM THE POLICY COMMUNITY**

Those from the policy community who participated in the conference and workshop were a diverse group from the national, state, and school district levels of government. The ideas of this group were as diverse as their affiliations. If there was a common theme in this group at all, it was
that a report like *How People Learn* will not have an impact on education policy unless its messages are communicated effectively for this audience. They made varied suggestions for next steps.

- **For research to be useful in policy arenas, it must emphasize the link between research findings and policies that address the practical issues of education.** Policy makers are concerned with the skills and competencies required for young people to succeed in (school or work) and to be active participants in their communities. Linking research findings to such goals will enhance their value to policy makers. The more closely research findings focus on the needs of the various communities served by the education system, the more useful those findings will be to the legislative process.

- **Presentations of education research must emphasize the scientific basis of the findings.** Deep skepticism is expressed by elected officials that there is much that is solid in the field of education research; many consider the field “soft” or “fluffy.” The difference in levels of funding between the National Institutes of Health and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement reflects a judgment by policy makers regarding the scientific basis of the work these agencies undertake. If policy makers can be persuaded of the scientific basis of education research, the gap between spending on health research and on education research might be narrowed.

- **It would be useful to policy makers to highlight examples of education success stories that use research-based innovations.** Policy makers want to do the right thing for the education system, but they are uncertain as to what that right thing might be. Examples of successes that are research based and focused on student achievement are very valuable and influential in policy arenas.

- **Agreement between researchers and the education community on the needed changes must come first.** The messages of the report are primarily directed to the community of educators and teacher trainers. If these communities can agree among themselves and with education researchers on the changes that need to take place, then these agreements can be reflected in public policy. If such agreement is achieved, the high rate of teacher turnover expected in the years ahead will provide an opportunity for major change to be channeled through newly trained teachers.

- **The public must be educated and engaged.** For the findings from *How People Learn* to have an impact on education policy, the public needs to understand the significance of the findings, what they mean in the context of their own experiences and for their children, and how schools and school
systems can realistically respond to the findings. If the public understands these issues, then they can influence their elected officials to think accordingly.

- **Researchers must communicate with policy makers more effectively.** To be useful to policy makers, research findings should be presented in a form that is brief, to the point, and jargon free. It must be targeted to specific policy audiences. School superintendents, state legislators, governors, and federal policy makers each have separate policy responsibilities. Each needs to have a brief description of key research findings as they relate to their area of concern. And since policy making tends to be reactive, learning opportunities need to be provided at opportune moments. They should not be limited to written materials, with which policy makers are inundated, but should include direct engagement in dialogue.