

IN THIS ISSUE

[p. 1] WELCOME

[p. 2] RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Transitioning to Kindergarten: What 3 RPPs Find on District-Led Programs

[p. 6] RPP DEEP DIVE

Measuring the Value of a Research-Practice Partnership

[p. 10] EXTRA CREDIT: SPOTLIGHT

The Role of Brokers in Research-Practice Partnerships

[p. 12] RESEARCH HEADLINES

Welcome!

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP



We are thrilled to share with you the very first edition of NNERPP I Extra, NNERPP's new quarterly magazine aiming to deliver key insights from the intersection of education research, policy, and practice. NNERPP I Extra shares deep and reflective articles around pressing issues in education tackled by research-practice partnerships across the country,

the impacts and use of such research on policy and practice, and high-priority questions that consider how to engage in research-practice partnership work more effectively.

In this inaugural issue, we'd like to introduce you to our regularly occurring sections:

- **Research Insights**, where we take a closer look at the connections between research produced by NNERPP members
- **RPP Deep Dive**, which will explore pressing challenges and possible solutions commonly encountered in RPPs
- **Extra Credit**, featuring shorter pieces covering a variety of topics through a Spotlight, How To, or Book Club format
- **Research Headlines**, which will include a roundup listing all of our members' research from the past quarter

We are excited to welcome you to this new space and look forward to finding more and deeper connections across the RPP field. Happy exploring!

NNERPP I Extra Online

Be sure to check out the NNERPP I 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.

Transitioning to Kindergarten: What 3 RPPs Find on District-Led Programs

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP

Introduction

As a Network of research-practice partnerships, we view serving as connectors to be one of our primary roles here at NNERPP. To that end, we are excited to present “Research Insights,” a new series bringing together related studies from NNERPP members so that our readers can (i) stay current on member research, (ii) see how related studies or programs compare, and (iii) generate new questions, ideas, or programs based on this collective knowledge. We hope to reach a variety of interested readers, including education researchers, leaders, and policymakers working across a number of important topics in education. Our intent is to have these articles serve as a jumping off point for more questions, more research, and indeed, more connections between relevant stakeholders. Happy reading!

Overview of the Three District-Led Programs That Support the Transition to Kindergarten

In this first edition of the “Research Insights” series, we visit the early childhood education space across NNERPP. Here we find three districts offering different versions of a kindergarten transition program for their students (programmatic details provided below). As it happens, the programs show a nice spectrum of possibilities for how a district might support their students in the transition to kindergarten, with Portland Public Schools offering the shortest and least resource intensive program while the program run by the San Francisco Unified School District is the longest and most resource intensive of the three.



We start with a brief overview of each program:

▶ PORTLAND, OREGON: EKT

Portland Public Schools (PPS) first piloted the Early Kindergarten Transition Program (EKT) in 2010 in two elementary schools, now offered at 41 schools across Multnomah County. The main goal of EKT is to promote a successful transition to kindergarten for incoming children attending Title I schools through a free, three-week summer program targeted to both children and their parents. In particular, the program aims to increase parental involvement in their children’s learning, reduce chronic absenteeism in kindergarten, and promote children’s success in school. During the course of fifteen half-day sessions in the summer prior to the start of kindergarten, children get the opportunity to practice school routines and expectations with a kindergarten teacher (among other activities), while parents and guardians attend meetings to facilitate relationship building with school staff and learn how to support their child’s learning at home.

▶ MADISON, WISCONSIN: MMSD 4K

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) launched MMSD four-year old kindergarten (4K) in 2011 with the goal of supporting social emotional and academic skill development of students prior to entering five-year-old kindergarten. All children who are four years old on or before September 1 are eligible to participate in the 3-hour per day program, offered in the morning or afternoon Tuesdays through Friday for one academic year. The district offers 4K in schools, early care and education, and Head Start sites. It is free to all eligible students other than a \$40 materials fee. In the 2018-19 school year, 1,776 students participated in MMSD 4K, reaching about three quarters of the students who enroll in kindergarten. School-based sites follow Creative Curriculum, a play-based program, while the early care and education sites and Head Start sites are encouraged to follow the same curriculum but are not required to do so.

continued on the next page

Transitioning to Kindergarten: What 3 RPPs Find on District-Led Programs, continued

▶ SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA: TK

In 2010, then-Governor Schwarzenegger signed the Kindergarten Readiness Act, which required all districts in California to offer Transitional Kindergarten (TK) starting in 2012/13. With wide flexibility on implementation of the law, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) developed a modified curriculum based on the California Preschool Learning Foundations and the Kindergarten Common Core Standards for use in its schools. The main goal of the two-year program is to bridge the skills gap across social, developmental, and academic areas for a successful transition to kindergarten. Eligible students, i.e., those who turn five between September 2 and December 2, are able to attend TK at 18 school-based or early childhood education sites. The program runs on an academic calendar year and features a 6-hour day, Monday through Friday. (Note that San Francisco also offers universal pre-kindergarten.)

Research Questions

All three districts are actively engaged with external researchers through their own research-practice partnerships: Portland Public Schools partners with University of Portland and Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) through the [Multnomah County Partnership for Education Research](#); MMSD partners with University of Wisconsin-Madison through the [Madison Education Partnership](#); and SFUSD partners with Stanford University to form the [Stanford-SFUSD Partnership](#).

Through these partnerships, the districts have been able to explore students' enrollment and participation in the programs. Here we share the research questions asked in each partnership-led study:

▶ PORTLAND, OREGON: EKT

- How do the demographics, attendance, and scores on an early literacy skills fluency measure (DIBELS) of EKT students that participated in EKT compare over time with students who attended EKT schools but did not participate in the program?

▶ MADISON, WISCONSIN: MMSD 4K

Report 1 on Attendance:

- Does MMSD 4K reach those students least advantaged and/or most at risk of low levels of kindergarten readiness? Do MMSD school and early care and education sites serve similar populations? Is the time of day that MMSD 4K is offered associated with patterns of enrollment? How does 4K enrollment in MMSD compare with similar districts in WI?

Report 2 on Readiness:

- Is MMSD 4K enrollment associated with higher levels of kindergarten readiness (as measured by literacy and social emotional skills)? Do the associations between MMSD 4K enrollment and kindergarten readiness vary across racial/ethnic groups, free/reduced price lunch, or parent education? Is 4K site type associated with varying levels of kindergarten readiness? How does the association between 4K enrollment and kindergarten readiness in MMSD compare to Milwaukee Public Schools?



▶ SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA: TK

- What is the effect of Transitional Kindergarten (TK) on student literacy skills and attendance in kindergarten and first grade, when compared to San Francisco's universal prekindergarten program?
- Do the effects vary by student ethnicity or other characteristics like English Learner status?

continued on the next page

Transitioning to Kindergarten: What 3 RPPs Find on District-Led Programs, continued

District Snapshots, 2018/19

Portland Public Schools (OR)	Madison Metropolitan SD (WI)*	San Francisco Unified SD (CA)
49,550 students	27,009 students	54,063 students
9% African American	18% African American	7% African American
7% Asian	9% Asian	35% Asian
16% Latino	21% Latino	27% Latino
56% White	43% White	15% White
37% Low-income	48% Low-income	55% Low-income
7% English Language Learner	28% English Language Learner	29% English Language Learner

*2017/18 Data

What Does the Research Show?

In terms of participation, all three programs tended to serve a greater number of non-white than white students, with a large portion of these students also classified as English Language Learners. Moreover, some of the findings from the TK evaluation in SFUSD and Report 2 on MMSD suggest that the benefits of the program are larger for minority children. Similar to how the authors of the MMSD 4K study characterize their findings, the findings from all three studies suggest that the programs are “equity-enhancing” (Report 1 on Attendance, p. 1) in that students from historically disadvantaged racial or income groups are more likely to participate than more advantaged students.

In terms of benefits to participation, we categorize the findings into three groups: attendance, literacy skills, and kindergarten readiness.

- ▶ **Attendance:** EKT students (Portland) and TK students (San Francisco) seem to have better attendance rates in kindergarten, although this effect appears limited to Asian students in the San Francisco case (note that this particular outcome was not included in the MMSD 4K analysis).
- ▶ **Literacy Skills:** Two of the three studies find improvements in literacy skills among students who enrolled in the program. In Madison, students who enrolled in MMSD 4K had slightly stronger literacy skills when starting kindergarten. And in San Francisco, kindergartners who attended TK outperformed their peers on all pre-literacy skills while English Language Learners who attended TK also outperformed their peers on a test measuring reading, listening, speaking and writing for non-English speakers. In the other hand, the research on EKT in Portland does not find any statistically significant differences between EKT and non-EKT students on the DIBELS test for literacy.
- ▶ **Readiness:** The Madison team additionally looked at skills associated with kindergarten readiness and find that students who enrolled in MMSD 4K were slightly more likely to have strong classroom behavior skills at the start of kindergarten.

continued on the next page

Transitioning to Kindergarten: What 3 RPPs Find on District-Led Programs, continued

Policy Implications

Here we share potential implications for policymakers as a result of these studies. First, although we note the research designs in the Portland and Madison studies are not causal, the findings from each are encouraging to policymakers interested in exploring options for offering promising programs that support the transition to kindergarten. In the case of Portland’s EKT program in particular, this could be one cost-saving way to offer some initial supports to students.

Second, for those interested in offering a more comprehensive program, the research finds that the SFUSD-designed TK does indeed provide direct benefits over other prekindergarten programs offered within SFUSD. Additional insights suggested from the research on TK is that these benefits may be partially due to two features of the program: one is that TK is subject to greater regulations than other prekindergarten programs in SFUSD, likely reducing the variation in quality across sites and two, the curriculum in TK is more academic in nature than what is offered in prekindergarten programs.

How Was the Work Used in Practice?

We asked the RPP teams how the research studies were used by their practice-side partners. Here’s what they had to say:

▶ PORTLAND, OREGON: EKT

Early Learners Program Manager for Portland Public Schools, Nancy Hauth, appreciated these findings, using them to improve data collection and tracking, as well as expand the program. In addition, the district created and widely distributed a research brief based on the data to market the program.

▶ MADISON, WISCONSIN: MMSD 4K

MMSD found both reports incredibly helpful in quantifying trends across the first several years of the 4K program. While the district already knew about some aspects of enrollment, digging into it in greater depth over a longer period of time helped frame and confirm much of what they believed. The reports also gave a public profile to the program, informing the greater Madison community about these enrollment trends and the potential impact on equity. MMSD will continue to use these reports for long-term planning and immediate programmatic improvement, sharing those results with district leaders and the Board of Education. The reports also built confidence and trust between the researchers and district leaders, which has led to further studies that test new interventions around home visits for incoming kindergarteners and professional development for 4K teachers.

▶ SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA: TK

The study results prompted SFUSD to reexamine their goals for TK impact, sparking conversations about the specific skills the district wants to promote in each of their grades and whether improving reading levels should be a goal at the Transitional Kindergarten level.

Want to Learn More?

PORTLAND, OREGON: EKT

- ▶ JOURNAL ARTICLE ON EKT
- ▶ PPS RESEARCH BRIEF ON EKT
- ▶ BLOGPOST ON EKT (PRACTITIONER)
- ▶ PPS EKT WEBSITE
- ▶ CONTACT NICOLE RALSTON TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

MADISON, WISCONSIN: MMSD 4K

- ▶ MEP REPORT 1 ON MMSD 4K ATTENDANCE
- ▶ MEP REPORT 2 ON MMSD 4K IMPACTS
- ▶ BLOGPOST ON MMSD 4K (RESEARCHER)
- ▶ MMSD 4K WEBSITE
- ▶ CONTACT BETH VAUDE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

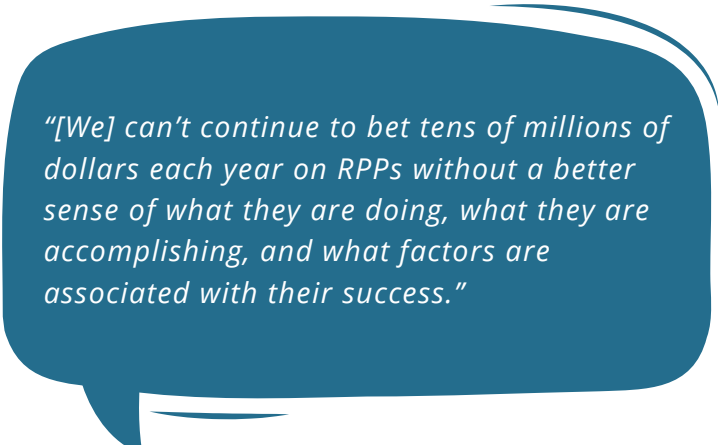
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA: TK

- ▶ RESEARCH PAPER ON TK
- ▶ BLOGPOST ON TK (RESEARCHER)
- ▶ BLOGPOST ON EKT (PRACTITIONER)
- ▶ SFUSD TK WEBSITE
- ▶ CONTACT LAURA WENTWORTH TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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

Measuring the Value of a Research-Practice Partnership

By Faith Connolly | Baltimore Education Research Consortium



"[We] can't continue to bet tens of millions of dollars each year on RPPs without a better sense of what they are doing, what they are accomplishing, and what factors are associated with their success."

- Mark Schneider, Director, Institute of Education Sciences | July 30, 2018

In late July 2018, shortly after assuming the role of Institute of Education Sciences (IES) director, Mark Schneider announced at the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships Annual Forum that he would like to see more evidence of positive impact on educational practice from recent IES investments in research-practice partnerships (RPPs). As executive director of one of three RPPs that Schneider identified as arguably the most successful in the nation, I truly believe in the value of RPPs but, admittedly, struggle to quantify our positive impact.

Place-based RPPs change their local ecosystem by being an empirical voice—a trusted, accessible source that can verify or validate the experience of children in our schools. **How do we quantify that value?** This is a conundrum I have pondered since I began working as part of an RPP.

For example, since the **Baltimore Education Research Consortium** (BERC) began examining municipal transportation data on Baltimore students' school commuting, our work contributed to a change in the community conversation about local transportation, which until that point had taken little account of student ridership. Organizations became aware of the challenges of transportation for after school programs and daily attendance, especially on-time attendance. Such changes have a large impact, but how can they be measured?

A typical strategy to determine return on investment (ROI) needs explicit inputs and outputs. While student achievement is one output measure, there are others produced by an RPP that are not as easy to quantify, such as raising awareness of how transit impacts high school attendance or how changes in college enrollment patterns impact college degree completion.

At BERC, we haven't shied away from the challenge, however, and have made the typical researcher attempts to quantify our efforts. First, we developed an internal survey to try to capture stakeholder satisfaction. Unfortunately, it had an extremely low response rate. When we discussed it with the school system CEO, she shared that she would rather tell us to our face what she thinks and not complete a survey. Next, in partnership with other RPPs, we crafted a survey tool (Wentworth, Mazzeo, & Connolly, 2017) to measure data and research use. More recently, we have used the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory to measure partnership qualities (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001).

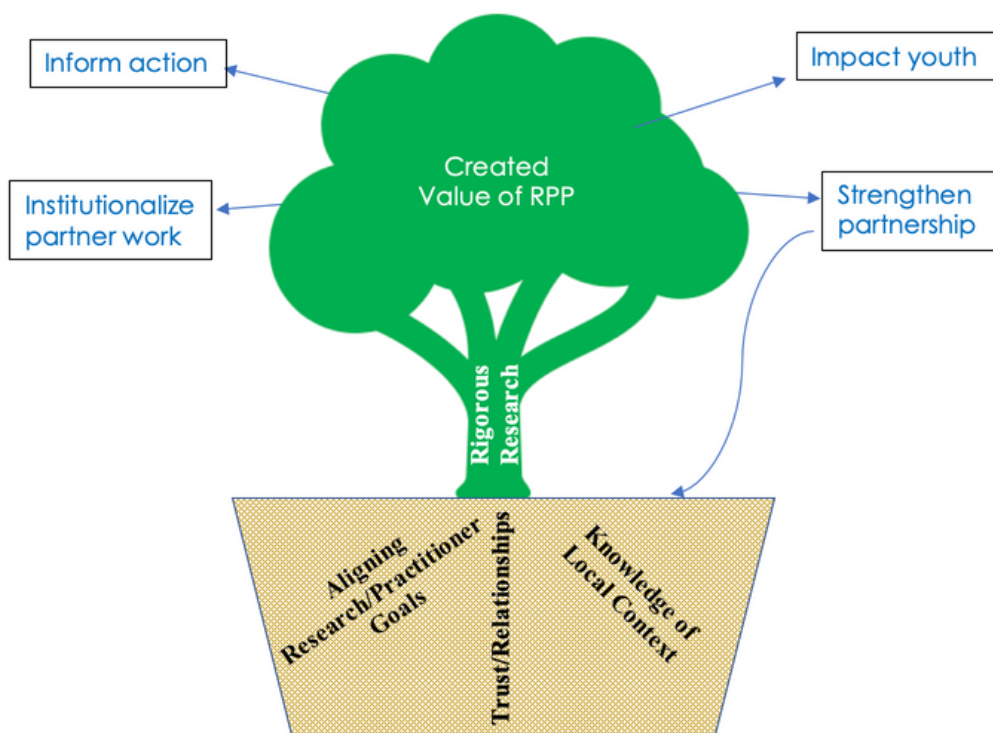
continued on the next page

Measuring the Value of a Research-Practice Partnership, continued

While the results from each effort offered us useful feedback, none captured the essence of the value of RPPs—and thereby specific information that would prove our value to funders as well as provide feedback to strengthen our RPP. After much internal conversation, we have a more comprehensive way to describe our value included here as Figure 1.

Our RPP focuses on being a **local institution** that provides support, research, and analysis for school district leaders, as well as community stakeholders and the assorted partners we engage with through our work. We think of this work in terms of growing and nurturing our partnerships via meeting their associated research needs.

Figure 1. Growing and nurturing a research-practice partnership to achieve valued outcomes.



Everything grows from a strong foundation (our roots), from which the work of rigorous research (our trunk) creates meaningful insights that impact youth (our crown of created value). When our collaborative efforts inform action, this further strengthens our partnerships as a result of demonstrating the value of working together, which in turn helps to institutionalize the work.

The Roots: Our Foundation

>> **Requirement 1: Trust and Relationships.** To exist and function, the RPP requires a number of foundational pieces to grow. Trust is essential for partners to have honest, transparent conversations and be vulnerable with each other. This is necessary for the partners to do work that matters. An RPP is not simply a researcher and a practitioner working collaboratively on a project. Instead, it is a partnership that begins with problem identification based on honest conversations about challenges and creating a much deeper, trusting relationship (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

continued on the next page

Measuring the Value of a Research-Practice Partnership, continued

- **Requirement 2: Knowledge of Local Context.** Local RPPs bring numerous partners to the table based on important recognition of its local contexts. External researchers wishing to initiate a project can be well-served partnering with an RPP, as it typically brings more stakeholders to the table for project development, implementation, and evaluation. Additionally, the deep understanding local researchers have of the community and context of the work is another powerful asset inherent in RPPs that can be leveraged by external actors. In addition to providing a richer and deeper understanding of local context, we know that context matters for school improvement (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; McLaughlin and Rowan, 1993).
- **Requirement 3: Aligning Goals.** The value of aligned goals works in both directions for practitioners and academics. Researchers can help practitioners think about their work within theoretical frameworks, but also help them focus on specific problems of practice (Roderick, Easton, and Sebring, 2009). For example, attendance is a challenge in general, but reducing chronic absences among first-time ninth graders is a more focused problem for which a research project and intervention can more manageably be defined. For researchers listening to district and school staff describe challenges and perceptions (e.g., “no one trusts the attendance data”), this helps create more realistic theoretical frameworks and better connects the research to more specific challenges on the ground (Coburn and Penuel, 2016).

The Trunk: Our Core Strength

- **Capacity: Rigorous Research.** The core strength of any RPP is its expertise in conducting rigorous research that can be used by practitioners to change policy and practice. Its conception and completion must be empirical, as well as independent. Any reports or products must be credible to the local community as well as to peer researchers. Maintaining a clear impartial and technical analysis of the work is essential, or the value of the RPP vanishes.

The Crown: Our Created Value

With deep roots supporting its ability to conduct rigorous research, an RPP will produce valuable research and information that can be used by practitioners and researchers alike to inform policy and practice.

- **Valued Outcome 1: Inform Action.** A priority for all research produced by an RPP is utility. Can partners use the findings to do their job better? It is a focus of RPP work to produce research and/or data that can be used by policymakers, practitioners, or community members. Its overarching goal is to inform action through policy development, policy and practice change, and creation of a local community knowledge base. To change the conversation about students and the institutions that serve them, all stakeholders—including parents, funders, and community members—must understand the research implications supplied by the RPP. Disseminating the research thus requires multiple forms of communications, with different take-home points, products, and styles (Finnigan, and Daly, (eds), 2014).
- **Valued Outcome 2: Impact Youth.** As policy and practice changes, there is an expectation that outcomes for youth will also be impacted. One value of an RPP is to highlight the links between research, changes to policy and practice, and changes in youth outcomes. For instance, in our Early Education Data Collaborative, longitudinal research on programs and pathways of youth have led early-learning providers to streamline pass-offs between programs to better serve children and their families. The research also showed differential outcomes depending of youth characteristics which led one program to re-prioritize enrollment in programs.

continued on the next page

Measuring the Value of a Research-Practice Partnership, continued

- **Valued Outcome 3: Strengthen Partnership.** As projects grow and the work becomes deeper, the partnership itself becomes stronger. Partners are more eager to reach out for help or advice, and additional challenges can be identified and overcome. These collaborative projects lead to innovation and new ways of thinking about the work of both research and practice (Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996). Ten years ago, or even five years ago, the district would not have reached out to BERC to sit on advisory panels, attend strategic planning meetings, and work as thought partners. In addition to that, local funders and community groups also look to BERC for the same support.
- **Valued Outcome 4: Institutionalize Partner Work.** As localized RPPs mature over time, their roles, processes and behaviors become institutionalized so that even when staffing changes occur, these qualities are known and instituted as new staff come on board both at schools as well as the district office and the universities. By creating common knowledge on school policy, data, practice, and outcomes, the RPP becomes a lever for change by increasing awareness across its locality and through other institutions in its community.

Summary

The work conducted by RPPs is valuable in both its formative aspects (i.e., developing relational trust, using rigorous research to provide data and perspective to our community, strengthening partners, and institutionalizing the knowledge) as well as its more formal returns (i.e., informing action, impacting youths' lives, and eventually changing our city).

We will continue to ponder how to measure this value. It is a challenge that will likely deepen as our connection to Baltimore expands and becomes more nuanced. Our hope is to develop a system of metrics that will provide feedback to strengthen and sustain an RPP and transcend the limitations of traditional ROI calculations to capture an RPP's full impact, in all of its complexity and productivity in the local context.

The author would like to thank Elaine Allensworth, Bonnie Legro, and Laura Wentworth for their important feedback and suggestions on early drafts.

- *Faith Connolly is Executive Director of the Baltimore Education Research Consortium.*

References

- Bryk, A. S.; and Schneider, B. (2002) *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, NY, USA.
- Coburn, C. E., and W. R. Penuel. (2016). "Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: Outcomes, Dynamics, and Open Questions." *Educational Researcher* 45 (1): 48-54.
- Finnigan, K. S.; Daly, A. J. (eds) (2014). *Using Research Evidence in Education from the Schoolhouse Door to Capitol Hill. Policy Implications of Research in Education 2*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-04690-7_11, Springer International Publishing Switzerland.
- Hallinger, P.; Murphy, J.F. (1986). *The Social Context of Effective Schools*, *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 94, No. 3, pp. 328-355.
- Mattessich, P., Murray-Close, M., & Monsey, B. (2001). *Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory*. St. Paul, MN: Wilder Research.
- McLaughlin, T. J.; and Rowan, B. (1993). *Understanding Context Effects on Secondary School Teaching*. *Teachers College Record* Volume 95 Number 1, p. 45-68.
- Roderick, M.; Easton, J. Q.; and Sebring, P. B. (2009). *CCSR: A New Model for the Role of Research in Supporting Urban School Reform*, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- Wentworth, L; Mazzeo, C.; Connolly, F. (2017). *Research Practice Partnerships: A Strategy for Promoting Evidence-Based Decision-Making in Education* *Educational Research*, 59(2) pp. 241-255.
- Powell, W. W, Koput, K. W.; and Smith-Doerr, L. (1996). *Interorganizational Collaboration and the Locus of Innovation: Networks of Learning in Biotechnology* *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 116-145.
- Schneider, M. (2018). *IES Director's Blog*. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/blogs/director/post/rpps>

The Role of Brokers in Research-Practice Partnerships

With Carrie Conaway, Erin O'Hara, and Jessica Vasan

As we continue to study how research-practice partnerships (RPPs) work, partnerships and leaders in the field are increasingly thinking about the “who” of RPPs. Going beyond the basic ‘researcher’ and ‘practitioner’ role, many have begun to ask, are there other, more specific roles that are essential to the success of RPPs? What are these roles and what functions do they serve? Across conversations in NNERPP, as well as within the [overall RPP field](#), one critical role within RPPs that has emerged is that of ‘brokers.’ Also called knowledge brokers, intermediaries, or boundary spanners, brokers sit squarely between the research and practice or policy worlds, navigating the cultures, languages, and conditions faced by each in service of the partnership. In this edition of the Spotlight, we take a closer look at this important role.

Our learning on brokers began last summer, when we gathered a room full of self-identified brokers during one of the sessions at our annual conference last July to discuss the skills, requirements, challenges and opportunities associated with this role -- and it was a lively discussion that could have gone on much longer. In the spirit of keeping the party going, we asked three of the brokers who were in that room last summer--and who all three are part of RPPs in NNERPP--to help us reflect more deeply on what makes a broker and why brokers matter in RPPs for this edition of the Spotlight. Please join us below to read more about key insights from Carrie Conaway, Chief Research and Strategy Officer at the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#), Erin O'Hara, Executive Director of the [Tennessee Education Research Alliance](#), and Jessica Vasan, Research Manager at the [Houston Independent School District](#), on their experiences serving as brokers.

What are the key skills needed to be a broker?

Our three brokers agree that the role is all about [facilitating the interactions and connections](#) between and across researchers and practitioners (and everyone else involved) in the partnership. Examples include “building agreement, resolving conflicts, finding the middle ground,” as Carrie describes, and “[setting] expectations for both researchers and practitioners,” in Jessica’s words. It takes, simply put, “people skills” to do this well, Erin observes.

Erin additionally notes the importance of having political knowledge of how things work for either partner and what might become an issue and why. A broker can then work to prevent these issues from coming up in the first place. The goal of a broker, really, is to “[move] fluidly between ‘we’ the researchers and ‘we’ the practitioners,” Carrie states,

drawing from the group discussion during the brokers session at the NNERPP Annual Forum. If that sounds hard, that’s because it is. Two specific skills brokers need to be able to fill that role emerged in our brokers’ reflections: communication skills and organization skills.

All three brokers named [communication skills](#) -- “relentless” communication skills, even -- as absolutely critical to the role. Says Erin: “This is about the ability to listen really well to what researchers and practitioners are both saying, and what they aren’t saying, and then to help each to understand the other’s perspective.” And sometimes this can be even more challenging when brokers need to deliver difficult feedback, as Carrie notes, or when negotiations around differing timelines come up, according to Erin.

Being able to communicate these aspects of the work also necessitate [strong organization skills](#), or project management skills, as Jessica puts it. Erin agrees: “Keeping track of lots of different research work, project elements, and findings is complex. There are lots of moving parts.” Brokers must therefore be able to organize and follow through. Similarly, Carrie names the creation of organizational routines as a critical skill needed to be a broker.

Implicit in all of this is the role of [trust and relationships](#), Erin and Jessica point out. In essence, a broker is “someone who can be trusted by all partners to be honest, to represent the best interests of each of the players in the partnership and the partnership more broadly,” Erin explains.

How critical is the role of the broker in your partnership? Why?

In short: very critical. As Erin puts it, brokers are “[critical to the health of the partnership](#).” In fact, Erin says that her partnership actually has several brokers, some housed at the state education agency, some housed at the university, and some working directly at the partnership level.

In thinking about the effectiveness or impact of a broker, Jessica points out that this can depend on [how much time](#) he or she gets to spend on the RPP’s projects. For her, being able to spend close to 100% of her time on the actual studies the partnership is working on allows Jessica to be [completely plugged in](#) and therefore able to “accelerate project timelines and move projects forward ... more quickly [and] more strategically.” She further shares that in her role as Research Manager, although she sits in the district’s research department, her salary is handled by the RPP itself, which is an

The Role of Brokers in Research-Practice Partnerships, continued

an intentional effort on the part of the partnership to create a formal brokering capacity.

Reflecting on the essential role of brokers, Carrie observes: “For every RPP I participate in, I can think of at least one moment where a project or relationship would likely have fallen apart **had it not been for a broker stepping in. If that’s not a critical role, I don’t know what is.**”

As a broker, what do you see as the most challenging part of your job?

Interestingly, Carrie, Erin, and Jessica each highlight different challenges when asked about the most difficult part of being a broker, though each challenge they name reflects the facilitative nature of the role, and the difficulties associated with it.

When it comes to district leaders, Jessica finds it most challenging to help them see the partnership as a **“top-notch, free, local academic resource that helps us ask and answer the right questions”** rather than an additional hassle. **Leadership turnover** at the district further complicates this, as Jessica has to work to build the appreciation for RPP work all over again. She also notes facilitating the sharing of **research findings that are not favorable** toward a district program as another challenge. With university researchers, on the other hand, Jessica’s greatest challenge is helping them **understand the context and “very real challenges”** of schools that can prevent school and district staff from prioritizing the partnership’s research projects.

Erin identifies **representing the best interests of the RPP as a whole**, rather than the best interest of any one partner, as her most challenging part of the job. “The people and players [in the partnership] may change, but the [partnership’s] goal of high-quality research influencing policy and practice to help improve education for students and educators will not change,” she explains. Placing this long-term goal and the health of the partnership above any one person’s interests or any issue that may arise “isn’t always easy in the moment” but critical to a broker’s role.

Carrie, in turn, points out another important balancing act brokers must pay attention to: That of investing enough of themselves to help get projects off the ground, **without the partnership becoming so dependent on the specific brokers** that it would collapse without them.

What recommendations do you have for someone wishing to become a broker?

First: **Learn**. Our brokers emphasized that in order to “navigate the messy space between the research and practice/policy communities” (in Carrie’s words), brokers must learn the “language and priorities” (Carrie) and “understand the perspectives” (Erin) of everyone involved in the partnership. Though brokers won’t know everything about research and practice as they start out and will have to spend time learning and listening, Erin also recommends that brokers figure out the “unique perspective and benefit” they already bring to the partnership from the start and use that to establish themselves as trusted partners. Similarly, Jessica reiterates the importance of relationship building and adds that brokers’ efforts should always point towards the common goal those from all ‘sides’ are working towards.

Second, Carrie and Erin recommend to **“find friends”** that do the same work -- by joining NNERPP, for instance -- who can help guide you, share lessons learned and common pitfalls, and learn together with you.

Finally, Jessica and Carrie agree that **“early wins”** are important to start off partnership work on the right foot. Two pieces of advice for what leads to an early win include picking a topic that is relatively less political and one that all partners can work on together fairly easily. Playing a long game pays off, says Carrie, as early wins pave the way for strong relationships and future projects: “While change is incremental and therefore hard to observe in the moment,” she says, “you can and will look back five or ten years later and see a big difference.”



● Carrie Conaway is Chief Research and Strategy Officer at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Erin O'Hara is Executive Director of the Tennessee Education Research Alliance; and Jessica Vasan is Research Manager at the Houston Independent School District.

Research Headlines From NNERPP Members: Last Quarter

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS
studies the Student Success Network's Continuous Improvement Fellowship Program aimed at youth development practitioners

DATA USE

RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS
examines data use in schools

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM ON SCHOOL RESEARCH
examines practice-driven data use

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER
examines how early learning programs can support dual language learners

JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER
introduces a program working with dual language learners

JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER
evaluates dual language learner programs

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

BALTIMORE EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines 'Judy Centers'

BALTIMORE EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines kindergarten readiness

PARTNERSHIP FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH
examines kindergarten performance in literacy

PHILADELPHIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
explores opportunities for cross-school collaboration to strengthen early literacy instruction

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM ON SCHOOL RESEARCH
explores conditions for high-quality early childhood education

EQUITY

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM ON SCHOOL RESEARCH
outlines practices for advancing educational equity

HIGH SCHOOL

PHILADELPHIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
explores 9th grade on-track patterns

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM ON SCHOOL RESEARCH
studies the transition to high school

POST-SECONDARY

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
tracks post-secondary outcomes

LOS ANGELES EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE
examines students' pathways to college

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM ON SCHOOL RESEARCH
examines educational attainment

PRINCIPALS

PHILADELPHIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines trends in principal mobility

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines school discipline

EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW ORLEANS
examines school discipline and socio-emotional learning

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

TENNESSEE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE
provides guiding principles for turnaround efforts

SCHOOL QUALITY

BALTIMORE EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
ponders school quality

BALTIMORE EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
shares new method to evaluate school performance

STUDENTS

EDUCATION CONSORTIUM FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION
explores student learning plans

REL NORTHWEST

examines impacts of Oregon's investment in accelerated learning on student participation

TEACHERS

TENNESSEE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE
explores turnover and retention patterns among Tennessee's teachers of color

WI EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP
explores how teachers experience evaluations

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, the Spencer Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Wallace Foundation.