Taxpayers are entitled to know if public schools are doing their job, but it's hard for them to evaluate the empirical research that is published ("New Truths That Only One Can See," The New York Times, Jan. 20). Opinions, no matter how deeply felt, are no substitute for expertise ("The Death of Expertise," The Federalist, Jan. 17).

Let's begin with replication, which is the sine qua non of science. Especially in education, researchers are wont to see what they want to see. It's typically an unconscious bias that causes them to interpret data to support their hypothesis. For example, critics contend that past studies showing the benefits of preschool couldn't be duplicated on a large scale ("California should give all kids the pre-K advantage," Los Angeles Times, Jan. 24). That's not surprising because successful pilot programs generally have low external validity. In plain English, it means they often don't generalize well to other persons, settings and times.

Sometimes, however, the bias is quite conscious. That's why it's imperative to ask who is funding the studies. They are often financed by philanthropic foundations. But unless the foundations have been willing in the past to back research that does not advance their agendas, I advise extreme skepticism. For example, the Walton Family Foundation a few years ago made headlines for the largest single donation in history to a public university. In exchange, the University of Arkansas established the Department of School Reform within its school of education. How likely is it that research emanating from the new department is not tainted by ideology?

But let's assume that a study passes muster on its backing. What next? I'd want to know if there were a control group, random assignment of students, peer review, cherry picking, or bottom fishing ("A Reader's Guide to Scientifically Based Research," Educational Leadership, Feb. 2003). However, even when these factors are taken into consideration, educational research does not involve chemicals in a laboratory. It involves students in real life. That alone should be cause for pause. Yet I remain skeptical that most taxpayers will put aside their deeply rooted opinions. That view doesn't bode well for public schools.