Evidence to Action: Reflections from a PolicyLab Alum

Date Posted:

Dec 17, 2018

How can we translate research into action? How can we infuse policy with the best of what we know? How can we support families to thrive? These are questions I have long wrestled with—from my first job mentoring youth in foster care to my current role at the Stoneleigh Foundation.

In September 2008, I began working at PolicyLab before the center even had a name. Dave Rubin and Kathleen Noonan hired me to help build PolicyLab from the ground up. Ten years later, I write this blog post with great pride, for, just as I helped launch PolicyLab, PolicyLab launched me.

During my tenure at the center, I wore many hats—from overseeing communications and establishing the center's organizational infrastructure to connecting with policy partners and collaborating on research. One of my earliest projects was drafting PolicyLab's inaugural "Evidence to Action" brief on the Children's Stability and Well-Being study. I remember sitting in Dave Rubin's office when the term "evidence to action" was first coined. Our goal was to get the research into the hands of policymakers and practitioners quickly and accessibly, and our method was simple. We paired each research finding with an action, and for each action, we identified "who" needed to do "what" and "how" and "why" they should do it. This approach, set in motion in that brief, has since become a guiding discipline at the center.

Applying Evidence to Action

To me, working on PolicyLab's impact strategy on psychotropic medication research epitomized the power of the "evidence to action" framework.

In 2012, PolicyLab researchers completed a comprehensive analysis of psychotropic medication use among children in foster care, revealing that clinicians were overprescribing these medications to children and, alarmingly, that the likelihood of a child being medicated varied greatly from state to state. At around the same time, newly enacted federal legislation was requiring each state to develop a health care oversight and coordination plan, including psychotropic medication guidelines, for children in foster care.

We knew that simply publishing PolicyLab's research would be insufficient at getting critical data into the right hands. So we also built interactive maps to make the data more accessible, traveled to Washington, D.C., to coordinate directly with policymakers and worked with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to distribute the data to state Medicaid and child welfare leadership. Locally, we drilled down on Pennsylvania's data and ultimately rewrote the state's oversight guidance, which has since been implemented successfully statewide.

Taking Change to Scale

During my last year at PolicyLab, I had an amazing opportunity to apply this model at a macro scale. The Chairman of the federal *Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities* asked me to serve as its

public health advisor. Congress established a bipartisan commission to build a national policy strategy to prevent child fatalities. My job was to synthesize the research, and then make it actionable. I spent much of my time examining strategies being tried by jurisdictions around the country. I explored where there was promising evidence, what might be transferrable and what could be taken to scale. Throughout the process, I sought to answer the same questions I had been trained to answer at PolicyLab, including honing "who" needed to do "what." Two years later, we developed a roadmap to prevent fatalities that has since been incorporated into the federal *Family First Services and Prevention Act* and in countless efforts locally, from San Diego, California to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Driving Systems Change

In my current role at the Stoneleigh Foundation, PolicyLab's "evidence to action" model continues to guide my work. Stoneleigh awards fellowships to exceptional researchers, policymakers and practitioners who work within and alongside youth-serving systems to catalyze change. As a program officer, I recruit, mentor and support our fellows to maximize their impact in the field. Two recent Stoneleigh fellows I have advised especially epitomize the "evidence to action" approach.

Abigail Gray is a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania who is examining innovative approaches to improve school climate. The School District of Philadelphia has made great strides to transform its discipline policies, but many of its schools are still struggling to become trauma-informed. Abigail's fellowship established a research-practice partnership to enhance the District's use of evidence in its school climate work. She is now collaborating with the District to rapidly implement and evaluate projects to improve school climate and identify promising practices to scale up.

In other instances, the "evidence to action" framework is flipped—whereby policymakers are prepared to act, but they need evidence to know what course of action will lead to the best result. Dominique Mikell's Emerging Leader Fellowship addressed this precise challenge. As an early career researcher, Dominique partnered with Juvenile Law Center (JLC) to examine the implementation of Pennsylvania's extended foster care legislation. While policymakers and advocates generally agreed that young people's utilization of extended foster care could be strengthened, they first needed a better understanding of the barriers to its implementation. Dominique's quantitative and qualitative research equipped JLC with the knowledge it needed to advocate for policy improvements.

Building Leaders

Critical to my work at PolicyLab was mentoring faculty and staff on the "evidence to action" model, and I truly appreciate that this role has continued at Stoneleigh. I partnered closely with Abigail to craft her fellowship, helping her look beyond her traditional research lens in designing her project. Similarly, I provided counsel to Dominique on working with policy partners and carrying out applied research. Dominique continues to build on these learnings and grow her leadership, now as a PhD candidate in social welfare. I am grateful for the mentorship muscles that PolicyLab helped me to build and, in turn, am now thrilled to be building the next generation of social changemakers at Stoneleigh.

As the center wraps up its 10th anniversary year, I've really been reflecting on how PolicyLab's "evidence to action" framework has profoundly impacted how I think about and conduct my work. PolicyLab showed me how to make sure that research doesn't just sit on a shelf, but rather actively propels smarter and lasting systems change.

Sarah Zlotnik, MSPH, MSW, is a program officer at the Stoneleigh Foundation.

This post is part of our series in recognition of PolicyLab's 10th anniversary and our ongoing efforts to chart new frontiers in children's health research and policy. Other topics have included innovation in pediatric primary care

, the value of community-engaged research and PolicyLab's origin story.