



The Latest Research

Education is such a sprawling, perennially high-profile topic that it should come as no surprise that a very large research industry is devoted to examining its every dimension and nuance. Many political scientists, economists, and sociologists study education issues, as do many more researchers from exclusively education-based disciplines such as educational psychology—not to mention the large number of scholars in university teaching colleges and departments who not only train educators but also conduct studies on everything from curricular development to best practices in educational administration. Entire academic journals are devoted to research in education (e.g., *American Journal of Education*, *American Educational Research Journal*). Given this, it is all but impossible for us to summarize here anything but a narrow slice of the latest education research.

That said, one of the more interesting developments in the latest research is the current direction of debates over the effectiveness of the market-based reforms that have provided much of the intellectual firepower behind the standards and accountability movement discussed in this chapter. These reforms—most of which are

discussed above—include such things as the strong focus on standardized testing and the introduction of competition through charter schools and vouchers. For more than 20 years, dueling studies have claimed to provide evidence to support or contradict the efficacy of such reforms. While a lot of that continues, over the past half-decade or so, scholars have been increasingly paying attention to what the mixed messages of all this research mean. Do the inconsistent reports on the efficacy of these reforms, or the lack thereof, mean that the evidence on the impacts is not clear, even though some of the reforms have been in place for decades? Does it mean that the studies are, consciously or unconsciously, being conducted to serve political agendas rather than to get at objective assessments of what works and what does not? Are the studies' results simply being cherry-picked by key players in the reform debate who ignore contradicting evidence and the often careful caveats that study authors place on the interpretation of their findings? Given the high stakes involved for state governments, which have often invested heavily in these reforms, these are important questions. Below we discuss some representative

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