

Welcome to Our Summer Edition

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP



We are excited to share with you the second issue of Volume 2 of NNERPP Extra! This issue features four new articles that we hope are timely in the research they highlight and the approaches they introduce.

Education in America is facing foundational challenges in this time of crises. Never has the need been greater for all organizations in the education space, including NNERPP and the RPP community, to actively examine their processes, programs, and people for evidence of practices perpetuating racism. Although we have great hope for the potential of RPPs to play an essential role in intentionally building a better future and more equitable nation, critical considerations of the work must be made. We invite you to read our full statement and commitments on our path forward here.

In this edition:

- **Research Insights:** We examine RPP-conducted research about students' experiences of homelessness, which will be especially important amid the current pandemic given its magnification of the challenges surrounding student homelessness.
- **RPP Deep Dive:** We learn how key principles of audience engagement from the communication science perspective can help improve the use of research evidence.
- **Extra Credit:** We read about how the use of principles from behavioral science and human-centered design is helping one RPP ensure equity and engagement in a district's application and enrollment procedures.
- **Improving Improvement:** We learn lessons from working with school districts during COVID-19.
- **Research Headlines:** We share a roundup listing all of our members' research from the past quarter, including research and resources around COVID-19.

We hope you stay healthy and safe and look forward to checking in with you again soon.

NNERPP | Extra Online

Be sure to check out the NNERPP | Extra website if you'd like to explore this issue's articles (and more!) online.

About NNERPP

NNERPP aims to develop, support, and connect research-practice partnerships in education to improve their productivity. Please visit our website at nnerpp.rice.edu and follow us on Twitter: @RPP_Network.

IN THIS ISSUE

[p. 1] WELCOME

[p. 2] RESEARCH INSIGHTS

When Students Experience Homelessness:
Learning From 3 RPPs' Work

[p. 8] RPP DEEP DIVE

Improving Use of Research Evidence: Insights
from Communication Science

[p. 18] EXTRA CREDIT: SPOTLIGHT

The Promise of a Collaborative Approach to
Problem-Solving and Innovation-Testing:
Reflections from a New Research-Practice
Partnership in New York City

[p. 21] IMPROVING IMPROVEMENT

Lessons Learned from Working with Partners
During the Covid-19 Crisis

[p. 23] RESEARCH HEADLINES

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs' Work

By Nina Spitzley | NNERPP

In This "Research Insights" Edition

This edition of the Research Insights series - which brings together related studies from NNERPP members to discover connections across research and advance our collective understanding of these topics - focuses on students experiencing homelessness [1]. Three research-practice partnerships (RPPs) within our network have examined this topic recently in an effort to better understand this vulnerable population of students and support more equitable outcomes:



Research Alliance for New York City Schools, an RPP between New York University and the New York City Department of Education.

Houston Education Research Consortium, an RPP between Rice University and a number of surrounding school districts. The study examined here focuses on the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and was conducted by Houston Education Research Consortium external researchers at Southern Methodist University.

John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, which has several partnerships with California school districts and communities. The study examined here focuses on the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD).

As we have examined in [previous editions of this series](#), not all studies on similar research topics and around similar research questions lend themselves to direct comparison, due to differences in sample constructions, outcome variables chosen for study, definitions of outcome variables, and so on. The three studies we examine here do ask similar questions around similar outcomes for similar groups of students, but for the reasons outlined previously, we do not attempt to directly compare findings across studies/districts. Rather, we highlight the contributions of each individual study and make broader observations about similarities and differences in the themes of the study findings. As you read with your own context in mind, we encourage you to think about how your own partnership or education agency might study student homelessness and which takeaways may be applicable to your context.

Why This Article

Amid the current pandemic, growing concerns about students who experience homelessness and an already increasing awareness of the challenges they face are amplified and especially top of mind for many education leaders. With this group of students facing greater obstacles in the best of times, a disruption of this magnitude raises many concerns about their trauma and learning loss in the wake of COVID-19. Even reaching these students now and once schools reopen in the fall is a considerable challenge. In this article, we hope to offer a starting point for addressing such concerns by examining what we already know through RPP-conducted research about students experiencing homelessness.

continued on the next page

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs’ Work, continued

TABLE 1. List of RPPs + Artifacts Included in This Article

PARTNERSHIP	REPORT (YEAR)
▶ The Research Alliance for New York City Schools	Homelessness in NYC Elementary Schools: Student Experiences and Educator Perspectives (2019)
▶ Houston Education Research Consortium	Examining Complexity in Student Homelessness: The Educational Outcomes of HISD’s Homeless Students (2020)
▶ John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities	The Educational Success of Homeless and Highly Mobile Students in San Francisco Unified School District (2017)

Research Questions

We first share the individual research questions that were addressed in each report:

NEW YORK

1. Who experiences homelessness in New York City’s elementary aged population?
2. What are the different ways in which students experience homelessness?
3. How does homelessness disrupt students’ educational experiences?
4. How are schools supporting homeless students?

HOUSTON

1. Who are HISD’s homeless students?
2. What are the educational outcomes of HISD’s homeless students, in terms of attendance, discipline, achievement, and attainment?
3. How do the educational outcomes of HISD’s homeless students depend on their family context?
4. How do the educational outcomes of HISD’s homeless students depend on their residential context?

SAN FRANCISCO

1. What is the size and distribution of homeless and highly mobile (HHM) students in SFUSD across different grades, schools, racial ethnicities, and language backgrounds?
2. How heterogeneous is this student population in terms of chronicity of HHM status, instability of living arrangement, placement in foster care, and number of siblings?
3. What promotes resilience and positive outcomes for HHM students?
 - a) What are the implications of being HHM for students’ school attendance, graduation rates, and academic achievement as indexed by GPA and standardized tests?
 - b) What student assets help explain variability in HHM students’ academic outcomes?
 - c) Do HHM students fare better in some schools than in others? Are there any shared attributes among these schools?

Research Methods

Here we share a high-level overview of each report’s research methods for some more context around the studies and how they are similar and different from each other. We encourage readers to explore each individual research artifact for more details.

continued on the next page

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs' Work, continued

The New York study focuses on homelessness and homelessness supports among elementary school students, given the foundational role the early grades play for long-term academic success. It follows the cohort of students who began kindergarten in the fall of 2012 through the end of the 2016-17 school year, when they should have been completing 4th grade. In addition to the system-wide administrative data used for this part of the analysis, the study also included interviews and focus groups with 18 school staff members, including principals, social workers, guidance counselors, and teachers, in five elementary schools with unusually high proportions of students living in shelters, and where those students had outcomes that were similar to those of housed students across the City. Researchers also interviewed four district officials in charge of supporting students experiencing homelessness to gain additional insight into how schools are supporting these students and the challenges they face in doing so.

The Houston study examines homelessness in HISD in all grade levels (Kindergarten through 12th grade) using district data from the 2012-13 school year to the 2016-17 school year to compare students who experienced homelessness during that time to all non-homeless HISD students and to a matched sample of non-homeless students with otherwise similar characteristics in terms of grade level, school year, race/ethnicity, gender, economic disadvantage, at-risk status, Limited-English Proficiency, and Special Education Enrollment, and school mobility.

Finally, the San Francisco study examines homelessness in all grade levels (Kindergarten through 12th grade) in SFUSD for the 2013-14 through the 2015-16 school years using SFUSD administrative data as well as students' self-reports on social and emotional learning survey items. Where appropriate, the study compared students experiencing homelessness to the whole SFUSD student population and/or to the population of students eligible for free lunch.



What Does the Research Show?

All three research artifacts provide descriptions of the students experiencing homelessness and all observe differences in the homelessness experience in terms of type and duration. All of the studies additionally examine similar outcome variables, including school mobility, attendance, suspensions, and academic achievement. The New York study takes a closer look at promising school supports as well as the challenges schools face in providing these, and the San Francisco study uses insights from social emotional learning questionnaires to examine what factors help students experiencing homelessness better overcome the obstacles they are facing. Here, we highlight just some of the major findings along these dimensions.

I. DESCRIBING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

A. Definitions and Measures of Students Experiencing Homelessness

To define students experiencing homelessness, all three studies use the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, which considers as homeless all students who live doubled up with other family, friends, or acquaintances, who live in emergency or transitional shelters, those awaiting foster care placement, those living in hotels/motels, and those living in temporary housing solutions such as trailer parks, campgrounds, cars, or public places (categorized as “unsheltered” in the Houston and San Francisco reports). The San Francisco study uses the term “homeless or highly mobile (HHM)” to refer to this population of students. The New York and San Francisco studies point out that the data might not capture all students experiencing homelessness, since a student’s housing status is generally self-reported, and that it does not capture all aspects of homelessness, such as the exact length of homelessness within a given school year or multiple forms of homelessness during the same school year.

continued on the next page

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs' Work, continued

In New York, almost 13% of the examined cohort of students (those who began kindergarten in the fall of 2012 and were then followed through the end of the 2016-17 school year) experienced homelessness at some point during that time. In Houston, approximately 2.5 to 3.5% of HISD students were homeless each year over the course of the study period (2012-13 to 2016-17) and 7.5% of HISD students were ever homeless over the entire study period. In San Francisco, approximately 4% of SFUSD students were reported homeless or highly mobile in the 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16 school year.

B. Characteristics of Students Experiencing Homelessness

In examining ethnicity/race of students experiencing homelessness in the respective samples the studies considered, all three studies found that Black students were overrepresented. In New York, Latino students were also overrepresented, and students experiencing homelessness disproportionately qualified for free or reduced price lunch every year between kindergarten and 4th grade, and were disproportionately more likely to be identified as English Language Learners or special education students. The study also found that students experiencing homelessness were heavily concentrated in particular neighborhoods and schools. In Houston, White and Asian/Pacific Islander students were underrepresented among the district's homeless students and Hispanic students were slightly underrepresented. In San Francisco, Hispanic students were overrepresented and Asian/Pacific Islander and White students were underrepresented. This study also examined gender among students experiencing homelessness (distributed fairly evenly) and home language among students experiencing homelessness (English and Spanish were the most common home languages).

C. Duration of Homelessness

In the New York study, which focused on elementary-aged learners, the students in the cohort who experienced homelessness did so on average for just under three years. Almost 70% experienced homelessness for more than one year, and over 25% experienced homelessness for all five years that were examined (2012-13 through 2016- 2017).

In the Houston study, which examined students across all grade levels from the 2012-13 through the 2016-17 school year, about 89% of students who experienced homelessness did so only for one year and only 0.3% of students who experienced homelessness did so for all five years of the study period.

Among students experiencing homelessness in San Francisco examined in the Gardner Center study (reminder: these included students across all grade levels in the 2013-14 through the 2015-16 school years), more than half were reported homeless in all three years, about 40% were reported homeless during one of the three years, and less than 30% were reported homeless for two consecutive years.

D. Type of Homelessness

Living doubled up and living in a shelter emerged as the two most common forms of homelessness in New York (58% and 30% of students who experienced homelessness, respectively -- these percentages refer to students who were only doubled up or only in shelter). Students who were doubled up were disproportionately Asian or Latino, while students in shelters were disproportionately Black. Additionally, results showed that 90% of homeless students in the cohort experienced the same form of homelessness from year to year. Given these findings, the study then divided all students who experienced homelessness into the following four groups to better understand the different experiences and their implications: 1) Doubled Up - Fewer Than Three Years (28% of homeless students), 2) Doubled Up - Three Years or More (30% of homeless students), 3) Shelter - Fewer Than Three Years (24% of homeless students), and 4) Shelter - Three Years or More (19% of homeless students). The qualitative data from the interviews with school staff showed that students in shelters were often described as the most vulnerable group.

continued on the next page

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs' Work, continued



Similarly, the two biggest groups of students experiencing homelessness in Houston were those living doubled up with family and friends (82% of homeless students in 2012-13; 81.9% in 2016-17) and those living in shelters (13.3% of homeless students in 2012-13; 10.2% in 2016-17). This study additionally examined the family context of students experiencing homelessness, as defined by students living unaccompanied (not living in the physical custody of a parent guardian) versus accompanied (living in the physical custody of a parent guardian). The share of students experiencing homelessness that were unaccompanied increased from 9.2% in 2012-13 to 11.5% in 2016-17, and unaccompanied homeless students were more than twice as likely to live in shelters (20.2% versus

8.9%) or to be unsheltered (8.0% versus 3.8%) as accompanied homeless students.

In San Francisco, 60% of students experiencing homelessness lived doubled up and 28% lived in shelters, where these two types of homelessness emerged again as the two most common types. This varied by race/ethnicity: For example, living doubled up was far more common among Hispanic homeless students than other groups. Additionally, Hispanic and Asian students were more likely than White and Black students to experience multiple years of homelessness.

II. OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

A. School Mobility

Not surprisingly, students experiencing homelessness were more likely than students not experiencing homelessness to move schools in all three studies (for example, 49.0% versus 18.7% between school years and 20.4% vs. 7.7% within school years in Houston and 12% of homeless students in SFUSD changing schools at least once during the school year versus 2% of free lunch students). In New York, homeless students in shelters for three or more years changed schools most often (with the average student changing schools at least once between kindergarten and 4th grade, and some changing schools seven times). In the interviews, school staff highlighted the challenges of teaching highly mobile students.

B. Attendance and Attainment

In examining attendance, the three studies found that students experiencing homelessness did have lower attendance and higher rates of chronic absenteeism than their non-homeless peers. Homeless students in the cohort examined in the New York study had almost double the levels of chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 20 days or more in a given school year) between kindergarten and 4th grade of never homeless students (almost 59% for homeless students and just above 32% for never homeless students), with students living in shelters for three years or more having especially high levels of chronic absenteeism (over 80% were chronically absent). These attendance issues were driven at least in part by transportation challenges in getting to school and back, as was discussed by school staff in the study's qualitative interviews.

Similarly, homelessness was associated with lower levels of attendance across all family and residential contexts in the Houston study, compared to all students who were never homeless and to the matched group of non-homeless students who had similar characteristics otherwise. For example, homeless students attended 5.5 fewer days of school than all non-homeless students and 3.3 fewer days of school than matched non-homeless students. The Houston study additionally examined dropout and on-time graduation, finding that students experiencing homelessness were substantially more likely to drop out and substantially less likely to graduate on time than students not experiencing homelessness, even when compared to the matched set of non-homeless students.

continued on the next page

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs' Work, continued

The San Francisco study found that 25% of students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent, compared to 11% of free lunch students. Homeless students attended school 92% of the time, compared to free lunch students' average attendance rate of 95%. Additionally, homeless 12th graders were less likely to complete the A-G course portfolio required for graduation in California (32% of homeless 12th graders versus 52% of free lunch 12th graders completed the A-G course portfolio in 2015-16), and less likely to graduate than their free lunch, reduced lunch, and non-homeless and non free or reduced price lunch peers (71% of homeless 12th graders versus 88% of free lunch 12th graders graduated in 2015-16).

C. Discipline

Two of the studies examined this dimension: The Houston study examined disciplinary infractions (defined as every disciplinary action that results in removal of a student from any part of their program, including administrative interventions, suspensions, expulsions, or removals to Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs), and the San Francisco study looked at suspensions. The Houston study found that homeless students received more disciplinary infractions per year than their non-homeless peers in general (.23 more infractions), but when compared to their matched group of non-homeless students received slightly fewer infractions (0.1 fewer infractions). Homeless students' disciplinary infractions varied significantly depending on their family and residential contexts. The San Francisco study found that students experiencing homelessness were 2.5 times more likely to be suspended out of school than free lunch students (4.4% of homeless students were suspended in 2015/16 versus 1.7% of free lunch students).

D. Academic Achievement

In terms of academic achievement, the New York study examined students' proficiency on state math and English tests in 4th grade, the Houston study examined rates of participation and pass rates on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams in reading and math for students in 3rd through 8th grade, and the San Francisco study examined students' GPAs and standardized test scores in English language arts, math, and science. Among the students in the New York study, only about a quarter of students who experienced homelessness attained proficiency on state math and English tests in 4th grade, compared to about 48% of non-homeless students in this cohort. Homeless students who lived doubled up were more likely than homeless students in shelters to achieve proficiency. Students who were in shelters for three years or more had the lowest scores (less than 20% attained proficiency on either test). Similarly, homelessness was associated with lower academic achievement in Houston: Students experiencing homelessness in the Houston study had substantially lower pass rates on the STAAR exams compared to non-homeless students; this varied by residential and family context. Notably, when compared to the matched group of non-homeless students, homeless students achieved slightly higher pass rates on the STAAR exams. Homelessness was also associated with lower rates of participation on the STAAR exams across all family and residential contexts. The San Francisco study similarly found that students experiencing homelessness scored lower on standardized tests in ELA, math, and science than their peers. In math, being homeless was associated with a 0.05 point reduction in standardized scores even when controlling for gender, race/ethnicity, grade level, and prior achievement. When examining students GPAs, SFUSD homeless students in middle and high school had GPAs that were on average half a point lower compared to the GPAs of free lunch students (2.4 vs. 2.9), and almost a full point below the GPA of their reduced price lunch peers (3.3).

III. SCHOOL SUPPORTS AND FACTORS PROMOTING POSITIVE OUTCOMES

A. School Supports

The qualitative interviews with school staff undertaken as part of the New York study highlighted several challenges schools face in supporting students experiencing homelessness, as well as promising practices.

continued on the next page

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs' Work, continued

Generally, school staff reported that there were not enough staff to meet the needs of these students, especially given the fact that helpful interventions and supports required significant personalized and time-intensive attention and care. For example, school staff found themselves needing to advocate for homeless students and their families with other agencies (such as social services) or to coordinate with other, similarly overburdened services (such as shelter-based services). Additionally, identifying students experiencing homelessness was a challenge, as was addressing barriers to school attendance. Finally, schools had limited funds that often were not sufficient to create the kinds of supportive programming and services needed as well as to hire designated staff for homeless students and other groups of vulnerable students. Deciding how to allocate those limited funds was a significant challenge. Practices that school staff identified as contributing to the improvement of homeless students' experiences were building trusting relationships with students and their families, which helped identify and support them, setting aside time to analyze trends in attendance data (including aspects like differentiating between morning and afternoon attendance), having additional non-instructional staff who could focus specifically on supporting homeless students, and partnering with community-based organizations.

B. Factors Promoting Resilience and Positive Outcomes for Students Experiencing Homelessness

In examining the variability in homeless students' outcomes and student assets that might explain why some homeless students fare better than others, the San Francisco study finds that many homeless students are able to thrive despite their overall lower outcomes when compared to non-homeless students. For example, three-quarters of SFUSD students who experienced homelessness had an attendance rate of 90% or above in 2015-16 and 56% had an attendance rate of 95% or above. 52% of students experiencing homelessness had a GPA of 2.5 or higher in 2015-16, 32% had a GPA of 3.0 or higher, and 15% had a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Additionally, one-third of students experiencing homelessness scored at or above the district mean on standardized state tests. The study tested multiple domains of students' self-reported social and emotional learning (including self-management, social awareness, growth mindset, and self-efficacy) to better understand which factors promote such resilience and positive outcomes, finding that student self-management and growth mindset positively predicted ELA and math achievement, controlling for race/ethnicity and attendance.



Implications for Policy and Practice

As these findings demonstrate, student homelessness is a diverse and varied experience, with type and length of homelessness and students' social and emotional learning skills being just some of the factors shaping students' outcomes. Students experiencing homelessness do face much adversity, but many are also able to overcome significant challenges and still thrive in school. Likewise, although schools may face myriad challenges in trying to support homeless students, the New York study highlights school staff's willingness to go above and beyond to help. Overall, the studies put forth the following implications for policy and practice for better understanding student homelessness and supporting students experiencing homelessness:

- Improvements in identifying homeless students and capturing more information in their administrative records are needed.
- More insight into effective school-level strategies for supporting students experiencing homelessness is needed, while being attentive to the unique and varied needs of different student groups by residential and family context. Specific areas for support that emerged were school mobility, attendance, attainment, test participation, and discipline.
- Non-instructional staff and partnerships with community-based organizations seem critical in supporting students experiencing homelessness.
- Targeting social and emotional skills seems promising for promoting better outcomes for students experiencing homelessness.

continued on the next page

When Students Experience Homelessness: Learning From 3 RPPs' Work, continued

Current Efforts

As we conclude, we want to highlight ongoing current efforts that will be important additions to the work examined in this article: In addition to the study featured above, the Gardner Center is also currently in the midst of another, larger study on housing instability among San Mateo County students, with the first phase completed (we invite you to explore the associated research brief in greater detail [here](#)). This first phase examined the size, distribution, and heterogeneity of housing instability among youth enrolled in Sequoia area public schools and investigated the relationships between each type of housing instability and several academic outcomes. Key findings were that African American, Latinx, and English Learner students were overrepresented among students experiencing housing instability, that the type of housing instability experienced by students varied greatly across all districts, and that experiencing housing instability was associated with lower academic achievement and school attendance. Academic achievement varied greatly by type of housing instability students experienced. Next, the Gardner Center will conduct similar analyses for the remaining public school districts in the county and conclude the project with a comprehensive, county-wide report on housing instability among students across all participating districts that will also include a comprehensive connection to the prevailing literature in the field.

Finally, we hope the findings and implications featured here provide a helpful overview of what we know about students experiencing homelessness and the policy and practice needs in this area during regular times -- and serve as a starting point for determining homeless students' needs and supports in these most unprecedented times, as well.

[1] "Students experiencing homelessness" is the preferred term and used whenever possible throughout this article. The term "homeless students" is used at times for the sake of brevity.

● *Nina Spitzley is Marketing Specialist at the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP).*

Improving Use of Research Evidence: Insights from Communication Science

By Itzhak Yanovitzky and Cindy Blitz | Rutgers University

Evidence-informed policy and practice is often touted as a gold-standard in both scientific and popular discourse. For many people, the idea that decisions made by policymakers and practitioners should be guided by the best available science, whether to improve STEM education in schools or fight a global pandemic, is immediately intuitive. It is therefore only natural for producers and funders of scientific research, as well as for research intermediaries such as NNERPP, to explore diverse venues for connecting policymakers and practitioners with the most rigorous and relevant research evidence that is applicable to problems they confront. Often, a primary focus of such efforts is the efficient translation and dissemination of useful research evidence. However, with the recognition that users themselves play an active role in acquiring and interpreting research evidence, there is a growing interest in implementing effective user engagement strategies.

Communication science has much to contribute in this regard due to its audience-centered approach. Unlike an information-centered approach which focuses on improving the transmission of information between producers and users, an audience-centered approach is focused on enabling and/or motivating users to integrate research-based insights into decisionmaking processes.

In this first part of a two-part series examining how principles of communication science can help improve the use of research evidence, we briefly introduce readers to key principles of audience engagement from this perspective. Part 2 in the next edition will offer the perspective of Communication leaders in research-practice partnerships (RPPs) on how to implement these principles in an RPP setting.



Think “Use,” Not “Evidence”

Too often, programs and interventions that aim to improve use of research evidence in policy and practice measure their success by tracking the scope and nature of the research evidence used in decisionmaking processes. However, this is not the same as tracking use of research evidence. In fact, this common practice has a number of undesirable consequences.

First, it promotes an artificial dichotomization of use vs. non-use, whereas use in reality is far more diverse and complex, and therefore appropriately defined as a continuum ranging from little or no engagement with research evidence to higher levels of engagement (e.g., frequent, deliberate, systematic, and critical).

Second, it imposes researchers’ own normative conception of what counts as use, whereas use in practice is determined by the goals, needs, capabilities, and circumstances of users.

Third, it disenfranchises the valid and important contributions of other forms of evidence to sound decisionmaking processes, most notably, practice or experience-based evidence produced by users themselves.

Lastly, it does not fully track the cognitive and social processes underlying use of research evidence including seeking, acquiring, filtering, interpreting, sharing, and deliberating the implications of research evidence.

continued on the next page

Improving Use of Research Evidence: Insights from Communication Science, continued

The bottom line is that defining and inferring use based on a priori assumptions or expectations is rarely useful. It is better and more informative to map out users' evidence use routines – who they typically seek or receive research evidence from, how they evaluate and interpret research evidence, how and for what purpose they use research evidence, etc. – to be able to adequately define and assess use relative to the unique context and circumstances of users.

Identify the Right Problem

You can't generate an effective solution to a problem if you get it wrong. Like any other behavior, use of research evidence is enabled by the combination of users' capacity, motivation, and opportunities to use research evidence.

Capacity has to do with the degree to which intended users have the necessary skills, competencies, and/or tools for seeking, acquiring, interpreting, and making an informed inference from research evidence. It is important to recognize that users may vary in their capacity to use research evidence as a function of their training and preparation.

Motivation to use research evidence may be internal or and/or external. Users are internally motivated to use research evidence if they perceive it to be valuable given their interests and goals compared to alternatives (i.e., relative benefits vs. costs of using research evidence) and/or if they believe that this practice is normative (i.e., that most other members of the group, particularly those who are important to them, use research themselves and expect them to do the same). External incentives or disincentives for using research evidence (for example, economic incentives or formal mandates) can also motivate use of research evidence, although they are generally less effective and more temporary source of motivation than internal motivation.

Opportunity refers to any objective barriers or facilitators for research evidence. This includes ease of access to sources of research evidence (e.g., scientific journals or experts), availability of technical assistance and other resources to support use of research evidence, time constraints, etc. RPPs, for example, can be an effective mechanism for improving use of research evidence because they create structured opportunities for researchers and practitioners to establish research-based collaborations to identify and address problems of practice.

The capacity-motivation-opportunity framework is an effective tool for diagnosing the real problem you need to address. Many interventions that target improvements in use of research evidence in policy and practice tend to assume that the problem is one of capacity or opportunity. But if the problem is essentially one of users lacking motivation to use research evidence, investing in building capacity or expanding opportunities to acquire and use research evidence may not solve the problem (if you build it, they may not come). So it is crucial to get the problem right before moving on to consider possible solutions.

Know Your Audience

The success of any strategy to improve use of research evidence crucially depends on the response from target audiences. For this reason, communication science places the audience at the center of any strategy for promoting a specific behavior or practice. This audience-orientation is formalized through audience analysis (sometimes referred to as audience insights). The goal of audience analysis is to develop a better understanding of target audiences' needs, goals, interests, predispositions, and experiences as they relate to the behavior or practice you are promoting.

continued on the next page

Improving Use of Research Evidence: Insights from Communication Science, continued

Approaching the problem from the perspective of audiences can inform your overall strategy in two important ways.



The first is **targeting** (or audience segmentation). We already know that a single fix will not universally solve the problem for everyone. Educators with relevant research training and experience require different types of support than educators who are new to research use. Targeting improves the efficiency and efficacy of behavioral interventions by identifying relatively homogeneous sub-audiences who are likely to benefit from the same intervention strategy. But this has to be done right. Segmenting target audiences based on demographic characteristics, for example, is customary but not very helpful from an intervention perspective. The fact that a user is a male or a female should make no difference regarding their use of research evidence, unless gender is a proxy for something else like differential access or training. Audience segmentation is more

useful when it is based on dimensions that are directly relevant to the enactment of the behavior. For example, segmenting audiences based on differences in capacity, motivation, and/or opportunity to use research evidence is particularly useful because it gets you to consider how different sub-groups experience the problem and what they require to change.

The second objective of audience analysis is to inform the **tailoring** (or customization) of the intervention to each target audience segment. For example, it may be that a large segment of your target audience simply lacks the motivation to use research evidence, but for different reasons. Perhaps there is one group of users that lack the self-efficacy to use research evidence; they want to use research but don't think they have the necessary skills to do this right or well. The other group of users have the self-efficacy but fail to see what's in it for them; they can do it but are concerned that doing so means an additional burden on their time or work commitments. Each one of these groups will need a slightly different motivational intervention: the first group needs something to build self-efficacy (e.g., a training or a tool) whereas the second group needs to be persuaded or offered an incentive.

Keep in mind that both targeting and tailoring requires you to collect information from your target audience regarding capacity, motivation, and barriers and facilitators to use of research evidence (based on how use is defined). It is always a good idea to ground data collection in behavior change theories such as the [theory of planned behavior](#), [social cognitive theory](#), or theories/instruments that are directly about research evidence use (see [Gitomer, Crouse, and Allen](#), for example).

Match Communication Strategy to both the Problem and the Audience

A successful behavior change strategy is typically judged based on its ability to achieve its goals. You may have determined that the real problem is one of capacity, or motivation, or opportunity, and you even have a good sense of what you need to do to address the problem. You still need the buy-in from your audience to make this happen, which is where communication enters. Now, we all have a natural tendency to believe that we are good communicators. Regardless of whether this is true or not (call it optimism bias), the issue is that we end up crafting a message and then expect it to be well received by our target audience. **It should not surprise you to learn that this strategy almost never works.** The reason for that is that your goal is to expose your audience to the message instead of seeking to engage them.

continued on the next page

Improving Use of Research Evidence: Insights from Communication Science, continued

Exposure is at the lower end of the audience engagement continuum. It assumes that your audience is a passive consumer of the information you provide and is very likely to find your message persuasive (again, because you are a good communicator). This explains why providing information that is intended to educate potential users about the value of using research evidence, which is the default approach, is also the least effective – you are asking people to do something that is important to you, but not something that is important to them or that they believe they can do.

Engagement, in contrast, is about building your audience's interest, motivation, perhaps even enthusiasm to use research evidence. In other words, it's about making them care. One communication strategy that can be useful in this respect is to connect use of research evidence to something users already personally value and/or are familiar with – improve your own performance, serve better those who benefit from your knowledge/expertise/advice, etc. – this is an example of how knowing your audience can be helpful in tailoring the message to your audience. Another potentially effective strategy is to suggest or provide cues that use of research evidence is desirable (valued by peers) and normative (prevalent, expected). You can even use a bit of modeling – show an example of excellent use of research evidence and how it is rewarding (or rewarded). A more evolved form of audience engagement involves coaching – don't just tell them what you want them to do and persuade them they care, also tell them how they can do this in a way that is easy, rewarding, and likely to result in the desired outcomes. This is the same as your doctor telling you to lose weight but also offering some guidance or a plan that will take you there. Without the plan, all you offer is prescription.

Still, the best strategy by far to engage your target audience with the change you are seeking is to partner with them on the design of communication. After all, they are the real expert on the problem since they are the ones experiencing it. This means that they have a wealth of insights to contribute regarding what should be communicated, how, when, and where – which is the essence of a basic communication plan.

One Last Cautionary Note

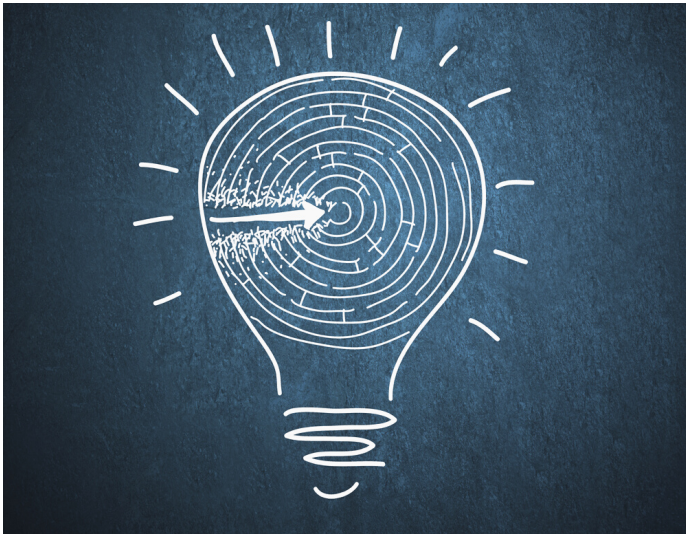
All interventions run the risk of unintended effects (positive or negative), regardless of how good your plan is. One important lesson from communication science is that you should always strive to pretest your communication strategy with an audience group before you go live so you can catch and correct any possible issues. The second important lesson is that it is your responsibility to anticipate any unintended effects on your intended audience but also unintended audience groups. Keep in mind that research, objective as it may appear to be, may introduce some bias into the way users think and act. For example, if a valid research procedure such as a survey systematically underrepresents the thoughts and experiences of a minority group, the evidence it produces is necessarily biased and users ought to be conscious of this bias. So communicators also have responsibility to communicate about what inference or conclusions can – and cannot – be drawn from research evidence to decrease the likelihood of misuse and disinformation. Research does not speak for itself; we must speak for research.

- *Itzhak Yanovitzky is Professor of Communication and Chair of the SC&I Health and Wellness Faculty Cluster at Rutgers University and is an expert in the areas of behavior change communication, public policymaking, translational research, and program evaluation. Cindy Blitz is the Executive Director of the Center for Effective School Practices (CESP) and a Research Professor at the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education (RU-GSE), where she works to facilitate the translation of scientific knowledge into educational practice in multiple domains of K-12 education.*

The Promise of a Collaborative Approach to Problem-Solving and Innovation-Testing: Reflections from a New Research-Practice Partnership in New York City

By Barbara Condliffe, Rekha Balu, and Margaret Hennessy (MDRC) and Rachel Leopold (New York City Department of Education Office of Student Enrollment)

MDRC, a nonprofit social policy research organization, and the Office of Student Enrollment at [New York City's Department of Education](#) (NYC DOE), are currently building a research-practice partnership (RPP) to address issues of educational equity in school application and enrollment. Called the Lab for Equity and Engagement in School Enrollment (E3 Lab), the partnership focuses on using insights from behavioral science and human-centered design to co-develop and test solutions that address operational challenges faced by the NYC DOE in efficiently ensuring equity and engagement in application and enrollment procedures. The work of the Lab builds on a long history of MDRC collaborations with NYC DOE (see for example, Hsueh, Corrin and Steimle, forthcoming[i]).



In this article, we consider the ways in which the problem-solving approach we are using to structure the activities of the Lab aligns with Henrick and colleagues' [five dimensions of effectiveness for RPPs](#) and what it suggests about potential new indicators to measure progress on innovation and solution design.

The E3 Lab began as a research-practice project called [Improving Engagement in Elementary School Selection](#). Initially designed to barriers that families face with the kindergarten application process, the project was motivated by NYC DOE's particular interest in focusing on barriers to application faced by families living in temporary housing and families for whom English is not a home language. The researchers (MDRC) and practitioners (Office of Student Enrollment at NYC DOE) came together as a team to

complete a cycle of problem identification, solution design, and rigorous testing. The partnership allowed for mutual learning, where the researchers gained more practical knowledge and the practitioners were introduced to new evidence-based strategies. Setting an upfront goal of testing was critical to this work and its transformation into a longer partnership, because it supported a focus on building and using evidence in a concrete process that repeats each year—school application and enrollment.[ii]

Building on this initial project, MDRC and NYC DOE began collaboration on additional solution design, applying insights from behavioral science to other issues. Most recently, the team is working through rapid and iterative design cycles to pilot new messaging to families regarding changes in the school registration process related to COVID-19 school disruptions.

The E3 Lab features collaboration structures aligned to **Dimension 1** of [Henrick et al.'s framework](#)—building trust and cultivating partnership relationships—that we hope will sustain and expand the RPP's utility and efficiency over time. The structures include: i) Creating processes for NYC DOE and MDRC to jointly identify problems that map to areas of greatest interest for NYC DOE to ensure buy-in throughout the project lifecycle and sustainability beyond individual team members' tenure, ii) designating a key contact at NYC DOE as a Co-Principal Investigator of individual projects, iii) collaborating on the development of all analysis plans to ensure analysis can be completed with available data (MDRC independently conducts impact analyses to evaluate interventions), iv) collaborating early in the intervention design process to build mutual capacity, allowing the researchers to share and apply evidence-based insights and the practitioners to apply critical practical knowledge, and vi) having researchers and practitioners co-present the project at local and national meetings and conferences.

Table 1: The Five Dimensions of Effectiveness from the Henrick, et al. Framework

Dimension 1	Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships
Dimension 2	Conducting rigorous research to inform action
Dimension 3	Supporting the partner practice organization in achieving its goals
Dimension 4	Producing knowledge that can inform educational improvement efforts more broadly
Dimension 5	Building the capacity of participating researchers, practitioners, practice organizations, and research organizations to engage in partnership work

continued on the next page

The Promise of a Collaborative Approach to Problem-Solving and Innovation-Testing: Reflections from a New Research-Practice Partnership in NYC, continued

The initial project and now the E3 Lab are using MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science's (CABS) six-step approach to problem-solving.

The CABS Approach is a systematic problem-solving framework that MDRC has used in collaboration with 100 government agencies, educational institutions, and nonprofits in 26 states to uncover barriers, design creative solutions, and evaluate those solutions using rigorous research methods. At its core, the CABS Approach leverages principles of human-centered design and evidence from behavioral science to solve for key problems following six steps that may be sequential or cyclical: Define – Clarify – Diagnose – Design – Develop – Test.

» **Step One: Define.** The goal of the Define step is to clearly identify the problem affecting the population of interest that the project aims to solve. This first step ends with the creation of a neutral and measurable problem statement that can anchor the subsequent investigation into the causes of that problem and the design of solutions. Aligned with **Dimension 3**, it is essential that a problem statement be focused on a meaningful outcome that supports the practitioner organization's goals. The Define phase of work also supports **Dimension 1** by establishing a foundation of communication and work routines between the research and practitioner partners to carry through the remaining project phases.

To help the researchers better understand the practitioners' goals and operational constraints, we brought together multiple district stakeholders (e.g. Office of Student Enrollment program and communications teams and staff from NYC DOE's Research, Policy and Strategy Group) for this phase of work on the project. Our team co-created the following problem statement: "Many kindergarten-eligible families do not submit a kindergarten application by the January deadline."

» **Step Two: Clarify.** After we identify a problem statement, we clarify its context and scope using both qualitative and quantitative data sources. The descriptive research activities that anchor the Clarify step of the CABS Approach align with **Dimensions 2 and 4** of the framework.

For the project, the team's first task in the Clarify step was to develop a process map that visually represents all steps a family should take to successfully engage in the kindergarten application and enrollment process in NYC DOE. Next, the researchers observed and interviewed kindergarten-eligible families and NYC DOE staff who oversee and administer the kindergarten application and enrollment process to identify

barriers families may face. The data collection and analysis from these events not only helped the team clarify the process and illuminate barriers, but also allowed the researchers to provide rapid feedback for the practitioners to inform time-sensitive decisions. For example, the researchers observed barriers to participation at information sessions hosted in family shelters and shared lessons from behavioral science about ways to improve outreach strategies. The practitioners rapidly applied some of those strategies in subsequent events by adjusting their promotional materials (e.g., fliers and letters) to align with [best practices from behavioral science](#).

In addition to the qualitative analysis, the researchers also conducted quantitative analysis as part of the Clarify step to identify where in the process families were dropping out or disengaging. Specifically, the researchers analyzed early childhood and kindergarten application and enrollment pathways of a prior cohort of students constructing data visualizations to show the relationship between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten application and enrollment behaviors. This analysis helped the RPP team refine the problem statement by clarifying its scope: "Among kindergarten enrollees in the 2016-2017 school-year 28% fell into the application gap, meaning they did not participate in the application process." This analysis approach also built conceptual capacity for the practitioners by demonstrating new ways for them to examine their data and highlighting new populations in need of targeting. Consistent with **Dimension 4**, the researchers published a [brief](#) on the findings to contribute to research literature on challenges families face in school application processes.^[iii]

Understanding and framing the problem as an "application gap"—people who potentially could apply but do not, despite ultimately enrolling—allowed the RPP team to highlight to district leadership and to other researchers why this problem was meaningful and had equity implications. Specifically, families falling into the "application gap" miss out on opportunities to fully exercise school choice for kindergarten since high-demand schools can fill up during the application period. The families may also miss out on opportunities to connect with the school and engage in kindergarten activities before the school year begins. The gap is also meaningful for the districts and for schools because it creates uncertainty in planning activities due to fluctuating rosters during the summer and early fall. The fact that our analysis found that English Language Learners and children living in temporary housing were over-represented in the application gap further bolstered motivation from the RPP team and important stakeholders to address this challenge.

» **Step Three: Diagnose.** During the Diagnose step, the team uses the qualitative and quantitative data collected during the

continued on the next page

The Promise of a Collaborative Approach to Problem-Solving and Innovation-Testing: Reflections from a New Research-Practice Partnership in NYC, continued

Clarify step to identify barriers that may be causing the problem. The team then draws on behavioral science research to develop hypotheses about the behavioral reasons for the barriers, or drop-off points, in the process map that was jointly created.

For the project, our team leveraged the original data, insights from behavioral science, and prior research literature on school choice to co-create hypotheses about the barriers that families face in the NYC kindergarten admissions process. This insight generation process aligns with **Dimension 4** of the framework as it can suggest additional hypotheses that can be explored empirically in other settings. The Diagnosis step is also integral to the development of innovative context-specific solutions informed by behavioral science.

In alignment with NYC DOE’s priorities for the project, our team focused particular attention on barriers faced by families living in shelters and those for whom English is not a home language. For example, we found that some families were overwhelmed by the prospect of indicating twelve schools on their application and were not familiar with schools available in the neighborhood where their shelter was located. We know from behavioral science research and the prior literature on school selection that barriers such as information gaps and choice overload can impede action.^[iv]

» **Step Four: Design.** In the Design step, the team develops solutions to address the barriers uncovered during Diagnosis. The district’s operations, infrastructure, and preferences for certain formats (e.g., paper vs. digital application; privacy rules about who can be reached, how, and when; deadlines that cannot be changed because of staff commitments to other grades’ application timelines) created parameters for our joint design process.

For the project, our team drew on CABS tools for designing solutions (see [SIMPLER framework](#) and [communications checklist](#)) and prior school choice interventions^[v], but recognized that this intervention would be less about improving choice and more about easing application. Thus the team co-designed a digital intervention intended to address barriers that families face in the NYC DOE kindergarten application process—an online “Kindergarten Application Helper” (called “K Helper”) that simplified decision making, and included an opt-in text message campaign offering reminders about the application timeline. In all discussions with the practitioners about the intervention design ideas, the researchers highlighted the specific barriers being targeted and behavioral principles underlying the solution ideas. In alignment with **Dimension 5**, NYC DOE has independently applied many of the design features of the RPP team’s intervention to other projects outside of the partnership. For example, after implementation of the “Kindergarten Application Helper” for the RPP project, NYC DOE developed a similar feature in their broader application system to support parents’ identification of early childhood programs for which they have highest priority to attend, incorporating a set of questions and search tools from the K Helper. This activity demonstrates that the partnership supported the practitioner staff’s capacity to apply principles of behavioral science on their own.

» **Step Five: Develop.** The Develop step focuses on ensuring the proposed solutions are feasible to implement and sustain, if found to be effective, and can be used by the target populations as intended. To this end, the team gathers feedback from stakeholders and uses that feedback to iterate and improve upon the solution. Since the practice organization often must carry the burden of

implementation of the solution at scale, the Develop step requires the team pay careful attention to buy-in from the practice organization as well as feasibility and usability of the solution when implemented at scale. Finally, in alignment with **Dimensions 2 and 4**, the research team needs to take care during the Develop step to clearly communicate implications of intervention design decisions for the research questions that can be asked and answered in the subsequent testing phase, and the appropriate research design that can answer those questions and be implemented well. Sometimes, priorities will need to be set, and tradeoffs made.

continued on the next page

Exhibit 1: Behavioral Barriers and Solutions from the E3 Lab’s Digital Intervention (Kindergarten Application Helper)

Information Gaps	Missing information or misinformation can limit people’s participation or making of optimal choices.	→	Pre-emptively correct common misconceptions regarding eligibility to apply.
Choice Overload	When there are too many choices, people can become overwhelmed and make no choice at all.	→	Limit the number of choices for families building a school list so that families don’t feel overwhelmed.
Hassle Factors	Capacity to take action is impeded by seemingly small barriers.	→	Provide information about a family’s zoned school as a first step in the process.
Intention-Action Gap	People often experience a disconnect between what they plan to do and what they actually do.	→	Provide prompts and planning tools to help families take steps to complete their goal. Leverage the power of social influence by using language to signal that the encouraged actions are those that “most parents” take.

The Promise of a Collaborative Approach to Problem-Solving and Innovation-Testing: Reflections from a New Research-Practice Partnership in NYC, continued

Our experience in the Develop step of the project demonstrates the importance of attending to **Dimension 1** in this critical time of problem-solving and testing. Our RPP team initially wanted to focus implementation and testing of the “K Helper” solutions for those families that the quantitative analysis suggested were most at-risk of falling into the application gap for kindergarten (e.g. previous non-applicants to pre-kindergarten). However, based on early feedback from the practitioner partner organization, our team learned that for a number of operational reasons, it would not be feasible to target outreach to previous pre-kindergarten non-applicants. As a result, we decided that it would be best to start implementation with families for whom the practitioners already had routines for digital outreach (subscribers to NYC DOE Office of Student Enrollment digital updates and prior pre-kindergarten applicants) and would be receiving standard NYC DOE notifications in the absence of the intervention. With this change in the target population for the implementation of the intervention, the research team had to adjust elements of the theory of change for the intervention and associated analysis plans before pre-registering the plan at the Registry of Educational Effectiveness Studies (REES).

Although this decision to shift the target population meant that the study was less targeted and the intervention potentially less impactful, the experience reflects the progress that the RPP has made on **Dimension 1**. It was the strong communication structures and tight relationships between the research and practitioner team members of the RPP that enabled this issue to be raised early enough for a change to be made early in the research plans and for the RPP team to identify an alternate path that would still meet the objectives of the practice organization to implement and test the efficacy of the solutions.

» **Step Six: Test.** The Test step is the final phase of the CABS Approach when the team deploys and monitors the implementation of the new solutions and evaluates them to determine effectiveness. In the Test step, the research partner not only measures effectiveness of the intervention at achieving the intended outcomes but also documents the experience of the practitioners implementing the solutions including facilitators and barriers. Consistent with MDRC’s mission, the Test step includes dissemination of findings to practitioners and policymakers. The Test step aligns with **Dimensions 3 and 4** by building rigorous evidence about the efficacy of solutions for the partner practice organization and the broader field.

For the project, the team randomly assigned potential kindergarten applicants (subscribers to NYC DOE email updates and former pre-kindergarten applicants) to receive NYC DOE’s standard email notifications about the kindergarten admissions process or the RPP team’s email that included behavioral messaging encouraging families to visit the “Kindergarten Application Helper” webtool where they could also sign up for text message reminders about the application process. The researchers are now independently conducting the impact analysis that will be shared with NYC DOE and then the broader field.

School districts can find themselves grappling with equity challenges in many areas of their operations, and may look to researchers to go beyond pointing out disparities and help them design, pilot, test, and scale potential solutions. As decades of research on education reforms and interventions have shown us, designing solutions for challenges rooted in pervasive and persistent inequalities is very difficult work. Getting to solutions will require significant innovation from researchers and practitioners. RPPs that align with Henrick and colleagues’ dimensions of effectiveness are uniquely situated to take on this challenge. Based on our reflections on how our approach in the E3 Lab aligns to the Framework, we are hopeful that our growing partnership will help achieve its lofty goals of improving equity in families’ experiences with NYC DOE school enrollment. As we consider successes and challenges of our first project of the E3 Lab, we wonder if the RPP community might consider expanding the Framework to include new indicators that focus on structures and routines to support innovation via strong problem identification, solution design, and testing. Using a systematic framework for collaborative problem identification, intervention design, and testing (like the CABS Approach) is one way that RPPs can infuse mutual learning via innovation into their approach. Extending this collaboration to a joint approach to testing can help advance evidence building and evidence use.[vi]

- *Barbara Condliffe is Research Associate, K-12 Education Policy Area and Center for Applied Behavioral Science, at MDRC, Rekha Balu is Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Applied Behavioral Science, and Margaret Hennessy is also a Research Analyst, K-12 Education Policy Area. Rachel Leopold is the Director of Enrollment Research & Policy at the New York City Department of Education Office of Student Enrollment.*

[i] Hsueh, J., Corrin, W., & Steimle, S. Forthcoming. “Building Towards Effectiveness: How MDRC Supports Continuous Learning, Evidence-Building, Implementation, and Adaptation of Programming at Scale.” New York: MDRC.

[ii] Balu, R., Dechausay, N., & Anzelone, C. (2019). Organizational Approach and Processes for Applying Behavioral Insights to Policy. Behavioral Insights in Public Policy: Concepts and Cases. Oxon, UK: Routledge.

continued on the next page

The Promise of a Collaborative Approach to Problem-Solving and Innovation-Testing: Reflections from a New Research-Practice Partnership in NYC, continued

Bangser, M. (2014). A Funder's Guide to Using Evidence of Program Effectiveness in Scale-Up Decisions. New York, NY: MDRC. Retrieved from: https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/GPN_FR.pdf

[iii] Bell, C. A. (2009). All choices created equal? The role of choice sets in the selection of schools. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84(2), 191-208.

Condliffe, B. F., Boyd, M. L., & DeLuca, S. (2015). Stuck in school: How social context shapes school choice for inner-city students. *Teachers College Record*, 117(3), 1-36

DeArmond, M., Jochim, A., & Lake, R. (2014). Making School Choice Work. Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from: https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/CRPE_MakingSchoolChoiceWork_Report.pdf

Fong, K. (2019). Subject to evaluation: How parents assess and mobilize information from social networks in school choice. *Sociological Forum*, 34(1), 158-180.

Fong, K., & Faude, S. (2018). Timing Is Everything: Late Registration and Stratified Access to School Choice. *Sociology of Education*, 91(3), 242-262.

Mavrogordato, M., & Stein, M. (2016). Accessing choice: A mixed-methods examination of how Latino parents engage in the educational marketplace. *Urban Education*, 51(9), 1031-1064.

Neild, R. (2005). Parent Management of School Choice in a Large Urban District. *Urban Education*, 40 (3), 270-297.

Rhodes, A., & DeLuca, S. (2014). Residential mobility and school choice among poor families. In Lareau, A. and Goyette, K. (Eds.), *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools*, (pp. 137-166). Russell Sage Foundation.

Sattin-Bajaj, C. (2015). Unaccompanied minors: How children of Latin American immigrants negotiate high school choice. *American Journal of Education*, 121(3), 381-415.

[iv] Chernev, A., Böckenholt, U., & Goodman, J. (2015). Choice overload: A conceptual review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(2), 333-358.

Glazerman, S., Nichols-Barrer, I., Valant, J., Chandler, J., & Burnett, A. (2018). Nudging Parents to Choose Better Schools: The Importance of School Choice Architecture. (Mathematica Working Paper Series, No. 65). Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.

Hadar, L., & Sood, S. (2014). When knowledge is demotivating: Subjective knowledge and choice overload. *Psychological Science*, 25(9), 1739-1747.

[v] Corcoran, S.P., Jennings, J.L., Cohodes, S. R., and Sattin-Bajaj, C. (2018). Leveling the Playing Field for High School Choice: Results from a Field Experiment of Informational Interventions. NBER Working Paper Series, No. 24471. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Hastings, J. S., & Weinstein, J. M. (2008). Information, school choice, and academic achievement: Evidence from two experiments. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 123(4), 1373-1414.

Weixler, L., Valant, J., Bassok, D., Doromal, J., and Gerry, A. (2018). Helping Parents Navigate the Early Childhood Enrollment Process: Experimental Evidence from New Orleans. Education Research Alliance for New Orleans. Retrieved from: <https://educationresearchalliancencola.org/files/publications/Weixler-et-al-ECE-RCT-6-7.pdf>

[vi] Tseng, V. & Coburn, C. (2019). Using Evidence in the U.S. from What Works Now: Evidence-informed Policy and Practice. New York, NY: William T. Grant Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2019/09/Tseng-and-Coburn-What-Works-Now.pdf>

Cody, S., & Arbour, M. (2019). Rapid Learning: Methods to Examine and Improve Social Programs. (OPRE Report #2019-86.) Washington D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Improving Improvement: Lessons Learned from Working with Partners During the Covid-19 Crisis

By David Hersh (Proving Ground) and Jennifer Ash (National Center for Rural Education Research Networks: NCRERN)



This is the second installment of **Improving Improvement**, our quarterly series focused on leveraging the power of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) to build schools', districts' and states' capacity to improve. As we're sure many of you have experienced in your work, the Covid-19 school shutdowns drastically changed our plans for supporting our partners' efforts to design, plan, pilot, and test evaluations in fall 2020. Our annual convening, the event during which our nearly 60 partner districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) come

together to make collective decisions and put in the bulk of the planning needed to achieve their goals, was scheduled for March 18. States began closing schools the week before. In less than a week we needed not only to redesign how we planned to support partners with the content intended for the convening, but to communicate changes clearly and reassuringly to an audience experiencing chaos and uncertainty. Despite the disruption and our partners' (understandably) changed priorities, our network remains on track to meet its goals. It has not been perfect or easy, but we have been inspired by our partners' work and commitment and have learned to adapt alongside them. Here, we share some lessons from this experience. We hope that these lessons will be helpful as you continue to rethink your partnerships and research plans in light of the unprecedented disruption that Covid-19 has brought and will continue to bring to schools.

Acknowledge and learn more about how Covid-19 is impacting your partners.

The first direct contact we had with districts after the Covid-19 shutdowns were not about our work but rather to connect with districts and listen. We had calls with every district to learn more about their response to the abrupt school shutdowns. While interviewers followed a semi-structured protocol developed specifically for these calls, the conversations themselves were informal, and interviewers took care to lead with curiosity about the district community as a whole and district team members as individuals.

From these calls, we learned about how our districts immediately sprang into action to devise creative solutions to provide students with meals, electronic devices, and internet access, and what teaching and learning looked like in the first few weeks following the shutdowns.

These conversations helped us build trust with districts, which was critical. In taking a pause from our scheduled programming and tasks that were already behind our original schedule, we demonstrated that we were not just focused on learning how Covid-19 would impact our particular project with districts but that we cared about the larger context of the district.

Don't be afraid to reach out, but be flexible and understanding.

Shortly after our decision to cancel our in-person convening and switch to an on-demand virtual one, we had to consider how to engage districts—how often was appropriate and with what tone? Nervous that our communications would seem tone deaf or get

continued on the next page

Improving Improvement: Lessons Learned from Working with Partners During the Covid-19 Crisis, continued

lost amidst the flood of new obligations, we started with less frequent communications that each contained more information. Following some valuable feedback, we dramatically shortened our communications while settling on weekly reminders of next steps. In practice, we are nudging districts fairly often, but always with an accommodating tone that recognizes their fluid availability.

Provide deadlines to maintain urgency but offer extensions when requested.

In addition to considering how often to engage districts and with what tone, we had to consider whether to push them to meet deadlines. Knowing they might be overwhelmed with new and challenging circumstances, we defaulted to providing near complete flexibility. We removed deadlines from our materials and all communications framed tasks as optional. While districts appreciated that we weren't piling on, some asked for clear deadlines to keep them moving. As one district told us, while the work was important to them, without deadlines, urgent items would always push the important ones further down the priority list. So, we added deadlines back in while communicating that districts should let us know if/when they couldn't meet a deadline. We either extended the deadline or developed a workaround to accommodate them. The feedback, and the results, were positive.

Admit when you don't have all the answers.

While they continued to work with us, districts retained a justifiable concern about the relevance of the work and how we would measure progress given the uncertainty around what school will look like in the fall. We've been working with states and others to offer some certainty, but we don't yet know the answers to some of these questions. Rather than delay or claim certainty, we leaned into our uncertainty. We acknowledged that we did not yet know exactly how the year would look or how we would measure impact. As nice as it would have been to project omniscience, our candor built credibility and some solidarity ("this is as new for us as it is for you"). We were careful to match the uncertainty with a plan for how we would address it and a promise to keep pushing for answers on their behalf, letting our partners know we have their backs.



Have and express confidence in your ability to adapt.

Again and again, we have come up against questions to which we do not know the answer. Our approach has been to encourage districts to make a plan for our shared work based on the information they have about the fall and set the expectation that we will need to revisit the plan once we know more about what school reopenings look like. We have assured partners that we will be ready and available to support them when we have the information we need to move forward. While it may seem like a bold promise to be ready to quickly change plans, it's helpful to remember that as researchers working in the field, we often have to adjust plans and have successfully done so.

Embrace virtual tools to provide more flexible and cost-effective support to partners.

Though we switched to virtual tools out of necessity, using virtual tools may be allowing us to be more supportive of and accessible to our districts than we would have been in our in-person event. Because it allows us to engage districts

continued on the next page

Improving Improvement: Lessons Learned from Working with Partners During the Covid-19 Crisis, continued

asynchronously over an extended period of time and without travel, we can provide one-to-one support to all nearly 60 partners. Our original plan was for a roughly 3-partner per support staff ratio. At the same time, we spared our partners the time and expense of traveling. All it took was liberal use of some readily available tools and the modification of our content for use by districts at home:

1. A content management system (e.g. Canvas) to lay out all of our guiding materials
2. Zoom for virtual meetings and to record presentations
3. Google Docs to collaborate in documents in real time
4. Slack to enable districts to engage directly with us and each other without endless email chains
5. Asana, a project management software, to document and assign action steps

We also learned that it was important to walk our partners through how to use the tools, so they would feel comfortable with the key features needed rather than overwhelmed. We provided technical support through user guides and live demos via Zoom and noticed an uptick in use after providing these resources.

Looking Ahead

By the time of our next installment of Improving Improvement, school will have started (likely in many different forms) and our partners will have launched or be ready to launch another round of interventions. Stay tuned for more lessons learned from the experience of helping them get there.

We are also always open to additional suggestions for topics for future editions of Improving Improvement. Reach out to us with any questions you have about our networks, continuous improvement process, or ideas you'd like to see us tackle.

- *David Hersh (david_hersh@gse.harvard.edu) is Director of Proving Ground and Jennifer Ash (jennifer_ash@gse.harvard.edu) is Director of the National Center for Rural Education Research Networks (NCRERN).*

Research Headlines From NNERPP Members: Last Quarter

ATTENDANCE

DETROIT EDUCATION RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP
examines seasonal patterns in attendance

COVID-19

DIGITAL PROMISE
compiles online learning resources and exemplars

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE
tracks states' crisis responses

REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORIES
collaboratively produce resource collection in response to COVID-19

REL CENTRAL
compiles answers to frequently asked COVID-19 questions

REL NORTHEAST & ISLANDS
compiles answers to frequently asked COVID-19 questions

RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS
provides overview on virtual and blended learning

TENNESSEE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE
examines educators' insights from teaching during COVID-19 school closures

ENGLISH LEARNERS

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines English Learners' postsecondary attainment

EQUITY

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines student homelessness

OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME LEARNING

EDUCATION NORTHWEST
examines out-of-school time STEM programs

POST-SECONDARY

BALTIMORE EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines college access

SCHOOL CHOICE

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE
studies access to school choice

SCHOOL CLIMATE

REL MID-ATLANTIC
examines development of a school climate survey and index

STUDENTS

EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW ORLEANS
examines students' perceptions of their schools and communities

TEACHERS

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE
studies teacher hiring

End Notes

NNERPP | Extra is a quarterly magazine produced by the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), a professional learning community for education research-practice partnerships (RPPs) housed at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University. NNERPP's mission is to develop, support and connect RPPs in order to improve the relationships between research, policy, and practice.



[@RPP_Network](https://twitter.com/RPP_Network)



nnerpp.rice.edu

NNERPP is made possible through generous funding provided by the William T. Grant Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and The Wallace Foundation.