Let laws reflect evidence

By Kenneth A. Dodge

DURHAM - The General Assembly is to be congratulated for its bipartisan actions to learn about the most effective ways to use public dollars on behalf of children and families.

We are in an era of accountability. Public officials are being asked to provide evidence to justify policy choices. The "rules" of evidence are becoming clear: one person's anecdote does not reach the same level of evidence as a randomized controlled trial. A program will not be funded simply because a politically powerful group runs it. A policy will not be endorsed simply because it seems like a good idea.

Especially in these economically challenging times, as we decide where to cut and where to invest, it is critical to use rigorous evidence that a program will work and to collect evidence about a program's impact with our children.

We have learned that many seemingly good programs, such as Scared Straight approaches for delinquent youth and D.A.R.E. school curricula for substance abuse prevention, do not work and waste taxpayers' dollars.

We have also learned that other programs, such as nurse home-visiting for families of newborn babies and multi-systemic therapies for delinquent adolescents, are indeed effective, reap great benefits for society and provide long-term monetary returns that make them wise investment opportunities that our business leaders would want to support in a heartbeat.

The story of North Carolina's graduated driver's license program is a compelling example. After years of highway deaths due to inexperienced and poorly monitored teenagers being given free access to automobiles, state officials helped lead the nation in adopting the concept of a graduated license that initially provides a teenager with limited driving access, followed by increased freedom as the teenager proves her skills on the road.

The policy was formulated based on an understanding of the adolescent brain and has been evaluated rigorously with sound empirical science and found to save lives. As the policy was implemented, new evaluation guided improvements that further enhanced
outcomes. Now, North Carolina is the model for the nation, with 46 states adopting some version of our approach. The reason for the success is simple: The policy depends on empirical evaluation of its effectiveness.

Recently, the legislature hosted the fifth annual Family Impact Seminar. Legislators asked the Center for Child and Family Policy to provide nonpartisan information about how to engage in evidence-based policy-making, so that leaders can make informed decisions about which programs to support and which to cut.

The seminar brought together national experts, state officials in the legislative and executive branches, and community leaders to discuss how to use evidence in setting policy and funding programs so that scarce dollars will be invested wisely.

What are the most pressing problems and challenges that face our children and families? Although we have made strides in our child welfare system, the maltreatment of our children remains high. People are struggling to parent effectively in a context of financial stress. Although reading scores are slightly up, math scores are down, and too many students drop out of school. Adolescent violence and crime continue.

Both Democrats and Republicans can rally around the principle that evidence should drive policy. With evidence-based policymaking, everyone can become confident that children who suffer the disadvantage of a disability or the scourge of an economic downturn will actually be helped by a program. Everyone can become confident that wasteful and ineffective programs will be cut and that dollars will be devoted to wise investments.

It is my hope that our leaders will commit to two policymaking principles: 1) We support programs and policies that work (and cut those programs that are known to be ineffective); and 2) We require the gathering of objective evidence about the effect of our programs so that we learn whether they have the effect that we need. By doing so, North Carolina will become the nation's leader in evidence-based policymaking.

Kenneth A. Dodge is the William McDougall professor of public policy studies at Duke University.

© Copyright 2009, The News & Observer Publishing Company
A subsidiary of The McClatchy Company