

From: cbrass@crs.loc.gov  
Sent: Monday, November 16, 2009 2:26 PM  
To: info@whatworks.ed.gov  
Subject: IES Website: Contact Us: Other, Reference ID Number:  
864318543

info@whatworks.ed.gov, this email was automatically sent through the  
Contact  
link on the WWC website.

From: cbrass@crs.loc.gov

Message: Hi, I work for the Library of Congress, in the Congressional  
Research  
Service. I was hoping I could speak with someone about one of your WWW  
Quick  
Reviews, regarding ED's Student Mentoring Program.  
[http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/QRReport.aspx?QRID=1  
20](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/QRReport.aspx?QRID=120)

Thanks,  
Clint  
202-707-4536

**From:** WhatWorks

**Sent:** Tuesday, November 17, 2009 6:08 PM

**To:** 'cbrass@crs.loc.gov'

**Subject:** What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)

Dear Clint,

Thank you for contacting the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). If you have questions about the WWC Quick Review of the Student Mentoring program study, please submit them in writing and we will direct them to the appropriate WWC staff person(s) for a response.

You may submit your question(s) in response to this email.

Thank you,

What Works Clearinghouse

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**From:** Clinton Brass [CBRASS@crs.loc.gov]  
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**To:** WhatWorks  
**Subject:** Re: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)  
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Thanks for your response.

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The review characterized the underlying evaluation with this "WWC Rating":

[The research described in this report is consistent with WWC evidence standards](#)

**Strengths:** [The study is a well-implemented randomized controlled trial.](#)

**Cautions:** [About 20 to 35 percent of students in the original sample were missing school records data, depending on the outcome. These students are excluded from the analyses of grades, test scores, and disciplinary infractions.](#)

I am wondering how WWC reconciles this rating and its characterizations ("well-implemented" and no mention of contamination) with the study's description of two sources of contamination that, according to the study authors, likely affected the counterfactual estimate and reduced the treatment contrast. The implication of the potential contamination would be to undermine the study's validity and render uncertain what exactly is the counterfactual that is being estimated as well as how to interpret the estimated impact.

Specifically, students not receiving mentoring services may have become aware of the fact that peers were receiving mentoring under the study, potentially leading non-served students and their families to seek mentoring elsewhere that they might not have sought otherwise. The study "noted that 35 percent of the control group students reported receiving mentoring either *from the [experimental] program* or elsewhere in the community. This finding ... reduced the treatment contrast and may have led to some dilution of the impacts on students compared to expectations" (pp. 91-92, emphasis added). Both of these phenomena may have contaminated the experiment, confounding results and diminishing estimates of the program's impact, compared to a situation in which no school-based mentoring were offered. Texts refer to these classic threats to a study's validity as "treatment diffusion" and "compensatory rivalry." See Lawrence B. Mohr, *Impact Analysis for Program Evaluation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995); and Thomas D. Cook and Donald T. Campbell, *Quasi-experimentation: Design & Analysis Issues for Field Settings* (Chicago: R. McNally, 1979).

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Clint  
202-707-4536

**From:** WhatWorks  
**Sent:** Friday, December 18, 2009 11:28 AM  
**To:** Clinton Brass  
**Subject:** RE: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)  
Dear Mr. Brass,

Thank you for contacting the WWC. We have received your email about the WWC Quick Review of the Report "Impact Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Education's Student Mentoring Program." WWC staff are reviewing your email and will prepare a response.

#### What Works Clearinghouse

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**From:** WhatWorks  
**Sent:** Friday, January 22, 2010 7:37 PM  
**To:** 'cbrass@crs.loc.gov'  
**Subject:** RE: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)

Dear Mr. Brass,

Thank you for your email. WWC staff are reviewing your email and will prepare a response.

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**From:** Clinton Brass [mailto:CBRASS@crs.loc.gov]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, January 20, 2010 5:34 PM  
**To:** What Works  
**Subject:** Re: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)

Hi, thanks for your response.

These are just some initial reactions for discussion from peer to peer, to your Quality Review Team, as I attempt to better understand the study and WWC's practices. This is not a formal statement from my agency or the Library of Congress. I'm not sure if you're authorized to respond on behalf of WWC or ED, or to respond at all, but for purposes of discussion, I think the letter you sent does little or nothing to address the matters my e-mail brought up.

With respect, I think the response letter misses the point and is not responsive. I'm not suggesting that a zero-service control group is appropriate for estimating the counterfactual. That's a misreading and a red herring. What I said may be more appropriate for dealing with this threat to validity of the impact estimate, is to have a control group that gets zero \*federal\* support for mentoring (and little to no contamination from the \*federal\* intervention) as opposed to zero availability of mentoring. Clearly, mentoring will occur in almost any natural setting, regardless of whether there is a federal government intervention. However, federal support for school-based mentoring (the source of the potential "compensatory rivalry" contamination) will not occur in a natural setting. It is the intervention. This particular RCT was designed and implemented in a way that allowed for contamination by "compensatory rivalry," leaving uncertain how to interpret the impact estimate, and therefore leaving uncertain whether \*federal\* support for mentoring (the intervention) had an impact, compared to no federal support. This is basic experimental design stuff. The purpose of the control group is to be insulated from the intervention in order to calculate an uncontaminated counterfactual estimate. In this case, the impact estimate is potentially contaminated, because the impact estimate is calculated with a potentially contaminated counterfactual estimate.

WWC seems to be implicitly saying that the impact estimate in this study is "scientific evidence for what works in education", when my point and your letter seem to indicate we have no idea whether the intervention "worked", or not, because the counterfactual estimate, and therefore the impact estimate, may suffer from contamination of the control group and may be biased. Your paragraphs beginning with "You raise..." and "More generally..." suggest that the WWC in this case may not offer what is advertised, a "central and trusted source of scientific evidence for what works in education," when



(a) studies are rated "well-designed" when they potentially suffer from such contamination, leaving an unsophisticated Quick Review reader with no idea of the potential contamination problem in interpreting the impact estimate (which could be biased), and

(b) WWC offers consumers of Quick Reviews no information about corresponding cautions in interpreting the impact estimate, when that estimate draws directly from a potentially contaminated counterfactual and, therefore, generates a potentially biased impact estimate.

Clearly, it's not WWC's place to determine what the appropriate counterfactual should be. However, WWC has implicitly judged the counterfactual in the case of this study to be appropriate (a "well-implemented RCT") when assessing "what works in education." What your letter has conceded is that, if the intervention is \*federal school-based mentoring\*, and if there was contamination in this case, you have no idea from the study what the impact of that \*federal\* intervention was, because we don't really know whether the counterfactual estimate was contaminated by the intervention. A likely form of contamination was not monitored or avoided. Because the intervention may have had an impact upon the control group, the study leaves uncertain how to interpret whether federal support for school-based mentoring had an impact. It seems to me that a case could be made that WWC is engaged in false advertising, for this Quick Review, if it does not highlight these things. Simply because the WWC Evidence Standards do not address this situation does not seem to be an adequate response. If we go back to what experimental design is all about, then the WWC's lack of standards here makes the WWC's rating and commentary, that the RCT is well-implemented (and therefore reliable as a guide to "what works"), potentially false. Congress and the President are making (and have already made) public policy on the basis of these study findings.

Again, I'm not speaking for CRS or the Library of Congress, but am speaking peer-to-peer as I try to sort this out.

Thanks again for your letter,  
Clint

>>> "What Works" <whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com> 1/20/2010 3:18 PM >>>  
Dear Mr. Brass,

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**Sent:** Wednesday, January 20, 2010 3:19 PM  
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**Attachments:** 2009008.pdf

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Clearly, it's not WWC's place to determine what the appropriate counterfactual should be. However, WWC has implicitly judged the counterfactual in the case of this study to be appropriate (a "well-implemented RCT") when assessing "what works in education." What your letter has conceded is that, if the intervention is \*federal school-based mentoring\*, and if there was contamination in this case, you have no idea from the study what the impact of that \*federal\* intervention was, because we don't really know whether the counterfactual estimate was contaminated by the intervention. A likely form of contamination was not monitored or avoided. Because the intervention may have had an impact upon the control group, the study leaves uncertain how to interpret whether federal support for school-based mentoring had an impact. It seems to me that a case could be made that WWC is engaged in false advertising, for this Quick Review, if it does not highlight these things. Simply because the WWC Evidence Standards do not address this situation does not seem to be an adequate response. If we go back to what experimental design is all about, then the WWC's lack of standards here makes the WWC's

rating and commentary, that the RCT is well-implemented (and therefore reliable as a guide to "what works"), potentially false. Congress and the President are making (and have already made) public policy on the basis of these study findings.

Again, I'm not speaking for CRS or the Library of Congress, but am speaking peer-to-peer as I try to sort this out.

Thanks again for your letter,  
Clint

>>> "What Works" <whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com> 1/20/2010 3:18 PM >>>  
Dear Mr. Brass,

Attached is a response to the questions you raised in your December 15 message to the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC).

Thank you,

What Works Clearinghouse

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**From:** Clinton Brass [mailto:CBRASS@crs.loc.gov]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, December 15, 2009 1:32 PM  
**To:** WhatWorks  
**Subject:** Re: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)

Hello,  
Thanks for your response.

I work for the Congressional Research Service, a nonpartisan support agency for the U.S. Congress. I am researching issues related to program evaluation and experimental evaluation. I have a couple questions about the "WWC Quick Review" for the U.S. Department of Education's Student Mentoring Program.  
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/QRReport.aspx?QRID=120>

The review characterized the underlying evaluation with this "WWC Rating":

The research described in this report is consistent with WWC evidence standards

**Strengths:** The study is a well-implemented randomized controlled trial.

**Cautions:** About 20 to 35 percent of students in the original sample were missing school records data, depending on the outcome. These students are excluded from the analyses of grades, test scores, and disciplinary infractions.

I am wondering how WWC reconciles this rating and its characterizations ("well-implemented" and no mention of contamination) with the study's description of two sources of contamination that, according to the study authors, likely affected the counterfactual estimate and reduced the treatment contrast. The implication of the potential contamination would be to undermine the study's validity and render uncertain what exactly is the counterfactual that is being estimated as well as how to interpret the estimated impact.

Specifically, students not receiving mentoring services may have become aware of the fact that peers were receiving mentoring under the study, potentially leading non-served students and their families to seek mentoring elsewhere that they might not have sought otherwise. The study "noted that 35 percent

of the control group students reported receiving mentoring either *from the [experimental] program* or elsewhere in the community. This finding ... reduced the treatment contrast and may have led to some dilution of the impacts on students compared to expectations" (pp. 91-92, emphasis added). Both of these phenomena may have contaminated the experiment, confounding results and diminishing estimates of the program's impact, compared to a situation in which no school-based mentoring were offered. Texts refer to these classic threats to a study's validity as "treatment diffusion" and "compensatory rivalry." See Lawrence B. Mohr, *Impact Analysis for Program Evaluation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995); and Thomas D. Cook and Donald T. Campbell, *Quasi-experimentation: Design & Analysis Issues for Field Settings* (Chicago: R. McNally, 1979).

An alternative design would have avoided these sources of contamination. Mentoring often is offered to some children at a particular setting, but not to all. Therefore, these two types of contamination may be evident, if students who are not offered mentoring (and their families) learn that other students are receiving formal mentoring and, as a result, seek mentoring from the program or other sources. Consequently, by design, school-based mentoring may make an impact not only on the "treatment" group, but also the supposed "control" group at the same location. Therefore, if the central policy question is whether or not to support school-based mentoring based on its impacts on outcomes that are valued, it may be more appropriate to use a different control group—settings that receive no federal support for school-based mentoring—in order to estimate the impact of school-based mentoring on various outcomes.

I would welcome any feedback on these questions.  
Many thanks!  
Clint  
202-707-4536

>>> WhatWorks <[WhatWorks@icfi.com](mailto:WhatWorks@icfi.com)> 11/17/2009 7:08 PM >>>

Dear Clint,

Thank you for contacting the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). If you have questions about the WWC Quick Review of the Student Mentoring program study, please submit them in writing and we will direct them to the appropriate WWC staff person(s) for a response.

You may submit your question(s) in response to this email.

Thank you,

What Works Clearinghouse

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-----Original Message-----

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Sent: Monday, November 16, 2009 2:26 PM

To: info@whatworks.ed.gov

Subject: IES Website: Contact Us: Other, Reference ID Number: 864318543

[info@whatworks.ed.gov](mailto:info@whatworks.ed.gov), this email was automatically sent through the Contact link on the WWC website.

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Message: Hi, I work for the Library of Congress, in the Congressional Research Service. I was hoping I could speak with someone about one of your WWW Quick Reviews, regarding ED's Student Mentoring Program.  
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**From:** What Works  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 23, 2010 2:31 PM  
**To:** 'CBRASS@crs.loc.gov'  
**Subject:** What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)  
**Attachments:** QRT 2009008.pdf

Dear Mr. Brass,

Attached is a response to the additional questions you raised in your January 20 message to the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC).

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**Sent:** Wednesday, January 20, 2010 5:34 PM  
**To:** What Works  
**Subject:** Re: What Works Clearinghouse (WWCPC 1701)

Hi, thanks for your response.

These are just some initial reactions for discussion from peer to peer, to your Quality Review Team, as I attempt to better understand the study and WWC's practices. This is not a formal statement from my agency or the Library of Congress. I'm not sure if you're authorized to respond on behalf of WWC or ED, or to respond at all, but for purposes of discussion, I think the letter you sent does little or nothing to address the matters my e-mail brought up.

With respect, I think the response letter misses the point and is not responsive. I'm not suggesting that a zero-service control group is appropriate for estimating the counterfactual. That's a misreading and a red herring. What I said may be more appropriate for dealing with this threat to validity of the impact estimate, is to have a control group that gets zero \*federal\* support for mentoring (and little to no contamination from the \*federal\* intervention) as opposed to zero availability of mentoring. Clearly, mentoring will occur in almost any natural setting, regardless of whether there is a federal government intervention. However, federal support for school-based mentoring (the source of the potential "compensatory rivalry" contamination) will not occur in a natural setting. It is the intervention. This particular RCT was designed and implemented in a way that allowed for contamination by "compensatory rivalry," leaving uncertain how to interpret the impact estimate, and therefore leaving uncertain whether \*federal\* support for mentoring (the intervention) had an impact, compared to no federal support. This is basic experimental design stuff. The purpose of the control group is to be insulated from the intervention in order to calculate an uncontaminated counterfactual estimate. In this case, the impact estimate is potentially contaminated, because the impact estimate is calculated with a potentially contaminated counterfactual estimate.

WWC seems to be implicitly saying that the impact estimate in this study is "scientific evidence for what works in education", when my point and your letter seem to indicate we have no idea whether the intervention "worked", or not, because the counterfactual estimate, and therefore the impact estimate, may suffer from contamination of the control group and may be biased. Your paragraphs beginning with

"You raise..." and "More generally..." suggest that the WWC in this case may not offer what is advertised, a "central and trusted source of scientific evidence for what works in education," when

(a) studies are rated "well-designed" when they potentially suffer from such contamination, leaving an unsophisticated Quick Review reader with no idea of the potential contamination problem in interpreting the impact estimate (which could be biased), and

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