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Welcome to Our Summer Edition

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP



Happy summer and welcome to our second issue of Volume 3 of NNERPP Extra! We are excited to share four new articles with you this quarter that capture what we are thinking about at NNERPP as we reach the tail end of the pandemic and look ahead to the challenges and opportunities post-pandemic. RPPs continue to come up as an important player in efforts to recover, reopen, and reinvent education, while the

field itself continues to grow and advance. With this in mind, we examine the following topics in this issue:

- **Research Insights:** We examine how three case studies of RPP work during the pandemic and in the wake of the racial justice movement highlight the critical need for unrestricted funding sources for RPPs.
- **RPP Deep Dive:** We take stock of where we are in the RPP field in terms of RPP effectiveness and propose a new idea for the field to consider in these efforts.
- **Extra Credit:** We share tips for onboarding new partnership members.
- **Improving Improvement:** We learn about outcomes of improvement efforts from three continuous improvement networks and takeaways from piloting and testing during a pandemic.
- **Research Headlines:** We share a roundup listing all of our members' research from the past quarter.

Happy reading and stay well!

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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 find us on Twitter: @RPP_Network.

Research Lessons from the Pandemic: Why Unrestricted Funding is Critical to RPPs

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Introduction



The severity and unpredictability of the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic over the past 15 months has upended life as we know it in many ways, particularly when it comes to schooling. In the U.S., an education system previously marked by structure and routine was forced to respond quickly and with little preparation or previous experience to unprecedented circumstances – a challenging task for education leaders, teachers, and students and families. Questions emerged on how, what, who, and when across all levels of the system, with a number of opportunities for research and evidence to help inform decisions.

In non-pandemic times, education research-practice partnerships (RPPs) often play an important role in filling knowledge gaps, given their aims to be responsive to and address problems of practice. This typically involves research- and practice-side partners co-developing a research agenda and individual projects in response to co-identified problems of practice. Even in normal times, this process is not without its challenges (e.g., research timelines are almost always longer than what practice-side partners would prefer). However, the pace of the work can generally be anticipated, with partnerships able to weigh priorities and timelines for projects depending on research-side capacity and practice-side needs.

This all changed swiftly when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the spring of last year. With the sudden shift to online learning amidst school building closures and enormous challenges around deepening inequities (to name but a few pandemic-related issues), the practice-side's priorities (and timelines) changed dramatically. Given partnerships' roles in supporting evidence-informed decision making prior to the pandemic, one might assume that RPPs would be uniquely positioned to pivot and answer these new calls from their practice-side partners. While there is some truth to this assumption, what we have learned recently from the experience of our members is that the ability to shift partnership work quickly is heavily dependent on how flexible an RPP's funding structure is. That is, most partnerships are funded by project rather than by partnership, which, practically speaking, means that a new research question that arises after a grant has been awarded may not necessarily be taken on by the partnership, especially if it is not attached to a particular project. Simply put, being able to pivot is directly tied to the flexibility of funding.

In this edition of the Research Insights series, we take a look at how three RPPs in NNERPP were able to respond to the needs of their practice-side partners during the pandemic and in the wake of the racial justice movement, and how these case studies highlight the critical need for unrestricted funding sources for RPPs if we hope them to fulfill their potential utility.

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Research Lessons from the Pandemic: Why Unrestricted Funding is Critical to RPPs, continued

Case Study 1: Lessons From Boston

The Boston P-3 Research-Practice Partnership was originally founded in 2007 by Dr. Jason Sachs from the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Department of Early Childhood and Dr. Christina Weiland, then a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The partnership has since expanded to include MDRC, the University of Michigan (where Dr. Weiland currently works), and Harvard University. In its current iteration, the Boston P-3 RPP aims to identify the key features in children's learning environments from prekindergarten to third grade that best support their academic, cognitive, and social-emotional development. However, like many RPPs, research-practice priorities are driven in part by funding for specific activities. For example, we are currently funded by the Institute of Education Sciences as part of the national Early Learning Network to identify malleable factors in children's P-2 experiences that lead to gains in children's academic outcomes within and across grades. In a different project housed under the umbrella of the RPP, we are funded by the Foundation for Child Development and the Heising-Simons Foundation to conduct a mixed-methods study examining the key facilitators and barriers affecting implementation of the BPS prekindergarten program – historically implemented in public school settings – in partner community-based organizations participating in the district's Universal Pre-K (UPK) expansion effort.

However, to truly partner with the district, our RPP has to also address pressing questions that fall outside the scope of our funded work. Without being able to address such needs when they arise, RPPs risk losing credibility and relevance with practice partners, potentially affecting the sustainability of the RPP in the longer-term. Flexible funding that supports the broader goals of the RPP without being tied to answering a pre-specified set of research questions can make RPPs more effective and impactful, both in the short- and long-term.

There are two recent examples in Boston where the team has leveraged flexible funds to support critical questions that the BPS district wanted to answer during the pandemic. First, in the context of the pandemic, districts across the country have encountered historic drops in prekindergarten and kindergarten enrollment. As reported in a [recent policy brief](#) published by the Boston P-3 RPP team, this issue was particularly salient for community-based UPK providers during the fall of 2020. In this case, the work was greatly facilitated by the flexibility of the Foundation for Child Development and the Heising-Simons Foundation. We kept them updated when our UPK research plans for 2020-2021 were upended by the COVID-19 crisis and they allowed us instead to focus on following the effects of the crisis on UPK sites.

Second, BPS began using a remote learning platform called “Seesaw” to support asynchronous instruction during the pandemic. Many teachers used Seesaw to assign a substantial number of assignments to students but given the stressors of the pandemic, it was difficult for the district to get a high-level view about how these types of assignments compared to the instruction that students would experience in a typical synchronous learning context. The district placed a priority on learning more about these assignments, particularly their cognitive demand, the extent to which they involved writing, and the quality of feedback teachers provided, among others. Using access to flexible funding support, we were able to co-construct, in a short amount of time, a coding tool with the district and then code about 500 activities randomly selected from 15 different schools. In exchange for course credit, a University of Michigan School of Education masters student and kindergarten teacher, Luna Terauchi, also worked as a coder on the team – a benefit of including university partners in particular in RPPs. In addition to summarizing findings across all activities, we were able to create school-specific reports for each of the 15 schools to give them a snapshot of their own data. We further developed a coding manual for principals to support them to review their own Seesaw data using this systematic lens. Importantly, the district has used the findings to create new best practices to promote the use of Seesaw in the coming school year as both a remote and in-person learning tool.

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Research Lessons from the Pandemic: Why Unrestricted Funding is Critical to RPPs, continued

At the Boston P-3 RPP, we have learned over the course of our 14 years in existence that the RPP model is most effective and mutually beneficial to districts and researchers when there is flexibility in how research can be used to provide timely information prioritized by district partners – which is possible through unrestricted or flexible funding. Our experiences during the pandemic, as outlined here, again demonstrate why flexible funding is so important for RPPs to make a real impact. As RPPs in education continue to expand in size and reach, gaining access to flexible funds can be critical for supporting the sustainability of these models, which is necessary for using research to make real change in policy and practice.

Case Study 2: Lessons From New Orleans

Over the past several years the [Education Research Alliance for New Orleans](#) (ERA-New Orleans), housed at Tulane University, has shifted its focus towards practitioner-partnership work with local education stakeholders. This work has included a variety of projects, including program evaluations of two local education nonprofits, a partnership with New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS) to test the effects of a text messaging intervention that supported families through the centralized enrollment process for early childhood programs, and a citywide youth survey developed in partnership with a variety of local community groups including NOLA-PS and the New Orleans Health Department. As this partnership work has become a more central component of our research agenda, we have developed a more formal process for conducting this research. Our advisory board and NOLA-PS annually propose and vote on topics that are of particular interest or relevance to their work. The ultimate goal is to provide timely and relevant data to help education stakeholders in the city make informed decisions about New Orleans students' public education.

Unlike much of our work, which is dependent on funds allocated towards specific research questions, this emerging line of work relies on less restrictive funds provided to us by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. This flexible funding allows our work to be more responsive – both in topic and in timeline – to policymaker and practitioner needs. For example, recent events have brought racial disparities to the forefront of national conversations with regards to disparities in health, policing, and many other aspects of society. In light of these conversations, our advisory board and NOLA-PS have expressed particular interest in developing a broader understanding of the racial disparities that exist within the education system here in New Orleans.



Over the course of the last year, we were able to examine two different questions posed by our partners with regards to racial disparities in New Orleans education. First, we used data from our citywide youth survey to examine student responses based on whether students had teachers who shared their race or ethnicity. As we report in the corresponding [policy brief](#), we found that on measures of school climate and student engagement, Black students are likely to benefit from having teachers who look like them. Having data to highlight these trends in student experiences can aid in the conversation as local groups advocate for increased representation of teachers of color in our schools' teaching forces.

Second, we evaluated the equity implications of a recent policy change to the centralized enrollment process. In New Orleans, students apply to schools through a centralized enrollment system called the OneApp, and they are then assigned to a school based on a lottery process, which relies on both applicant rankings of programs and program-specific admissions priorities (i.e.,

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siblings of current students are admitted first). Most elementary schools have historically had a broad geographic zone priority, but in the 2019-20 school year, NOLA-PS implemented a “half-mile” priority. This new priority meant that students living within a half mile of a school now receive priority for some of the broader geographic priority seats. In looking descriptively at the implications of this policy, we found that White and higher income students were more likely to have priority to the city’s most in-demand elementary schools, and they were therefore more likely to ultimately benefit from the new priority. Being able to provide these findings about the unintended equity implications of this policy to district leaders and the New Orleans community has informed continued conversations about the fairness of New Orleans’ centralized enrollment process and the racial disparities that may be furthered as a result of particular policy decisions.

The empirical evidence from these practitioner-driven, fast-turnaround projects can inform, in real-time, discussions that our partners are having with regards to addressing the racial disparities that exist in the New Orleans public education system. A flexible, less restrictive funding stream has allowed us to conduct research that is timely and relevant not only to our local partners, but to the broader national discussion.

Case Study 3: Lessons From Houston

In early March 2020, as the severity of the pandemic became fully known and schools worked to figure out how to educate students during a pandemic, it became clear that just as schools were adapting their practices, the [Houston Education Research Consortium](#) (HERC) would need to adapt its practices as well. Founded in 2011, HERC began as a partnership between Rice University and the Houston Independent School District. In 2017, HERC expanded to other Houston-area school districts, for a total of now 11 district partners. Guided by its mission to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities, HERC’s research portfolio includes projects related to early childhood education, English and dual language learners, postsecondary readiness and outcomes, wraparound needs, arts education, decentralization, students experiencing homelessness, and more.

At the onset of the pandemic, HERC had more than 10 research projects in motion. Most projects involved receiving data directly from districts, and all involved regularly engaging with districts to share out findings and receive feedback. The pandemic placed new and urgent demands on districts that reduced, and in some cases eliminated, the ability for them to participate with HERC in the research process. Had HERC been supported mainly by project-specific funds, this change in partner availability during the early weeks and months of the pandemic could have produced significant strains on the ability of HERC to meet its timelines or provide deliverables. Instead, HERC has a significant portion of its budget covered with flexible funding that is tagged for conducting research, but not tied to specific projects. As a result, when its district partners needed to redirect their efforts inward to ensure students were receiving an education in the spring 2020, HERC was able to respond by making several bold but necessary decisions about its partnerships and existing research projects. First, HERC decided it was going to proactively collect data about the consequences of the pandemic on education and schooling. Second, HERC decided it was going to continue meeting with district partners but pause disseminating research (unless specifically requested by a district partner). Finally, HERC decided it would be a resource to its district partners in helping collect and analyze COVID-19-specific data and information.

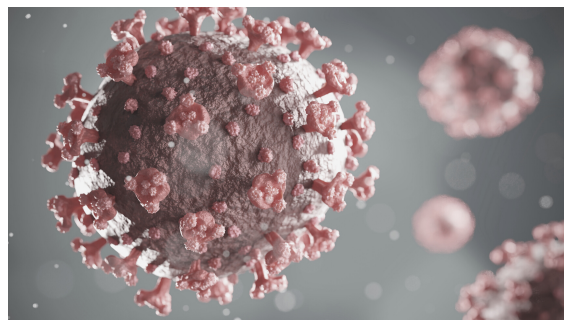
In light of its first decision to proactively collect data on the consequences of the pandemic for education and schooling, HERC reached out to others in the Houston community to determine what data collection efforts were already underway.

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Through these efforts, HERC partnered with Connective (formerly Harvey Home Connect) to launch the [Gulf Coast Coronavirus COVID-19 Community Impact Survey](#) in late March 2020. Early data from the survey was used by Connective to get information about available supports and services (e.g., assistance with rent/mortgage, utilities, food) to families in need, as well as develop an interactive dashboard that allowed non-profit organizations around the Houston region to know where pockets of concentrated need existed. HERC subsequently used these data to produce [three reports detailing the social consequences of COVID-19](#).

Based on HERC's second decision to continue meeting with districts, but pause research dissemination, HERC reached out to each of its district partners to consult with them on this decision. Each partner district agreed with the decision to pause research dissemination, but also agreed to continue holding regular check-in meetings to discuss emerging research needs and determine when it would be appropriate to begin sharing study results with the districts again. Many districts asked for research dissemination to be paused until the end of the school year (i.e., June 2020) with a few asking that nothing be shared until later in the summer.



From the districts' perspective, they needed to focus all their energies and efforts on supporting schools, teachers, principals, and students to ensure education was happening. Districts did not have the bandwidth to also fully engage in the research process with HERC, and therefore preferred delaying the receipt of findings. Beginning in late-summer 2020, HERC re-started sharing findings with districts, and by the fall, had re-engaged nearly all their district partners in the research process.

Finally, as a result of its third decision, HERC undertook several research efforts related to COVID-19, making its research services available to districts as needs arose. For example, if a district was interested in collecting data from parents or students about education during the pandemic but did not have the time to design, program, and administer a survey, HERC was available to help. In spring 2020, HERC designed and programmed a parent-survey for one of its district partners (making it available online and in English and Spanish). Over the summer, HERC formed the COVID-19 Action Research Committee (COVID-19 ARC) – a small team of district representatives and researchers at HERC – tasked with actively monitoring and providing support to school districts who had data or research needs specifically related to the pandemic. The COVID-19 ARC met every-other-month through the end of 2020, and responded to public school requests to put together a dashboard on school opening and closures because of COVID-19 cases, and also designed a student engagement survey aimed at understanding engagement with learning during the 2020-21 school year and the factors that were disrupting learning.

The decisions made by HERC in the early days of the pandemic helped provide data to community organizations so they could connect with families in need and offer supports and services. The decisions resulted in a temporary pause to research dissemination, but in doing so gave space to build further the relationship between HERC and its partner districts. Finally, the decisions created the space for HERC to adapt and meet the changing and urgent needs of districts in the Houston area. HERC was able to make these decisions and respond to the immediate needs of schools, districts, and families in the Houston area during the COVID-19 pandemic because of its access to flexible funding.

Recommendations for Requesting General Operations Support

In this final section, HERC director Ruth López Turley shares the lessons she has learned over the last decade of securing

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grants for general operations support – that is, flexible funding that is not tied to specific research projects. These recommendations are not specific to pandemic times, nor are they applicable in all circumstances and to all types of partnerships; rather, these are general tips that Ruth has found to be helpful in her RPP funding efforts and that may be helpful to your partnership as well. We invite you to let us know if you have other suggestions to add to this list.

»Start local

General operations support is most compelling to local funders because their mission often focuses on local issues, and education is frequently among them. Since much of the work of RPPs is primarily relevant for local agencies, this is a good fit for local funders. However, a strong case has to be made for how supporting a local RPP will benefit local students and what the return on investment will be. One challenge is that some geographic areas have fewer potential funders than others, limiting their local opportunities. Additionally, some funders are more engaged than others. This is why state and federal funding should also move in the direction of providing general operations support for RPPs, efforts that can be moved along by NNERPP. However, if local funders do exist in your area, they should be involved as much as possible, even if not through funding per se (more on this in the paragraph below), as this will help build the case for other forms of support.

»Develop long-term relationships

Funders need to know who they are investing in. Ultimately, they are investing in students, but they are also investing in the members of an RPP, so funders need to know them well – beyond the type of information you can get through a website, brief, or proposal. They need to know the RPP team members, particularly those in leadership positions, on a personal level, so they can hear and see directly that the people doing this work truly care. These types of relationships with funders can take years to cultivate before making a funding request. Even if a request is never made or funded, these relationships are worth the time investment, as funders can provide valuable information, and vice versa.

»Generate compelling deliverables

When making a request for general operations support, be sure to generate compelling deliverables. Just because you're not requesting project-specific support doesn't mean that you don't have specific deliverables to provide. If anything, it's even more important to develop a strong list of deliverables resulting from general support, including items such as developing a longitudinal database, generating a specific number of research briefs, or presenting regularly to funders, legislators, or other community stakeholders. Be sure to ask funders about the types of deliverables they think are important and impactful in your community.

»Mitigate risks

General operations support may seem riskier to funders due to factors such as leadership turnover, school board dysfunction, natural disasters, and anything that can interfere with the work of the RPP. In addition to generating a compelling list of deliverables, it's helpful to make clear to funders that you are aware of potential risks and that you are taking steps to mitigate those risks. Risk mitigation deserves a lot of thought. With all the crises we've experienced recently, we have a lot of information about how to prepare for and anticipate future crises. This information should be included in all funding requests.

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>>Build funder partnerships

Another way to mitigate risk for funders is to help build funder partnerships that can jointly invest in your RPP. By working together, funders don't have to single-handedly take on the risk of a failed effort. Furthermore, joint investment can increase the amount of funding and in turn increase the likelihood of a successful RPP. Funders often communicate regularly among each other anyway, especially if they support similar topic areas and geographic areas, so it's not a big leap for them to collaborate in support of a specific RPP.

Concluding Thoughts

Perhaps more clearly than any other time, the past 15 months of the pandemic have emphasized just how closely an RPP's potential utility to practice-side partners is related to its ability to be responsive to shifting practice-side needs. This, in turn, is tied to the nature of RPP funding (flexible or restricted). As illustrated in this article by the case studies from three of our member RPPs, partnerships are able to produce work that has immediate impact when they do not have to contain it within boundaries that were predefined long before the work was to actually take place. If impact is truly what we care about, then current funding models for RPPs may need to reconsider their approach and examine ways in which funding can be supportive of rapidly changing practice-side needs.

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What's New With RPP Effectiveness?

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP

I. INTRODUCTION

Although RPP effectiveness, including how to define and assess it, remains a critically important topic at NNERPP, it has been a while since we last shared a piece exclusively about this for NNERPP Extra ([here](#) is the most recent one and [here](#) is the one before that). Elsewhere, we have organized a number of learning opportunities for those interested in getting up to speed with RPP effectiveness, through:

- Providing up-to-date curated content and resources on RPP effectiveness on the [NNERPP RPP Knowledge Clearinghouse](#), an online repository of RPP-related artifacts covering all kinds of partnership topics;
- Hosting conversations about RPP effectiveness at every [NNERPP Annual Forum](#) since 2016 (incidentally, we first workshopped the now well-read [Henrick, et al. \(2017\) framework](#) with attendees at the 2016 Annual Forum);
- And holding several formal and informal conversations with NNERPP members and friends, through our monthly virtual brown bags, external conference presentations, and ad hoc.



Given all of these efforts, we thought it was time to check back in with where we are in terms of RPP effectiveness, which will also help us see where we should go next. Here, we provide a recap of major efforts around defining and assessing the effectiveness of RPPs, highlight the outstanding questions that remain, and finally offer a couple of new ideas for the field to consider going forward (feedback welcome!).

II. RECAP

We begin this recap with the Henrick, et al. (2017) framework, as it represents a pivotal moment in our quest to understand RPP effectiveness. This white paper helped advance our conversations from one-off, singular contributions to the public sphere on understanding how and when RPPs work (e.g., [Ralston, et al., 2016](#); [Wentworth, Mazzeo, and Connolly, 2017](#)) to a field-informed contribution. Thus, the Henrick, et al. framework can be seen as more than a large step forward in conceptions of effectiveness, in that it also synthesizes / marks where the RPP field stood at that moment.

Taking a step back to 2017, one of the major challenges at the time was to name and consider the different types of RPPs (e.g., design-based, research alliances, and networked improvement communities, from [Coburn, Penuel, and Geil, 2013](#)) and whether they could (or should) be assessed using similar metrics. One of the important features of the Henrick, et al. framework is that it represents a near-consensus, if you will, of the prioritized aims identified by RPPs of all three types -- it documented five dimensions or outcomes that seemed to be important for "effective" RPPs, no matter the approach to partnership.

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Four years later, we have moved away from hard distinctions among the three types of RPPs, as the lines between each model have blurred considerably (Arce-Trigatti, Chukhray, and Lopez Turley, 2018), but the Henrick, et al. framework has endured. It has since anchored many conversations we've had within NNERPP and with others outside of our network, leading to a number of new developments that we highlight here (note that this is not an exhaustive literature review but rather key examples of artifacts that have emerged after Henrick, et al.):

>>Application of the Henrick, et al. framework to a large sample of RPPs by those studying RPPs

Farrell, C., Davidson, K., Repko-Erwin, M., Penuel, W., Quantz, M., Wong, H., Riedy, R., Brink, Z. (2018). [A descriptive study of the IES researcher-practitioner partnerships in education research program](#). Boulder, CO: National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (NCRPP).

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) asked a team of researchers at NCRPP to help them study IES' (now defunct) Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships in Education funding program. In this descriptive effort, NCRPP developed interview questions and survey instruments based largely on the five dimensions from the Henrick, et al. framework. This technical report summarizes the instrument development process and key constructs, as well as findings across 27 RPPs that participated in the study.

>>Application of the Henrick, et al. framework to an individual RPP by those in an RPP

Goldstein, H., McKenna, M., Barker, R., and Brown, T. (2019). [Research-practice partnership: Application to implementation of multitiered system of supports in early childhood education](#). Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups, p. 1-13.

This paper is an example of an individual RPP working through the five dimensions of the Henrick, et al. framework, and examining how these dimensions apply to their own particular context. These reflective efforts are quite valuable to furthering our understanding of how (and whether) the five dimensions apply to a partnership's context.

>>Application of the Henrick, et al. framework to a community of RPPs from the same funding source

There are several ongoing efforts to apply the Henrick, et al. framework to the evaluation of [Computer Science for All RPPs](#), spurred in large part from the National Science Foundation requiring an evaluative component for its funded projects. The convener of this community of RPPs, [RPPforCS](#), has also developed a "Health Assessment" tool based on the Henrick, et al. framework and [asked 5 partnerships](#) to reflect on their use of the tool.

>>Application of the Henrick, et al. framework to assess your RPP's progress on its goals

Most recently, a small team at REL Southwest led by Carrie Scholz [produced a tool](#) grounded in the Henrick, et al. framework to assess the health of an RPP. This is a formative analysis meant to provide ongoing opportunities to check in with partners around the five dimensions identified in Henrick, et al. Importantly, the tool is meant to support improvement efforts around partnership health by asking members to "purposefully and honestly reflect on their

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collaborative work” and moreover, “to make necessary adjustments over time”. Teams are invited to set quarterly goals around the 5 dimensions and given guidance on how to monitor those goals via an Excel workbook containing prompts and interview protocols.

»Application of the Henrick, et al. framework to to assess your RPP’s developmental progression

In our own backyard, NNERPP has partnered with NCRPP to develop a set of research-based tools grounded in the Henrick, et al. framework, through a project **funded** by the William T. Grant Foundation. Using an evidence-centered design (ECD) approach, we are creating a survey and set of interview protocols that all types of RPPs can use to get a sense for where they fall along a developmental progression. We have additionally developed and included an equity lens to each of the dimensions, an aspect that was not as explicit in the original framework. We are currently in Phase 2 of the grant, where we are testing a pilot survey and working with RPP stakeholders to develop an interview protocol.

III. OVERARCHING THEMES, OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS

The efforts we review above have brought us a long way in our conversations around RPP effectiveness and our ability to measure certain aspects of it. However, some prickly questions remain unresolved. Many of these ideas have been raised previously throughout our conversations with NNERPP members and friends, with no clear answers yet. We summarize a few of them here:



1. RPP goals are sometimes similar but oftentimes not.

Through these advancements in understanding RPP effectiveness, we have affirmed our prior suspicion that it is still incredibly important to first understand what a given RPP’s goals are, and especially how those relate to the five dimensions of the Henrick, et al. framework, if that is the basis for the assessment. The extent to which any dimension from the Henrick, et al. framework will be applicable or a priority for a partnership will vary substantially across all RPPs, even within the same “type”. At NNERPP, we took a deep dive into this idea for a [previous NNERPP Extra article](#), asking members and friends to consider whether Dimension 4 of the framework, “Producing Generalizable Knowledge to Inform Efforts More Broadly” is / should be applicable to all RPPs, for example.

2. What do we mean by “RPP Effectiveness”?

There are a number of ways of framing questions around RPP effectiveness, including assessing for “success”, evaluating progress on goals, and checking the “health” of the partnership, just to name a few. These are all slightly different and will provide different information about the partnership. For example, Wentworth, et al. recently **wrote** about RPP “success”, where they focus very narrowly on the partnership’s role in “shaping district policies and practice” (i.e., assessing for impact and practice-side change). On the other hand, the notion of “effectiveness” may be somewhat broader, perhaps involving inquiry into whether you are meeting the

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goals you set out for your partnership (whatever those may be), many of which include process dimensions of the work rather than ultimate downstream impacts on practice. Finally, partnership health seems like something entirely different, invoking a sense of strength relative to weakness. In this case, we might be interested in asking how strong is your partnership? As such, this may be less about goals and more about the connective relationships that support the work.

3. What is the intended use for the evaluation and who is using it?

For example, an RPP's evaluation could be intended as a formative assessment, like the REL Southwest tool introduced earlier, or it could be intended as a summative assessment, like what some of the evaluators are providing for the NSF CSforAll RPPs. One thing that remains unclear to us though is who is using this information, regardless of whether the assessment is summative or formative in nature. For example, do practice-side partners care about assessing the work or is this mainly a research-side endeavor? Does that matter? Are there mechanisms in place to help the partnership integrate findings from the evaluation? Whose responsibility is it to ensure that there are opportunities to improve based on the feedback? How will the partnership know whether it is indeed improving over time?

4. What if you have limited resources to allocate to this work or are a small RPP?

Apart from the NSF-funded CSforAll RPPs, which have to allocate some of their grant funding for evaluation, RPPs generally have a choice as to how much time, funding, and effort they will invest in assessing their effectiveness. Thus, the extent to which an RPP is able to assess its effectiveness may vary considerably depending on the availability of these resources. Moreover, this question also echoes the point made above around differences in RPP aims. How should we think about effectiveness for partnerships that are much smaller in scale, relative to those situated in large urban school districts, which tend to have more resources from which to draw upon? Additionally, does the potential to create partnerships that will have an impact on practice vary by the scale of operations? For example, is it “easier” to draw a line from RPP to impact for smaller partnerships and/or those who partner with smaller districts since there may be fewer barriers on the way from decision to practice?

IV. A NEW IDEA

As our understanding of RPPs continues to evolve and grow, we expect (and hope) that new ideas on how to measure their progress, impacts, and health also emerge. To that end, I share a new idea for how we might assess RPP effectiveness, based on a concept that has previously been introduced in the RPP literature to characterize partnership work, but has not figured centrally in the current discussions of RPP effectiveness. Our aim here is to propose a not-yet fully developed way of imagining effectiveness so that others may weigh in as well, hopefully leading to new thinking or discussions.

The notion of “joint work” is arguably the most universal aspect of partnership work that cuts across RPP type, approach, and stated aims. Of course, there may be instances of joint work happening outside of partnerships, but to truly be considered an RPP, there must be examples of joint work occurring between partners. In fact, we could go so far as to say that it is part of a partnership's “DNA”. Therefore, one way to think about RPP effectiveness is to invite questions specifically about the joint work itself -- e.g., how much joint work is indicative of an effective partnership? When do we know that there are too few instances of joint work happening? What does high quality joint work look like? ...and so forth. This line of questioning may help us better understand how well we are partnering, and forms the basis for the new idea introduced here.

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What's New With RPP Effectiveness?, continued

But before we get there, what is “joint work”, really? And how do we know we are engaging in “joint work”? The Henrick, et al. framework first introduces it as an indicator of progress under Dimension 1: “Building trust and cultivating relationships”. In this case, the authors use it to characterize the investments partners must make towards the development of trust and relationships, i.e., that partners “routinely work together”, which results in “joint work” (page 5). This description is somewhat vague, as many things can count as routinely working together and may not be in the vein of RPPs (e.g., researchers providing technical assistance to practitioners, which requires them to work together, but is not necessarily what we would consider an RPP).

Somewhat fortuitously, I happened to recently re-read “[Conceptualizing Research-Practice Partnerships as Joint Work at the Boundaries](#)” by Penuel, Allen, Coburn, and Farrell (2015), in which, as the title implies, the authors argue for characterizing partnership work as more than a transactional endeavor wherein the main goal is to facilitate the translation of research to practice. In the paper, the authors instead argue that the nature of partnership work is a kind of joint work that requires partners to engage in boundary crossing and boundary practices. Let's first define these terms and then ponder what this has to do with RPP effectiveness.

Starting with **boundary crossing**, the authors define this as “an individual's transitions and interactions across different sites of practice” (p. 188). In other words, these are the instances in RPPs where a “researcher” or a “practitioner” is called to contribute to partnership efforts in a manner outside of their primary job description or home organization. Examples can include a researcher providing thought partnership to their practitioner partners in a research area that goes beyond their expertise, or a practitioner helping prepare a conference presentation for an academic meeting. Partnership work thus calls on each “side” to take on activities or roles that they may not have previously, in service of the collaboration, which results in boundary crossing.



Building on this idea, **boundary practices** are the “stabilized routines, established and sustained over time, that bring together participants from different domains for ongoing engagement” (p. 190). The authors call these activities “unfamiliar” to partners prior to working in partnership and “hybrid” in that they often emerge from a meshing of “R” and “P” voices, roles, or perspectives to create a new process or product. One of the examples provided in the paper describes the work of the MIST Project, where the partnership worked to co-create a regular theory of action report. This report called for the practitioners to provide their expertise in filling in the components of the theory of action (as opposed to researchers bringing in theory / research to fulfill this in the absence of the RPP), while the researchers provided an external viewpoint for practitioners as they reflected on their process (as opposed to practitioners working through an internally-driven theory of action with their organizational peers). The resulting theory of action report thus reflects a jointly constructed artifact that would not exist were it not for the partnership.

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What's New With RPP Effectiveness?, continued

So, why should we care about boundary crossing and boundary practices? And what do they have to do with joint work and RPP effectiveness?

The authors suggest that “the joint work of partnerships requires participants to engage in boundary crossing, and that joint work is accomplished through boundary practices, which are routines that only partially resemble the professional practices of researchers and practitioners” (p. 187, emphasis mine).

And so, here is the new idea: if all RPPs must contain examples of joint work, and joint work requires boundary crossing (which is enabled through boundary practices), what if we created measures to help us understand whether these (boundary crossing and practices) are indeed happening as a way to measure joint work? And to connect this with RPP effectiveness: if we are able to measure how well partnerships are facilitating joint work, we may be able to get a sense for how well the partnership is doing -- which ultimately tells us something about the effectiveness, success, or health of the RPP.

Elaborating further, encouraging partnerships to reflect on their efforts to create and support boundary crossing and practices would give them a new set of tools (and a new perspective) for aims around assessment. For example, what if partnerships asked themselves: to what extent are we creating multiple opportunities (i.e., through boundary practices) for instances of joint work to occur? Or, what does it mean for partnerships to cultivate the conditions leading to joint work (i.e., leading to instances of boundary crossing)? There may be great potential to expand our understanding of the various elements related to RPP “effectiveness” simply by taking up these new terms and applying them to our thinking.

V. ONE FINAL THOUGHT

Since we already have you here, I thought we would call out one more idea that we have not yet seen be taken up regularly in the discussion of RPP effectiveness. From what we have seen here at NNERPP, especially over the last year (and what is highlighted in “[Research Insights](#)” in this edition), an RPP’s potential or realized capacity to be responsive, adaptive, and nimble is critical in order to be considered “effective.” These three partnership features are not a part of the standard RPP effectiveness lexicon right now, and they probably should be. Despite the advances we’ve made in better understanding what makes an RPP productive, there is still no one “right” way to do partnership work...although if there is a “right” way, it may be that the partnerships which seem to grow, endure, and effect change are those that follow a responsive, adaptive, and nimble approach to partnering, all in service of their partners’ needs. These attributes are not directly named in the Henrick, et al., framework, for example, and it’s not clear that they are showing up in our RPP effectiveness conversations either. And yet, what we know from our experiences with members and friends on the practice-side is that “aims” are ever-changing, due to a variety of factors that are typically outside of the partnership’s purview. If we apply the idea that effective or productive partnerships are those that support their P-side partners in achieving their aims (Dimension 3 of the Henrick, et al. framework), then by default we are describing partnerships that must be responsive, adaptive, and nimble. (Again, these traits are exactly the ones we highlight in this very edition’s Research Insights contribution.)

While we could go on, this is a good place to pause and hear from you! What do you think about these new concepts of RPP effectiveness? Are you already measuring instances of boundary crossing and boundary practices? What do they tell you about your partnering efforts? Has your partnership had to pivot in the last year? What made that easier or harder? Let us know [here](#)!

● *Paula Arce-Trigatti is Director of the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP).*

Onboarding New Partnership Members? Here are Three Slides to Include

By NNERPP



What does it mean to “partner” in an RPP? What expectations should be shared for new partnership members? How do you communicate about the ways of working together in your partnership? These are just some questions you may encounter when onboarding or integrating newly hired staff that are not only new to your partnership, but may be new to RPPs more generally. Given the complexity of partnership work, it can be challenging to determine what essential information you should consider sharing as you introduce new members to the team. In this Extra Credit piece, we share three slides you might consider including in the onboarding deck to welcome new members, whether these newcomers are joining in an “R”, “P”, or other capacity. (And for information on how to run an equitable partnership meeting, especially in terms of setting the tone for working across R and P, please see [this recent NNERPP Extra article](#).)

Before sharing our suggested slides, we first invite you to consider what goals you may have for the onboarding process. What are you hoping to communicate to your new teammate(s)? Relatedly, what do you hope to learn from them during this initial integration effort? How you answer these questions may depend on a number of factors. For example, if your partnership is already established and has had a long history, one goal for the onboarding process may be for newcomers to learn about and understand the RPP’s story, to hear about significant changes that were experienced by the partnership over time, and talk about anything else that has

shaped the current identity of the partnership. If your partnership has only launched recently, a quick summary of efforts to date may suffice, and so you might spend more time thinking together about the next steps for the partnership. In either case, creating space for new members to (i) provide input on the partnership’s intended direction, (ii) hear about how they see themselves in the work, and (iii) engage in relationship building among new and existing RPP members will be critical. Articulating the aims of the onboarding process will thus be an important first step in determining the information you ultimately decide to include in the onboarding slide deck.

Slide 1 | What is an RPP?

We suggest starting with what may be obvious but nonetheless fundamental: Defining research-practice partnerships. The purpose of this slide is two-fold: First, to ground everyone in understanding what the field means by “RPP” (which may or may not closely align with your own take on it – more on that in Slides 2 and 3), and second, to provide a field-level description of where RPPs are in their development in light of the growth and changes the field has seen in recent years (Arce-Trigatti, Chukhray, and López Turley, 2018).

We share with you here a forthcoming working definition by Farrell, Penuel, Coburn, Daniel, and Steup that represents an update to the previous definition put forth by Coburn, Penuel, and Geil (2013). Given the rapid growth of the RPP field in recent years, including the emergence of new RPP types not captured in the 2013 paper (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018), this updated definition represents a more current understanding of RPPs. According to the new definition, an RPP is:

“A long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research. These partnerships are intentionally organized to connect diverse forms of expertise and to ensure that all partners have a say in the joint work.” (Emphasis added.)

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Onboarding New Partnership Members? Here are Three Slides to Include, continued

Let's dive a little deeper into the main components of an RPP according to this definition:

1) An RPP is a long-term collaboration: The longer time horizon of RPPs –versus the short time horizon of a one-off research project– allows for the development and cultivation of deep relationships, trust, and respect so that an actual committed partnership around multiple projects can form.

2) An RPP aims for improvement and equitable transformation: The goal of the RPP is not only to answer some theoretical research question but to also improve the educational experience of various stakeholders and to equitably transform education policy and practice.

3) An RPP prioritizes engagement with research: This improvement and transformation is brought about by and anchored in rigorous and relevant research. By jointly negotiating research questions, talking through research methods, and making sense of data and findings, R, P, community, and other relevant stakeholders actively engage in the research rather than Rs simply putting research out there in the hopes that Ps might find and use it.

4) An RPP connects diverse forms of expertise: An RPP acknowledges that researchers, practitioners, community members, and other education stakeholders all hold different kinds of valuable expertise and ensures that they all get to actively contribute their expertise to the partnership work.

5) An RPP engages in joint work: The research- and practice side actively work together at various points of the creation and development of the partnership and throughout the research process, including negotiating the aims of the partnership, the questions investigated in the various research projects, and the milestones of partnership success, in ways that require them to step outside of traditional R and P norms and roles.

What these main components look like in action can differ significantly across partnerships, since there are varied approaches to RPP work. This is illustrated in our own [NNERPP Annual Report](#), a collection of vignettes of our members' work over a given calendar year. In the absence of a field-level census of RPPs, the Annual Report can give partnership members that are new to RPPs an overview of at least one slice of the sector. If your partnership is a member of NNERPP, the Annual Report can also help introduce newcomers to the overall NNERPP community, including where and how similar lines of work are being conducted.

Slide 2 | Who are we?

A second slide to consider including in your onboarding materials is one where you share the “who” of your specific RPP. The purpose of this slide is to bring awareness to how you see your own RPP relative to the field-level look shared in Slide 1. As such, you may wish to emphasize some elements of the RPP definition over others, and perhaps add or omit partnership components that may better align with your team's vision for partnership work. You may also want to elaborate on some of these elements, such as sharing how your partnership engages or plans to engage in joint work. As an example, the [Stanford-Sequoia K-12 Research Collaborative](#)'s guiding values illustrate how this particular partnership views itself while bringing together several of the elements from the RPP definition in slide 1.

This would also be a great place to invite your new teammates to share how they see themselves contributing to the partnership and what role(s) they hope to play. This slide may also include more structural elements of the partnership, such as primary funders, an organizational chart outlining team members' roles, and an overview of projects (past, current, and planned) and perhaps who is involved in these projects. For example, when onboarding new team members, the [Stanford-San Francisco Unified School District Partnership](#) shares this [project map](#) that also illustrates how the projects align with the district's goals, priorities, and strategies. Additional structural elements to share could be a

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Onboarding New Partnership Members? Here are Three Slides to Include, continued

list of the data the partnership uses and information on any data contracts and agreements, and a theory of partnership change or theory of action describing how the partnership envisions its efforts leading to action (see some resources on theories of action [here](#)). You might also share information about steering committees, advisory councils, and similar governance structures. Lastly, you might want to share a brief history of the founding and evolution of the partnership.

Slide 3 | Why do we partner?

Finally, we also recommend sharing an overview of the “why” behind your partnership efforts – this will be related to the “who” of your partnership, but can dive a little deeper into why you do the work described in the previous slide and why you chose the RPP model as the best way to achieve this work. If your RPP already has a mission statement and/or objectives established, this would be the place to share those. See some example mission statements from NNERPP members below:

- [Houston Education Research Consortium](#) (HERC): “HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.”
- [Los Angeles Education Research Institute](#) (LAERI): “LAERI’s mission is to improve Los Angeles students’ educational experiences and outcomes by bringing researchers and practitioners together to collaborate on important educational challenges.”
- [Philadelphia Education Research Consortium](#) (PERC): “The mission of the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium - or PERC - is to provide timely, actionable, rigorous, and non-partisan research on the most pressing issues facing Philadelphia public education. To do this, we seek to engage the region’s colleges and universities, nonprofits, and the Philadelphia public education sector, including both district and charter schools, in respectful, mutually beneficial research-practice partnerships. By providing Philadelphia’s leaders and citizenry with high-quality information about progress, challenges, and effective strategies in

education, PERC aims to increase education opportunities and achievement for all Philadelphia students.”

If your partnership is still emerging and the specific mission and objectives are still being developed, perhaps you can share the story that inspired the creation of the partnership. Any other information about why you chose an RPP model versus other ways of doing research and why/how different partners came to be a part of the RPP can also help your new team members understand what drives your partnership team to do the work. What is it about the specific goals of your partnership or about your community that makes the partnership model the best choice? How have you been able to make a difference so far? When talking about the difference your partnership has been able to make, you might also share how your partnership defines and/or measures success or effectiveness, if these are things your RPP has thought about or established.

Bonus | Additional RPP Resources

If you have the time, one more recommendation that might be helpful to new partners, especially if they are unfamiliar with RPPs is the following short reading list (and where to find more literature):

- [Research-Practice Partnerships: Building Two-Way Streets of Engagement](#)
- [Fostering Educational Improvement with Research-Practice Partnerships](#)
- [A University and District Partnership Closes the Research-to-Classroom Gap](#)
- [Lessons From a School District-University Research Partnership: The Houston Education Research Consortium](#)
- [Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: Outcomes, Dynamics, and Open Questions](#)

For a larger collection of learning resources on RPPs, we invite you to explore the [NNERPP RPP Knowledge Clearinghouse](#), where we share the most relevant and up-to-date resources from across the web curated specifically to

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Onboarding New Partnership Members? Here are Three Slides to Include, continued

facilitate one's learning of education RPPs. We also recommend exploring the [William T. Grant Foundation RPP microsite](#) and the [Research+Practice Collaboratory](#) website for additional resources.

Final Thoughts

While engaging in RPPs is complex work that cannot easily be packaged into neat step-by-step instructions, it is important to think about how we might help new partners integrate seamlessly into the work. Organizing your onboarding slide deck to highlight some of the basic elements we've suggested here may be a good place to start. And, of course, there is always more to learn, to study, and to improve about RPPs, so we imagine everyone's three slides will look different now and as we collectively learn more. We hope the slideshow outlined here serves merely as a starting point, with deeper thinking and training as an RPP team to follow.

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Improving Improvement: Results from a Pandemic Year

By David Hersh | Proving Ground

This is the fourth 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. In a little over a year of writing for NNERPP Extra, we've shared an [overview of our improvement work](#), lessons learned from [working with existing partners during the pandemic](#), and lessons learned from [creating and launching an improvement-focused RPP in response to the pandemic](#). We also recently argued for [using stimulus funding to invest in an improvement infrastructure](#) with RPPs playing a central role.



Writing this installment, as the 2020/21 school year winds down, we reflect on some of the outcomes of our improvement efforts with our partners. As we shared in our previous installments, we have been managing three continuous improvement networks: the Proving Ground (PG) Chronic Absenteeism Network, a network of larger, mostly urban school districts; the National Center for Rural Education Research Networks (NCRERN), a network of smaller, rural school districts that focused on attendance in its first improvement cycle; and the Covid Recovery Cadre (CRC), a purpose-built improvement network of Florida districts addressing students' challenges in 8th-grade Pre-algebra and 9th grade Algebra. Across the three networks, nearly 40 district partners piloted 12 distinct interventions over the past year. While we have not formally written up the analyses – stay tuned for links to technical reports – we can share high level results and some broader takeaways here. Despite challenges posed by the pandemic, several of our partners' interventions improved the outcomes they sought to address. At the same time, navigating the pandemic taught us lessons that will inform our work in future pandemic-free years as well.

Pilot Results

While our results are generally mixed in “normal” years (some share of piloted interventions will have substantively negligible effects) this year's results were our most nuanced to date. Of the 12 interventions our partners across the three networks tried, four had meaningful positive impacts on the main outcome of interest[1], one was too small to measure, one had a large impact that we struggle to explain and six had null effects. The four with positive impacts were the four easiest to implement. One of the interventions with null effects was based on an intervention that was highly successful in all prior pilots. And for one intervention, we found the largest impact of any of the more than two dozen interventions our partners have piloted, but we could not reconcile the impact with the implementation data. Thus, while our partnerships still generated evidence that districts could use to make decisions, we ultimately learned as many lessons about the challenges of piloting and testing as we did about the interventions themselves. Below is a summary of pilot results by network.

>> Proving Ground Chronic Absenteeism Network

In this network, our five partners tested five interventions (one per district) to reduce chronic absenteeism in their schools: restorative circles (an in-class practice that restores relationships through structured, mutual sharing), collaborative case management (a structured protocol for engaging families of high-absence students in the development of solutions), mentorship (routine engagement between a student and adult to build a trusted relationship), daily attendance nudges for virtual attendance (automated messages sent in the evenings to remind virtual students to log in if they haven't yet), and weekly

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Improving Improvement: Results from a Pandemic Year, continued

messaging nudges for virtual attendance (digital messages letting families know the students' attendance record and reminding them to log in). Only the nudges and restorative circles cost-effectively improved the outcomes (the others either did not measurably improve attendance or improved attendance minimally relative to the effort they took to implement). For restorative circles, we estimated the largest impact we've ever estimated but also learned that the implementation diverged so much from the original design and was so complicated that we could not identify the treatment-control contrast that was generating the result. That partner is now engaged in a deep dive to identify what exactly it should scale up.

>> National Center for Rural Education Research Networks

Within NCRERN, our 28 rural partners piloted four interventions over the course of the fall and winter to increase attendance: elementary postcards sent weekly to students missing at least a day, with the postcards highlighting cumulative absences and what the student missed (9 districts), periodic personalized messages sent via text or robocall every 6-8 weeks letting families know how many days the student had missed (8 districts), mentorship (routine engagement between a student and adult to build a trusted relationship, 5 districts), and a family engagement practice that involved routine bi-directional messaging and included specific types of supportive messages, such as pro tips on how to improve attendance (6 districts). Of those, only periodic personalized messaging, the easiest intervention to implement, had substantively significant impacts on attendance while three had no evidence of meaningful effects on attendance. The null effect for postcards was perhaps the most surprising result, as the intervention was based on one that had proven effective for all five partners that piloted it in the PG Chronic Absenteeism Network in prior years. Given the complexity of implementing in a pandemic year and considering prior evidence of impact for the interventions, several partners have opted to repilot their interventions in 2021/22.

>> Covid Recovery Cadre

In the CRC, our four district partners piloted three interventions to improve students' algebra achievements. Two piloted **PERTS growth mindset modules for 9th graders**, one piloted twice-weekly small group tutoring with adaptive software, and one piloted virtual **MQI coaching** involving up to six feedback sessions on teacher practice with a virtual coach based on recordings of class sessions. The latter involved only 12 teachers and therefore resulted in an evaluation largely focused on implementation and user-feedback. The tutoring intervention ran into myriad implementation challenges and resulted in a negligible impact estimate. For the growth mindset intervention, we got a mixed result, finding meaningful GPA improvements for one partner and negligible changes for another. All four partners are currently incorporating these results into their decision-making using a decision-making protocol that requires them to reflect on the effort it took to implement and define the size of impact they need to see to justify scaling up before they see the results. Where the impact falls below their defined thresholds (or where they did not get a rigorous impact estimate), they will choose whether to adapt and repilot or stop altogether. Where the impacts fall above their thresholds, they will decide whether to scale the same way they implemented, or scale with revisions to improve implementation.

Lessons Learned Beyond the Impact Estimates

While we learned a great deal about piloting in a pandemic, with any luck, many of those lessons will not be generalizable in a Covid-free future. Here, we focus on those lessons that are not unique to testing interventions during a public health crisis.

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Improving Improvement: Results from a Pandemic Year, continued

>> In continuous improvement, repiloting is a valid outcome

Decision-making in education agencies tends to be binary: scale up or stop. What makes “continuous improvement” continuous is the idea that all interventions can be improved upon. The options include trying again a different way. We have seen partners find cost-effective interventions in the first semester and iterate on them to find bigger impacts in the second semester. Likewise, when we find null effects, that can be because the theory was wrong or because implementation diverged so much from the design that the theory was never really tested. Piloting in a pandemic – with the implementation challenges that it creates – was an important reminder that where implementation fidelity is lacking, repiloting might be the right decision. Implementation data is therefore critical to the decision. It cannot be made with impact estimates alone. Next year, ten of our NCRERN partners will repilot: seven will repilot the postcards more in line with the original design and three will repilot their family engagement interventions.



>> Implementation data is critical

As noted above, where an impact evaluation leads to a null estimate, implementation data is critical for deciding whether to stop or try again with lessons learned the first time. However, we were also reminded this year that implementation data is critical even with a strong impact estimate. One of our partner’s interventions generated the largest impact estimate we have ever recorded. Yet based on their implementation, which involved a great deal of spillover and a non-random introduction of an additional treatment, it is

difficult to say what caused the change in outcomes. As such, the district is undergoing an intensive post-mortem on their intervention to develop a hypothesis about what to scale up. They may need to try again. In all cases, implementation data is critical to making changes for next time.

>> Value the full set of outcomes

In the real world, even impact estimates and implementation data may not be enough to make decisions. The costs are usually far broader than what gets calculated – staff or other stakeholder push back, for example, might make an intervention that is otherwise free too costly to continue. The benefits are likewise not all easily quantified – staff or stakeholders might value an intervention for reasons that are important but not well captured by measurement instruments. Because this year made the impacts harder to measure than in the past, we worked with partners to incorporate a broader set of considerations into their decision-making. Instrumental or secondary outcomes became more critical. For example, one district saw no impact on academic outcomes in the short term but participating teachers recognized for the first time the degree to which their students lacked number sense. This was not enough evidence to scale up but helped them decide to repilot rather than stop.

>> Stakeholder engagement is not optional

One of the compromises we made to the process this year was limiting the amount of stakeholder engagement. Our standard continuous improvement process incorporates user-centered design principles that involves directly engaging stakeholders at at least three stages. Once a target population is defined, our partners meet with a few members of the population to develop

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Improving Improvement: Results from a Pandemic Year, continued

personas (detailed summaries of who their target audience is). Partners rely on these personas to ensure they are designing interventions around the needs and personalities of the members of their target population. Once partners have designed their interventions, they create prototypes and engage members of the target population (and, often, those who will implement the intervention) to gather feedback on their prototypes. This feedback is used to finalize the design and implementation plan for the intervention before it is piloted. Finally, stakeholders are engaged during or after the pilot so that their experience can help characterize the impact estimates. This year, time was more limited, and stakeholders were less accessible, so we were forced to skip the first two engagement exercises. However, our partners' interventions suffered as a result. Lack of stakeholder engagement affected the design of the interventions, the fidelity of implementation and the fidelity to the research design. Going forward we need to ensure partners can build in opportunities to engage users in the design, execution, and interpretation of their interventions.

Looking Ahead

Our next installment of Improving Improvement will look ahead to the upcoming school year. We are working with new partners on new outcomes and testing out different ways of delivering continuous improvement content.

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 would like to see us tackle.

[1] Proving Ground uses a Bayesian estimation model that allows for pooling across districts to evaluate the impact of pilots. All results referenced here are based on the pooled posterior estimates emerging from RCTs lasting from as little as 6 weeks up to around 20 weeks.

● *David Hersh (david_hersh@gse.harvard.edu) is Director of Proving Ground.*

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Research Headlines From NNERPP Members: Last Quarter

COVID-19

BOSTON P-3 RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP examines the impacts of Covid-19 on Boston's universal prekindergarten centers

DIGITAL PROMISE

-- examines teaching and learning in the pandemic
-- provides guidance to school districts on how to use Covid-19 relief funds to build sustainable technology plans

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE examines

-- instructional delivery amid Covid-19 (April update)
-- Michigan educators' perceptions of Covid-19 and K-12 schooling in Fall 2020
-- the effects of the pandemic on Michigan's lowest performing schools

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM examines
-- the impact of Covid-19 on the experiences of Houston area families and communities with education and schooling
-- the impact of Covid-19 on family and well-being in the Houston area
-- the impact of Covid-19 on wages and employment in the Houston area

METRO ATLANTA POLICY LAB FOR EDUCATION examines the impact of the pandemic on student learning outcomes

TENNESSEE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE examines the experiences of students and educators in Fall 2020

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM examines college enrollment and retention during the pandemic

COMPUTER SCIENCE

CHICAGO ALLIANCE FOR EQUITY IN COMPUTER SCIENCE examines advanced placement computer science a course taking and success

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE examines how early literacy coaches are implementing Michigan's read by grade three law

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, continued

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM examines
-- the relationship between literacy by 3 practices and campus literacy growth
-- how teachers are using guidance on implementing the literacy by 3 initiative

NYC EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH NETWORK examines early intervention services

REL NORTHEAST & ISLANDS

examines factors associated with turnover in the early childhood educator workforce

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM

examines how access to full-day pre-k matters for later student outcomes

ENGLISH/DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM examines increases in long-term English Learners in Texas

REL NORTHWEST

examines how EL policies function for Alaska native students who are classified as English Learners

METRO ATLANTA POLICY LAB FOR EDUCATION

examines effects of dual language immersion programs on student outcomes

EQUITY

RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS

-- examines families' experiences with summer meals programs
-- outlines blueprint for advancing equity in NYC schools

POST-SECONDARY

REL CENTRAL

-- develops tool to estimate student postsecondary success
-- examines access to and participation in dual enrollment across seven states
-- examines the impact of CTE on postsecondary outcomes in Nebraska and South Dakota
-- reviews survey instruments and scales for measuring civic readiness

continued on the next page

Research Headlines From NNERPP Members: Last Quarter, continued

POST-SECONDARY, continued

REL NORTHEAST & ISLANDS

examines the effects of accelerated college credit programs

REL SOUTHWEST examines

- alternative career readiness measures for small and rural districts in Texas
- the accuracy and strength of Arkansas' college and career readiness indicators

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM

examines college paths and outcomes

URBAN EDUCATION INSTITUTE examines

- the impact of a community scholarships program
- the impact of a higher education scholarship program

RPPs

REL SOUTHWEST

develops tool for assessing the health of research-practice partnerships

STUDENT MOBILITY

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

examines the prevalence of returners in Houston area student mobility patterns

STUDENTS

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

examines an alternative method to determine immigrant generation

OFFICE FOR EDUCATION POLICY

examines the relationship between gifted status and academic growth

REL MID-ATLANTIC

examines how to support students with health conditions

URBAN EDUCATION INSTITUTE

examines patterns of high school student employment

TEACHERS

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE

examines trends in Michigan's teaching workforce

TEACHERS, continued

REL MIDWEST

examines certified Michigan teachers who are not currently teaching

REL NORTHEAST & ISLANDS provides

- guidance for analyzing teacher mobility and retention
- advanced guidance for studying teacher mobility and retention

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REL SOUTHWEST

examines outcomes for early career teachers prepared through a pilot residency program in Louisiana

TURNAROUND

REL NORTHEAST & ISLANDS

examines how turnaround indicator ratings are related to schoolwide student outcomes in Massachusetts

End Notes

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