NNERPP | EXTRA
Delivering fresh ideas from the intersection of ed research, policy & practice

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Happy Spring!

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP

Welcome to our second edition of NNERPP | Extra! We are very excited to share three new articles with you this quarter, covering everything from English learners to evidence-based decision-making in practice, to tips and advice on how to launch a research-practice partnership. We've also included another quarterly roundup of research headlines from our members to keep you plugged into what's happening across the network.

In this edition, the image to the left was chosen both for the network-like qualities of the glass structure plus the bright lights (i.e., great ideas!) surrounding the structure itself -- two concepts that drive NNERPP | Extra.

Since we are all still sort of new here, we'd like to remind you once again of 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 | Extra Online

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

About NNERPP

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

Exploring English Learners' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP

In This "Research Insights" Edition

NNERPP | Extra's "Research Insights" series brings together related studies from NNERPP members so that readers can stay current on member research, discover how studies or programs are connected, and advance our collective knowledge by generating new questions, ideas, or programs.

In this second edition of the series, we bring together work on English learners (ELs), highlighting two studies done by NNERPP members that assess students' progress towards English proficiency. We look across two reports that follow multiple cohorts of kindergartners to measure how many are English proficient within four or five years after entering school. In "Finding Their Stride: Kindergarten English Learners and Time to Proficiency in the School District of Philadelphia," the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium examines initial English proficiency of four cohorts of kindergartners, what percentage of EL kindergartners reach English proficiency by the end of third grade (i.e., within four years), and how this varies by student characteristics. Similarly, the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest also examines how many EL kindergarten students achieve English proficiency four or five years after kindergarten and how this varies by student subgroups, but their sample focuses on four districts in New Mexico and Spanish-speaking ELs, in particular.

Why This Research

We begin by providing a brief description of the context in which these studies occurred, both in Philadelphia and New Mexico.

PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia has seen a growing immigrant population in recent years, with most EL students entering the School District of Philadelphia in the early elementary years. Examining EL students' English proficiency upon school entry and their subsequent time to proficiency can inform the district's efforts in supporting these students. Additionally, Philadelphia has identified a literacy goal that all 3rd graders will read at grade level by the end of the school year, a goal that requires paying special attention to ELs' specific needs and progress toward English literacy.

NEW MEXICO

New Mexico public schools have one of the highest proportions of EL enrollment in the United States (14% of the state student population in the 2014/15 school year were ELs), the majority of which are Hispanic. The New Mexico Public Education Department has set the following goals for ELs for 2022 under ESSA: 51% of ELs to be proficient in English language arts and 50% to be proficient in math on the New Mexico Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (NMPARCC) assessment. Only 7% of ELs in grade 5 were proficient in either English language arts or math on the NMPARCC in 2016. Research around ELs' language and academic outcomes can thus inform the state's efforts in understanding how best to support these students.

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Exploring ELs' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships, continued

Current EL Supports

PHILADELPHIA

The School District of Philadelphia offers three main programs to support English Learners: Its English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program provides ELs with specialized language instruction and content area support; its Bilingual/Dual Language Programs, currently offered at six schools, put native English speakers and native Spanish speakers together for a shared learning experience; and its Newcomer Learning Academy, a four-year program for students aged 14-20 who are new to the U.S., provides a jump start on learning English. The district also provides a free four-week summer camp for Middle School ELs.

NEW MEXICO

New Mexico offers five state-funded bilingual multicultural education program models providing instruction in English and in the students' home language:

- Dual Language Immersion: Designed for both English speaking and non-English speaking students to develop full proficiency in English and their home language
- Maintenance: Students start out receiving instruction in English as a Second Language until they achieve proficiency and receive some content-area instruction as well as Language Arts courses in their home language
- Enrichment: Designed for students already fluent in English, this model focuses on students' further development in their home language
- Heritage: Designed to provide instruction in students' home language and English as a Second Language instruction
- Transitional: Has students initially instructed in their home language but transitioning into being instructed completely in English

Research Questions

Both reports were developed and produced within research-practice partnerships: The School District of Philadelphia and local non-profit organization Research for Action together form the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium. REL Southwest partnered with the New Mexico Achievement Gap Research Alliance, which includes a number of different stakeholder groups in New Mexico that are collaboratively working to address achievement gaps among Hispanic and Native American students.

Below we share the particular research questions that were addressed in each report:

PHILADELPHIA

- Among English learner students who enrolled in kindergarten from 2008–09 to 2011–12, what percentage reached English proficiency within four years? Are there differences in proficiency rates by student gender, home language, disability, or English proficiency at entrance to kindergarten? Are there differences in proficiency on the ACCESS language domains (i.e., speaking, listening comprehension, reading, and writing)?

NEW MEXICO

- What were the initial Spanish and English proficiencies of English learner students in kindergarten? What percentage of English learner students were reclassified as fluent English proficient four or five years after kindergarten? Do the results vary by initial Spanish proficiency in kindergarten?
- What percentage of English learner students who were reclassified as fluent English proficient four or five years after kindergarten also demonstrated grade-level readiness in grade 4 or 5 in English language arts and math? Do the results vary by initial Spanish proficiency in kindergarten? How do the rates of grade-level readiness for these students compare with those for all students statewide in the same grades?

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Exploring ELs' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships, continued

Measures

In both studies, the "Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to State" for English learners (ACCESS for ELs) was administered to measure students' English proficiency. ACCESS characterizes student proficiency in four language domains: Listening and Speaking (Oral Language) + Reading and Writing (Literacy). Students can receive a composite score ranging from 1 to 6 on the exam; those receiving an ACCESS composite score of 5 or above are considered English proficient.

Additionally, the New Mexico study also used results from the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey–Revised (WMLS-R) or the pre-Language Assessment Scales to evaluate students' initial Spanish language proficiency and place them into either low, medium, or high proficiency. Grade-level readiness in English language arts and math in grades 4 and 5 was measured using the New Mexico Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (NMPARCC) standardized academic assessments.

What Does the Research Show?

Here, we categorize the findings into four groups: Findings around initial English (and Spanish, in one of the studies) proficiency, findings around time to proficiency, findings around which students were more likely to reach English proficiency, and findings around the relationship between English/Spanish proficiency and other measures of student achievement.

Initial Proficiency: Overall, initial English proficiency was low for most kindergarten ELs in both studies: In Philadelphia, ⅔ of kindergarten ELs knew and used minimal English when they entered school, with almost half placing at the lowest proficiency level. In the New Mexico school districts, more than 80% of students in the 2010 cohort and about half the students in the 2011 cohort entered kindergarten with low English proficiency. In contrast, most of these students had medium or high Spanish proficiency upon kindergarten entry. Notably, students with higher initial Spanish proficiency also had higher initial English proficiency.

Time to Proficiency: In both studies, the majority of kindergarten ELs achieved English proficiency within the examined timeframe. In the Philadelphia study, almost 60% of kindergarten ELs achieved English proficiency within four years of starting school (i.e., by the end of third grade). In the New Mexico study, about 75% of students in the 2010 cohort (59% in the 2011 cohort) attained English proficiency four years after kindergarten (i.e., by grade 4), with over 80% of students attaining English proficiency five years after kindergarten (i.e., by grade 5).

More Likely to be Proficient: The Philadelphia study found that female students, non special education students, and students who spoke Arabic, Chinese, Khmer, or Vietnamese at home rather than Spanish were more likely to be proficient within four years of starting kindergarten. Additionally, students with higher initial English proficiency were more likely to reach proficiency in four years. In the New Mexico study, students with high initial Spanish proficiency were more likely to reach English proficiency four or five years after kindergarten than students with low or medium initial Spanish proficiency; in fact, a majority of high initial Spanish proficiency students in both cohorts were reclassified as fluent English proficient by year 3 after kindergarten (recall that the New Mexico study focused solely on Spanish-speaking ELs).

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Exploring ELs' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships, continued

Proficiency and Other Achievements: The Philadelphia study also examined the breakdown of students' English proficiency scores across Oral Language and Literacy on the ACCESS, noting that more students became proficient in Oral Language than Literacy, with writing proficiency a notable area of struggle. The New Mexico study additionally examined reclassified students' grade-level readiness by grade 4 or 5 in English language arts and math, finding that fewer than 25% achieved grade-level readiness in grade 4 or 5. Regardless of initial Spanish proficiency, students' rates of grade-level readiness were low (and lower than statewide averages for all New Mexico students in these grades), but ELs with high initial Spanish proficiency were more likely to be grade-level ready than ELs with low or medium initial Spanish proficiency.

Policy Implications

Findings from both studies suggest that when it comes to setting proficiency targets, a uniform standard for time to proficiency might not be appropriate, even among English learners entering school districts at the kindergarten level. Given the relationship between initial proficiency in English (in the Philadelphia study) and in Spanish (in the New Mexico study) and time to English proficiency, policymakers may want to consider differentiating proficiency targets by these initial proficiency ratings. Initial English proficiency assessments can also help identify students in need of additional support (i.e., those students with low initial English proficiency ratings). In other cases, assessing a student's proficiency in their home language might also be an early indicator for targeted needs (i.e., students with low proficiency in their home language may require greater support).

Additionally, the Philadelphia study suggests that ELs need targeted support to develop proficiency in writing; the New Mexico study suggests that grade-level readiness in ELA and math remains a challenge even for ELs who have reached proficiency.

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:

PHILADELPHIA

This study has given the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs baseline data on the amount of time ELs need to become proficient in English. As the district has set a goal for all students to be reading on grade-level by the end of third grade, this information is guiding its work to meet this goal and set appropriate expectations for ELs. Specifically, the data from the report is informing revisions to English Language Development (ELD) curriculum in grades K-3.

NEW MEXICO

The study results were translated into a blog and a video aimed at practitioners to gain a broader audience to research findings from the Regional Educational Laboratories. Also, while working together with the the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) to conduct the study, a number of irregularities arose related to ELs data across districts, such as reclassification status, assessment outcomes in a student's primary language, or language of instruction. NMPED has since worked with school districts to conduct a data audit to understand the reasons for the data irregularities and have provided increased guidance for data collection for ELs so that reliable, consistent data is collected regularly.

Want to Learn More?

PHILADELPHIA STUDY	NEW MEXICO STUDY
REPORT	REPORT
CONTACT MOLLY PILEGGI TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH	CONTACT BRENDA ARELLANO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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

What Are The Dimensions of District Capacity That Enable Effective Evidence-Based Decision-Making?

By Norma Ming | San Francisco Unified School District

Much of the discourse around building practitioners' "capacity" to use research evidence presumes that external partners produce research for which practitioners need to increase their knowledge and skill to use it effectively. This implies a unidirectional, narrow view of "translating" research into practice which neglects the range of roles, processes, and evidence types involved in the full scope of practitioners' evidence-based decision-making (EBDM). The broader perspective proposed here highlights four critical distinctions:

- First, an organization's capacity goes beyond just the sum of the capabilities (knowledge and skills) of the individuals within the organization, and includes important system-level structures and resources, such as data and knowledge management infrastructure or social processes for decision-making, which affect the reliability and quality of EBDM.
- Second, research is only one form of inquiry producing rigorous, useful evidence for educational agencies; evaluation and improvement provide valuable methods addressing other important goals and incorporating other forms of evidence (more on how these categories differ below).
- Third, the use and generation of evidence are distinct activities requiring different elements of EBDM capacity.
- Fourth, such evidence may be generated from sources that are internal to the organization, not just from external researchers.

Understanding the importance of these distinctions first demands articulating districts' EBDM goals, to define success. We would not expect a district to use evidence for its decision-making if high-quality evidence exists but is not relevant, or if the relevant evidence available is of dubious quality. Whether evidence is relevant to a district's decision depends on its decision-making goals.

Three Types of Questions That Guide EBDM

We can conceptualize the questions that guide decision-making in three categories: research, evaluation, and improvement [1]. I adopt the narrower definition of research* here both for its familiarity and for its value in distinguishing between broadly generalizable results and locally specific results. Thus:

Research questions elucidate the desired state and how to measure it. Answering these questions may include consulting the literature for generally applicable theoretical approaches and robust empirical evidence, as well as conducting new analyses which may potentially apply to other contexts.

Evaluation questions assess gaps between the current and desired states. These focus on analyzing local needs and program effectiveness. While some evaluations may be sufficiently generalizable to also count as research, their primary purpose for the local agency is to understand the function or impact of a particular program.

[1] Improvement here comprises quality improvement, continuous improvement, or improvement science, e.g.:
Langley, G. J., Moen, R., Nolan, K. M., Nolan, T. W., Norman, C. L., & Provost, L. P. (2009). The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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What Are The Dimensions of District Capacity That Enable Effective Evidence-Based Decision-Making, continued

Improvement questions examine how to develop, discover, or optimize strategies for closing gaps between the current and desired states. These explore changing conditions and actions for better product design or service delivery. Some improvement projects may overlap with formative and developmental evaluations of pilot interventions; some design studies or implementation studies of improvement initiatives may also offer opportunities for research if there is broader interest in documenting and learning from these processes to apply elsewhere.

Situating the Goals Within the Work of an Education Agency

Most urgently, educational agencies must serve their students better, which drives their need for information and action. I offer a simplified framework for how addressing research, evaluation, and improvement questions can inform district-wide decision-making across the following three levels:

1. Outcomes: Identify students' needs
2. Practices: Provide services to meet those needs
3. Systems: Strengthen structures and professional supports for providers to meet those

Some of the questions that emerge at these levels invite research, while others motivate evaluation, and still others are simply improvement questions. Figure 1 depicts the application of this framework to instruction.

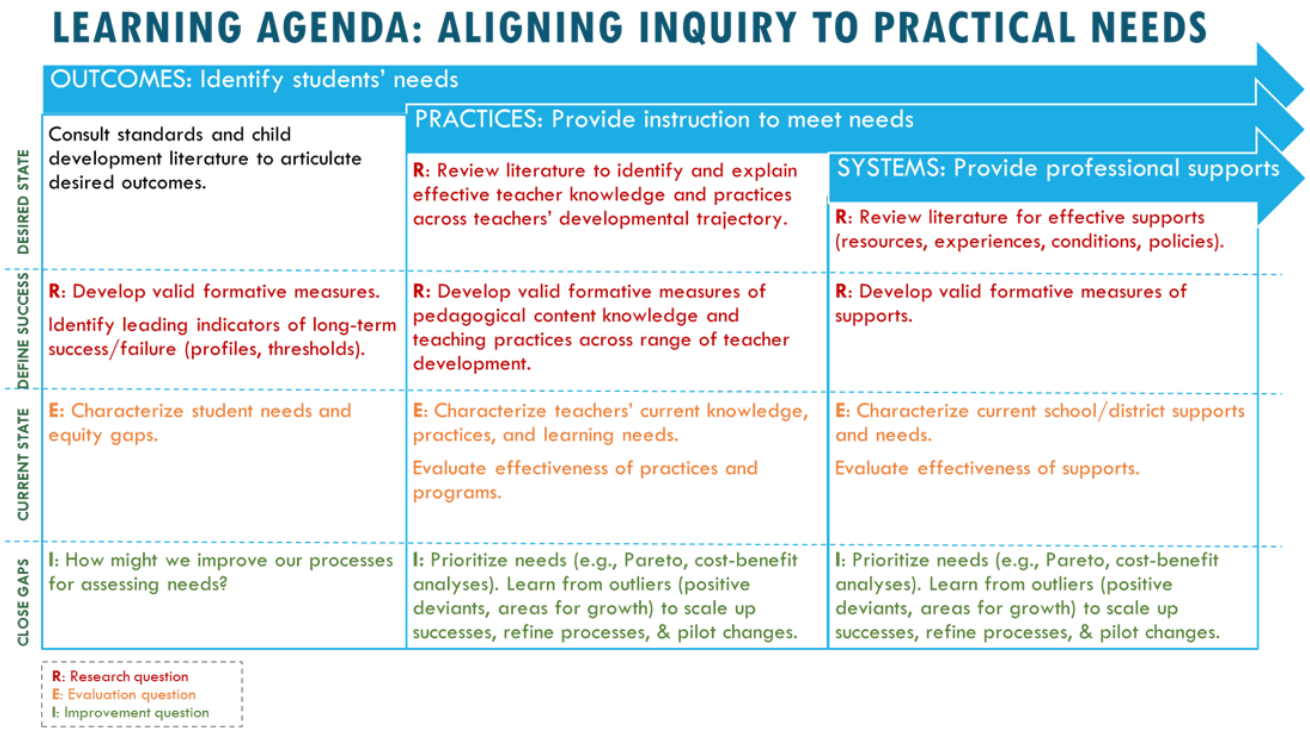

Figure 1. A framework for constructing a learning agenda that encompasses research, evaluation, and improvement questions, across student outcomes, teacher practices, and system-level supports.

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What Are The Dimensions of District Capacity That Enable Effective Evidence-Based Decision-Making, continued

For example, if the targeted outcome is students' sense of belonging, then developing valid instruments and determining early indicators of belonging are possible research questions where external partners can contribute valuable expertise. Characterizing different subgroups' relative sense of belonging would constitute an evaluation question most relevant to the local context. Similarly, elucidating the specific obstacles impeding a district's process of administering surveys and locating students experiencing homelessness would address a local improvement need that is less likely to yield implications for the broader research community.

At the practices level, determining which strategies best develop students' phonological decoding skills or assessing teachers' understanding of common mathematical errors is a research question, while determining whether a particular socioemotional learning program has been implemented effectively is a traditional evaluation question. In contrast, characterizing the variability in how teachers deliver feedback or developing procedures to ensure consistent progress monitoring of focal students would address improvement questions.

Similarly, at the systems level, identifying essential leadership supports or effective coaching techniques would be a research question, while measuring the effectiveness of their delivery is an evaluation question, and understanding what impedes the district in aligning and coordinating its resources is an improvement question.

Capacities for EBDM

In all of these cases, EBDM requires the capacity to locate and utilize relevant evidence, and potentially also the capacity to generate useful evidence if none presently exists. Although research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have tended to privilege the generation of new research evidence, whether by external researchers or in co-production with practitioners, building the capacity to utilize existing evidence offers a greater return on both past and future investments in the evidence generated by any entity. Once established, the structures and resources required for utilizing evidence apply to both existing and new evidence, whereas generating new evidence demands additional time and support. Figure 2 enumerates the necessary conditions, resources, and structures constituting the capacities to utilize and to generate evidence.

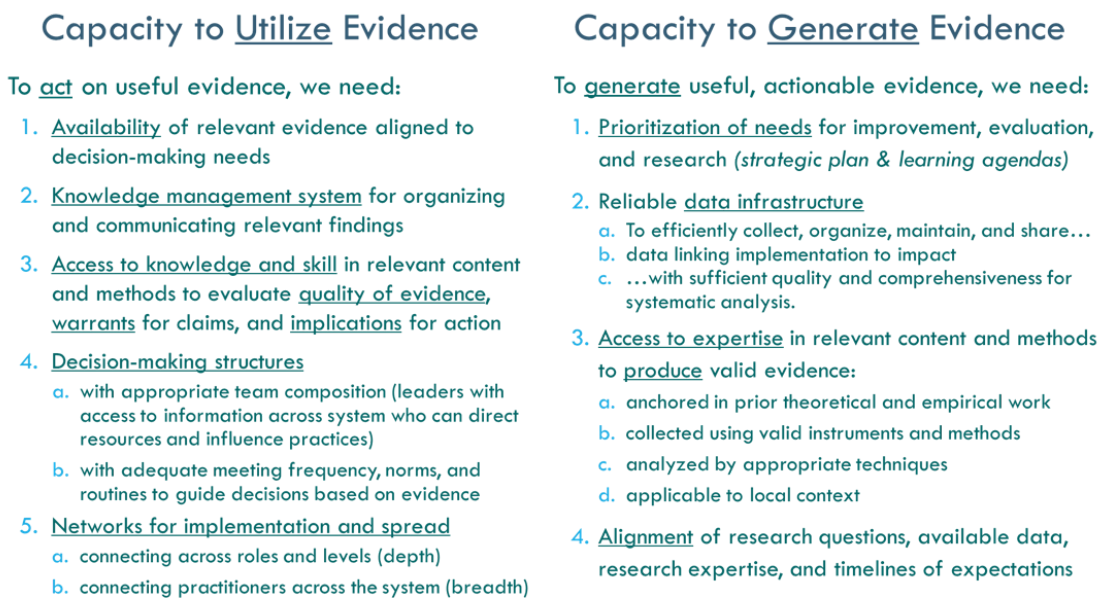

Figure 2. Components of system-wide capacities to utilize and to generate evidence.

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What Are The Dimensions of District Capacity That Enable Effective Evidence-Based Decision-Making, continued

The most important prerequisite for districts to **act** on useful evidence is the availability of relevant evidence aligned to their decision-making needs (as illustrated in Figure 1). Utilizing such evidence also requires having a knowledge management system for finding it, as well as access to expertise to ensure **valid interpretations** of the findings when formulating implications for action. Decision-making structures are critical for collectively sharing, interpreting, and applying the evidence to the district's local context, in conjunction with networks of leaders and practitioners who are empowered to act on and spread practical knowledge.

In the absence of sufficient relevant evidence, a district seeking to engage in EBDM must be able to lead or co-lead its own inquiry and analysis in order to **generate** useful evidence (see column 2 of Figure 2). This type of capacity depends on developing a useful research, evaluation, and improvement agenda to prioritize its inquiry needs and guide projects toward those needs. Conducting analyses requires a reliable data infrastructure for providing comprehensive, high-quality data suitable for analysis; access to expertise in the relevant content and methodological areas to produce valid evidence; and alignment between the inquiry questions, available data, content and methodological expertise, and timelines of expectations.

The capacity to sustain evidence-based practices spans **both** the utilization and generation of evidence, requiring ongoing processes for monitoring and adapting practices to ensure that the implementation of policies achieves the desired impact.

EBDM Processes in Action

Integrating EBDM in practice draws upon the capacities to utilize and generate evidence described above throughout a district's process from inquiry to implementation. Figure 3 (following page) illustrates how a district might productively integrate the generation of new evidence with the improvement processes required for successful implementation of evidence-based practice. The initial stage (lower left) of formulating the learning agenda guides the search for relevant evidence, whether from the literature or from new data collection (top row). Those findings then inform the potential changes to be tested in practice, through cycles of continuous improvement (lower middle). Whereas research or evaluation projects typically culminate in disseminated reports (upper right), successful improvements demonstrate their viability through institutionalized learning and sustained changes to practice at scale (lower right).

While this diagram highlights projects generating new evidence, similar processes may apply to literature searches, except writing the review likely precedes exploring implications for action. The diagram also does not distinguish between external and internal research projects. For external projects, such as what might occur within a research-practice partnership, coordinating productive collaborative inquiry requires another set of conditions: communication, trust, flexibility, and compatibility between internal (practitioner) and external (researcher) partners [2]. Discovering and developing these conditions requires not just the good fortune of alignment of interests and availability, but also significant time and resources [3]. This motivates better understanding when it is worthwhile to nurture external partnerships, and when it is more efficient to allocate resources to generate the evidence internally, which I discuss next.

[2] Henrick, E.C., Cobb, P., Penuel, W.R., Jackson, K., & Clark, T. (2017). Assessing Research-Practice Partnerships: Five Dimensions of Effectiveness. New York, NY: William T. Grant Foundation. https://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/10/Assessing-Research-Practice-Partnerships.pdf

[3] Oliver, K., Kothari, A., & Mays, N. (2019). The dark side of coproduction: do the costs outweigh the benefits for health research? Health Research Policy and Systems, 17:33. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-019-0432-3

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What Are The Dimensions of District Capacity That Enable Effective Evidence-Based Decision-Making, continued

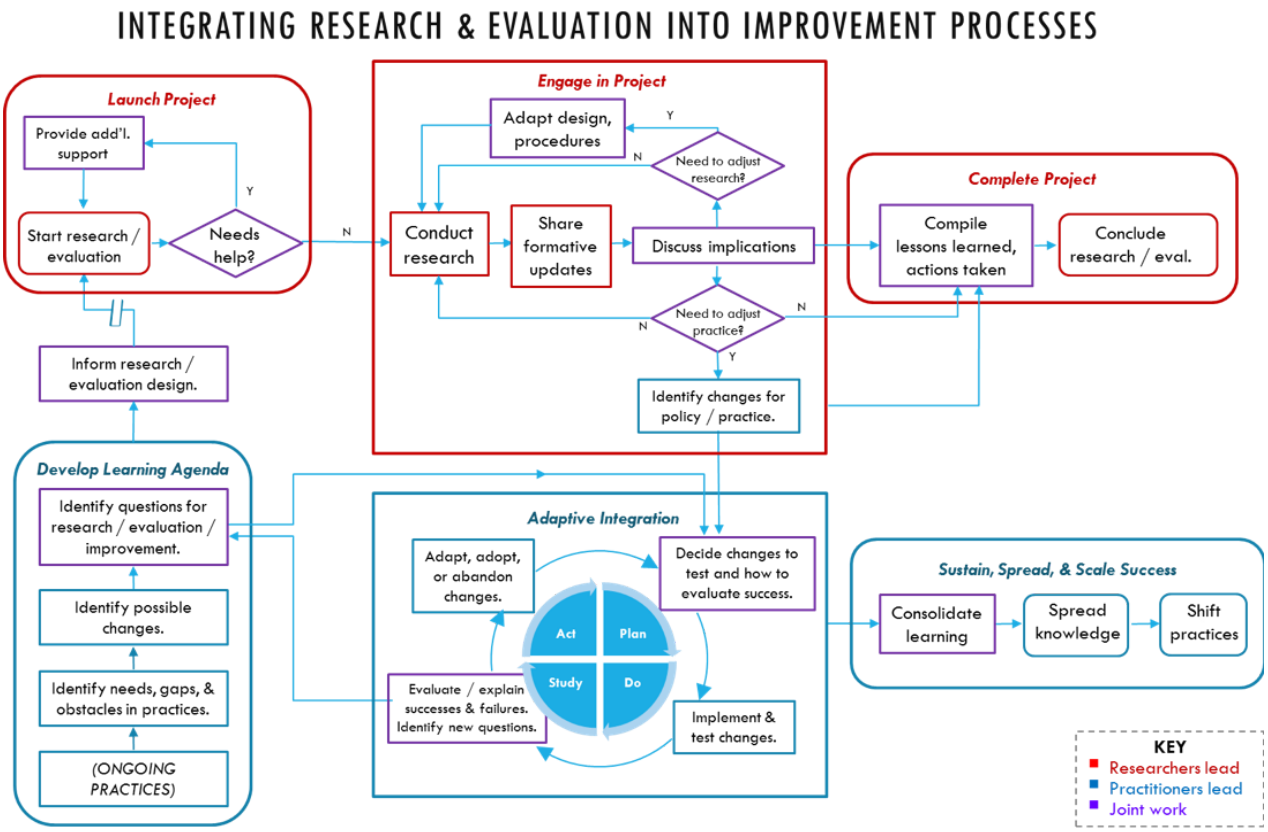

Figure 3: Flowchart depicting activities to support research and evaluation projects on the top, with the improvement processes necessary to guide and integrate learning in practice as the foundation underneath.

Generating Evidence Using Internal vs. External Expertise

Certain logistical constraints may point toward internal analysis, such as a short timescale for decision-making or circumstances where it is easier to conduct the analysis than to anonymize, link, and share the data with an external partner. Alternatively, a large project scope that exceeds the agency's available personnel-time may justify external engagement. Internal analyses may be preferable when analyzing data with high sensitivity, such as narrative descriptions in disciplinary referral records or special education assessment reports, or early-stage measures that may be useful for informing internal improvement but lack sufficient validation for external research[5]. In contrast, high-stakes evaluations or controversial policy decisions may demand external independence. A final consideration is the nature of relevant expertise: Decision-making goals where direct internal knowledge and access strengthens the opportunity both to explore and to act quickly on the knowledge may motivate internal investigation, whereas questions that benefit from specialized content expertise and knowledge of the broader field may recommend external research. Together, these dimensions highlight the important role for considering factors supporting internally- vs. externally-generated evidence to guide districts' decision-making (Figure 4, following page).

[5] Solberg, L.I., Mosser, G., & McDonald, S. (1997). The three faces of performance measurement: Improvement, accountability, and research. The Joint Commission Journal on Quality Improvement, 23(3), 135-147. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1070-3241(16)30305-4

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What Are The Dimensions of District Capacity That Enable Effective Evidence-Based Decision-Making, continued

FACTORS RECOMMENDING INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL ANALYSIS

	Internal Analysis	External Analysis
Logistics	Short time-scale for decision-making Higher cost for sharing than analyzing data	Scope of project exceeds internal personnel-time
Sensitivity	Highly sensitive data Measures or practices still under development	High-stakes evaluations Controversial policy decisions
Expertise	Deep knowledge of internal context Direct access to multiple decision-makers	Specialized content expertise Broad knowledge of multiple contexts

Figure 4. Possible factors motivating internal vs. external analyses.

An example illustrates the potential interplay of these dimensions. Initiatives with a high funding profile involving calibrated observations and anonymous interviews of a large sample of classroom teachers may be better suited for external evaluators who do not know the individual teachers and have limited access to their colleagues, thereby preserving the staff's coaching or supervisory relationships. These may be complemented by internal analyses of longitudinal student-level outcome data across different dosages or conditions. The results of both analyses may be integrated into practice through cycles of continuous improvement where internal facilitators support the collection and interpretation of formative data to guide ongoing modifications and monitoring of practice.

Conclusion

These four dimensions – accounting for multiple forms of evidence, distinguishing between using and producing evidence, recognizing the importance of resources beyond knowledge and skill, and acknowledging both internal and external roles in generating evidence – highlight the need for a broader conception of "research use capacity." Beyond creating a more complete picture of the lifecycle of how evidence informs decision-making, this reveals the range of systems, structures, and processes necessary for that cycle to function. Establishing those supporting conditions is critical if we expect evidence to be incorporated effectively in improving educational outcomes.

*Some may define research broadly, as in "applying systematic methods and analyses to address a predefined question or hypothesis" (http://wtgrantfoundation.org/grants/research-grants-improving-use-research-evidence). Traditional conceptions of research conform to the Common Rule: "a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/common-rule/index.html). That expectation of generalizability omits accountability reporting and evaluations conducted only for local progress monitoring, as well as quality improvement efforts focused on understanding or improving implementation of practices (https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance/faq/quality-improvement-activities/index.html).

● *Norma Ming is Supervisor of Research & Evaluation for the Research, Planning, & Assessment Department at the San Francisco Unified School District.*

How to Launch a Research-Practice Partnership

With Michèle Foster, Matt Linick, Michael Strambler, Joanna Meyer, Clare Irwin, and George Coleman

Launching a research-practice partnership can look different for each partnership: between the local context, resources available, and which problems are most pressing, an RPP's goals, priorities, and structure can vary greatly. While each one's path is unique, resources on creating RPPs (see here and here, for example) do shed light on and provide guidance around some general key tasks to consider.

Conversations within our network have also highlighted the value of learning from each other and sharing experiences around the launching process, with partnerships in NNERPP being able to help each other in navigating this sometimes daunting and seldomly straightforward task. For this "How To" article, we asked three of our members -- all at different stages in their journey -- to share some of their experiences and insights around launching a partnership.

Joining us for this conversation are Michèle Foster from the University of Louisville-Jefferson County Public Schools (UL-JCPS) partnership, Matt Linick representing the Cleveland Alliance for Education Research (CAER), and Michael Strambler, Joanna Meyer, Irwin Clare, and George Coleman from the Partnership for Early Education Research (PEER).

> The UL-JCPS partnership was founded in 2016. It is currently working most directly with one school in Jefferson County Public Schools in particular: Michèle describes the partnership as almost like a mom and pop business with a very small staff.
>
> CAER, also founded in 2016, has three partners that form the RPP: the Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, and the American Institutes for Research.
>
> PEER is a state-level partnership among early childhood education stakeholders in Connecticut and was founded in 2014. Partners include the Connecticut State Department of Education and the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, the Yale School of Medicine, Cooperative Educational Services, Education Development Center, and the communities of Bridgeport, Norwalk, and Stamford.

Join us as we hear about these partnerships' experiences in getting the RPP off the ground!

What are 1 or 2 things that need to be negotiated before you actually start working together in the partnership?

All three partnerships name securing organizational support as an absolutely necessary step before working together. More importantly, it's not just general support for the RPP that's needed -- Michèle, Matt, and the PEER team all point out the need for the "right kind" of organizational support. For Michèle's partnership, that meant first ensuring that everyone at the university and school district understood exactly what they were agreeing to participate in, from defining the key features that make up an RPP to how they differ from the many short-term partnerships districts often form with universities for specific purposes. Michèle adds that buy-in must come from multiple levels of the participating organizations.

Matt says that understanding the goals of the people involved in partnership work is the very first step. The partnership should be aligned to these goals, and organizational support should be directly related to them and must come from everyone's organization.

The PEER team adds that organizational support should come from top-level leaders at the organizations involved in the partnership -- starting out, PEER secured letters of support from the superintendent of the school district and the chief executive of the largest community-based provider in each community -- but it is then also critical to identify others who can "speak for each organization in negotiating shared priorities among partners," because it is not necessarily these top-level executives who will engage in partnership activities, such as negotiating the research agenda. These representatives should have adequate knowledge of their organizations' strategic plans and research needs and should also have the authority to commit to partnership projects. "Ensuring that the right people are at the table helps reduce the risk of basing the work of a partnership on goals that may not be meaningful to the organization as a whole," according to PEER.

What has been your greatest challenge in getting a partnership off the ground?

Interestingly, all three partnerships experienced a different top challenge in getting their partnership off the ground. For CAER, Matt says time was the greatest challenge: "Doing this work well

How to Launch a Research-Practice Partnership, continued

means that you need to dedicate time and effort" to activities such as drafting by-laws, discussing publication guidelines, and scheduling meetings, but finding that time in everyone's already busy schedule can be "difficult and cumbersome." Putting in the time, though, "is ultimately worth the investment and necessary to the work," Matt adds.

Michèle names human and monetary resources as the top challenge for UL-JCPS. "Neither partner committed any funding to the project," Michèle says, and the university does not have the human resources -- such as full-time graduate research assistants or postdoctoral fellows -- or the financial resources to hire people to grow the partnership. Therefore, her "mom and pop" RPP has "a minimum number of employees that can only handle limited research activity." She also identifies an instability in leadership in the partner organizations as an additional and remaining challenge, one that endangers the organizational support identified as so critical by all three partnerships (see question 1).

For PEER, the main challenge in getting the partnership off the ground was developing everyone's capacity to partner productively. Because the member organizations had varying degrees of experience with collaborative research, things like data sharing, an appreciation for the value of conducting research together, and the ability to envision how the partnership could support their work all required extra time and attention.

At what point did you feel like you actually became a "partnership"?

The PEER team and Michèle both point out that this is not a linear process and that there are ups and downs in becoming a partnership. PEER has seen the engagement of different partner organizations "wax and wane" over time; similarly, for Michèle's partnership, "high points have been offset when things didn't work out." She identifies several moments of official support and gestures of approval/recognition by key stakeholders where she felt the RPP was becoming an actual partnership, including the Interim Superintendent giving the RPP his imprimatur and the Director of Research inviting the partnership to observe presentations by schools seeking small grant funding under a new Deeper Learning Initiative.

Likewise, the PEER team says that moments of approval and recognition of the partnership's work have helped them feel like a real partnership, specifically, when partners started approaching the RPP rather than the other way around.

Matt and Michèle both name attending the NNERPP Annual Forum as an experience that created a feeling of true partnership. As Matt explains, attending a conference as a team and finding time to sit and work through partnership planning "was critical to developing the necessary first steps." They continued to build on that experience and feeling of partnership, eventually developing "a cadence and regularity" to the work.

Michèle adds that other key activities and milestones, such as launching a website and writing a blogpost on the work of the partnership for EdWeek, also created the feeling of becoming an actual partnership.

What does "success" look like or mean to your team at this early stage of a partnership?

Success looks quite different for our three partnerships, reflecting the stage they are at and the challenges they have experienced (or continue to experience).

For Matt and the CAER team, building the RPP's infrastructure is a good measure of success. This involves things like writing by-laws, signing memorandums of understanding (MOUs), and hosting the first CAER Steering Committee Meeting. Getting this infrastructure right, Matt points out, enables the development of a "sustainable, meaningful, and long-term" partnership.

Success for the UL-JCPS partnership is at this point "tied more to individual actions than to those of the RPP" and revolves around building relationships, Michèle observes. For example, one person's excellent relationship with key people at certain schools can make a big difference; and one researcher working closely with one principal is a sign of success.

For PEER, "success means that you have begun to produce work that partners find interesting and useful, and that motivates them to engage further." Such engagement with and appreciation for the collaborative work signals that partners recognize an RPP's ability to "produce meaningful results that they can act upon."

Michèle Foster is Director of the University of Louisville-Jefferson County Public Schools partnership; Matt Linick was Executive Director of Research and Evaluation at Cleveland Metropolitan School District before joining American Institutes for Research; and Michael Strambler is Director of the Partnership for Early Education Research, with Joanna Meyer and Clare Irwin serving as Co-Directors, and George Coleman as Practitioner Lead.

Research Headlines From NNERPP Members: Last Quarter

ARTS EDUCATION

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE
examines benefits of of arts-learning experiences

ATTENDANCE

GARDNER CENTER
examines attendance patterns for mission promise neighborhood students

PHILADELPHIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines ninth grade attendance patterns

DECENTRALIZATION

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE
examines the impact of decentralization on student outcomes

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE
examines the impact of decentralization on funding equity

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW ORLEANS
explores how to support parents applying for early childhood ed programs

NYC EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH NETWORK
studies variation in Pre-K For All implementation and quality

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

EDUCATION NORTHWEST
examines how to enhance English learner access to effective teachers

EQUITY

RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS
examines homelessness in NYC elementary schools

POLICING

RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS
examines the impact of police surges

POST-SECONDARY

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
assesses college advising needs

PRINCIPALS

TENNESSEE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE
studies principal quality across Tennessee schools

SCHOOL CLOSURES

BALTIMORE EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines approaches to closing schools and their outcomes

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

BALTIMORE EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
examines approaches to closing schools and their outcomes

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM
examines school administrators' perceptions of roadblocks to school improvement

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM
examines how to integrate social, emotional, and academic development

TEACHERS

REL CENTRAL
examines teacher mobility in rural and nonrural settings in four states

End Notes

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