Nonprofit Organizations and the Promotion of
Evidence-Based Practice in Education

Mark A. Smylie
University of Illinois at Chicago

and

Thomas B. Corcoran
Center for Policy Research in Education
University of Pennsylvania

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This paper examines the prospects of nonprofit organizations to promote evidence-based practice in schools and school systems. It presents an overview of the characteristics and behavior of nonprofit organizations as well as trends in the nonprofit sector and then explores their implications for the ability of nonprofits to promote evidence-based practice. The paper concludes with some general observations about the likelihood that nonprofit organizations will act as effective agents of evidence-based practice and the conditions under which they are most likely to be successful.

We drew upon several literatures to shape and support our analysis. The first concerns the characteristics and behaviors of nonprofit organizations. The second concerns trends and issues in the nonprofit sector. These literatures consist largely of descriptive, non-analytical, and promotional works. We have looked past these works to empirically and theoretically-based reviews and syntheses and to a relatively small number of reports of original empirical research. In addition to these literatures, we looked to the literature on intermediary organizations—many of which are non-profits— and the factors associated with their effectiveness working in education and in other areas of human service provision. The literature on intermediaries was used to provide additional insight into issues that might shape the work of nonprofits in promoting evidence-based practice in schools. To supplement these literatures, we identified several examples of nonprofit organizations working with schools that illustrate different aspects of our analysis. Some examples come from published reports. Others are drawn from our own observations and experiences working at the state and local levels. Because of

the varied nature of our "evidence," our findings and conclusions are necessarily speculative and provisional. They may best be considered propositions for discussion and study.

Promoting Evidence-Based Practice

We begin with a discussion of what evidence-based practice means to us and what we think is required to promote it. The definition and demands of evidence-based practice have important implications for understanding the likelihood that nonprofit organizations, indeed any type of organization, will be able to promote it effectively.

The Meaning of Evidence-Based Practice

In education, decisions about the design or adoption of improvement initiatives and about instructional practices typically have not been based on careful reviews of evidence of effectiveness. Rather it has been commonplace for education innovations and instructional decisions to be justified on the basis of their logic, their consistency with particular philosophies or value systems, past practice, anecdotal and promotional stories—"gee-whiz reports" as Slavin (1989) calls them—provided by users, or simply the "good word" of developers. Where evidence has been considered, it has been considered in several different ways. Most typical have been selective appeals to literature that justifies the strategies being pursued. Often these justifications have been based on selected polemics, normative essays, or theoretical arguments rather than on original empirical evidence. However, organizations citing such sources typically have referred to them indiscriminately as "research." When empirical evidence has been examined, decision-makers have often relied on a single study or the work of a particular researcher rather than examining the larger body of evidence bearing on their design

decisions. Another approach to decision-making has relied heavily on the clinical experiences and perceptions of practicing educators. Here, indicators such as levels of use, teacher satisfaction, professional opinion, and appeals to experts (e.g., accomplished teachers) have been used to justify a program or practice.

A third approach consists of the use of systematic reviews and syntheses of literature to guide the design or adoption of strategies or programs. Unfortunately, this approach has not been widely used, perhaps because it has often been hard to find relevant reviews. This approach is different from the first in that the use of literature may be less selective and more systematic and privilege empirical evidence over polemics. Sometimes "evidence" of this type has been used to develop new initiatives, such as the original New American Schools designs.

Even more rarely have reformers conducted rigorous empirical evaluations of program effects before scaling up their work. This approach is currently favored by the U.S. Department of Education, and the recent reauthorization of the ESEA, referred to as *No Child Left Behind*, gives preference to those educational practices and professional development activities that are supported by "scientifically-based" research. NCLB defines "scientifically-based" as research that "employs systematic, empirical methods" and uses "experimental or quasi-experimental designs" with a preference for random assignment experiments (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). While the USDE has received consideration criticism for espousing a narrow definition of what counts as "science" and "bona fide" research in education (Shaker & Heilman, 2004), the federal government's stance has been quite influential. It has created an impetus for a "product-oriented" interpretation of evidence-based practice. It puts a premium on validation and

transportation of discrete programs and practices and emphasizes fidelity of implementation over mutual adaptation in context.

In addition to the issue of what constitutes evidence to support new practice is the issue of the means by which new practice is introduced to and implemented in schools and school districts. Perhaps the most prevalent approach is "technology transfer" by which practices, presumably based on some form of credible evidence, are imported into schools and school systems. These practices are considered exogenous to the context in which, and to the people by which they are to be put in place. This is a view in which research prescribes practice. Specification of what to do—"What Works"—and implementation fidelity—"Just Do It!"—are its guiding principles.

An alternative view of evidence-based practice is more complex, interactive, and dynamic. This perspective envisions policymakers and practitioners using the best evidence available to make decisions about how to work with students, and engaging in a continuous process of data collection and review to improve programs and practices over time. This approach places the practitioner at the center of instructional decision-making rather then the program developer, and demands that practitioners make full use of the knowledge available to them to make the best possible decisions about diagnosis and treatment of their students learning needs. This approach recognizes that research in education seldom specifies the precise actions that need to be taken to meet the needs of all students in all situations. It also recognizes that useful evidence-based knowledge can be derived from clinical experience as well as from scientific studies. This perspective sees value in both theory—formal and applied—and research. In this view, local decisions and action should be guided by experience as well as principles derived from

theory and research, and it should not be constrained by narrow empiricism. This view requires more than the validation of the effectiveness of educational programs and products through clinical trials; it requires the development of practitioners' capacities to assess and make use of knowledge gained from different sources to provide the best possible learning opportunities for their students. This approach requires practitioners to monitor and study their practice to strengthen their understanding of what works under various conditions. It incorporates an ongoing, reflective process of developing new evidence and knowledge from the thoughtful, disciplined study of practice. This establishes a dynamic process of discovery and action. Claims based on past research may serve as an initial basis for decisions and action, but those claims may "trumped" by evidence of outcomes associated with those decisions and actions in local context. For external organizations promoting evidence-based practice in schools, initial evidence might "get you in the door," but developing evidence about the outcomes attained in the local context would be important to sustain the work.

The issue of fidelity is not irrelevant to this view of evidence-based practice. However, fidelity is something to be considered in relation to strength of evidence, the similarities in the original and new settings, the need for flexibility and adaptation of practice to context, and ongoing inquiry. In general, the greater the specification of the practice and the more persuasive the evidence, the more fidelity should be stressed. Only when the evidence of effects is overwhelming and the replicating conditions are the same would insisting on high levels of fidelity make sense. Where practices are not well specified, where the evidence is mixed or shows only modest effects, or where the context differs significantly, deliberate, evidence-based adaptation is more appropriate.

According to this view, the issue is not one of a tradeoff between seeking fidelity or permitting adaptation. The issue is the strength of the evidence and how similar the replicating situations are to the sites in which evidence was derived. Even in situations where pursuing high fidelity makes sense, this view of evidence-based practice calls for continuous inquiry to develop new evidence about the effects of new practices in context. The assumption is that even the most robust interventions can be improved, and that variations in effects among students and across contexts can be reduced through analysis of student responses and modifications in the program. Commitment to continuous improvement will lead to larger effects and better fit with the students being served. This approach presumes practitioners have the flexibility to make adaptations when new evidence calls for them.

If this more dynamic, principle and process-oriented view of evidence-based practice is conducive to meaningful educational practice and improvement, then we need to consider the things that are required of organizations, and for the purpose of this paper external, non-profit organizations, that seek to promote it.

Demands on External Organizations

It follows that in order for external, non-profit organizations to promote evidence-based practice as we have defined it, they must possess and exercise a number of different capacities. They must be able to identify, define, and understand problems in schools and classrooms and be able to identify the outcomes they seek to address those problems. They must develop and sustain strong connections to the knowledge base—scientific and practitioner—in the domains in which they are working. They must be able to work collaboratively with practitioners to collect evidence, diagnose problems, and

where required, make adaptations. They must be able to assess the contexts in which they work and evaluate the available scientific evidence and professional expertise concerning the appropriate actions to take in these contexts to achieve the desired outcomes. External organizations must be able to tell weak evidence from strong and the relevant from the irrelevant. They must be able to think theoretically and operate with regard to sound theories or "maps" of change. Uncritical reliance on evidence as information about what to do can be problematic without good theory and problem definition as guides.

These organizations must have the capacity for continuous inquiry, analysis, and adaptation (see Argyris & Schon, 1996). They also must have the capacity to monitor and evaluate the conduct and effects of their own work. And, they should have the willingness and ability to be flexible, and to alter directions when the evidence warrants it. They must be more pragmatic than ideological, more problem-oriented than product-oriented. These organizations should be able to engage in this inquiry and analysis in a way that is credible and persuasive to schools and to funders that their actions are warranted. It is not enough to simply justify or legitimate their goals, services, and actions by appealing to values, philosophies, or popular but untested theories. Inquiry and analysis should be conducted in a way that makes credible contributions to the broader base of evidence concerning the improvement of schools, teaching, and student learning.

Our definition of evidence-based practice also points to particular capacities external organizations must have for working with schools. These organizations must be able to develop and sustain, over substantial periods of time, commitment and

engagement of the schools and schools districts with which they work. This may require that they be able to work with schools and school districts as contributing partners and participants in planning and decision making. Thus, co-construction may not only be required to adapt work to a specific context but also to promote commitment to and engagement in the work itself.

In addition, external organizations must be able to provide a great deal of process support to schools over time. This means more than simply providing a particular program or practice. It means working along side educators to enhance their readiness for change, the implementation of new practice, and their capacity to diagnose problems and design interventions over time. It may also mean providing support for developing the organizational and human resource capacities of schools and school districts to engage in and benefit from this from of evidence-based practice.

All these requirements suggest that a successful external organization must be able to acquire and sustain adequate and stable levels of financial resources over time and recruit and retain a professional staff that can work well with schools. It must have the capacity for research and development, and be able to connect with the knowledge base and the field of action. External organizations may thus need to develop the understanding and commitment of their sponsors and to sustain supportive relationships with them over time. Like working with schools and school districts, this may require external organizations to enter into relationships in which sponsors are active partners in co-constructing the work.

It is not completely clear that external organizations need all of these capacities to work effectively with schools and school districts, or depending on the context whether

some capacities may be more salient than others. The logic of our argument and the

research on intermediary organizations reviewed in the next section suggest that all are

important in one way or another. In addition, it is not clear whether external

organizational that lack certain capacities can "make up" for them by collaborating with

other organizations, such as universities or other research organizations to build overall

capacity for inquiry and analysis. While such relationships carry the prospects of added

capacity and economies, the literature on inter-organizational coordination for children's

service provision indicates that such relationships may also introduce new complexities,

conflicts, and costs which may compromise any added value (Crowson & Boyd, 1993;

Smrekar & Mawhinney, 1999).

<div align="center">Lessons from Research on Intermediary Organizations</div>

This assessment is consistent with the findings from research on factors

associated with effectiveness of intermediary organizations working in education and in

other areas of human service provision.[1] In this literature, intermediary organizations are

defined in a number of different ways (e.g., Honig, 2004; McDonald, McLaughlin, &

Corcoran, 2000; Kronley & Handley, 2003). According to Honig (2004), what is central

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[1] Research on subject is fairly recent, dating back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Most research from studies of large-scale, comprehensive school reform initiatives of the early and mid-1990s, particularly of the New American Schools Corporation (e.g., Berends et al., 2001, 2002; Bodilly, 2001) and the Annenberg Challenges established in different cities across the United States (e.g., CRC, 2000; Honig, 2004; McDonald, McLaughlin, & Corcoran, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1999; Newmann & Sconzert, 2000; Sconzert et al., 2004; Shipps & Sconzert, 1999; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; Wohlstetter et al., 2003). There are several other studies that examine the work of intermediary organizations in general or in other education and non-education contexts (e.g., Campbell, 2002; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Kronley & Handley, 2003; Pravetti et al., 2001; Szanton, 2003). In addition to this recent research, we also looked at earlier studies of external change agents and the implementation of educational innovation that are relevant to this discussion, particularly those major studies by the Rand Corporation and evaluations of the federal Follow-Through program (e.g., Fullan, 2001; Kennedy, 1978; McLaughlin, 1990).

to most definitions is that these organizations "occupy the space in between at least two other parties" (p. 67). She continues that

> Intermediary organizations primarily function to mediate or to manage change for both those parties. Intermediary organizations operate independently of these two parties and provide distinct value beyond what the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass by themselves. At the same time, intermediary organizations depend on those parties to perform their essential functions. (p. 67)

According to Van Til (1994), in the nonprofit world intermediary organizations link donors and their resources to the needs that nonprofit organizations seek to meet. Effectiveness is usually defined in terms of implementation of the programs and practices they promote and their impact on the organizations with which they are working. In education that is typically schools and school districts.

Two things are notable about this literature. First, from the general descriptions of work that they do, the intermediary organizations that are the focus of this research are seldom engaged in the sort of evidence-based practice we consider in this chapter. They are more typically promoting improvements in services to low-achieving populations or advocating use of particular strategies or programs that been deemed to be consistent with their philosophies and missions. Still, the capacities and processes that seem to make them generally successful working with schools are consistent with those things we argue are necessary to promote our view of evidence-based practice. Second, many of the intermediary organizations that are the subjects of this research can be recognized as nonprofits even though they are not identified as such. They are usually presented as "generic" organizations without regard to their "nonprofitedness" or to the sector to

which they belong. Nevertheless, this research provides some understanding of nonprofit
intermediaries and the capacities that are associated with their success. Four general
areas of capacity can be identified in this literature. We suspect that these areas act in
concert. That is, when they function together intermediary organizations may have their
best chance of success.[2]

Qualities of Service

It seems axiomatic, but this research stresses the point that intermediary
organizations are more likely to be successful working with schools if the programs and
practices they promote, if they services they provide, are of "high quality." Even so, the
point is important to make. The literature provides ample documentation of external
organizations working with schools that promote programs and practices of questionable
quality and undocumented effectiveness (Fullan, 2001; Rowan, 2002; Slavin, 1989;
Sykes, 1996).

"Quality" is defined in this research to mean the potential effectiveness of a
program or practice to achieve its goals in the context in which it is adopted and
implemented (Fullan, 2001). In this chapter, we see evidence-based practice that is not
only synonymous with "quality" at a particular point in time, but also as an approach that
has the potential to improve "quality" over time. At the same time, the research indicates
that providing quality service may also involve helping schools develop the

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[2] Most of the literature on intermediary organizations in education concludes that successful school
improvement depends in large part on the capacity of schools to work well with intermediary organizations
and to engage and implement the innovations that may be the focus of that work. Several studies have
pointed to principal leadership, teacher readiness and commitment to change, low staff and administrator
turnover, and low levels of conflict within schools, among other factors, as important to an intermediary
organization's ability to work effectively with schools (e.g., Berends et al., 2002; Newmann & Sconzert,
2000; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). While we acknowledge the importance of school capacity, we focus here
on intermediary organizations and the factors that promote their ability to work effectively with schools.

organizational structures and processes needed to implement and incorporate new programs and practices well (e.g., Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Kronley & Handley, 2003; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). Without attention to these capacities, which may include school-level leadership, working relationships among teachers, and readiness for and commitment to improvement, new programs and practices may be implemented poorly and be short-lived. This may be particularly true with regard to new instructional practices (Smylie & Wenzel, 2003).

This research also indicates that intermediary organizations are more likely to be successful if their work is driven by a well-informed and effective theory of change (Berends et al., 2002; Campbell, 2002; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). In other words, intermediary organizations need to have a good idea, grounded in theory and research, about how the change they seek is to be achieved. The literature points to the importance of having clearly defined goals and strategies and a good sense of the incentives, opportunities for learning, and accountability mechanisms that may be needed to promote change in particular contexts.

Finally, this research points to the importance of providing strong implementation support appropriate to local needs (Berends et al., 2002; Newmann & Sconzert, 2000; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). Such assistance would likely be a part of a broader theory of change that might include the development of organizational capacity necessary to maintain reformed practice and support improvement over time. This means that intermediary organizations may need to help schools and school districts develop greater coherence among the multiple programs and innovations that they typically are engaged in at any point in time (Fullan, 2001; Sconzert et al., 2004). Intermediary organizations

may have difficulty promoting improvement in a context where competing innovations are at play and where district and state policies and standard operating procedures impede coordination or integration (Berends et al., 2002; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; see also Knapp et al. 1998).

<u>Working with Schools</u>

A second area of research concerns an intermediary organization's capacities—its knowledge, skills, and commitments—for working effectively with schools. Researchers have identified a number of such capacities. They have concluded that intermediary organizations are more likely to be successful promoting school improvement if they possess technical expertise about the problem to be solved, the innovation intended to solve that problem, and the change process (Corcoran, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Honig, 2004; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). They are also more likely to succeed if they have knowledge and experience working with schools in the type and scope of change sought (Fullan, 2001; Kronley & Handley, 2003; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). This includes understanding local educational contexts and issues (Fullan 2001; Kronley & Handley, 2003).

The research also emphasizes the importance of relational skills (Berends et al., 2001, 2002; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Kennedy, 1978; Kronley & Handley, 2003; McDonald et al., 2000; Pravetti et al., 2001; Sconzert et al., 2004). Intermediary organizations must be able to establish effective systems of communication among relevant actors. They must be able to gain access to schools and build and sustain relational trust. Moreover, intermediary organizations must also be able to provide schools with adequate, sustained levels of the resources needed for the desired changes to be introduced, implemented, and institutionalized successfully (Berends et al., 2001,

2002; Bodilly, 2001, CRC, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Kennedy, 1978; McLaughlin, 1990,

Newmann et al., 20000; Pravetti et al., 2001; Sconzert et al., 2004; Smylie & Wenzel,

2003). Such resources include money but also human and intellectual resources, time,

and public legitimacy. None of this is possible without strong leadership and internal

management. In order to be successful, intermediary organizations must be able to set

and sustain a vision for their work and manage the scope of the services they render to

schools (Berends et al., 2002; Kennedy, 1978, Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; Wohlstetter et al.,

2003).

Working in the Broader Environment

A third area identified in studies of intermediary organizations concerns their

capacities to work successfully within their broader environments. These environments

consist of numerous other organizational actors, including school district central offices;

members of the "school improvement industry" (Rowan, 2002); state and local

governments; and other stakeholders such as parents, unions and civic elites who may

influence education policy and practice. The literature suggests that intermediary

organizations are more likely to be successful if they are able to define and distinguish

their organizational roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis other organizations in this broader

environment (Pravetti et al., 2001; Shipps & Sconzert, 1999). To be successful, they

must also be able to develop and sustain credibility, legitimacy, and trust within that

environment. They must possess the political acumen to be able to engage the external

environment and shape it to their self-interests. And, they must possess the technical

ability to "prove the work," to demonstrate its effectiveness in ways perceived as

credible, and to legitimate that their work as "worth it" to stakeholders and to sources of

their own funding (Berends et al., 2002; Bodilly, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Kennedy, 1978; Kronley & Handley, 2003; Shipps & Sconzert, 1999). Intermediary organizational may also be more successful if they are able to help schools manage their relationships with critical actors in their external environments such as central offices, community organizations, state education agencies, business groups, and so on (Berends et al., 2002; Bodilly, 2001; Honig, 2004; Newmann & Sconzert, 2000; Sconzert et al., 2004; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003).

One of the most important capacities an intermediary organization must have, according to the literature, is the ability to acquire stable financial and political resources for its own operations over time (CRC, 2000; Honig, 2004; Kronley & Hadley, 2003; Shipps & Sconzert, 1999; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; Szanton, 2003). Insufficient or uncertain support and instability spell trouble for developing and sustaining the stable long-term relationships with schools that are often necessary to promote lasting change. Intermediaries that rely on short-term grants may find it necessary to shift their agendas to please their funders thereby making it impossible to engage in deep, sustained work with schools. At the same time, an intermediary organization must be able to maintain some degree of independence from the school district and policy environment in which it works, and from its own sources of support. It must be able to preserve the integrity of its mission and its services despite commitments and obligations—explicit or implied—that come with "doing business" and accepting resources (Honig, 2004; Shipps & Sconzert, 1999). This becomes more difficult as relationships between intermediary organizations and school systems become closer and more mutually dependent, driven by exchanges in valued resources and services.

Strategic Capacity

A final and crosscutting factor associated with intermediary organizations'
success is strategic capacity. This factor has several dimensions. The first is the
intermediary organization's capacity for assessment and analysis (Finnigan & O'Day,
2003; Fullan, 2001; Kronley & Handley, 2003; McDonald et al., 2000; Newmann &
Sconzert, 2000; Shipps et al., 1999). Similar to the concept of organizational learning
(Argyris & Schon, 1996; Levitt & March, 1988), this involves the ability to effectively
identify and define problems and to accurately assess contexts and the capacities of
schools and school systems for engaging and implementing change. It also involves
capacity for self-analysis and the ability to develop new capacity for meeting new
demands for service. A second dimension is the ability to establish a match between the
type and substance of service an intermediary organization provides and the needs,
interests, and demands of the local contexts in which it works (Campbell, 2002; CRC,
2000; McLaughlin, 1990; Newmann & Sconzert, 2000; Pravetti et al., 2001; Smylie &
Wenzel, 2003). These contexts may include schools, school districts, the policy
environment, and funding agencies. This points to the ability to match the amount, the
scope, and the intensity of services, the funding to support them, with the levels of need
(Berends et al., 2001; 2002; CRC, 2000; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Kennedy, 1978;
Pravetti et al., 2001; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). This ability to match may drive
intermediary organizations' decisions about whether to work with one school, small or
large numbers of schools, or whole districts. It may also drive their decisions to stay
small or to "scale up." A related strategic consideration is the capacity to integrate their
services with other initiatives in order to reduce the burden on educators and the

fragmentation of improvement efforts. While such efforts to "fit in" are appreciated by practitioners, it may be hard for intermediary organizations if they are operating in a competitive funding environment and require high visibility and credit for their work in order to maintain support from funders. Intermediary organizations trying to assist the same school system may be competing and there can be tensions between the desire to be helpful by fitting their work into the situation and their need to attract funds.

Another related dimension of strategic capacity is the ability to adapt to changes in the needs, interests, and priorities of schools, school systems, policy environments, and funders (Berends et al., 2001; CRC, 2000; Bodilly, 2001; Campbell, 2002; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003; Honig, 2004; Kronley & Handley, 2003; Newmann & Sconzert, 2000; Pravetti et al., 2001; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; Wohlstetter et al., 2003). Being able to adapt services to such changes may require a substantial amount of flexibility in organizational functions and processes (Honig, 2004; Pravetti et al., 2001; Shipps & Sconzert, 1999).

Summary

We have argued that in order for external organizations to promote evidence-based practice, as we define it, they must be able to meet certain demands. They need to have the capacity for accessing new knowledge and for continuous inquiry, analysis, and adaptation. They must be able to develop and sustain productive working relationships with schools and school districts and they must be able to provide necessary process support. To acquire these qualities, external organizations must have the ability to attract and sustain adequate and stable levels of financial and personnel resources conducive to

this work. All this is consistent with research that points to particular capacities that intermediary organizations must possess to work effectively with schools.

If such capacities are important to promoting evidence-based practice as defined here, how likely are nonprofit organizations to possess or develop and exercise them? How do the defining organizational characteristics of nonprofit organizations affect their capacities to develop such capacities and to promote evidence-based practice? How do the common behavioral tendencies of nonprofits affect these abilities? And finally, what trends and issues in the nonprofit sector may affect how they perform this kind of work with schools? We address these questions first by taking a brief look at the characteristics and behaviors of nonprofit organizations and of the nonprofit sector. Then, we explore implications of that overview for the capacities of nonprofits to promote evidence-based practice.

<p align="center">A Look at Nonprofits</p>

Before we begin this overview, it is important to set some context. First, scholars have wrestled for some time with how to define nonprofit organizations as a distinct organizational type. Charitable entities have a long history in the United States, but today's nonprofit organizations are a relatively new institutional form. According to Hall (1994), the concept of a nonprofit sector dates back little more than two decades. By his estimate, 90 percent of the nonprofit organizations that are now in existence were established after World War II.

A number of different approaches have been taken to define nonprofit organizations. Efforts to distinguish them from other organizations by what they do have not been particularly useful. Nonprofits perform a wide variety of functions, many of

which are also performed by public agencies and for-profit organizations (DiMaggio, Weiss, & Clotfelter, 2002). More effective definitions have followed from nonprofits' specific legal characteristics. These include exemption from federal taxation, eligibility to receive tax exempt gifts, engagement in direct service activities aimed at benefiting organizational members or persons beyond the organization's membership, and formal control by a private independent board of directors (Salamon, 1987). The primary basis for their "protected" legal status has been this general service function. Hausmann (1987) adds that nonprofits can also be defined by the "nondistribution constraint," a legal prohibition of distributing residual earnings to individuals who exercise control over the organization. This constraint does not mean that nonprofits cannot earn profits. Rather they are required to devote surplus earnings to financing future services or distribute it to persons in noncontrolling positions in the organization. We will return to these characteristics shortly.

This definition captures a large and extremely diverse population of organizations (Clotfelter, 1992; Ferris & Graddy, 1989). Hall (1994) observes that

> [Nonprofits] vary enormously in scope and scale, ranging from community and neighborhood organizations with no assets and no employees through multi-billion dollar foundations, universities, and health care complexes with thousands of employees. They vary enormously in what they do, from offering traditional charitable assistance to the needs to carrying out manufacturing and advanced research…. Their sources of revenue follow no clear pattern…. Their modes of governance range from the autocracy of sole trustees selected from among the descendants of a charitable donor through broadly representative boards

composed of *ex officio* elected officials or elected by members of organizations.

(pp. 3-4)

So it is with nonprofits that work in education. While hard estimates are difficult to come by, the number and diversity of nonprofits working with schools and school districts are enormous. In his analysis of the school improvement industry, Rowan (2002) estimated that more than 80 percent of all school systems in the United States contract with more than 3,700 outside organizations for some professional and technical service in any given year. In addition, more than 400 outside organizations, not including universities, perform research and development functions. While he does not break out nonprofit organizations in these counts, Rowan deems them "numerous" (p. 284). Two examples illustrate. First, Corcoran and his colleagues' (2001) study of school reform support in Kentucky identified more than 700 nonprofit and for-profit groups seeking to provide professional development activities for teachers in literacy or mathematics in only *one* region of the state. Second, during the late 1990s, the Chicago Public Schools reached agreements with 50 external organizations to serve as probation managers and partners in the system's 100 lowest achieving schools (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003). At the same time, the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, a six-year independent citywide educational reform initiative, made grants to another 45 other external organizations to help promote school improvement among some 210 schools (Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). These nearly 100 organizations (very few Annenberg partners also served as probation partners) ranged from community-based organizations to universities to museums and other cultural institutions to school reform and advocacy groups. Some partners were local and others were national. Some were large and some were quite small. Virtually all

were nonprofit organizations. And together they represent only a fraction of the external organizations providing services to the school system and to individual schools. The number of non-profits working with schools appears to be growing due to the expansion of charter schools, the general pressure on school systems to improve performance, the trend in school districts toward contracting out key services, and the increased interest in having external organizations manage public schools.

The size and diversity of the nonprofit sector leads to a second point. It is difficult to generalize about the varied organizations that populate the sector. It is also difficult to develop a typology that would capture the most salient dimensions of the numerous types of organizations in the sector. The implication for our analysis is that while we seek an understanding of the potential role of nonprofit organizations in general in promoting evidence-based practice, we must also show how that this understanding may vary across different organizations within the sector.

And now we turn to our overview. First, we examine the primary legal and structural characteristics of nonprofit organizations. Second, we discuss the issue of resource dependency and how funding sources affect the behavior of nonprofit organizations. This includes a look at growing competition for traditional funding among nonprofits and between nonprofits and other types of organizations and growing commercialization within the nonprofit sector. Third, we assess the tendency of nonprofits toward isomorphism, that is, the inclination of these organizations to emulate the characteristics and behaviors of other organizations around them and to reflect broader social values. Fourth, we examine issues of nonprofit autonomy and accountability. And fifth, we explore some internal rigidities and tensions and the

capacity of nonprofit organizations for innovation and experimentation. In the section that follows this overview, we explore the implications of these characteristics and behaviors for the ability of nonprofits to promote evidence-based practices.

<u>Legal and Structural Characteristics</u>

As noted above, nonprofit organizations are defined by several legal characteristics that distinguish them from other types of organizations. They are exempt from federal taxation and are eligible to receive tax-exempt gifts. They provide services to benefit their members or persons beyond the organization, often public services in partnership with government (Kanter & Summers, 1987; Salamon, 1989). Many nonprofits organize their missions and strategies around particular principles and values and are driven more by altruistic than self-serving motives (Young, 1989). Nonprofits are controlled by private independent boards of directors and must abide by the "nondistribution constraint." Recall that nonprofits are not prohibited from making profits. Rather they must devote any profits they make to financing future services or distributing them to persons in noncontrolling positions in the organization.

The literature is not clear whether these characteristics are advantageous or disadvantageous to nonprofit performance, their ability to achieve their missions, or their ability to compete with for-profits or government agencies for clients and funding. For instance, Wiesbrod (1989) contends that the nondistribution constraint may reduce nonprofits' access to the market for equity capital that may be used to support and expand services, build organizational capacity, and support experimentation and innovation. In contrast, some observers argue that nonprofits carry lower administrative costs that give them some advantage over government organizations. Others suggest that such savings

may be off-set by costs accrued by carrying "free riders"[3] and from the need to devote

sometimes considerable resources to securing donations, building organizational

membership, or competing for grants and contracts (see Douglas, 1987). Steinberg

(1987) elaborates this idea of a "trade-off" arguing that while nonprofit and for-profit

organizations possess different internal structures and operate under different conditions,

they perform quite similarly in production, marketing, and the distribution of services

(see also Silk, 1994). He contends that these similarities can be explained by a "theory of

compensating differentials." For instance, the tax advantages held by nonprofits may

balance out the advantage for-profits hold in their access to financial capital.

<u>Resource Dependency</u>

Resource dependency is a theoretical perspective used widely in the literature to

explain the behavior of nonprofit organizations. In brief, this perspective views

relationships among organizations in terms self-interested exchange and mutual benefit

(Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Organizations enter into and sustain relationships as long as

they find them beneficial. Organizations will adapt to sustain those relationships if they

believe that they will continue to benefit from them. If a relationship ceases to provide

benefit and if one or more organizations in that relationship are unwilling or unable to

change to restore that benefit, the relationship will likely end. The implication is that an

organization will change to meet the expectations of other organizations to optimize the

benefit of relationships with them. Furthermore an organization will change its goals,

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[3] Free riders are persons who take advantage of a nonprofit organization's services but who do not "pay"
for them through donations, dues, or fee-for-service.

structures, and behavior in order to continue to receive resources it needs from other organizations (Ferris & Graddy, 1989; Powell & Friedkin, 1987).

Nonprofit organizations depend on external sources of revenue and other resources for their operation and survival, and according to Weisbrod (1998), "no source of revenue has unambiguous effects" (p. 171). The character of a nonprofit's behavior and output will be related to the character of its revenue (Lifset, 1989; Rose-Ackerman, 1987). Nonprofits may prefer revenue from unconstrained sources but when that revenue becomes scarce they will shift to sources that impose more obligations and constraints (Lifset, 1989). As resource dependency theory would suggest, nonprofits often find it necessary to adapt to the interests and expectations of their donors, funders, and stakeholders (Powell & Friedkin, 1987). Indeed, nonprofits with multiple diverse funders and stakeholders may need considerable flexibility to satisfy multiple and diverse interests.

The literature also suggests that the major sources on which nonprofits depend for support exert the most influence over their behavior (Tuckman, 1998). Nonprofit organizations tend to respond more to the goals of their strongest constituencies than the goals of their weaker constituencies (Powell & Friedkin, 1987). Historically, foundations and government agencies have been among the largest and most influential sources of support to nonprofit organizations (Hall, 1994). It is well established that foundations can exert substantial influence over organizations they fund (Ylvisaker, 1987). They can choose the organizations they will support, they can concentrate their resources in particular types of organizations, and they can use their resources to "lever" particular behaviors and outcomes. Government agencies can influence nonprofits in similar ways.

Donations can also be a source of influence. An unrestricted donation does not constrain a nonprofit in pursuing its goals. But, according to Weisbrod (1998), not all donations are unrestricted. When donations are made with conditions, they may exert influence similar to foundation grants or government contracts. Donations may also be akin to sales or fee-for-service arrangements (Weisbrod, 1998). That is, they can only be attained if the nonprofit offers something that the donor is willing to purchase.

These dynamics may trigger a number of tensions within nonprofit organizations. The amount of change required of nonprofits to obtain needed resources may create conflicts between a nonprofit's mission and goals and its funders' missions and goals (Ferris & Graddy, 1989). Adaptation may be "bounded," that is, nonprofits may only be willing and able to go "so far" in their relationships with particular funders and stakeholders. Adaptation also may take a conservative course. Powell and Friedkin (1987) contend that when financial resources are in short supply or when they are controlled by a small number of sources, nonprofits are inclined to adopt more mainstream and acceptable approaches rather than more confrontational, controversial, or innovative ones that may be more consistent with their mission and goals. When nonprofits must look for support to a large number of funders with diverse interests, their response may be similar--abandon the innovative for the acceptable.

The issue of resource dependency has come into sharper focus as competition for traditional sources of funding increases in the nonprofit sector and as the sector becomes more commercial and market-oriented. Light (2000) tells us that this is the "best of times and the worst of times" for the sector (p. 7). During the past twenty years, there has been substantial growth in dollars attracted by the sector and the total employment in the

sector. At the same time, there are increased demands on the sector for service and accountability and greater financial stress and uncertainty (Gronberg & Child, 2003). Government budget cuts and increased privatization and outsourcing have shifted traditional flows of resources from nonprofits to a broader range of organizations. This has resulted in greater competition for funding among nonprofits and between nonprofits and other organizations and a growing sense of financial insecurity (Light, 2000; Salamon, 1995).

As resources have become scarcer, funders and clients of services have become more demanding, expecting nonprofits to demonstrate economic efficiencies and results (Light, 2000). For instance, government agencies are able to be increasingly selective in awarding grants and contracts, attaching more restrictions, greater reporting requirements, and higher expectations and performance standards in the process (Salamon, 1995). This pushes nonprofits toward providing more and better service and toward greater accountability. It may also push them away from innovation and toward seeking safer, more acceptable changes in the schools. And because nonprofits generally provide services rather than products that are easily "market-tested," nonprofits can lack a credible basis for demonstrating the value of what they do (Salamon, 1999).

Pressure also comes from the diversification of the human service "market." Through privatization and outsourcing, for-profit firms increasingly are competing for work and revenue traditionally controlled by nonprofits. According to Light (2000), for-profits are likely to expand their market share and engage in more direct competition with nonprofits for clients and funds. This may be especially true in education. Twenty years ago the idea of a school district out-sourcing key services to a for-profit farm was

anathema, but it is now considered to be innovative, even standard, practice. As competition has increased, nonprofits' operating margins have been squeezed severely threatening their ability to support mission-related activities (Light, 2000; Salamon, 1999).

In the face of what Salamon (1999) calls "a permanent state of budgetary stringency," many nonprofits have had to reduce their services (despite increasing demands), create new operational efficiencies, or find alternate sources of funds (Gronberg & Child, 2003). For the most part, the sector has pursued the third course (Salamon, 1999). Nonprofits have reduced their reliance on donations and government funds and have moved toward grants, fees, and more commercial sources of income (Ferris & Graddy, 1989; Hansmann, 1989). This has brought them into increasingly complex relationships with the rest of the economy, and into greater competition with for-profit organizations (Skloot, 1987; Weisbrod, 1997). For example, many of the new curricula and improvement programs developed by non-profits, including universities, in the past decade with federal financial support have been sold to for-profit firms. This move into the commercial market is not universal across the nonprofit sector, and, as Salamon (2003) reminds us, nonprofit activity in this market is not new. What is new is the extent to which nonprofits have become involved in commercial activity in search of resources and the projections that commercial activity among nonprofits will become more intensive (Tuckman, 1998).

Isomorphic Behavior

The literature tells us that nonprofit organizations have a tendency toward isomorphic behavior. In other words, they tend to change in the direction of institutional

conformity (Douglas, 1987). Isomorphic behavior is related to but goes beyond change associated with resource dependency. It refers to changes that nonprofits make to reflect broader social and institutional norms and expectations of the environments of which they are a part (Powell & Friedkin, 1987). These environments include the fields of service nonprofits provide (e.g., education and social services), the nonprofit sector as a whole, and the particular niches in which nonprofits operate. Growing competition for resources pushes nonprofits harder to adopt services and organizational practices that are expected of them in the larger environment. Nonprofits' legitimacy, support, and perhaps survival are related to the extent to which they look like and operate as others expect them to. Isomorphic changes are not necessarily innovative or assure improved performance and effectiveness (Light, 2000).

Weisbrod (1997) argues that as nonprofits pursue revenue in the same ways and in the same markets as for-profit firms, they tend to emulate those firms. Nonprofits are shaping themselves more and more in the image of business-oriented firms to attract customers and donors who value that image (Light, 2000; Weisbrod, 1998). Findings from Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld's (1998) study of nonprofits are consistent with this observation. Those nonprofits took on the managerial, political, and legitimation tactics of the arenas from which they were most heavily dependent for resources. The more they used the predominant tactics of other organizations in those arenas, the more resources they reaped. These nonprofits also emulated the tactics of organizations from which they received their resources. The irony is that while nonprofits may enhance their legitimacy and support by adopting goals and practices of other organizations, particularly the market and business-oriented practices of commercial organizations, they may also

undermine the distinctive roles and fundamental justifications for the special social regard and legal privileges they have traditionally received (Ferris & Graddy, 1989; Weisbrod, 1997).

While their legitimacy and support are related to the degree to which they reflect external expectations, nonprofits are not completely reactive. Kanter (1979) argues that crucial to nonprofits' survival is their ability to shape external definitions and expectations for their mission, and shape expectations for what counts as credible evidence of their effectiveness. Wooten's (1990) historical case study of nonprofit legal education in New York City showed that while nonprofit law schools adapted under the influence of their environments they also were able to exert substantial influence on those environments in pursuit of their own interests. In more recent research on the characteristics and behaviors of "high performing"[4] and "innovative" nonprofits, Light and his colleagues found that the effectiveness of these organizations was associated with aggressive interaction with their environments and their efforts to challenge and shape those environments to their own benefit (2002; Light, Hubbard, & Kibbe, 2004). They were also selective about the resources they would accept and the sources from which they accepted them, seeking those that aligned most closely with their missions and operations and carried as few constraints and obligations as possible.

Autonomy and Accountability

Historically, nonprofits have enjoyed substantial autonomy and freedom from accountability (Douglas, 1987). Their traditional sources of funding--donations and grants--were not necessarily tied to specific outputs (Ferris & Graddy, 1989). "Mission

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[4] In this research, performance is defined as programmatic impact.

vagueness" often made nonprofit accountability difficult (Weisbrod, 1998). Moreover, nonprofits have generally provided services as opposed to goods. The impact of the former tends to be much more difficult to assess than that of the latter (Kanter & Summers, 1987). Kanter (1979) observes that nonprofits have historically lacked "market tests" of their services and accomplishments. Historically, it has been easy for nonprofits to find noncompetitive niches in which to operate. This has been particularly true of small local nonprofits. As charitable organizations, nonprofits have traditionally lacked "clear-cut owners," whereas for-profit firms may have stockholders concerned about productivity and profitability. And, because they often have had flat organizational structures and relied on volunteers, nonprofits have lacked clear hierarchical lines of authority (Kanter, 1979). Each of these factors has made nonprofit accountability difficult.

Useem (1987) argues that certain conditions are associated with the levels of autonomy and accountability experienced by a nonprofit. He contends that autonomy is likely to be greater and accountability lower if a nonprofit's reliance on external resources is low, if outside contributors are large in number and diverse in goals, if no outside contributor accounts for a disproportionate share of a nonprofit's resources, or if there is an ample supply of alternative revenue sources. On the other hand, autonomy is likely to be lower and accountability greater if a nonprofit is highly dependent on the resources of a small group of contributors with well-formed preferences.

Lack of accountability carries with it important costs. While lack of accountability may bring welcome autonomy to a nonprofit, it may also make it more difficult for that nonprofit to attract resources. According to Useem (1987), lack of

accountability means greater risks for potential investors. In situations where demand for nonprofit service and service quality are high, lack of accountability may bring about external accountability standards, reduce nonprofit autonomy, and perhaps threaten the missions of nonprofits. As competition for scarce resources increases, nonprofit accountability is also likely to increase. Private foundations are demanding more accountability from the nonprofits that they fund, and many are helping nonprofits become more "businesslike" in their operations. Moreover, as nonprofit services become more commercial, they may well be subject to new external regulation and market-oriented accountabilities. Two very important questions are whether nonprofits have the capacity to meet the new accountability demands being made on them, and whether they can demonstrate through the generation of credible evidence that they are acting and producing in ways that are expected by those that make them.

Flexibility and Capacity for Experimentation and Innovation

Because of their traditional autonomy and the wide variety of interests represented in the sector, nonprofits have been thought to have considerable flexibility and facility for experimentation. Indeed, some observers contend that in this area they have the edge over for-profit organizations (Douglas, 1987; Powell & Friedkin, 1987). On the other hand, there are organizational rigidities that may limit nonprofit flexibility and capacity for experimentation and innovation. These rigidities operate in relation to but also independently of the pressures toward conservatism and conformity associated with resource dependency and isomorphism (Salamon, 1987; Tuckman, 1998).

One of the most important sources of rigidity in nonprofit organizations is the centrality of their missions (Kanter & Summers, 1987; Powell & Friedkin, 1987). Young

(1989) observes that preservation of mission and goals is one of the strongest internal motivations influencing nonprofit behavior. Lifset (1989) argues that nonprofits have both normative and financial interest in preserving their mission and goals, inasmuch as donors and other sources of revenue invest in the achievement of nonprofit missions and goals. And nonprofits tend to act accordingly. In a study of large national nonprofits in the areas of youth services, health charities, community and recreation services, and advocacy programs for children and older Americans, Young (1998) found that these organizations behaved in ways that preserved their missions, sustained consistency between their mission and their activities (including commercial activities), and preserved their legal status as nonprofits. They were selective in the funding they accepted, opting for sources that imposed the least obligations. They worked hard to avoid activities, particularly commercial ones, that posed serious risks to their missions and to their public reputations for charitable and public service. Preserving mission and goals may be easier for large, well-established, and well-supported nonprofits than for smaller, less well-established, and less well-funded ones.

The literature identifies several other sources of rigidity that could limit nonprofit flexibility, experimentation, and innovation. Kanter and Summers (1987) argue that the larger the number of funders or stakeholders claiming to define the mission and operation of a nonprofit, the more difficult it is for that nonprofit to experiment and innovate. We noted earlier the tendency of nonprofits to adopt more conservative activities and ways of operating when they are dependent on a large array of sources of support. In addition, nonprofits in which professionals play important roles may be constrained by the norms and standards of practice "imported" by those professionals from sources outside the

organization (see Granovetter, 1973). According to Kanter and Summers, those external norms and standards can interfere with a nonprofit's ability to develop new responses to changing constituent needs and other external demands. Finally, Kanter and Summers contend that normative-oriented nonprofits have a tendency to believe in their own value independent of external reference. In these organizations, failure to achieve goals is not necessarily taken as a sign of weakness or as an indication of a need to change or innovate. Instead, such failures are often interpreted as signs that effort should be intensified (see also Kanter, 1979). This observation is consistent with Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld's (1998) finding that when the nonprofits they studied faced hostile conditions in their particular niche, they tended to persist in what they were doing, reducing the scale of their activity somewhat, but acting with greater levels of intensity and conviction.

<u>Internal Stresses and Crises of Identity</u>

Resource dependency, growth of competition and commercialism, increased accountability, and organizational rigidities are all sources of internal stress for nonprofits. Increased competition for traditional funding sources and growing commercialism pose serious challenges to the ways nonprofit organizations operate and to popular conceptions about how they are supposed to behave (Salamon, 1999). By becoming less "charitable" and more "market-oriented" and "businesslike," they may appear to be compromising their public service missions, altering the ways in which they function, and these changes may raise questions about their legal "protections," and incur even more financial risk. According to Skloot (1987), competition and commercialism can diversify a nonprofit's revenue base and perhaps spawn new programs and services.

At the same time, they can promote conflicts over goals and priorities, resource allocation within the organization, and staff activities. Skloot also contends that nonprofits in greatest need of new revenue sources may be the least able to create commercially viable ventures. These nonprofits tend to be small, serve the neediest clients, and lack the internal capacity and operating margin for marketing, service innovation, and organizational flexibility.

Salamon (1994) observes that growing competition for funds creates the need for nonprofits to develop new capacities for market awareness and managerial expertise. Competition also strengthens the imperative and centrality within the organization of generating revenue (Gronberg & Child, 2003). Competition, accountability demands, and the shift toward commercialism also create new pressures on nonprofits to increase their professional and management staffs as well as to rationalize their bureaucratic structures. It may also pressure nonprofits to think about services more as products to be packaged, marketed, and sold and clients more as paying consumers (Salamon, 1989).

These conditions put traditional missions and the charitable and advocacy roles nonprofits at risk (Salamon, 1994, 2003; Tuckman, 1998). They create new complexities that require a wide range of more sophisticated technical, legal, and financial expertise. This in turn creates new and heavier demands on nonprofit leadership and sets up the potential for conflict between professional and managerial staff and nonprofessional, volunteer staff, donors, and other stakeholders who may hold tightly to traditional missions and roles (Powell & Friedkin, 1987).

Some observers believe that these changes are leading to a split between donative nonprofits and commercial nonprofits and that this split is creating a "massive" identity

crisis for the sector (Hansmann, 1989; Salamon, 2003). The crisis may be felt within nonprofit organizations as they experience tension between traditional missions and roles and successfully competing for resources and clients in an increasingly commercial market. This identity crisis may also manifest itself in the threat it poses to public trust in the sector (Salamon, 2003). As nonprofits become more commercial, they can be perceived as acting and advocating less on behalf of the clients and communities they serve and more on behalf of their own self-interests. And this creates a problem of public perception and legitimacy that brings into question the traditional legal advantages and protections nonprofits have traditionally been accorded (Salamon, 1989, 1999). It is, as Salamon (2003) suggests, a conflict between the "distinctiveness imperative" of nonprofit organizations and the "survival imperative," with the latter seemingly getting the upper hand.

<u>Implications for Promoting Evidence-Based Practice</u>

In the preceding section, we presented an overview of the characteristics and behaviors of nonprofit organizations and we examined a number of recent developments in the nonprofit sector. Our contention is that these characteristics, behaviors, and developments have important implications for the ability of nonprofit organizations to effectively promote evidence-based practice as we define it. In this section, we explore a number of these implications. We have organized this section much like the last, looking first at the implications of structural characteristics of nonprofit organizations, then implications of resource dependency and isomorphic behavior, and so forth.

Our discussion is largely speculative and provisional. There is little research to support our arguments. Indeed, we hope that this discussion will raise questions of

interest to researchers. Much of the research on external organizations working in education has focused on nonprofits but has made little of their "nonprofitedness" and how it may affect their work with schools and school districts. More importantly, the organizations that have been examined in the research have seldom been engaged in the type of evidence-based practice that is advanced here. Where we can, we provide examples of nonprofit organizations working in education to illustrate our points.

Structural Characteristics

If we stipulate to Steinberg's (1987) idea of compensating differentials, the structural characteristic of nonprofits most salient to the promotion of evidence-based practice may be their mission of public service. This focus on service could draw nonprofit organizations toward evidence-based practice, particularly if the current trend toward evidence-based decision-making in the public sector continues and proves fruitful. And if nonprofits were persuaded that evidence-based practice would help them achieve their goals, they would be even more likely to adopt it. At the same time, however, nonprofits with strong normative or value-based missions and goals might eschew evidence-based practice because it could threaten their missions and strategies and because of the flexibility and adaptation it may require. Being evidence-based implies a willingness and a capacity to alter directions when the evidence warrants it. This suggests a much more pragmatic than ideological approach to providing services to the public. Evidence-based practice could require a nonprofit with a narrow ideological mission and strategy to reconsider its purpose entirely. It could require levels of reflection and self-evaluation that might be difficult for an ideologically based nonprofit to achieve, particularly if it is a small organization that lacks the capacity for research and

development and cannot easily develop new strategies or services. What may matter most here is the degree to which a nonprofit is "results-oriented" rather than committed to a particular value, principle, objective, or strategy. The latter set of commitments could create tension and conflict when evidence challenges a nonprofit's basic assumptions and ways of working.

Being evidence-based would also require that a nonprofit have the capacity to monitor, evaluate, and justify its actions and outcomes to funders and stakeholders differently. A nonprofit's goals and strategies could no longer be legitimated to others by appealing only to values, philosophies, or popular but untested theories. Instead, nonprofits would have to show that their actions are warranted by credible and persuasive evidence. This might require a fundamental change in how nonprofits represent themselves, their actions, and the outcomes of their work. Such changes might deter nonprofits with particularly strong ideological orientations and weak research and develop capacity from becoming involved with evidence-based practice.

There are several other structural characteristics of nonprofit organizations that we did not introduce earlier because they are not defining of nonprofits per se. However, they may make some difference in the ability of nonprofits to promote evidence-based practice. The first is size, and the human and technical capacity of a nonprofit to engage in evidence-based practice. Rowan (2002) observes that most nonprofits working with schools and school districts are small in size and lack resources for research and development. Small nonprofits may have difficulty monitoring their practice, collecting evidence, keeping up with research, and making changes in their services and operations. Promoting evidence-based practice may require a nonprofit to expand its staff to build

research and development capacity or it may require a nonprofit with relatively few resources to reallocate staff resources, for instance, to trade staff members who provide direct service to the field for research and development staff. These changes could create internal tensions that may undermine the ability of the nonprofit to function efficiently and effectively. In addition they could prove to be a disincentive for small nonprofits to promote evidence-based practice (see Salamon, 1994, 2003; Tuckman, 1998). Another important implication of size is that small nonprofits with a weak or unpredictable resource base may have greater difficulty developing and sustaining the long-term relationships with schools and school systems required to engage in evidence-based practice. Nonprofits may be deterred from evidence-based practice if they are uncertain that they could "stay the course" and effectively promote it over time.

Locale is another structural characteristic that could have implications for a nonprofit's ability to promote evidence-based practice. In their study of "reform support organizations" (RSOs), many of which were nonprofit, Kronley and Handley (2003) found that there were important differences between RSOs that were "local" with established roots in a school system and RSOs that were "imported" and that functioned independently of a specific community. Kronley and Handley found that local RSOs often have intimate knowledge of a community's educational issues. They tend to provide a broader array of programs and services tailored to their specific settings and are more flexible in how they work with schools and school systems. Trust and legitimacy grow out of proximal familiarity. Because much of their support is local, local RSOs have an incentive to adapt to sustain good will. Kronley and Handley contend that imported RSOs have much less knowledge of a local community's issues, needs, and

interests. These RSOs are more generally identified with a specific program or practice and their legitimacy is often derived from their national experience and reputation. Imported RSOs are more likely to be "wedded" to their particular programs and practices and less likely to expand or adapt them or the ways in which they operate as organizations to local needs.

These findings suggest that local nonprofits may find it easier to engage schools and school districts in evidence-based practice and the changes that may be suggested by it, if they are willing to go along with it. On the other hand, local nonprofits may find it more difficult to share "bad news" from evidence and put relationships and resources on which they depend at risk. As Kronley and Handley (2003) put it, they may be reluctant to be "public critics" of their primary sources of support and legitimacy. As such these nonprofits may be reluctant to press for changes that may be called for. Imported nonprofits may face a different set of issues promoting evidence-based practice. Their broader reputations may provide some impetus for local schools and school systems to adopt evidence-based practice and their distance and relative independence from the locale in which they work may make it easier for them to share evidence and suggest changes. At the same time, because of their distance and independence, imported nonprofits may have difficulty establishing the trust relationships so important to processes of ongoing assessment and change. Moreover, if tied to particular programs and practice, imported nonprofits may have difficulty adapting their services and modes of operation should local context or evidence warrants it.

Finally, the affiliations nonprofit organizations are able to develop may make a difference in their willingness and ability to promote evidence-based practice. Research

on nonprofits suggests that proximity to and strong relationships with civic and organizational elites have positive effects on their ability to raise donations and to gain volunteers (Galaskiewicz & Bielefeld, 1998). As our discussion below suggests, these relationships may provide a strong set of incentives. If the elites upon which they depend emphasize evidence-based practice, nonprofits may have substantial incentives to promote it. On the other hand, if elites reinforce something else there may be weaker incentives for nonprofits. Moreover, the types of organizations with which nonprofits are affiliated may affect their capacities for evidence-based practice. For instance, nonprofits associated with universities or other research-oriented organizations may be better positioned than more autonomous nonprofits, say community-based organizations, to promote evidence-based practice successfully.

Resource Dependency

According to our discussion of resource dependency, the importance that funders, stakeholders (including "elites"), and client schools and school districts give to evidence-based practice will likely determine the extent to which nonprofits are likely to promote it. If funders, stakeholders, and clients value and "demand" evidence-based practice, nonprofits are more likely to promote it. On the other hand, if these sources of support value and demand other types of services, nonprofits may have more difficulty promoting evidence-based practice. While not advocating the form of evidence-based practice we advance here, NSF has encouraged many of its grantees to use "reform" math and science curricula developed with NSF funding even though in some instances the evidence supporting the effectiveness of these curricula is limited and not particularly robust (Confrey & Stohl, 2004).

Because of growing competition for resources, many nonprofits may need to diversify their resource bases to stabilize their operations. Diversification of resources could lead to greater diversity in the preferences about mission, strategy, and program exerted by their sources. This condition could well introduce a higher level of fragmentation in expectations and accountability demands, compromising the depth and coherence of effort needed to promote evidence-based practice successfully. Nonprofits that have flexibility in choosing among funding sources and clients may find it easier to control their own future, whether or not that future includes evidence-based practice. And, depending on their own preferences, the ability of nonprofits to shape the values and preferences of those who support them may make it easier for them to promote the practice. It might be argued that evidence-based practices will make it easier for nonprofits to shape the preferences of their funders. If evidence of effectiveness becomes the primary currency of legitimacy, then those nonprofits that have it will secure more funding.

The collection of evidence about performance and outcomes that is part of evidence-based practice also may pose some risks to nonprofits and their ability to sustain financial and political support. Collecting evidence that reveals that they are having little impact may lead to a reduction in nonprofits' funding and clients. If the emphasis funders and clients place on evidence of outcomes increases, the nonprofit sector could face significant changes. Growing demand for evidence of impact could lead to a winnowing out of small nonprofits that are not particularly successful working with schools or that are not capable of generating evidence that is seen as credible. In addition, growing demand for evidence of impact could lead to a growth in large

nonprofits that have the research and development resources and staff to be able to provide more "effective" service and develop credible evidence of impact. With such capacity, large nonprofits might become preferred providers and come to dominate the service market, or at least the nonprofit portion of it. Such a trend might make nonprofits more conservative in their search for and production of evidence and more likely to over-state the validity and importance of the evidence that is available. Indeed, this might also encourage nonprofits to undertake more conservative, easily measured, "sustaining" innovations rather than risk more innovative, and "disruptive" ones.

Growing competition for resources may not only require nonprofits to change the types of services they offer and produce greater evidence of outcomes, but it might also change the more fundamental ways in which they operate. As we argued earlier, competition for resources is likely to increase nonprofit accountability not only for what they achieve but also for how they achieve it. Nonprofits are being pushed by funders to adopt more business-like operations. The question is whether and how these practices, adopted to satisfy accountability demands, may promote or impede the promotion of evidence-based practice. The move toward business-oriented practices may draw scare resources from the "service" side of a nonprofit to the "management" side, reducing the ability of the nonprofit to engage in the long-term, process-oriented work required of evidence-based practice. On the other hand, the adoption of business-oriented practices may sharpen the focus within a nonprofit on performance, outcomes, and evidence thereof, each consistent with evidence-based practice.

Another consideration is the extent to which dependency on schools and school districts as clients would affect the willingness of nonprofits to promote evidence-based

practice. To gain access to schools and school districts to do the "socially useful" work that they want to do (and to also gain revenue), nonprofits must offer something educators value. That something might be the provision of resources (financial, personnel, material), legitimation or status, or the promise of real improvement. If schools or school districts continue to stress expediency and visibility more than evidence of effectiveness, it will be difficult for nonprofits to gain access by arguing that their value is that they are "evidence-based." However, to the extent that federal and state policy, especially *No Child Left Behind*, encourage schools to adopt evidence-based practices, nonprofits working in education may also have to move in that direction.

But what form of evidence-based practice will the federal and state accountability pressures push schools and school districts, and their nonprofit partners to adopt? It is certainly possible that high-stakes accountability pressures might push schools and school systems toward a more expedient "technology transfer" form of evidence-based practice. Indeed, the push for short-term, measurable improvement in test scores may serve as a disincentive for the schools and school systems that need it most to engage in the longer-term process-oriented evidence-based practice that we advance here. As a consequence nonprofits offering highly specified programs of improvement supported by evidence of increased test scores will be advantaged over those seeking to help schools build professional cultures that foster continuous improvement.

Isomorphic Behavior

Beyond relationships with particular funders, stakeholders, or clients, the broader norms and expectations of the education and policy environment, indeed the school improvement market, may have substantial influence on whether and how nonprofits

promote evidence-based practice. It is more than an issue of gaining access and resources from particular sources. It is a matter of developing and sustaining legitimacy, vitality, and competitiveness in the broader environment. In public education in the United States evidence-based practice, however it is defined, is gaining greater credence in the school improvement market and in the broader environment as it is being promoted by federal and state policies. Nonprofits may be "pushed" away from promoting more faddish or innovative products that have a weak base of evidence to a narrow form of evidence-based practice, not only to be more competitive for resources but also to establish and sustain broader legitimacy. This could discourage innovation and disadvantage small nonprofits. Only large nonprofits might be able to mount the sorts of research and development initiatives required to test new ideas in scientifically credible ways. And these larger nonprofits could become more dependent on federal grants and thus federal approval of their research and evidence. In turn, this could reduce the special value of nonprofits in the broader pluralist environment.

At issue is what counts as evidence-based practice in the broader environment as well as in relationships with funders and client schools and school districts. Many nonprofits that work in education claim to be "evidence-based" but it is not clear how many of them really are (this depends in part on how evidence-based practice is defined). In the introduction to this chapter, we described some of the different ways that external organizations claim to be "evidence-based." Returning to the example of Kentucky, Corcoran and his colleagues (2001) found that of the 700 organizations that were accepting state funds to provide professional development services for teachers, only 60 could produce any evidence to support their claims of impact. Only a handful had

evidence that would meet minimum standards of research and evaluation methodology. For the vast majority of these organizations, the mere claim of being evidence-based was sufficient to receive funds for services.

Promoting evidence-based practice may help nonprofits establish credibility and legitimacy in the broader environment, which may help them become more visible and competitive in crowded markets in which they operate. Where markets are not so crowded, the issue of wider credibility and legitimacy may not be so important, as least in the short-term. Organizations and programs like Success For All, the Merck Institute for Science Education, the National Center for Education and the Economy, the Boston Plan for Excellence, and others like them illustrate this point. These nonprofits have funded large-scale, independent evaluations of their work because they believed that credible evidence would help them improve the quality of their programs and services, enhance their legitimacy, promote their visibility and reputations, and expand their work with schools. Nonprofits that serve smaller markets with little competition have had less need to produce evidence to establish reputations in their environments. For example, the El Paso Collaborative for Excellence in Education and the Fund for Excellence in Baltimore have national reputations, but only recently have begun to invest in the collection of data about the impact of their work. Similarly, the International Baccalaureate Program has never conducted systematic evaluations of its work but has earned an international reputation for quality. Now under pressure from new federal mandates, this program has begun to develop a research program to collect evidence of its effectiveness.

Autonomy and Accountability

Competition for scare resources and the push toward accountability may provide important new incentives for nonprofits working in education to promote evidence-based practice. As we discussed earlier, norms of organizational autonomy and freedom from accountability among nonprofits are being challenged in the current environment. The heightened press for accountability may encourage nonprofits to adopt evidence-based practice inasmuch as funders, clients, and the broader environment may be "defining" accountability in those terms. This new accountability may require more than making simple (and sometimes highly selective) references to previous research to support a nonprofit's strategies. It may require producing evidence of results. Again, depending on the definition of accountability, and depending on the competitiveness of the market in which they operate, nonprofits may lose school and district "clients" to other "providers" if they cannot demonstrate that their services contribute to school performance. Evidence-based practice can help them do that.

This raises the important issue of the capacity of a nonprofit to develop evidence of its own effectiveness. To provide such evidence, it must have staff with the technical capacity for research and development, or partners with such expertise, and the resources to support this work. There must also be incentives in place for nonprofits to overcome the aversion to engaging in self-evaluation that might reveal evidence of ineffectiveness or inconsistency across contexts.

Finally, there is the possibility that heightened accountability may lead nonprofits to be more selective about the schools and school districts with which they work. They may avoid those with poor track records and few resources—the "tough cases"—for the

risks they pose to achieving successful outcomes. Instead, nonprofits might seek schools and school systems with better records and stronger capacity that present them with a greater likelihood of success.

Flexibility and Capacity for Experimentation and Innovation

As we advance it here, evidence-based practice requires adaptation as evidence warrants. The autonomy and freedom from accountability traditionally associated with nonprofit organizations may thus make them particularly well suited to promote evidence-based practice. In theory, those nonprofits able to develop and sustain adequate levels of resources and to attract professional research and development staff will be able to gain the independence needed to experiment and innovate. However, our analysis suggests that there are a number of factors that may severely constrain nonprofits' ability to be flexible and adaptive. Indeed, these factors may promote conservatism and persistence in nonprofit behavior rather than experimentation and innovation.

These factors include the tendency for nonprofits, particularly normatively oriented ones, to act in ways that reinforce and preserve their missions and primary strategies. Nonprofits are prone to isomorphic behavior, which may encourage conformity over innovation. Nonprofits may also be influenced in conservative directions by the expectations of those organizations that support them. Heightened accountability, which on the one hand may provide an incentive for nonprofits to adopt evidence-based practice may on the other push them toward less risky school clients and less risky, perhaps less effective practices. None of these influences are necessarily conducive to promoting the forms of evidence-based practice we believe hold the greatest value for schools.

Internal Stresses and Crises of Identity

The internal stresses and crises faced by nonprofits also have implications for their promotion of evidence-based practice. Competition for scarce resources; tensions between the need for revenue generation and the provision of quality service; increasing and conflicting demands on leadership; tensions and power differences among volunteer, professional, and managerial staff; conflicts among efforts to meet demands and expectations of diverse funders and stakeholders; all these issues may make it difficult for nonprofits to devote the resources and sustain the commitment necessary to promote evidence-based practice over time.

Among all these sources of tension and stress, the tension between growing commercialism and the preservation of the public service function may hold the most important implications for the promotion of evidence-based practice. The trend toward commercialism may push nonprofits more toward a product orientation rather than a service orientation in their work. This would be consistent with the federal administration's view of evidence-based practice as "technology transfer" and NCLB offers incentives for nonprofits to move in this direction. However, "going commercial" carries its own costs and requires the commitment of internal resources. There are both direct and opportunity costs. Resources that might have gone into working with schools must be put toward product development, marketing, and advertising. Ironically, going commercial to become more competitive may invite more competition from other nonprofits and for-profits, and this may intensify internal tension and stress.

A product orientation and its attendant costs may reduce the ability of nonprofits to promote evidence-based practice as we have defined it here. This form of evidence-

based practice requires long-term process oriented relationships with schools and school districts that may be viewed as inefficient and costly if nonprofits become concerned with product development, testing, and dissemination. Facing financial stringency, nonprofits may have to reconcile the tension between developing and selling products, having immediate impact on test scores, and generating more revenue and providing services which may be less profitable but more effective in achieving their mission and goals in the long-run. This conflict is clearly illustrated in the case of comprehensive school reform developers who have found that there was more money to be made in selling model components to private vendors than in providing long-term process-oriented services to schools. This choice has often been justified as a more effective dissemination strategy so that "effective" programs could reach more users. However, this strategy may not necessarily be the most effective one for promoting continuous improvements in schools.

As we suggested earlier, "going commercial" may also threaten public and political perceptions of nonprofits' motives and their claims to altruistic public service. It may challenge their credibility and "moral" capital and compromise their legal protections and financial support. In addition, commercialism may introduce a new and different form of nonprofit accountability—the market. These conditions also may create incentives for nonprofits to embrace evidence-based practice. If a nonprofit can provide credible evidence that its services are effective it may do better marketing its products and services to schools in the commercial market. More fundamentally, if a nonprofit can show that through evidence-based practice it is providing a high quality service and is achieving the outcomes expected of it, it also may enhance its public image. It can

demonstrate that the focus of its efforts is on the client rather than its own interests. In doing so a nonprofit can help preserve its reputation for altruistic service and preserve the public trust.

<div align="center">Concluding Observations</div>

Our analysis suggests a number of observations about nonprofit organizations and the promotion of the form of evidence-based practice we advance here. First, there seems to be nothing inherent in the organizational or legal structure of nonprofits that creates incentives for them to promote evidence-based practice. However, there are other characteristics of nonprofits, notably their missions and sources of legitimation, that have more significant implications for their willingness and capacity to promote evidence-based practice. Our analysis suggests that nonprofits that have relied on the salience of educational problems and on passion and charisma to legitimate their actions and attract support may experience difficulty moving to evidence-based practice. For these organizations, politics, connections to the communities they serve, and persuasive philosophies have been and may remain more important than evidence justifying their actions. Our analysis also suggests that nonprofits are more likely to promote evidence-based practice if their funders and client schools and school districts insist on it. Nonprofits are also more likely to promote evidence-based practice if it is expected in the broader social, political, and policy environments in which they operate.

Our analysis suggests that large, well-funded nonprofits may find it easier to promote evidence-based practice. These organizations may be better able than smaller, less well-supported nonprofits to support the staff and dedicate the resources to stay connected to the knowledge base, to develop evidence of their effectiveness, and to

engage in continuous adaptation of strategy. Because of their connections to the knowledge base and because of their ability to perform research and development functions, larger, professionally based nonprofits may be more capable of promoting evidence-based practice than community-based or volunteer-based nonprofits. It is always possible that small, less technically capable nonprofits could collaborate with other organizations to enhance their analytic capacity, but as we argued earlier such inter-organizational relationships are complex and may introduce new problems that diminish the value added. And, problem-oriented nonprofits may also be more likely to be able to promote evidence-based practice than those that are organized around specific ideologies, products, or solutions. Their pragmatic stance toward solutions equips them better for the demands of evidence-based practice.

We think that the development of an evidence-based environment could lead to more nonprofit failures and to consolidation within the sector as some nonprofits struggle to develop evidence of their effectiveness. Large regional and national nonprofits with the capacity to provide evidence of their effectiveness are likely to gain the greatest market share. Smaller, local nonprofits are more likely to fail in such an environment. Pressure from the environment to demonstrate effects may raise personnel, research and development, and operating costs for nonprofits that may encourage consolidation in the sector. This may provide an incentive for commercialization to generate new sources of revenue. And this we have argued may undermine the overall impact of the shift to evidence-based practice by focusing attention more on the "product," by deemphasizing the "process" or support side of evidence-based practice, and by raising questions about nonprofits as "protected" pubic service organizations.

Finally, we think that increasing demand for evidence of effectiveness, among other dynamics that shape their behavior, may make nonprofits more conservative and risk averse. This may lead nonprofits to look for "safe" places to work that would increase their chances of success and to favor "sustaining" innovations rather than more "disruptive" ones. And this would create an ironic situation where schools and school districts that might benefit the most from evidence-based practice might be least likely to avail themselves of it, and where strategies that might be most conducive to school improvement are sacrificed to the self-preservation of the agent or to the stability of a relationship of mutual dependency.

Are nonprofit organizations capable of promoting the form of evidence-based practice that we advance it here? Yes, we believe they are. However, this conclusion is conditional. The ability of nonprofits to promote evidence-based practice depends on their own orientations and resource base. It also depends on the relationships they have with those organizations that support them and the expectations of the broader environment in which they operate. Those nonprofits most capable of promoting evidence-based practice may be the largest, most pragmatic, well-established and well-funded ones with the strongest record of performance and innovation. These organizations may have the financial, technical, and political capital to assume the risks associated with evidence-based practice and to shape the environment so that it is more supportive of their work. We are less sanguine about the potential of smaller, more ideological, less well established and less well-funded nonprofits to do this work well.

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