



RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

A PRIMER FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES (SEAs)

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ABOUT: This guide is intended to help State Education Agency (SEA) leaders understand some key steps in establishing, managing, and using research-practice partnerships (RPPs) to support ESSA implementation, particularly as it relates to overseeing and evaluating the impact of school improvement efforts.

PART I: A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS

WHAT ARE RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS?

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are formal, long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations between education researchers and practitioners. A variety of different stakeholders may form an RPP, including universities, research institutions, schools, districts, and state education agencies, to name a few examples. RPPs typically involve the co-development of research agendas in which the questions are jointly negotiated between researchers and practitioners to reflect prioritized problems of practice.

HOW ARE RPPs TYPICALLY STRUCTURED?

RPPs can take on a number of structural arrangements depending on the problem of practice, the available expertise from both the research and practice sides, and the intended aims of the collaboration.

- In Tennessee, for example, collaborative work with Vanderbilt University through the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) allows the TN Dept. of Education to keep a long-term focus on issues they anticipate will matter in the future while internal staff take on more immediate needs. By having external research partners work on high-priority questions with longer time horizons, the TN Dept. of Education is able to diversify the topic areas they study and develop a larger pool of potential solutions to draw from.
- In Massachusetts, Carrie leads a small number of partnerships with a greater variety of external research partners that specialize in different topics. For example, one of the partnerships includes a collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and focuses on charter schools, while another examines school turnaround efforts in a partnership with American Institutes for Research (AIR). The diversity in collaborations allows Carrie's department to attend to multiple issues and involve complementary expertise from many different research teams.

WHERE DO WE START?

Not all RPPs start the same - some may evolve from a single collaborative project between research and practice agencies while others may result from a formal commitment to partnership work from the start. Whatever your agency's path, some key considerations to think through include:

- What problems are you interested in learning more about, exploring possible solutions to, or developing improvement systems for?
- What current individual capabilities and organizational capacities does your agency have around research?
- Are there any local external researchers that you or your colleagues are already familiar with that may be interested in partnering?
- What topics is your agency interested in studying but may not currently have the personnel or time to explore?

Both the Tennessee Education Research Alliance and the partnerships Carrie manages with the MA Dept. of Elementary & Secondary Education started out with a single project. As relevant research questions continued to emerge and initial working relationships proved fruitful, the partnerships were slowly built over time.

PART II: HOW CAN RPPs SUPPORT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS?

WHAT ROLES CAN EXTERNAL PARTNERS PLAY?

In terms of local school improvement efforts, external research partners can support SEAs in a variety of ways through an RPP. Some key examples include:

Extending the capacity of the SEA to conduct research

Limited research staff or organizational capacity to conduct research that will help inform school improvement efforts may benefit from the extra research support available by partnering with external researchers. This may be as simple as providing summaries of findings from previous research, producing tables of summary statistics, or can include more complex research designs that may address longer-term questions of interest.

Identification and selection of appropriate policies or programs

External research partners may also help SEA leaders increase their access to and their engagement with a larger variety of research frameworks, findings, and related policies that may improve the types of evidence considered. More generally, external researchers can often serve as thought partners to the SEA, bringing complementary expertise that may shed new light on pressing problems of practice.

Ongoing evaluation of policy or program implementation

Working with external research partners may also include helping the SEA develop, conduct, and learn from policy or program evaluations essential to implementation efforts around school improvement. This set of activities may be particularly important under ESSA, given the fourth tier of evidence agencies can rely upon when implementing previously untested programs or policies.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

IN MASSACHUSETTS...

- After a new state law was passed giving new authorities to the state's lowest performing schools, Massachusetts implemented a new school turnaround strategy
- Carrie's office worked with internal and external researchers to conduct research on that strategy in order to measure implementation and impact
- Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to assess the program's overall impact and determine what factors contributed to the strong improvement observed in some schools and not others
- This research helped to surface four important school-level practices present in the most improved schools
- As a result of these studies, Massachusetts now aligns their school improvement systems around these 4 practices, with ongoing support and evaluation of implementation to ensure efficacy

IN TENNESSEE...

- At the Tennessee DOE, Nate's office is working with external research partners to develop an evidence guide for school improvement
- The improvement model is based on 4 pillars that include the recruitment and retainment of effective teachers and leaders and wrap around services, for example
- The end result is to provide schools with a useable guide to facilitate easier implementation of evidence-based strategies
- The guide will contain programs accompanied with information on whether they are supported by tier 1, 2, or 3 evidence
- In the longer-term, Tennessee is interested in developing a framework to monitor progress similar to the Massachusetts example

WHAT ARE SOME KEY LESSONS LEARNED?

Partnership work can be very rewarding. At the same time, a number of challenges may arise when choosing to engage with external partners. Here we highlight just a few lessons learned:

Ensure the right people are at the table

While it may be easier to send a data manager from the SEA to engage with external researchers, this may ultimately result in inaction, as key decision makers and program staff needed to implement policy change at the SEA are absent.

Not all evidence needs to involve a 25-page research paper

Indeed, descriptive summary statistics are often more informative (and produced more quickly) and can generate deep discussions around potential problems of practice.

Not every problem of practice will require an RPP

It's important to understand what the agency's goals are; in particular, some may be better served with by hiring an outside firm, partnering with a university-based researcher or graduate student on a single study, or conducting analyses internally.