

BROOKINGS PAPERS ON EDUCATION POLICY: 2005

Can the Federal Government Improve Education Research?

Brian Jacob and Jens Ludwig

Will recent federal policy changes succeed in improving the quality of education policy research? One explanation for the limited supply to date of high-quality evaluation evidence in education is limited demand, owing perhaps, in part, to market failure for both education outcomes and education research. In the market for education outcomes, the public seems to have limited information about school performance, and educators thus face limited incentives to improve performance. In the market for education research, consumers face information problems that make it difficult to determine the quality of the research “product.” Even for research producers, information about the costs of high-quality research designs (such as randomized or natural experiments) is more readily available than information about the benefits, which may help explain why such methods are not more common. The government’s new Institute of Education Sciences seeks to directly increase the supply of experimental evidence, clearly a step in the right direction. But more sweeping changes in education research may ultimately arise from efforts to stimulate the demand for high-quality education research and solve the information problems facing both consumers and producers in the research market. The success of federal policies in this last regard is likely to require better data on the benefits and costs of different research designs, particularly from research on the conditions under which nonexperimental research designs can replicate experimental findings.