I’m delighted to welcome you back home to the 41st annual meeting of the Association for Education Finance and Policy. This is my twentieth AEFP meeting, and I know that there are a few of you who have been to all 41. I also know that there are dozens of you for whom this is your very first AEFP meeting. Whether this is your first, your 41st, or like most of us, somewhere in between, I wish you a hearty welcome.

Dan Goldhaber and his program committee choose a very timely theme for this year’s conference: “The Perils of Research Irrelevance: Balancing Data Use Against Privacy Concerns”.

While I’ve only been active in AEFP for half of our history, during that time I’ve seen how the advent of large-scale administrative datasets has transformed many aspects of education research and what we know about policies and practices.

These data are collected for purely administrative purposes, but they represent remarkable new opportunities for expanding our knowledge and, through the conduct of analyses with more comprehensive data and better sources of exogenous variation than could typically be used in times past, challenging conventional wisdom in many areas based on previous research utilizing other sources like surveys.

Administrative data also facilitate study of research questions that have heretofore not been possible to study credibly at all. Researchers who are able to access these data, especially those able to link data across administrative domains, have the ability to make extraordinary scientific advances by exploiting the population-wide data sets combined with the increased opportunity for identification of causal effects through exogenous variation by, for instance, policy changes, natural disasters, and other shocks that affect some groups of people but not others.

In addition to natural experiments, these data can facilitate the conduct of field experiments, where the subjects of short-term experiments can be followed administratively for a longer period of time in manners that would have been impossible or prohibitively expensive to do absent large-scale administratively-collected data. The new insights from these studies have extraordinary potential to inform education policy and practice. Indeed, the massive growth in the quality and diversity of social science research on educational topics is certainly related to the increased availability of good administrative data.
All of this is great for policymakers and practitioners as well. Legislators and education policy leaders need to make decisions about funding for programs and policies, evaluate personnel, and identify priorities. The advent of large-scale administrative data, and its use in research, provides opportunities for more compelling evidence on a wider range of topics of extremely high policy importance and currency than has ever before been possible. Partnerships and data-sharing between the policy, practice, and research communities makes great sense, for all involved.

But there are lots of factors that make data-sharing and research-practice partnerships more challenging. Citizens are very concerned, and appropriately so, about the confidentiality of data about individual students and teachers. As the sophistication of data storage technology increases, so does the savvy of data hackers who might seek to abuse information. Therefore, a shared data system must put into place safeguards regarding the storage and access of confidential information, and data users must be trained in ethics and data usage. I applaud the Data Quality Campaign and their collaborators for their statement of student data principles that emphasize both the rationale and need for data use, but also the responsibilities inherent in responsible data use – issues like the maintenance of data privacy and security, procedures for determining who gets to use data and for which purpose, and how the data will be destroyed after that purpose is finished, and thinking about remedies for data breaches and the like. Every member of the research community has a responsibility to every student and their families to think of datasets not as a resource to be exploited, but rather as a deep and abiding trust relationship. Researchers sometimes forget, but never should, that the word “confidential” derives from the Latin “fidere”, “to trust”.

Education policy leaders who would share data files are also concerned about confidentiality, and they impose additional demands regarding the costs in making data files accessible and the kind of research that needs to be conducted with education data. They are responsible for increased reporting of education progress and accountability programs, while their resources decline in a time of austerity. They seek data systems that can reduce their cost and workload, and they seek relationships with researchers who can facilitate their reporting and evaluation quality. They are aware of attacks on education from many perspectives, including the potential for attacks from those who would devalue data-sharing endeavors. They are also aware that sharing data with researchers means they will get more accurate information about whether their policies are effective, and that the results may or may not support their state’s or locality’s current policy direction. Education policymakers and practitioners value relationships with scholars that depend on trust that builds with experience. Carefully-crafted data-sharing agreements and repeated, thoughtful interactions between all involved helps all around.

I should point out that the research-practice relationship is not a one-way street. In my own experience, I’ve learned that policymakers and practitioners are highly valuable to research, not just because they possess the data, but also because they
possess the knowledge. They understand how the institutions work and frequently have had lots of experience with trial and error. Some of my closest relationships are with educators and education administrators, who constantly teach me how much I have to learn about the institutions I study, help me to frame new research questions, craft new research designs, and interpret results. Efforts like the Spencer Foundation’s program on research-practice partnerships, which emphasize true collaborations, will surely deeply benefit both education practice and research. Policy-relevant research is at its best when it is reflective of the realities that policymakers and practitioners face. And while policy-relevant research need not concern the issues that are currently front-of-mind for policymakers and practitioners, researchers have an obligation to translate our research so that it is usable and seen as useful.

All of these conversations are major objectives of AEFP! I look forward to hearing what you are all up to!