

# Overcoming the Challenges: A Response to Alan H. Schoenfeld’s “What Doesn’t Work”

by Rebecca Herman, Robert Boruch, Rebecca Powell, Steven Fleischman, and Rebecca Maynard  
*What Works Clearinghouse*

**W**e appreciate the opportunity to respond, as representatives of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), to Alan Schoenfeld’s article about that organization. The article sets forth his concerns regarding outcome measurement used by the WWC and claims that his contributions to the WWC were subject to censorship.

To begin, we would like to thank Alan Schoenfeld for his contributions to the WWC as senior content advisor of the middle school math review. In that role, he was responsible for advisement on content issues. For example, he played a key role in identifying the mathematics skills and knowledge areas that must be covered by an assessment study if it is to be considered relevant to the WWC review. Schoenfeld’s guidance led to advances such as reporting more explicitly the outcomes measured in studies under review.

## Outcome Measurement Used by the WWC

Schoenfeld questions the WWC’s strategy for handling outcome measures. He believes that math curricula have evolved, that current assessments do not measure the full range of outcomes targeted in current curricula, and that the WWC should review only studies that use the most comprehensive assessments. This is especially important, he believes, for interventions focusing on nontraditional outcomes that might be missed by traditional assessments.

When Schoenfeld first raised this concern, the WWC discussed the issue with the WWC Technical Advisory Group (TAG), a group of distinguished experts in research design, program evaluation, and research synthesis who have worked in numerous substantive areas both within and outside education.

It was apparent in these and follow-up discussions that there is no definition of “comprehensive” on which math, measurement, and methodology experts can agree, perhaps reflecting the larger discussion regarding mathematics curricula that engages both researchers and practitioners. It is beyond the scope of the WWC to validate individual outcome measures as “comprehensive” or “limited.” For the WWC to try to adjudicate an issue about which there is no consensus in the field would be presumptuous and would immerse the WWC in a debate about “acceptable” outcome

measures that the WWC could not hope to resolve. Furthermore, this task would detract from the time and resources to conduct reviews, our principal task.

The WWC decided to focus on reporting all outcomes that were relevant to the topic, rather than reporting only outcomes found on “comprehensive” tests. This direction reflects the state of the field in mathematics education, the practical matter of focusing on the WWC’s core mission, and the needs expressed by WWC users.

## Perception of Censorship

Schoenfeld raises concerns that an essay that he wrote for the original protocol guiding the middle school math review was not released. He was not unique in this, as other senior advisors for other WWC reviews also had written background essays intended to be included in their protocols. On the basis of urging by focus groups of educators that the WWC reports be made more concise and practical, and because we needed to streamline the WWC protocols, the WWC removed background sections from all of the protocols.

Schoenfeld raises a further concern that IES approves publications produced by the WWC. The work of the WWC is carried out through a contract. IES has an obligation under federal regulations to assure that publications produced under that contract conform to the contractual terms, and the WWC website clearly states that the U.S. Department of Education reviews all final reports. In this sense, the conditions for paid consultant work for a government contractor differ from those for university-based research conducted by scholars who receive federal grants to produce their own work.

In addition to his questions about outcome measures and censorship, Schoenfeld also disputes the WWC’s judgment regarding several studies. We would like to note that each of the decisions that he critiqued was guided by the WWC Evidence Standards and discussed extensively by technical experts.

There is no single solution to all of the issues that we are wrestling with in the field of education research today. Similar dialogues have taken place in the medical and justice systems for some time. We are content that the WWC is one of many venues stimulating such needed conversations in its field. We are pleased by our impact: Publishers and researchers are publicizing the alignment of future studies with the WWC Stan-

dards; foundations and government agencies are recommending the use of the WWC Standards in the development of new studies; and national education organizations are incorporating the WWC Standards as benchmarks.

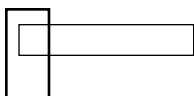
We will continue to listen to educators and researchers, whose comments enable us to provide useful and meaningful reports. We hope that this letter is informative and clarifies some overarching questions for your readers.

## AUTHORS

Rebecca Herman (Project Director), Robert Boruch (Principal Investigator), Rebecca Powell (Communications Co-Director), Steven Fleischman (Communications Co-Director), and Rebecca Maynard (Senior Advisor) are senior staff members of WWC and represent WWC with this response. Correspondence should be addressed to Rebecca Herman, What Works Clearinghouse, AIR, 1000 Thomas Jefferson Street, NW, Washington, DC 20007; e-mail [rherman@air.org](mailto:rherman@air.org).

Manuscript received September 15, 2005

Accepted November 29, 2005



# Reply to Comments From the What Works Clearinghouse on “What Doesn’t Work”

by Alan H. Schoenfeld

Issues of curriculum evaluation can be complex. Some things are straightforward, however. I did not claim, as my colleagues from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) assert, “that the WWC should review only studies that use the most comprehensive assessments.” What I did say is that, whenever the evaluation of a mathematics curriculum is included in a WWC report, the report should also include a content analysis of the assessment(s) used in that evaluation. This is a matter of scientific integrity.

## The Issue of Outcome Measurement

As I have explained, WWC reports cannot be interpreted meaningfully unless one has access to the relevant content analyses. Absent such information, there is the possibility of false positives at the individual student level, the possibility of false negatives at the curriculum level, and an inability to aggregate results meaningfully using meta-analysis.

To produce its middle school mathematics reports, WWC performed a comprehensive review of 20 years of published and unpublished studies. Of all those studies, only 10 met the WWC standards for evidence and were then described in WWC reports. My article discusses the ways in which some of those 10 reports are seriously flawed. It would have taken WWC very little effort to analyze the measures used in those 10 studies, thereby establishing their reports on a firm scientific basis. Yet WWC has refused to do so. Moreover, its representatives avoided addressing this issue in their response to my article, focusing their attention on a claim that I did not make. One has to wonder why.

## Censorship

I am, of course, aware of the distinction between grants and contracts. Indeed, I described the role of the Institute of Education

Sciences (IES) in WWC’s suppression of my work because of the contractual relationship between the two organizations. WWC attempts to avoid responsibility for what it did by pointing to its contract with IES. In pleading its case this way, the WWC leadership is, in essence, defending its role by saying, “We were only following orders.” Granted, IES instructed WWC to take the actions it did. Nonetheless, WWC must share the responsibility for those actions.

Let me be clear about the stakes involved in this case. The issue here is the suppression of a report that challenges the scientific underpinnings of the current federal policy agenda. The WWC website claims that WWC was funded by the government “so that you know what the best scientific evidence has to say.” The evidence suggests otherwise.

In recent years there has been mounting evidence of attempts to suppress research on global warming that challenges the rationale for federal policy in that area. At stake there, and here, are the integrity of the research process and the academic freedom on which it depends. Also at stake is the public trust in results vetted by federally sponsored groups that claim to represent the best that science has to offer. The academic community must strive to preserve the integrity of the research process and its contributions to our society. In the words of John Philpot Curran, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

Manuscript received October 2, 2005

Revision received November 8, 2005

Accepted November 30, 2005