Education Policy Comprehensive Exam— April 2020
Policy Analysis
Answer **ONE** of the following two questions (Please respond to all parts).

1) Comparisons play a major role in research on alternative education policies. Among the many examples are comparisons of charter and traditional schools, comparisons of student achievement in school districts with different levels of funding, comparisons of different class sizes, comparisons of policies to attract and retain qualified teachers in high-poverty schools, and comparisons of policies to increase access to higher education. **Please draw on two research areas (from the examples listed above or other examples) and respond to the following questions for each:**

   a) What are the major research findings for each area with respect to a set of clearly-defined outcome variables? What are the methodological and contextual issues that need to be considered in designing the comparisons? How did these issues play out in the specific studies you are using as examples, and how did they influence the findings and their interpretation?

   b) What are your recommendations with respect to strengthening future research in each of the research areas? Is it worth continuing to conduct comparative studies in these areas? If so, how can the studies be strengthened? If not, how might the research questions be framed differently? Please explain.

   c) In your view, are the conclusions of the research you analyzed strong enough to support policy recommendations? Why? Why not? What policies would you recommend based on these findings? How are you accounting for inconsistent results?

2) Since the year 2000, the most significant, and controversial, policies in elementary and secondary education have occurred in areas of school choice and test-based accountability. **Please respond to the following questions for each of the two policies:**

   a) What were the educational and societal factors that led to the adoption of each policy and was the policy a relevant response to these factors? Why? Why not?

   b) What are the major research findings for each policy with respect to a set of clearly-defined outcome variables? Where findings are inconsistent across studies, please describe the contextual and methodological factors that might have led to those inconsistencies. What are the methodological constraints in conducting research in these areas? How might the research in each area be strengthened?

   c) In your view, are the conclusions of the research you reviewed strong enough to make policy recommendations? Why? Why not? What policies would you recommend based on these findings? How are you accounting for inconsistent results?

Answer <u>ONE</u> of the following two questions by responding to all parts and supporting your arguments with evidence:

Question-1: Studies on the same topic vary in their research designs, definitions of key variables, and outcome measures. It is not surprising, therefore, that their findings are often inconsistent and research reports typically conclude that we need more research.
Please respond to the questions below, drawing examples from two of the following research areas—test-based accountability, charter schools, school resources, and access to higher education.

a) How might the research findings in each of the two areas be influenced by the way the research questions are framed and by the design of the research used to address them— for example, the definitions of key variables, the choice of comparison groups, the confounding variables that are controlled (or ignored), the extent to which the broader societal context is considered, and the outcome measures used?

b) How consistent or inconsistent are the actual research findings in each of the two research areas you analyzed, and, in your view, are the inconsistencies artifacts of the research design choices or "real" differences in the study outcomes? Please provide research evidence to support your response.

c) Are the conclusions of the research you analyzed strong enough to support policy recommendations in each of the two areas? Why/why not? What policies would you recommend based on the findings? How are you accounting for inconsistent results? In your view, would additional research in these areas be helpful or do we have enough information to focus instead on other research questions?

Question-2: An important consideration for any research field is when, and if, to change course on the issues studied and focus instead on a different set of topics—or, in cases where research is still needed on a topic, to consider whether it might be useful to reformulate the way that research is conceptualized and designed.
Please respond to the questions below, drawing examples from two of the following research areas—test-based accountability, charter schools, school resources, and access to higher education,

a) Based on your analysis of the two research areas, please identify any lines of research that you feel should be discontinued because the information needed to make policy recommendations is already available, or because the topic has become obsolete—or for another reason. In addition, are there examples where the field could be strengthened by reframing the research questions or reformulating the research approach in other ways? Include in your response the rationale for your conclusions and the analysis that led to them.

b) Policy research also faces a very different problem from the one described in Question A —interpreting research results with incomplete or methodologically flawed information and then basing public policy on these interpretations. Please draw on the two research areas you have selected to analyze the problem and present examples.

c) Summarize your recommendations on how best to ensure that policy proposals are based on valid research information while, at the same time, encouraging the field to reexamine periodically the usefulness of its research priorities and research designs.