Inquiry with Influence

Funding proposal to support and sustain the Wheelock Educational Policy Center
Better information leads to better policy decisions. Perhaps now more than ever, policymakers are looking for empirical research that is not only technically sophisticated but also accessible and relevant to the challenges they face in developing educational systems capable of producing equitable and excellent student outcomes.

Boston University’s newly launched Wheelock Educational Policy Center (WEPC) is committed to pursuing inquiry with influence. WEPC informs local and national public policy conversations by conducting and disseminating rigorous, policy-relevant research in partnership with policymakers and stakeholders. We achieve this through:

**RESEARCH**
Conduct exceptionally rigorous policy-relevant research that meaningfully contributes to public policy decision making and academic literature.

**DISSEMINATION**
Drive and engage in local and national conversations about the impacts of educational policies and practices on the life outcomes of historically marginalized students.

**TRAINING**
Prepare future researchers for successful careers in educational policy and educational policy research.

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**Core Beliefs**
As a research center embedded within a world-class private research university located in the heart of a historic American city and in the leading education state in the country, WEPC is primed for immediate impact. The center supports faculty pursuing research projects aligned with a set of core beliefs about the role of research and policy for improving student outcomes.

**Rigor**
Rigorous empirical research should inform policy decisions at all levels.

**Relevance**
Education policy research should be grounded in the issues that policymakers and practitioners identify as an important and timely need and help to set a course for what could lie ahead.

**Equity**
Educational opportunities and experiences have historically been, and continue to be, unequal for certain student populations. Therefore, equitable educational policies focus attention on student populations that have experienced injustices in the system.

**Whole Child**
An education that best serves students addresses their academic, social-emotional, physical, and mental health needs. Therefore, educational policy research must account for the complex set of relationships between schools and other related systems.
WEPC brings together a team of nationally recognized scholars, talented early-career researchers, and promising trainees who are using cutting-edge methodologies to address some of the most pressing topics within educational policy today. The center’s affiliated faculty have earned reputations for producing exceptionally rigorous policy-relevant research that meaningfully contributes to both policy decisions and the academic literature. Additionally, the inclusion of experienced policymakers on WEPC’s leadership team ensures that the center’s research meets the needs of decision makers at the highest level. As the hub for educational policy research within Boston University (BU), WEPC will continue building a multidisciplinary group of faculty and students throughout campus.

BU’s Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, via the leadership of Dean David Chard, provided generous seed funding to launch WEPC, and the college plans to continue investing in the center. Ultimately, however, WEPC’s future growth and sustainability will depend on support from external sources committed to supporting evidence-based policymaking and the highest-quality research. In addition to seeking grants to support research activities for specific projects, WEPC seeks external investments in order to maintain its research infrastructure and invest in building sustainable research-practice partnerships with educational organizations.

Opportunities to support the center’s efforts include:

- Underwrite a partnership between WEPC and a specific state, district, or educational organization that matters to you or your organization
- Sponsor research and dissemination activities within one of the center’s focus research areas
- Fund fellowships for deserving post-doctoral scholars and/or doctoral students to support and learn from affiliated faculty
- Invest in building and maintaining WEPC’s infrastructure and general administration

Read on to find out more about:

- Leadership Team
- Affiliated Faculty
- Research Agenda
- Center Activities
Leadership Team

WEPC’s leadership team incorporates a combination of research expertise and policymaking experience that positions the center to be a unique and strong partner for educational organizations at any level.

Marcus is WEPC’s founding faculty director and is primarily responsible for ensuring the quality of the center’s research. He is an associate professor at BU Wheelock and chair of its Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. Trained as an economist, Winters’s research primarily uses quasi-experimental techniques to measure the causal effects of modern educational reforms on student outcomes. He has previously conducted research in partnership with several large school systems, including the states of Arizona, Florida, and Massachusetts, and large school districts, such as Broward County, New York City, and Newark. He has published in a variety of academic journals, including Journal of Public Economics, Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Educational Researcher, and Economics of Education Review. His research is often covered widely in national and local press outlets, and he has written numerous articles on educational policy topics for publications including the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and USA Today.

Meagan is WEPC’s Executive Director with primary responsibilities for external communications and developing partnerships with policymakers and educational organizations. Prior to WEPC, Meagan served as the Director of Educator Effectiveness at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education where she oversaw the state’s policies and practices on teacher and leader preparation, educator assessment and licensure, educator evaluation, induction and mentoring, teacher recognition, and diverse workforce efforts. In addition to her invaluable experience as a policymaker, Megan brings to WEPC her skills in facilitating relationships and commitment to research as a policy-informing endeavor.

Ariel is the center’s Managing Director primarily responsible for project dissemination. She is a lecturer at BU Wheelock and directs the college’s MA program in Educational Policy Studies. With a deep commitment to identifying and supporting implementation of effective policies and practices that improve the academic and social-emotional outcomes of culturally and linguistically diverse students, Ariel focuses her research on policy and program implementation, school improvement, civics education, and global citizenship education. Her research has appeared in a variety of academic and media outlets, including Educational Administration Quarterly, Teachers College Record, Educational Policy, Leadership and Policy in Schools, Journal of Educational Change, and Education Week.

Hear from Marcus & Meagan about their hopes for WEPC in a recent BU Today Feature: New Wheelock Educational Policy Center Will Put Research in the Hands of Policymakers, Drive National Conversations
Aim: improving educational outcomes for historically marginalized students
Affiliated Faculty

**Andrew Bacher-Hicks** is an assistant professor at BU Wheelock. He studies K–12 education policy in the United States, with a focus on teacher labor markets, school discipline, and the link between crime and education.

**Olivia Chi** is an assistant professor at BU Wheelock. Her research uses quantitative methods to study the economics of education, with a focus on teacher labor markets, measures of teacher quality, and policies that reduce educational inequality.

**Joshua Goodman** is an associate professor of economics and education at BU. His research primarily uses quasi-experimental methods to evaluate how schools and labor markets work, particularly with respect to postsecondary and STEM education.

**Nathan Jones** is an associate professor of special education at BU Wheelock and a founding member of the BU Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences. His research focuses on teacher quality, teacher development, and school improvement, with a specific emphasis on conceptualizing and measuring teaching effectiveness.

**Kevin Lang** is a professor of economics at BU. He currently serves as the editor-in-chief of *Journal of Labor Economics*. His research focuses on the economics of labor markets and education, including such topics as discrimination, unemployment, and the relationship between education and earnings.

**Daniele Paserman** is a professor of economics at BU. His current research spans topics in labor economics, economic history, and political economy.

**Jesse Bruhn** is an assistant professor of economics at Brown University. He earned his PhD from BU in 2019. He is a labor economist who studies the economics of education (teacher labor markets, educator effectiveness, school choice) and the economics of crime (street gangs).

“Working with the BU Wheelock research faculty has strengthened our ability to analyze how Massachusetts schools have adapted to the pandemic and has allowed us to advance public discussions about how best to support students during this challenging time. It’s great to see this commitment to bringing academic expertise to bear on pressing education policy questions formalized in the Wheelock Education and Policy Center.”

*Ed Lambert, Executive Director, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education*
The center’s research agenda includes faculty-initiated projects that address questions within key topical areas as well as projects developed in collaboration with policymakers as part of a sustainable and mutually beneficial research-practice partnership.

**Increasing Data and Research Capacity for Partner States and School Districts**

Policymaker use of data and research to inform decisions about educational systems at the state and district level has grown by leaps and bounds during the past 2 decades. Many states have invested heavily in robust data systems and routinely partner with academic researchers to study the impacts of their policies and practices on student outcomes. However, such project-based partnerships initiated by external partners as well as constraints on internal research capacity leave some areas of interest to policymakers inadequately addressed. At times policymakers must make important decisions that impact the lives of students without the benefit of a full set of information that remains hidden within its administrative data sets.

In a joint effort with BU’s Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences (CDS), WEPC is pursuing partnership agreements in which the center will serve as a trusted, reliable, and knowledgeable ally for state and district education departments that have a desire to increase their data and research capacity. By establishing regular routines, communication structures, and dedicated staff to manage the portfolio of work, WEPC will pursue coherent and streamlined research activities for the direct benefit of its partner educational organizations.

Though there are specific nuances to each relationship, the representative partnership between WEPC, CDS, and a large educational system revolves around 3 core functions:

1) an **Answer Core** designed to provide timely and rigorous answers to questions of immediate need,

2) pursuit of a **Joint Research Agenda** collaboratively developed on an ongoing basis to address larger questions of particular interest to the partner organization and/or BU faculty, and

3) an effort to bolster the **Infrastructure** supporting the organization’s administrative data and ensure more seamless points of connection across various systems.

These functions are intended to be interconnected, informing and shaping one another. For instance, the Answer Core will likely rely on the Infrastructure put in place to connect siloed data systems, and inquiries from the Answer Core may shape longer-term or broader questions in the Joint Research Agenda.
Equalizing Educational Opportunity

Disparities in student opportunities and outcomes from kindergarten through higher education are shaped by a complex set of school, community, governance, and non-education sector factors. WEPC researchers evaluate the impact of policies and practices both within and outside of schools on student educational and life outcomes.

Examples of recent WEPC research projects addressing Equalizing Educational Opportunity include:

**Inequality in Household Adaptation to Schooling Shocks: COVID-19 Induced Online Learning Engagement in Real Time**

WEPC-affiliated faculty Joshua Goodman and Andrew Bacher-Hicks with RAND’s Christine Mulhern found evidence that internet searches for instructional resources increased dramatically with the start of school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that search intensity was about twice as large for areas with above-median socioeconomic status (SES) than for areas with below-median SES. These results lend support to the notion that school closures have the potential to widen socioeconomic achievement gaps and suggest that expanding access to technology and support for remote learning among low SES households should be a priority in ensuring that students have equal access to learning opportunities.


**The Effect of Charter Schooling on Student Mobility and Classification Status**

High attrition rates from charter schools has led to the concern that charters systematically “push out” students. But it’s not clear the extent to which higher mobility from charter schools is a feature of charter schooling or an artifact of the type of students who enroll in charter schools. WEPC faculty director Marcus A. Winters and his co-authors Allison Gilmour and former BU economics PhD student Colin Shanks exploited a randomized component in school assignments in Newark, New Jersey, to measure the causal effect of enrolling in a charter school on subsequent mobility and disability classification. They found that enrolling in a charter school substantially reduces the likelihood that a student changes schools within the next 2 years overall and for students in underrepresented groups. In addition, they found that enrolling in a participating charter school increases the likelihood that a student is declassified out of special education.
There is both a moral imperative and federal mandate to provide students who require specialized services, such as English language learners and students with disabilities, equal access to instruction. Yet in many cases, these groups of students are not receiving the supports they need to succeed academically. WEPC researchers leverage large-scale administrative datasets and rigorous causal research designs to study the effects of policies and evaluate the efficacy of commonly used practices targeted for English learners, students with disabilities, and others who benefit from targeted supports.

Examples of recent WEPC research projects addressing Improving Specialized Services include:

Co-teaching—in which a general education teacher and a special education teacher work together to teach students with and without disabilities in a shared classroom—has emerged as a common strategy for educating students within an inclusive setting. Leveraging data from Massachusetts public schools, WEPC researchers Nathan Jones and Marcus A. Winters found that attending a co-taught classroom, on average, leads to test score improvements for both students with and without disabilities, but the magnitude of the benefit is small relative to other educational interventions. Though the findings are generally positive, given the small magnitude of the effect, broad endorsements of co-teaching common among special education researchers and policymakers are perhaps not warranted.

https://wheelockpolicycenter.org/specialized-services/are-two-teachers-better-than-one-the-effect-of-co-teaching-on-students-with-and-without-disabilities/

WEPC-affiliated faculty Marcus A. Winters, Nathan Jones, and Jesse Bruhn with their co-author Yasuko Kanno evaluated the impact of a professional development training for general education teachers instructing English learners (ELs) in Massachusetts delivered at a nearly unprecedented scale: Over a 5-year period, more than 35,000 in-service public school teachers throughout the state completed a training equivalent in scope to a college-level semester-long course. They found that completing the training had no significant effect on average math or English language arts scores for ELs that a teacher instructs. However, the null average result masked potentially important heterogeneity in the effect of the training. The training led to improvements for recently hired teachers and produced modest but positive spillovers for students with disabilities and the larger group of non-EL students who the teacher instructs.

https://wheelockpolicycenter.org/specialized-services/professional-development-at-scale/
Effective Educators

Schools are only as effective as the teachers, administrators, and staff working within them. WEPC researchers seek to better understand the educator pipeline and to measure the impact of policies designed to improve the education workforce from teacher preparation to professional development to increasing the diversity of the education profession.

Examples of recent WEPC research projects addressing Effective Educators include:

**A Classroom Observer Like Me: The Effect of Demographic Congruence Between Teachers and Raters on Observation Scores**

To further understand the challenges of diversifying the teacher pipeline, researcher Olivia Chi examined how race and gender dynamics influence administrators’ subjective assessments of teachers in the context of classroom observations. Specifically, Chi asked whether teachers receive higher classroom observation scores as a result of sharing a race or gender with their observers, who are typically school-based administrators. On a broad scale, if teachers benefit from being evaluated by observers who share their demographic background, this could place non-White and male teachers at a disadvantage, since both groups are underrepresented in the education sector in the United States.


**Regulatory Arbitrage in Teacher Hiring and Retention**

WEPC faculty director Marcus A. Winters and his co-authors Scott Imberman and Jesse Bruhn showed that Massachusetts charter schools disproportionately lose their best and worst teachers. High performing teachers who exit charter schools tend to move to other public school employment opportunities, while lower performing teachers tend to exit the Massachusetts education system entirely. The pattern of results suggests that charters may contribute to the quality of education within a locality in part by attracting unlicensed but perhaps promising teachers to the profession and then acting as filtering mechanism by inducing their worst teachers to leave the education sector while also providing a pathway for high-quality teachers to enter traditional public schools.

[https://wheelockpolicycenter.org/effective-teachers/regulatory-arbitrage/](https://wheelockpolicycenter.org/effective-teachers/regulatory-arbitrage/)
Center Activities

WEPC’s affiliated faculty need no additional motivation to conduct rigorous policy-relevant research. The center contributes value by providing research support, furnishing an infrastructure in which scholars can incubate ideas and develop collaborations, facilitating relationships with policymakers and thought leaders, and providing a platform that faculty can leverage in order to disseminate their research findings for maximum impact.

**Post-Doctoral Fellows** – WEPC hires talented recent PhDs seeking additional training prior to taking a permanent research position to 2-year appointments in which they work in collaboration with affiliated faculty on projects related to WEPC’s key research areas and/or in support of research-practice partnerships. The fellows are also given time within the week to further develop their independent research projects.

**Graduate Student Research Assistants** – Students earning a PhD or master’s degree within BU Wheelock or in social science disciplines across the university (e.g., economics) are hired to provide research assistance to support WEPC’s research projects and partnership responsibilities.

**Education Policy Roundtables** – During these quarterly meetings, small groups of policymakers are invited to share and discuss their current challenges with one another and faculty working in the area. For example, the first Roundtable brought together HR directors from large urban districts across the country to discuss issues related to the educator workforce in their systems.

**Developing and Maintaining Effective Research-Practice Partnerships** – The research-practice partnerships at the core of WEPC’s research agenda will mutually benefit educational organizations and the center’s scholars. By developing research agendas in collaboration with its partners, WEPC ensures that its research is immediately relevant and that findings reach decision makers at the highest level.

**Advisory Board** – WEPC is in the process of developing an active advisory board comprised of leading researchers, policymakers, and thought leaders. The board will meet twice annually in order to guide WEPC’s leadership in all areas, including developing effective partnerships, pursuing impactful research questions, and increasing the center’s influence on public policy conversations.
**PRviewing Education REsearch Questions (PREREQ)** – This bi-weekly forum for affiliated faculty, students, and post-doctoral fellows allows them to present and receive feedback on their early stage education policy research projects.

**Internal Reviews** – In addition to review by the faculty director, all WEPC manuscripts and funding proposals receive feedback from at least one senior faculty member.

**Packaging Research for Multiple Audiences** – In addition to an academic manuscript meant for journal publication, all WEPC research projects are condensed into short (about 2 page) policy briefs meant for widespread dissemination. Authors also record brief presentations (about 6 minutes) of their work, which are hosted on the WEPC website and YouTube page. These materials are also used to connect directly with decision makers most likely to link the findings with the needs of their local context.

**Public Events** – The center will host public events based on the findings of a particular WEPC research project or build a panel of researchers to discuss a notable topic related to the center’s research agenda. WEPC seeks wide attendance for these events among faculty, students, and local stakeholders. These events will be streamed live online and later hosted on the center’s website.