

Q&A With Director Holly Jacobson

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning Joins WestEd

The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, a respected nonpartisan organization best known for its annual report examining the status of teaching in California, became part of WestEd in 2011, and Holly Jacobson became the Center's new Director.

Prior to leading the Center, Jacobson had spent nearly two decades with the California School Boards Association (CSBA), most recently as its Assistant Executive Director for Leadership Development and Policy Analysis. In that role, she oversaw much of CSBA's policy agenda, including teacher quality, curricula, standards, assessment, accountability, preschool, and charter schools.

R&D Alert recently spoke with Holly Jacobson about the focus and future plans of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd.

Q: You most recently worked with California school boards. How does that role prepare you for your new job?

A: While I have been able to see how best practices happen at the local level, I also was focused on trying to provide insight and direction on state policy, particularly accountability and assessment issues. I understand that state policy is not always well conceived because legislators are too far removed from the classroom. It's the same issue that people raise with the federal government and accountability: that the federal government can't possibly be thinking of every scenario. So I think there are ways to help support local districts and local policy with sound data that will help inform their practices.

Q: Do you see your role as bringing those parties together?

A: I do. Collaboration is a primary focus for the Center, which for 15 years has been providing research to policymakers to help strengthen the teacher workforce in California.

Q: What does it mean to strengthen the teaching force? What goes into that?

A: Well, it's really looking at the entire spectrum, from how they're prepared through their teacher credentialing program in higher education, how they're assigned in the classroom, and how they're supported in their work through professional development. For example, in this past year's research, we looked at the principal's role in supporting teachers, and we've looked at specific issues related to the teaching profession. One of our concerns has been science education. We recently released a report about how well prepared teachers are to teach science in the elementary grades.

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Q: Why the focus on science?

A: Despite the call for STEM-related [science, technology, engineering, and math] priorities in California and nationally, many teachers at the elementary grades do not have a high level of comfort or deep background in science. Also, because of accountability measures focusing almost exclusively on language arts and math, we wanted to know how that has affected science instruction in the elementary grades. And sure enough, teachers overwhelmingly feel underprepared to teach science. We found that 85 percent of elementary teachers have received no professional development in science in the last three years.

Q: What do you hope the report will achieve?

A: We're hoping policymakers will think about what broader policies can reverse the current trends in science. First, what can be done to ensure that accountability systems don't undermine the goal of providing comprehensive science education for all students? We also think that state and local districts need to be thinking about the kind of professional development that teachers need in science. And as we think about science instruction that is consistent with the National Research Council's framework, which calls for kids to engage in the practice of science and to reason scientifically, that will require a deep understanding of science content plus different strategies for teaching science.

Q: The report finds broad support for better science education training and resources, but this comes at a time of more limited spending for education. How do you persuade policymakers to provide more?

A: I think that policymakers haven't had a lot of pressure to provide resources for science. Obviously, given diminished resources, that's problematic. But time is a resource that doesn't necessarily require a lot of money. Just expanding the amount of time that teachers spend providing instruction in science would be helpful. We found that 40 percent of elementary teachers spend 60 minutes or less per week on science.

Q: How will WestEd's resources and expertise help the Center's work?

A: WestEd has considerable expertise in the STEM arena. NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] is going to come out with its technology and engineering assessment in 2014, offering the Center an opportunity to begin conversations about teacher readiness to deliver technology and engineering content. Within WestEd, our Center can help scale up work in support of teachers and inform policymakers. Together we hope to have a stronger voice on teacher issues at the state level. WestEd has done so much to spread effective practices in classrooms, and, within WestEd, we can now ensure such practices get scaled up on a district and state level.

WestEd also brings tremendous intellectual capacity. It's a phenomenal organization with deep expertise in both research and practice — including professional development and instruction. I think the Center, with our policy expertise, can help spread effective practices even further. And with WestEd's national reach, there are opportunities for the Center to expand beyond California and link to what's happening in other states.

Q: Do you envision a broader reach for the Center?

A: That just came up in relation to the science report. There was a lot of curiosity from the media about how California compared to the rest of the country in terms of the quality and quantity of science instruction. We're looking now at the Common Core Standards to see how well California teachers may be able to address them and what kind of professional development they might need. This might be an opportunity to look at what's happening in other states as well.

Q: Let's talk a bit about media and communications and your role in informing policy. In many cases you've been the deliverer of bad news, such as the report about the scientific literacy gap. Is it possible to be both a messenger and an advocate? Does it set you up as a critic?

A: I think that rather than being critics, our role is to report on what exists. I'm very proud that the Center provides information that hasn't been manipulated by any particular point of view. Sometimes the news isn't good. But it's always better to have the facts and try to make the facts better over time than to not know at all.

Q: Can you say more about how you do your work?

A: We do pure research that involves survey collections. We do case studies. We've recently started doing focus groups. We did a variety of public opinion work to set the stage for the science report. We convene groups of policymakers and practitioners to help us better understand the implications of our research. For the yearly Teaching and California's Future report, we assemble a very large group that includes state-level policy staff, district leaders, teachers, principals, and superintendents. It's a wonderful way for us to learn from the various perspectives, from the classroom all the way up to state policy leaders. That helps us think through how we will organize and report the data.

The Center's role is also to make sure everyone is aware of the data. We do that in a strategic way in communicating with policymakers on a regular basis, but also communicating with key stakeholder groups and the media. For example, the science report: We never had data about time spent on science instruction. Now we know that 40 percent of elementary teachers spend less than an hour per week on science instruction. People knew there was a problem but they couldn't quantify it previously.

We also prime the pump. Well in advance of the report's release, we talk about the findings with policymakers who might be interviewed by the media so they can have their communication arms ready to respond. The last thing you want is for someone to say, "I haven't read the report yet so I can't comment." That doesn't create energy about our research findings. And when there's energy behind the findings, policymakers are more likely to take action.

Q: So you need to keep them informed all the way through?

A: Exactly, about the good, the bad, and the ugly. Whatever it is, we're letting them know so that they can be prepared.



Q: Your work is really a lot about relationships.

A: Absolutely. It's very important, though, even beyond relationships, that the data source is one that people trust. It's essential that we be impartial and that we tell the full, accurate story – not one that has been manipulated.

For more information about the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd, contact Holly Jacobson at 916.492.4092 or [hjacobson@WestEd.org](mailto:hjacobs@WestEd.org).