The objective of this research study was to examine whether, how, and why research evidence is used in state-level decision-making about policies related to childhood obesity in Minnesota.

The study participants were 51 stakeholders who were interviewed: 16 in legislative roles, 16 in advocacy roles, and 19 in state agency roles.

The interview questions included: 1) How stakeholders use research; 2) the barriers they face; and 3) their recommendations for improving a system that facilitates stakeholder use of evidence.

So, what did we find? Advocates, both for and against childhood obesity legislation, use research evidence to support their positions but often find it difficult to overcome the persuasive power of personal narratives and political or personal values.

What’s happening now?

Advocates use research to 1) overcome the persuasive power of non-evidence-based arguments—such as personal anecdotes or political philosophies; 2) determine whether a policy or program is achieving its goals; and 3) inform legislators and community members.

What are the challenges?

Different norms, values and expectations.

› Advocates face challenges in bridging the differences in priorities, timelines, and language between researchers and decision-makers.

› Researchers are often seen as having too narrow a scope in their work, and not producing the types of evidence needed.

Communicating evidence to decision-makers.

› Research on obesity is complex and often changes, making it difficult to convey to legislators and staff.

› Advocates find it difficult to overcome personal narratives, political values, and public opinion—which can be extremely persuasive to legislators—with evidence-based arguments.

What can we improve?

Expand infrastructure to communicate evidence.

› Set up a web-based clearinghouse as a centralized resource for research summaries on policy-relevant topics.

› Create a conference that gives researchers the opportunity to present their work to decision-makers and allows different stakeholder groups to form professional connections.

Bridge research and communication gaps.

› Evidence should appear in more accessible formats—such as one-page executive summaries and infographics—and engage communications and graphic design professionals.

› Advocates recommend building networks that connect key stakeholders—such as workgroups, coalitions, and email listservs.

› Research evidence should be delivered through appropriate messengers (e.g., physicians for clinical findings, epidemiologists for prevalence data), and be framed in terms of what the audience cares about.

Broaden approaches to research.

› Advocates feel that researchers should consider broader policy implications when designing studies and presenting their findings.

› Research institutions should increase opportunities for networking between researchers and external stakeholders to establish and maintain professional relationships.

For more information or to contact the research team, visit the project website: http://z.umn.edu/obesitypolicy

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A large part of what we spend our time on is developing those relationships with state agencies, with legislators, with those advocacy groups, with the community…

*Advocate – Proponent*

Understand the value of your advocates at the Capitol. Information is great, but unless you’ve got people who are willing to go to the Capitol and tell the story and help organize grassroots around it, it’s hard to move a policymaking body in your direction.

*Advocate – Opponent*