

An Interview with Michael Kirst

Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Research

PEOPLE IN Educational Evaluation and Research (PEER), prepared by the Phi Delta Kappa Center on Evaluation, Development, and Research, introduces *Kappan* readers to individuals who make exemplary contributions to research or who make effective, practical applications of research in the administration of public schools. Michael Kirst is featured in this PEER column because of the exemplary way in which he is bridging the gap between policy and research in California.

With his colleague James Guthrie, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Kirst created and now co-directs Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), a university-based education policy center. PACE was established in 1983 to provide legislators and policy makers with a broad foundation of information on which to base education policies. PACE researchers act independently — free from the influence of government or of education interest groups, yet able to provide both groups with data and advice.

Kirst's unique qualifications and experiences enable him to see many sides of an educational issue. He is currently a professor of education and business administration and a member of the affiliated faculty in political science at Stanford University. He has served as president of the California State Board of Education (1977-81), vice president of the American Educational Research Association, and commissioner of the Education Commission of the States. Before joining the Stanford faculty, Kirst held sever-

al positions with the federal government, including staff director of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty and director of program planning and evaluation for the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Office of Education.

CEDR: How did the idea of PACE originate?

KIRST: The need for such a center grew out of the changing role of the state in setting school policy. Over the last few decades, there has been tremendous growth in the state role in education in California. Starting in the 1960s, there were state budget controls related to the accountability movement; state categorical programs for disadvantaged, handicapped, and bilingual children; school finance reforms; and minimum competency testing — joined in the mid-1980s by the academic standards reform movement. With these changes, the state became involved in setting education policy, a very different situation from the old days when education interest groups (i.e., teachers' and administrators' organizations) set policy. Now state government officials create education policies, and local interest groups react to them. Educators lost control of the state agenda quite a while ago.

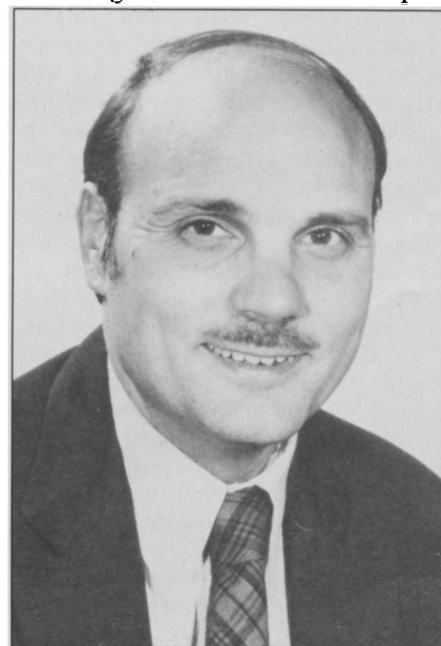
CEDR: Who are your clients?

KIRST: We serve the state's policy-making community: elected legislators, state education department officials, the governor's aides, journalists, business leaders, and some interest groups. California has the nation's largest state policy analysis staff serving its legislature and its department of education. However, most members of the policy-making community are too busy with day-to-day operations to reflect on policy alternatives and to study the impact of policies.

CEDR: The development of PACE has been aided greatly by the high quality of California's education database. What kinds of materials are included, and why is this database so highly regarded?

KIRST: The state pays for and collects data. The state department of finance prepares 10-year enrollment projections for public and private schools, which are updated annually. The state department of education collects information annually on teachers, students, test scores, and school finance.

One of the kingpins of the database is the California Assessment Program, which provides us with achievement data by school over a 10- to 15-year period. The program tests students at grades 3, 6, 8, 10, and 12. The data are broken down by quartiles, so that we can examine students' scores more carefully. By combining data from the assessment pro-



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gram with data collected at the building level, PACE can give policy makers information on the characteristics of teachers, on per-pupil expenditures for instruction and administration, and on course-enrollment patterns. Using data on school characteristics and on the socioeconomic background of the parents, PACE can predict student achievement in a particular school.

A second set of data in the PACE database is called the California Basic Education Data Systems. This data set tells us what courses are taught and who's taking which courses. With these data we can report the trends by school in general mathematics, algebra, trigonometry, geometry, analytic geometry, and so on. We can compare schools over a given period of time, or we can take a 10-year look at any given school.

CEDR: When a decision must be made for which there are no data, what do legislators do? Do you know of any cases in which this has happened?

KIRST: There are times when policy makers have to speculate. For example, the question of a statewide salary schedule for teachers was seriously discussed in California. Many states have a salary minimum, but no state has a total salary schedule that would remove this item from collective bargaining at the local level. A statewide salary schedule might have some real merit, but there are no data on the effects of such a schedule. However, policy makers could reason out the possible effects. They could also sort through a set of possible assumptions and simulate the potential outcomes.

Not all analysis is driven by databases. In the classic view of eclectic policy analysis, researchers draw on economics, sociology, and political science, as well as on educational practice. Policy issue networks — groups of individuals who create formal or informal networks focusing on specific issues — can give policy makers a great deal of information.

CEDR: What do PACE researchers do when there are no data on a given issue?

KIRST: Times when we have absolutely no data are very rare. But even the absence of data tells us something. If a project is so good, why doesn't somebody fund it somewhere? If a project is only in place in six locales, what are the characteristics of those locales? In the absence of data, we might urge legislators to conduct pilot studies. Experimental pilot programs are very popular in California, and legislators like to view

themselves as having ideas that are newer than anyone else's. If there's not much known about something, that isn't going to stop them. They will just go ahead — on the theory that, if nobody's thought of this idea, it might just be the right thing to do.

If a decision is a big disaster, however, legislators will often revise it after a while. We had a program called Cash for CAP (California Assessment Program), which gave money to those schools that increased their achievement test scores by certain percentages. But state policy makers believed that many of the achievement increases were random effects, and Cash for CAP was phased out.

CEDR: Many educational researchers are working in areas of interest to policy makers. With a bountiful literature in educational research, why are centers like PACE needed?

KIRST: Researchers are frequently not tuned in to the primary concerns of state policy makers. They work on whatever they are interested in — and, if it happens to coincide with current issues, it happens to coincide.

But if research data are not available when legislators are considering an issue, the opportunity is gone. In California, legislation on dropouts came and went like Halley's comet. It was number two on our hit parade in September 1985. By 1986 it was no longer on the hit parade at all, even though dropouts were (and still are) a problem. By the time the academic community got cranked up about dropouts, the issue was dead for legislators.

Many academics have collected data, but they don't know how to use them to influence state policy. Most professors don't know enough about state policy making to translate the data they have into usable form.

CEDR: How do PACE researchers work with policy makers?

KIRST: After the legislature adjourns, we spend some time shopping for ideas. We talk with legislators, in an effort to determine which issues will be arising next year. They tell us the areas in which they lack understanding or about which they need information or a fresh perspective.

CEDR: How do you present this information to legislators?

KIRST: We produce brief reports. Legislators want short, timely, to-the-point papers that suggest alternatives for policy decisions. Since we don't expect

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many policy makers to read even these 15- to 20-page reports, we try to meet with them personally to explain the various issues and alternatives. The report that we leave with them serves as a reference document.

CEDR: What do you include in a typical report?

KIRST: A report generally gives the history of the issue, an analysis of policy alternatives, and an evaluation of the alternatives. Sometimes it also includes recommendations or a variety of perspectives on the issue. Some PACE reports warn legislators about the need for making policy in a particular area. For example, over the past three to four years enrollments in vocational education have declined by about 30%. We've asked legislators what they want to do with the vocational education system — let it atrophy or make policy that will shore it up?

CEDR: You use a newspaper format for your annual report, *Conditions of Education in California*. Why is that?

KIRST: People get a lot of information from newspapers. Most people do not read detailed reports, but they do read the print media. This makes the print media crucial conduits for funneling policy information to policy makers.

So we have developed a systematic strategy for working with the print media. We send out press advisories, announcing that PACE is going to release a report. Our tabloid report, *Conditions of Education in California*, serves as a wedge to get our data into the general

media. In September, just as school opens, we rent press clubs and hold press conferences around the state to proclaim the condition of education. Our presentations come directly from the tabloid report, and our themes are clearly stated in the headlines.

The full report, a 163-page book, is distributed to reporters to use as a reference. We urge the reporters to call us, and we take time to answer their questions. We have PACE offices throughout the state, and journalists seem to feel free to phone local PACE staff members. By providing such services, we build trust.

CEDR: What is the relationship of your press strategy to policy decisions?

KIRST: The newspapers help us alert policy makers to issues that ought to be on the agenda and help us frame the assumptions under which policy makers begin to approach solutions. In other words, they highlight emerging problems, help us set the policy-making agenda, and orient policy makers to the basic assumptions that underlie some solutions. But the newspapers are not going to solve the problems.

CEDR: Do you have any concern about how the information that you produce is used? In your view, has a PACE analysis, policy statement, or policy brief ever been misused? If so, how do you handle that kind of situation?

KIRST: That's a good question, because I think that many educational researchers dislike seeing their data summarized in ways that differ from their own interpretations. That's one reason they don't talk to the press very often. If researchers are going to deal with the policy-making community in highly charged political environments, however, they are going to have to be willing to see things they have written or said be somewhat distorted by partisan participants, who will make partial use of this or that to support a point of view.

In my view, most journalists don't distort; they just pick and choose what they want to say. It takes great skill to anticipate how quotes will be used — to say things that are graphic, punchy, and quotable but that still convey the point in a wholly rounded way that is hard to use out of context.

CEDR: PACE researchers are currently evaluating California's omnibus reform bill, S.B. 813. Describe the bill and your evaluation efforts for *Kappan* readers.

KIRST: State governments are spend-

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ing a pathetically small amount of money — many of them are spending virtually nothing at all — to evaluate the outcomes of their education reform measures. Many states have enacted omnibus reform bills, which are difficult to evaluate. We call S.B. 813 the "omnibeast," because it includes about 80 reforms. Higher academic standards and improved teaching conditions are at the core of the bill, but various legislators added on their pet reforms. Anybody who had a good idea threw it in the pot.

Most of us at PACE have done program evaluation or some general monitoring of indicators, but the omnibeast overwhelmed both of those technologies. After some debate, we decided to conduct a formative evaluation, finding out where the reforms are working well and how the state has helped them do so — choosing schools that have made big jumps in achievement, attendance, and other quantitative indicators.

This kind of in-depth, school-based evaluation is expensive and time-consuming, since it involves several levels of research. First, we want to understand the process of change in the school over time. What was the school like before the reform bill, and how is it transformed now? We have decided to tell this story through interviews with key people. Second, we intend to examine the support structure for administrative commitment and staff development. Third, we plan to examine the most interesting part of reform: academic standards. We will gather data on syllabuses

and course lists, and we will talk with teachers about how their courses have changed over time. We will combine this data with information from other sources — including studies on school change, at-risk students, and aggregate and cumulative effects — in order to get a holistic picture of school reform in California.

CEDR: What point have we reached in the reform movement?

KIRST: I think we're at the end of the first wave of reform — a period of digestion, consolidation, and reconsideration. A call for "efficiency" seems to be taking shape. I think that many states would use research data on the reforms that have proved effective and the reforms that have not, if they had a source from which to obtain such data. Many states can't fund everything they've included in their omnibeasts. They're going to have to sift and sort the programs covered in their omnibus bills, and they'll do that either through hearsay or through the informed use of research findings.

CEDR: What is the next wave of reform going to be?

KIRST: The next wave of reform might have to do with children's policy. State officials ought to decide whether they want to make policy for children or policy for preschools, schools, juvenile justice agencies, and so on. Although concern for children is rising, there is still an underinvestment in them. As a society, we have chosen to invest much more money in people over 60 than in the young. I am concerned that politicians will pit the two groups against each other.

The history of children's policy has been first to blame and then to penalize the family for messing up with its children. But there's a growing awareness that the family unit today is different from what it was in the past. The federal government is not leading in the area of family policy anymore, and it may now be up to the state governments to play a major role.

CEDR: You are working on a project about the condition of children in California. Please describe that project for *Kappan* readers.

KIRST: The Condition of Children Project is funded by two San Francisco groups: the James Irvine Foundation and the Stuart Foundations (whose money is generated by the Carnation Company). The study is unique in two respects: its scope and the fact that it is directed by an education organization, rather than a children's agency or a school of social

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welfare. We've drawn together a consortium of authors with specializations in health, education, employment, demography, poverty, child care, social welfare, and criminal justice. This broad-based collaboration will make possible a comprehensive treatment of the vital issues affecting children.

In addition to studying problems that are results of poverty — lack of prenatal care, health problems, parental problems, problems related to family structure — we will be studying issues that affect children of all social classes. What do children think about? What are their attitudes? What do they do in their spare time? What interest do they have in schooling? How much time do they spend watching television? What are their motivations for learning or not learning? What other public or private agencies besides the schools influence their lives? What is the impact of religion on the young?

The report will compare the condition of California children with the condition of children in other states and nations in terms of such things as minimum standards, equity criteria, trends, values, and attitudes. It will include information about middle-class children and about youngsters attending schools in the private sector. Then it will examine children's policy holistically, in light of all this information.

If a new vision of children's policy emerges, it will have implications for teacher training. We will have to train teachers to think about the services

offered by the schools and about their abilities as teachers to broker other services.

CEDR: Is PACE unique because of its five directors, or can it be replicated?

KIRST: You can't replicate the idea intact without having at hand a fairly unusual combination of individuals. Location is a big factor. An antagonistic, insecure relationship exists among state officials in some states, and nothing like PACE could happen there. But I think that most states can duplicate to some extent what we have.

CEDR: What advice would you give to people who are interested in establishing a center similar to PACE?

KIRST: You need established bases that are perceived as legitimate. A lot of the major state universities could do some of the things that PACE does and have an impact. Consortia of universities would be even better. There are enough state universities that have both legitimacy and the right kind of people. Many of these universities are also located close to or in the state capitals where policy decisions are made.

Historically, universities are not oriented to serving state government very well. As I have already noted, education policy making is drifting increasingly toward the state level. But universities have traditionally been oriented more strongly toward practice at the local level. If universities are going to emulate PACE and take state policy seriously, they will have to create staffs for this enterprise in the same fashion as they have created staffs to cover other new areas, such as

educational technology. They will have to hire from a variety of departments within the university. Meanwhile, the vision and leadership have to come from the top, from a mixture of people — perhaps the president and the trustees — who are thoroughly tied into the ebb and flow of state politics. Our experience to date has demonstrated that it's tough for schools of education to do this on their own.

CEDR: As the idea of PACE spreads, how will legislators in the various states use the information that policy analysts give them?

KIRST: They will use it to refine and improve policies, to reduce the funding for some programs and increase the funding for others, to revamp, to revise, and to improve. For example, some of the 80 reforms mandated by S.B. 813 are losers and ought to be eliminated. But many education policies interact, and one often cannot be divorced from another.

CEDR: Isn't that also true of educational research — that one part of the teaching/learning process under study is often connected to many other parts of the process?

KIRST: Yes, and that's why state governments have to be willing to fund in-depth school research. They also have to use more than simple performance indicators, such as course enrollments and test results. Performance indicators provide a superficial look at policy interactions; they tell us nothing about which aspects need improving or about which initiatives are ineffective or inefficient. K



"Let's take it from where the music teacher quit!"