

## The Spencer Foundation: More Effectively Planning Work by Assessing the Impact of Education Research

The Spencer Foundation was founded to “investigate ways in which education, broadly conceived, can be improved around the world.” Spencer has funded many research projects that have investigated various topics in education. During the past several years, the Foundation has become quite interested in the topic of grant effectiveness, and particularly why some research influences policy and practice more than other research of equally high quality. It quickly realized that it was exploring a complex issue – one that had many variables contributing to the explanation of “influence.” However, Spencer also believed that learning more about “influence” would help the Foundation better plan its work going forward.

Spencer set out to investigate what types of research (Spencer and non-Spencer) were most influential to educational policy and practice. The Foundation was interested in whether there were certain types of research that have a proven “track record” of positively influencing educational practice. Spencer wanted to understand this, as well as answers to several other questions such as what mechanisms practitioners and policy makers use to learn about good research. While Spencer is aware of the considerable time it often takes for research to impact policy, the foundation values learning about how research findings are used so that it can better plan its own work and because the information could be valuable to the field at large. With a better understanding of how influence evolves, the foundation can facilitate the communication of important findings and expedite the impact of research. Mary Cahillane, its CFO notes that: “Our due diligence can be better informed by understanding what factors increase the probability that our funded research will influence and improve educational policies and practices.”



The information-gathering process began with Spencer sending letters and a brief survey to researchers, policy makers, and practitioners in education. The survey asked scholars to provide examples of research, whether Spencer-funded or not, that had made an impact on education practice or policy. Survey respondents were then asked for a brief description of the impact and reasons why the research was especially influential. Spencer defined impact and influence broadly, whether as increased educational attainment, implementation of more effective teaching methods, a shift in a conceptual paradigm, or a change in public policy. While Spencer does not believe that there are formulas for influential research, understanding broad themes related to influential research can be helpful to planning work that will ultimately have a greater chance of improving education.

Responses from the field yielded some important themes. Specifically, the field articulated that education had benefited from research that was relevant, well-designed, longitudinal and experimental in nature, and had implementation recommendations.

Research that organized data into useful constructs and allowed people to make sense of the findings quickly was also highly valued. In addition, scholars commented about the barriers to effective research, noting the need for research standards, data availability, more focus on how and why certain interventions worked, rather than simply whether or not a particular approach worked, and the importance of multi-disciplinary research due to the complexity of the issues.

Respondents to the survey also highlighted the issue of communication, pointing out that the results of many “influential” studies were clearly communicated by the academic community and disseminated to broader audiences who were interested in education. This observation helped the foundation understand that more emphasis was needed on communicating research to a broader community, including journalists, high-level practitioners, and policy organizations. To respond to this need, the foundation organized the Spencer Forum in 2006 to place more focus on disseminating and interpreting research results to policymakers, practitioners, and journalists.

In addition to the survey, the foundation also reviewed its “completed grant practices” (pilot study with a Program Director) to determine what types of information it can and should track to measure the quality and influence of its funded research. While the foundation has always utilized external reviews, citations, and publications as indicators of quality and influence, the pilot study showed the value of conducting reviews in a more systematic way. While no one indicator can measure the elusive variable called influence, a review of a variety of indicators can provide a broader-based and more complete picture of the importance or potential importance of various research findings. The foundation will also more proactively discuss research findings from its completed grants to determine what the Spencer Forum should highlight in its agenda.

In summary, Spencer used low-cost approaches – surveys, review of easily accessible data (citations and publications), and review of its internal practices – to develop insights about “influence.” This information has informed how it does its work today and will continue to do so in the future.

## The Spencer Foundation

- Located in Chicago, IL, the Spencer Foundation aims to investigate ways in which education can be improved around the world
- Focused on supporting high-quality investigation of education through research
- \$451 million in assets in 2006
- \$13.3 million in grants in 2006
- 21 full time staff

