



NNERPP
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Delivering Fresh Ideas From the Intersection of Education Research, Policy & Practice



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WELCOME TO OUR SPRING EDITION

Welcome to our new issue NNERPP Extra!

We are excited to share our spring edition with you, which features three new articles: First up, insights from the Nashville Partnership for Educational Equity Research on a district program designed to strengthen student-adult relationships in schools and its "rapid response study" approach to this work; next, an examination of three university grant-making programs designed to incentivize university researcher participation in RPP work; and finally, an account of NNERPP's recent launch of a regional subnetwork and reflections from the subnetwork's first in-person meeting.

A special thank you goes to our wonderful guest authors who contributed to this issue.

Happy reading!

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

ENSURING EVERY STUDENT IS KNOWN: HOW AN RPP'S RAPID RESPONSE STUDY PROVIDED QUICK ANSWERS TO GUIDE PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AT SCALE

By Abbey Loehr | Metro Nashville Public Schools + Nashville Partnership for Educational Equity Research (PEER) | PRACTICE-SIDE and Marcy Singer-Gabella and Jessica Holter | Vanderbilt University + Nashville Partnership for Educational Equity Research (PEER) | RESEARCH-SIDE



OVERVIEW

THE RESEARCH ARTIFACT

"Metro Nashville Public Schools' Navigator Rapid Response Study Findings"

By Maury Nation, Caroline Christopher, and Megan McCormick

Presentation of findings from the RPP's rapid response study on the implementation of the Metro Nashville Public School's Navigator Program to Metro Nashville Public Schools

THE RPP: MISSION

The Nashville Partnership for Educational Equity Research (PEER) is a collaboration between

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Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) and Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development. Founded in 2021, **the partnership pursues equity-driven research to guide public education policy and practice, disrupt educational inequities, and enable all students to thrive.**

THE RPP: LAUNCHING RAPID RESPONSE STUDIES

A central space for this work is PEER's cross-institutional working groups. These groups of leaders from the district and researchers from the university come together to co-construct research questions, design and conduct studies related to PEER's research priority areas, and then turn learnings into recommendations for policy and practice.

While the working group structure has supported partners' deep engagement in and shared ownership of the work, it is not designed to systematically answer questions on a relatively short timeline. To fill this gap, PEER launched a new strand of work in 2023 called "Rapid Response Studies," which are quick-turnaround studies designed to provide evidence on pressing questions within six months or less.

Potential rapid response studies are typically identified by district leaders during routine program review and strategic planning conversations. These topics and a proposed timeline are then brought to the PEER Partnership Planning Group (which includes representatives from the district and the university) for vetting and refinement. If the study is determined to be viable, district leadership will choose an MNPS sponsor for the project. Once the project sponsor and desired deliverable timelines are set, PEER's co-directors issue a Call for Proposals to the Peabody College community, host an informational session, and request 1-2 page proposals within two weeks. Submitted proposals are reviewed by PEER's co-directors and a representative from the district's Research Review Committee. If there are multiple strong proposals (to date, proposing teams have chosen to join forces rather than compete!), the co-directors provide a recommendation to district leadership regarding which should move forward. The co-directors and PEER's research operations manager facilitate communication and collaboration of rapid response cross-institutional teams to finalize study design details and logistics, support data collection, and interpret preliminary findings as they become available. At the conclusion of the study, researchers share their findings and recommendations with relevant district leadership and project teams who provide feedback and share initial plans for using study findings. MNPS's PEER co-director informally monitors and supports ongoing use of study findings through their embedded role in the Research Assessment and Evaluation department and involvement in district strategic planning conversations.

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WHY THIS WORK

PEER's first rapid response study focused on the district's "Navigator Program," which grew out of a need to connect to students during the pandemic and was first piloted at scale across the district by MNPS in the 2020-21 school year. The Navigator Program aims to connect every student in the district to a caring adult who serves as their mentor, advocate, and advisor – their "navigator." Navigators can be teachers, counselors, or other school staff members. Every school identifies a lead navigator to support program implementation and serve as a liaison with the district implementation team. The program is designed to strengthen student-adult relationships through students' use of a computer-based weekly reflection platform and an in-person monthly check-in with their navigator. Navigator has become an important initiative to fully realize MNPS' commitment to creating belonging in schools and ensuring every student is known. In particular, the Navigator Program seeks to connect every student in MNPS to a caring adult through regular check-ins, communication points, and opportunities to build a relationship. These strong student-adult relationships are theorized to be a key strategy for increasing school attendance, decreasing school discipline, and supporting the collaborative referral process that connects students to the supports they need

In 2023, as PEER first launched the rapid response studies strand of work, the Navigator Program emerged as a priority area

for district leaders who wanted to assess program implementation and understand what had been learned from the first few years of implementation. Because the Navigator Program began in the 2020-21 school year as a response to meeting student needs during the pandemic, the program evolved over time. Implementation, data tracking, and progress monitoring looked different each school year. Additionally, each year there were shifts in the district leadership who oversaw the program. By 2022-23, the district felt an urgent need to better understand implementation and examine impact, and they wanted to start with perspectives from the school-level implementers—the navigators. In response, PEER activated its first rapid response study, in which researchers interviewed current navigators in schools with varying levels of implementation quality, reported their findings back to district leaders, and helped district leaders establish a set of action steps to improve monitoring and supports for implementation in the upcoming school year.

WHAT THE WORK EXAMINES

The objective of this rapid response study was to identify factors influencing the implementation of the Navigator Program and opportunities to improve implementation. The specific research questions emerged through a dialogue among the district research team, the district project sponsor, the PEER co-directors, and the university researchers. Given the initial broad charge of helping the district assess implementation, the researchers generated an outline of potential strands of research they

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could pursue to examine implementation and presented the options to the district team and PEER co-directors. After collaboratively considering the affordances and constraints of each approach, the district team members decided that conducting interviews with navigators about their experiences with implementation would be most helpful as a first step.

The following primary questions were identified:

- What are navigators doing to implement the program in their school and with their students?
- What are the barriers and supports that are affecting the implementation of the Navigator Program?
- How do the experiences of navigators differ across high and low implementation schools?
- What are navigators' suggestions or recommendations for improving the Navigator Program and program implementation?



To carry out the analysis, the research team first needed to select the sample of schools. To do this, they created a weighted composite score for Navigator implementation level based on four indicators, including student engagement rate (how often students participated in weekly reflections), teacher feedback rate (how often teachers responded to student entries), navigator contact attempts rate (how often navigators attempted to check in with students), and navigator successful contact rate (how often navigators successfully checked in with students). The team then identified the eligible school sample based on grade tier (elementary, middle, high), implementation level (low or high), and nominations from the district Navigator Program implementation team. From this eligible pool of schools, the final sample included 7 schools total (3 elementary schools, 2 middle, and 2 high schools). Lead navigators and navigators (both teacher and non-teacher) were recruited from each school.

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The research team then conducted a thematic analysis across a series of 1 hour interviews, the majority held virtually, with 12 navigators (9 teacher, 1 non-teacher, and 2 lead navigators), paying special attention to responses that differentiated interviews from low and high implementation schools (i.e., “difference makers”).

At the beginning of the study, PEER's co-directors held daily stand-up meetings with the research team and the district project sponsor to flesh out the study design details and work out logistics, including gaining expedited research approval from the district, submitting an application to the university's institutional review board, and preparing data to support the study. Once the study was approved, PEER's co-directors met weekly with the research team and the MNPS project sponsor to check in on research status and help clear obstacles during the research process. Because of the tight timeline and limited capacity, the district's Research, Assessment, and Evaluation team assisted with some of the interviews.

FINDINGS

Four main themes emerged from the interviews with the navigators: Program successes, questions about the program purpose, concerns about time, and variation in how students were engaging with navigators. In summary, the following key ideas were named for these four themes:

Program Successes

- Strengthening relationships with students
- Identifying student and family needs and connecting to supports
- Utilization of the monthly navigator check-ins and weekly emotional reflection platforms as computer-based tools for implementation

Questions about the Program Purpose

- Navigators wanted to know the "why", as well as what the long-term goals and vision were
 - Interviews revealed gaps in understanding about the program components (the weekly student reflection and monthly check-ins with navigators were seen as two different initiatives), which was surprising to the implementation team.

Concerns about Time

- Competing priorities made it difficult to implement the Navigator Program effectively in the time given (at high implementation schools especially). Dedicating time for program activities into existing schedules helped.

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Variation in how students engaged with navigators

- Some students engaged less with the weekly reflection platform and more with monthly navigator check-ins (and vice versa) for different reasons

Interviews revealed a number of aspects that facilitated program implementation, which the research team called “difference makers.” These included:

- Effective dissemination of materials and ongoing training for navigators throughout the year
- Buy-in from school-level administration
- Having a flow chart of supports and knowing who and how to connect students to supports, including follow-up (closing the loop)
- Having a clearly identified “go-to” person for all things Navigator. This was intended to be the lead navigator, but sometimes individuals looked to someone else to answer questions
- Having a community of support: Knowing what happened after students were connected to supports, getting help from fellow staff and talking to other navigators about their work. In the case of lead navigators, having monthly meetings with leads from other schools was a difference maker

The researchers summarized their findings in a PowerPoint deck and presented the results to a group of district leaders involved in decision-making and implementation of the Navigator Program. The group discussed the results and began to identify action steps in response to the findings. Slides from the deck have since been integrated into ongoing program planning and formative evaluation presentations at the district and have contributed to a deeper understanding of both program implementation and what needs to change to improve. Ultimately, the findings revealed a common challenge faced by large, urban districts – effectively adapting and scaling effective practices across school contexts, grade levels, and for students with unique learning needs.

IMPACT AND USE OF THE WORK

The learnings stemming from lower implementation schools inspired a deeper quantitative analysis to understand what was happening at the school level across implementation levels. This analysis revealed that many schools were having similar challenges, which led to several changes in program practice for the 2023-2024 school year:

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- Combining weekly and monthly check-in platforms into a single platform for ease of use and consolidation of implementation monitoring data
- Identifying and designing key implementation metrics to monitor progress across multiple indicators of implementation
- Starting bi-weekly district implementation team meetings with the platform team to review and monitor quantitative implementation data by school and follow up with targeted supports for schools

MNPS is still using learnings from the study findings to:

- Improve strong messaging and coherence around the “why” of the program, including redefining its purpose as a Tier 1 support that every student receives through regular instruction
- Refine expanded supports for all schools (provided at the beginning of the year and throughout the year), such as
 - Protected, individualized support blocks (one-on-ones) for navigators and navigator leads
 - Updated SharePoint with tutorials and handbooks for administrators, teachers, and students (including videos, written communication, and prompt guidance to support student-navigator conversations)

- Continued monthly navigator leads meetings
- Weekly communications to navigator leads
- Refine protocol for follow-up at low-implementation schools identified through monitoring of quantitative implementation data
- Refine scheduling and determination of who is best positioned to serve as a navigator (e.g., teachers vs. other school staff)

Ultimately, the initial rapid response analysis and findings presentation generated a snowball of new hypotheses to test, which then led to additional analyses that informed the creation of new measures for the upcoming school year. Reviewing findings from this rapid response study and additional analyses has helped build understanding at the district Cabinet level about key initiatives and how to problem solve for improvement.

A second rapid response study was completed Fall 2023 and a third is currently underway, demonstrating a shared commitment from both the research and the practice side to build capacity for evidence-based decision-making that leads to changes in practice. Thinking nimbly about specific initiatives and getting research findings back fast was really exciting for the district. Pursuing responsive, just-in-time partnership research has increased opportunities to engage expertise on both sides of the partnership and inspired deeper understanding of district initiatives aimed at creating conditions for students to thrive, in turn building trust and relationships among

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all members of the partnership.

The process of engaging in rapid response studies has also informed how to improve the efficiency of working groups taking on big ideas with a longer timeframe. For example, identifying more specific problems of practice and creating urgency for research milestones that map onto key decision-making timelines in the district are two learnings that were reinforced by the rapid response study process.

OPEN QUESTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The PEER team is currently pondering two main questions:

The first relates to sustainability. The rapid response studies have generated significant goodwill toward PEER – building awareness and a sense of value for the partnership among a wide swath of district stakeholders. However, rapid response studies are essentially evaluation studies, which for many RPPs are a key source of income. While PEER has chosen to provide these for free to the district, the studies have costs: Faculty time (which is currently donated), as well as graduate student support and participant incentives (which are paid in real dollars). Currently, these costs are covered by seed funds from the university. How can PEER ensure the sustainability of this work once the initial funding runs out? One possible avenue the partnership is exploring is for the district to create a line item in its operating budget for rapid response studies.

The second question relates to measuring impact. The PEER team is interested in tracking ongoing learning and uptake of research findings from rapid response studies, as well as the ways in which rapid response studies lead to new lines of inquiry. How can PEER systematically track the impact of this strand of work?

PEER is excited to continue pursuing these questions and building out the rapid response studies strand of work to help the district address pressing problems and questions quickly.

This article was written by members of the [Nashville Partnership for Educational Equity Research \(PEER\)](#) team: Abbey Loehr is Co-Director of PEER and Manager of Research-Practice Partnerships at [Metro Nashville Public Schools](#); Marcy Singer-Gabella is Co-Director of PEER and professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at [Vanderbilt University](#); and Jessica Holter is PEER's Director of Communications.

DOES MONEY MATTER FOR THE PRODUCTION OF RELEVANT RESEARCH? INCENTIVIZING RESEARCHERS TO WORK ON RESEARCH RELEVANT TO PRACTICE, POLICY, AND COMMUNITIES

By Laura Wentworth | California Education Partners + Stanford-SFUSD Partnership, Erin O'Hara | Erin O'Hara Consulting, and Beth Vaade | Madison Metropolitan School District + Madison Education Partnership



One of the most commonly cited influences leading to the research-practice divide in education is academics' lack of motivation or incentive to research topics that are relevant to the educational challenges faced in practice, policy, and communities. Universities award tenure to academics based on multiple factors, typically prioritizing the number of publications in peer-reviewed academic journals. While educational research is an applied discipline – the topics explored by educational researchers can be quite applicable to practice– challenges in education are complex and require multi-level systems thinking that goes beyond the solutions suggested by a single study. Consequently, educational research published in journals focuses on findings that may or may not be relevant to the dynamic challenges faced by education professionals and community

members, and if relevant, may only address one challenge in a multi-pronged quandary. Gamoran (2023) refers to these realities as the tensions between the aims of engaged scholarship and the reward structure of a research university.

The research-practice partnership (RPP) approach to research is an example of a structure meant to facilitate the connectivity between research and practice (Coburn and Penuel, 2016) and may thus be a promising way to motivate academics to engage in relevant, timely research that addresses the more complex educational problems. RPPs help researchers and practitioners work at the boundaries of their roles and change routines and practices used for producing and using research (Penuel et al., 2015). However, most

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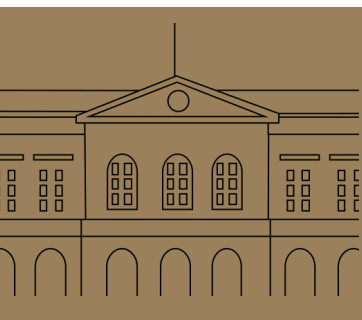
academics engaged in RPP work still face the above-mentioned tensions between the RPP aims of engaged work done in partnership and the typical reward structures of universities that are not necessarily supportive of collaborative work. To address this, university grant-making programs designed to incentivize faculty to work in RPPs are emerging as a structure to encourage university researchers to work on research that is relevant to practice, policy, and communities and works towards the more multi-pronged solutions needed in the field of education.



Generally, these financial incentives are awarded through grant-making programs but can also be provided through access to resources like infrastructure for accessing school district or state data (e.g., Kim et al. 2021) or other forms of social infrastructure like routines and meeting structures (e.g., Penuel, 2019). The financial incentives from grant-making come through payment of course releases, summer salary, funding of faculty research teams like doctoral students and lab staff, or funding supporting the practice or community partner to engage in the partnership. Little research currently exists about such incentive structures and the type of supports needed to implement them, as well as the kind of work and other impacts resulting from such efforts.



In this article, we document the use of financial incentives to support university faculty work in RPPs with practitioners and policymakers by examining the grant-making programs of three universities that have been administered starting in 2014, 2016, and 2017 (one of the programs is still being administered today). For the purposes of our article, we limited our analysis to when the grants were administered during the 2014-2021 school years. The universities are the [Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison](#), [Vanderbilt University](#), and [Stanford University Graduate School of Education](#), and the three RPPs supported by these grant-making programs are the [Madison Education Partnership](#), [Tennessee Education Research Alliance](#), and [Stanford-SFUSD Partnership](#). We are three RPP directors (two current and one former), one from each of the RPPs, and were directly involved in supporting the implementation of the respective grant-making program.



UNIVERSITY GRANT-MAKING PROGRAMS SUPPORTING RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS

Here, we describe each of the three grant-making programs and highlight the main effects we have seen these programs have, both the positive effects and the stumbling blocks.

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(I) UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON + MADISON EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

Overview

University of Wisconsin-Madison's Grant-Making Program to Support Madison Education Partnership

The [Madison Education Partnership](#) (MEP) was established in 2016 as a partnership between [Wisconsin Center for Education Research](#) (WCER) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the [Madison Metropolitan School District](#) (MMSD). WCER and MMSD created MEP to collaboratively engage in “high-quality, problem-based” research that influences policy, practices, and the understanding of educational processes more generally. In addition to expedited approval processes, easier access to district administrative data, and support for relationship development with district leaders, the university also provided financial incentives for university researchers to engage in MEP through a grant-making program. The grants provided university faculty, research faculty, and graduate students (supported by a Principal Investigator) an opportunity to submit proposals for funding of up to \$50,000 for one year. Typically, two proposals per year were selected (with \$100,000 in total available each year) through a thorough scoring and discussion process.

Submitted projects needed to align with these four criteria:

- Focus on a MEP problem of practice.
- Produce findings within one year of the award.
- Present research findings twice to school district leaders.
- Create two reports about the findings (one interim and one final).

MEP released a request for proposals and interested researchers submitted a short application that included a cover page, a project description (maximum three pages), project budget, project timeline, and a description of project personnel (including biographical sketches and CVs). The proposal information also included a scoring rubric (see [here](#) for the rubric). Once submitted, the MEP co-directors and the Steering Committee reviewed proposals and made recommendations for funding to the school district superintendent and the WCER director for final approval. MEP has offered the grant competition four times since Fall 2016, with the last competition in 2020-21. By 2024, MEP no longer offered sponsored research grants.

Effects of UW-Madison's Grant-Making Program

Four grant cycles have taught MEP about the effects that financial incentives do and do not have

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on researchers. The grant-making program:

- **Achieved many of its intended goals of producing faculty-led relevant research.** By 2019, MEP funded nine studies, all aligned to the partnership's problems of practice (four-year-old kindergarten and student attendance). Of the funded cohorts, all projects have conducted new research and submitted multiple reports to MEP and MMSD. Several projects have also led to academic publications and further, larger grant funding from external organizations.
- **Sparked more robust methodological approaches to and new faculty perspectives on the problem of practice and MEP.** All nine studies collected new data and used qualitative methods as at least one component of their work.
- **Attracted new faculty to MEP:** The nine studies also came from faculty in a diverse set of departments, schools, and colleges across the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as well as researchers who were new to MMSD and education.

Despite these successes, there have been learnings for MEP about the limitations of using financial incentives to spark researcher interest in partnership work:

- **MEP saw limited interest from faculty in applying for and participating in the grant program for a number of reasons.** The faculty lacked knowledge of MEP and/or the grants, had little interest in the problem of practice named by the district, or were concerned that the funding amount and/or timeline were infeasible.
- **MEP directors had to coordinate multiple research projects across the same problem of practice.** It was challenging for the school district personnel to coordinate the operations of multiple research projects. School district staff, at times, struggled to see how the projects related to each other and to MEP. Additionally, it was challenging for researchers to understand the contours of each other's research projects, which led to researchers making repetitive requests to the school district.
- **University researchers needed more support than the MEP directors had expected to write reports on findings that practitioners found accessible.** The university researchers had trouble writing interim and final reports of their findings in language friendly to their practice partners.

(II) VANDERBILT PEABODY COLLEGE + TENNESSEE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE

Overview

Vanderbilt Peabody College's Grant-Making Program to support the Tennessee Education Research Alliance

The [Tennessee Education Research Alliance](#) (TERA) is a research-policy-practice partnership

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between Vanderbilt University's Peabody College (Peabody) and the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). Formally launched in 2016, TERA builds on a long history in Tennessee of supporting high-quality research that directly impacts state policy. Starting in 2017, Peabody offered faculty the opportunity to apply for research start-up grants twice a year of up to \$15,000. After initial interest from Peabody faculty in data housed within TERA, TERA launched a new larger grant opportunity in 2020. The TERA Research Partnership Fund allowed for larger grants (up to \$40,000) for faculty to partner with TERA and TDOE aiming to attract faculty with diverse expertise and disciplines to partnership work.

TERA formed a selection committee that included the then TERA Executive Director and Faculty Director and Peabody's Associate Dean for Research. Because of the gubernatorial transition and subsequent change in leadership at the TDOE, the initial selection committee did not include TDOE leaders.

After initial iterations, the TERA Research Partnership Fund settled on four key criteria for funding:

- Alignment and relevance: Is the project aligned with TERA and TDOE research priorities? Does the proposal demonstrate the potential and plan for the results to be of use to policymakers and/or practitioners seeking to enhance the quality and/or equity of education in Tennessee? Does the proposal clearly address a problem of policy or practice?
- Methodological rigor: Does the proposal clearly outline an empirical strategy and does that strategy serve to address the research questions? Will the empirical strategy produce valid, replicable results?
- Personnel: Does the Principal Investigator have relevant substantive and methodological expertise and experience to do this research? Has the Principal Investigator secured a co-Principal Investigator from TDOE to help plan, operationalize, and use the research?
- Feasibility: Does the proposal detail adequate time and personnel to carry out a high-quality research program?

Applying faculty were asked to submit a 2-3 page brief summarizing their project. Through three cycles of grant applications, eight total grants were submitted and six awards were granted. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for examples of the scoring rubric used in the grant-making competition.) In 2024, the TERA Research Partnership Fund program is currently on hold.

Effects of Vanderbilt Peabody College's Grant-Making Program

Peabody College launched their initial grant competition in Fall 2017, and ran the grant competition in Spring 2018 and Fall 2018, before ultimately launching a TERA specific program in 2020. The programs had the intended effects of getting more researchers involved in TERA's partnership work, but with some stumbling blocks:

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- **In the first round, the proposals were not co-developed with TDOE; therefore, department staff at the time were initially hesitant to approve the research outlined in the winning proposal.** Subsequent conversations led to slight adaptations to the research design to address some concerns by the state and university officials and to an understanding between the faculty member and staff at the Department of Education about the potential policy impact of the research.
- **In the second round, TERA changed the proposal structure to align with TDOE's topics of interest, but they ultimately did not receive any proposals.** When TERA's leadership team worked with the Peabody Research Office to revise the request for proposals to include specific topics of interest to TDOE, the small grants focused on TERA did not receive any proposals.
- **With the launch of the TERA specific competition, the TERA Research Partnership Fund, the submitted proposals differed from previous proposals in that the research had been developed in partnership between TDOE and the faculty members applying.** Additionally, TERA and TDOE added TDOE's (then) Chief Research and Strategy Officer to the review committee at Peabody. The winning proposals had significant input both at Peabody and at TDOE.

The TERA and Peabody leaders running the grant competitions realized a couple of important lessons learned:

- **The TERA team needed to help both partners understand the incentives for the other partner:** Specifically, the team needed to help articulate what motivates the Peabody faculty to participate in partnership research, what motivates TDOE to participate in and approve partnership research, and how these motivations could be aligned.
- **Vanderbilt researchers' participation in TERA increased when they received the support of a broker to help develop research questions and connect to the right staff at the partner organization.** (A broker is someone who facilitates the interactions and connections between and across members of the research and practice/policy side of the partnership. See [here](#) for more information about RPP brokering.)

(III) STANFORD UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION + STANFORD-SFUSD PARTNERSHIP

Overview

Stanford University Graduate School of Education's Grant-Making Program to Support the Stanford-SFUSD Partnership

Since it was established in 2009, the [Stanford-SFUSD Partnership](#) aims to cultivate joint projects,

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which result in [Stanford University Graduate School of Education](#) (GSE) researchers conducting useful, generalizable research and [San Francisco Unified School District](#) (SFUSD) administrators using the research in key decisions, in hopes of advancing better outcomes for students. The partnership is run by a Partnership Director, employed by a third party, [California Education Partners](#). Starting in 2014, Stanford GSE in partnership with SFUSD created a grant-making program for projects in SFUSD aimed at incentivizing professors to work on projects aligned with SFUSD's priorities and useful to SFUSD administrators. After the request for proposals (RFP) was announced, interested faculty had one-on-one meetings with the Partnership Director to find a practice partner and learn more about the RFP. Stanford faculty were encouraged to write the proposal in collaboration with an SFUSD leader. A joint selection committee composed of two SFUSD representatives and two Stanford representatives selected projects. The members of the committee included SFUSD's Deputy Superintendent of Instruction and Assistant Superintendent of Research, Planning, and Assessment, and two Stanford faculty representatives selected by the Stanford GSE Dean. There were three criteria the selection committee used to award incentive funds:

- The project is aligned with the school district priorities.
- The project meets Stanford GSE's standard for generalizability – likely to produce findings that will be relevant and useful to other school districts.
- The project has a district leader acting as the owner/sponsor of the research who helps plan, operationalize, and use the research.

As seen [here](#), the committee used a rubric to guide selection of the projects based on these criteria.

After awarding the first set of Incentive Fund grants in 2014, the Stanford GSE gave out about 4-6 grants a year which were valued on average around \$25,000-\$100,000 each, with a few projects receiving over \$100,000. By 2024, the grant-making program still existed, although the budget and grants were smaller at \$50K each, with about two to three grants awarded each year.

Effects of Stanford GSE's Grant-Making Program

The grant-making program has had a number of impacts on both the RPP and faculty members' research. Here we share a few reflections from our efforts in supporting this program so far:

- **More faculty worked in partnership with SFUSD than did prior to the incentive fund.** Between 2014-2019, of the 23 faculty who received incentive fund awards, over half had not worked with SFUSD before.
- **The selection committee wanted more evidence of district support and "impact" of projects pursuing a second year of funding.** For example, the committee added a letter of

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recommendation as one of the requirements to help understand the role of the district leader acting as the owner or sponsor of the research.

- **The incentive fund required the school district to improve how they articulated their research priorities.** It was challenging for SFUSD to explain the ideas or questions they wanted to research that could coincide with the one-year timeline of the grants.
- **The need for research aligned with district priorities moved under a faster timeline than the average development of research.** This challenge emphasized the importance of the match between the researchers' interests and the practitioners' interests for making a good project.



SIMILARITIES, DIFFERENCES, IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY GRANT-MAKING PROGRAMS FOR RPPs

When comparing across the three university grant-making programs, we see several similarities and a number of notable differences. Similarities include:

- **The grant-making programs all shared a common goal – to increase the number of faculty working in the RPPs on research seen as aligned and useful to the respective practice partner.**
- **Grants were awarded on an annual cycle** with the expectation that findings were also shared over the course of one year.
- **All three of the programs had the requirement that the research had the potential to make an impact on policy and practice.** This required the district and state partners to name their priorities for research.
- **In all three RPPs, the RPP director needed to provide social infrastructure (scaffolded meeting routines and orchestrated events) for the researchers and practitioners to interact.**
- **The grant-making programs all required researchers to widen their portfolio of research.** To explore the topic of interest to the district or state leaders, some researchers

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tried a new method or explored another discipline, thereby working at the boundary of their expertise. For example, many faculty who traditionally look for causal warrants in their research designs pursued descriptive research.

Some differences we noted across in the grant-making programs were:

- **The amount of money awarded was different.** UW Madison’s grant-making program awarded about \$100,000 in total each year (typically, two proposals for funding of up to \$50,000 were selected), the Peabody program offered research start-up grants twice a year of up to \$15,000 and the subsequent TERA program offered up to \$40,000 for around two to three projects a year, and Stanford GSE’s program awarded four to six grants a year, ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000 each.
- **The point at which the programs were launched with respect to the RPP’s journey was different.** For example, the Stanford GSE launched its grant-making program after working in partnership with SFUSD for four years, whereas UW Madison and Vanderbilt launched their grant-making programs at the beginning of their RPPs. For the latter two universities, the grant-making program aimed to jumpstart faculty engagement with the RPPs, whereas for Stanford GSE, the RPP was already established, and the grants were meant to accelerate faculty engagement.
- **Each university used a different approach to sharing criteria and awarding funding.** Vanderbilt used a university-based committee to award funding, whereas UW Madison and Stanford used committees mixed with university faculty and district leaders. The TERA program did add a TDOE representative to the review committee at Peabody. The universities used different criteria for awarding funding, which are contrasted in Table 1 below. Two of the three universities used a rubric to guide decision-making about which projects to award grants.

Table 1: Elements of Research Practice (Policy) Partnerships and Incentive Fund Programs

	Madison Education Partnership	Tennessee Education Research Alliance	Stanford-San Francisco Partnership
Year Established	2016	2016	2009
Year Incentive Fund Program Established	2016	2017	2014

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	MEP	TERA	Stanford-SFUSD
Size of Grants	up to \$50,000	up to \$40,000	\$25,000-\$100,000+
Number of Grants Awarded in First Year of Grantmaking Program	3 projects at \$50,000 for one year	3 projects at \$40,000 for one year	6 projects ranging in amount from \$30,000 to over \$100,000 for one year
Timeline for research	Annual	Annual	Annual
Criteria for Grant Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address a problem of practice selected by the partnership • Produce findings within one year of the award • Present research findings twice to district leaders • Create two reports about the findings (interim and final) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add to existing TERA and TDOE knowledge base • Add to faculty's existing research program • Clear research questions and data to be analyzed • Clear research plan aligned to TERA and TN Dept of Ed priorities • Potential to lead to other funding • Advance the policy and practice of TN Dept of Ed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project is aligned to the school district priorities • The project meets Stanford GSE's standard for generalizability – likely to produce findings that will be relevant and useful to other school districts • The project has a district leader that helps plan, operationalize, and use the research

IMPLICATIONS

This cross-case analysis surfaced a handful of potential implications that may be useful for other universities that want to launch grant-making programs in support of enhancing academic

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researchers' ability to participate in local RPP efforts. In order to be successful, university grant-making programs might require the following:

- **Practice-side capacity to articulate priorities for research topics and where research can support their work.** If universities want their faculty to produce ideas for research that are useful to their district and state partners, then the practice partners will need to have the capacity to articulate their goals and describe the types of research topics, questions, and timelines that could be useful.
- **Research-side capacity to develop proposals and engage in RPP work.** In our three cases, the directors provided necessary capacity building for the RPP that supported the grant-making program. The RPP directors matched faculty with district and state leaders who had similar interests in research. They also supported faculty when developing their proposals by providing feedback and ideas for improving the proposal. Capacity-building efforts need to be accounted for in grant-making programs, either by providing additional time for these added support mechanisms or allocating additional funding to directors to help them engage in this work.
- **Structures and routines for developing proposals and awarding grants (this takes time and resources).** All three universities relied on RPP directors to run their grant-making programs. The directors developed the request for proposals in collaboration with other university and practice leaders and acted as the broker to operationalize the grant-making programs (see Wentworth et al., 2023 for a detailed description of RPP brokering).

CONCLUSION

As we conclude our analysis of three university grant-making programs designed to incentivize university researcher participation in RPP work, we return to this article's original question asked in the title: Does money matter for the production of relevant research?

For RPPs involving universities, there is often a larger goal around structural changes needed to address misaligned incentives, such as different university promotion and tenure guidelines that actually do prioritize research that is relevant to and co-produced with practice, policy, and community partners. As we have heard many times over, this will likely take time. In the meantime, the three cases outlined here, which we experienced first-hand, seem to suggest that money does help and matter, with a couple of caveats and conditions. For one, money alone only gets you so far in changing systems in universities – it's a necessary, though not sufficient solution. For example, we had faculty who would engage because of the money, but generally had limited interest in engaging in deeper partnership research. Many faculty needed a guide –or what we call a broker– to be able to benefit from the larger social infrastructure of a partnership and navigate relationship building with

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their new practice partners. The district and state leaders also benefited from engaging with the broker to learn about and engage in important RPP practices, such as naming researchable questions. Both the development and execution of the research benefit from tight alignment between researcher and practitioner. In short, in view of our own experiences with these grant-making programs, we can confidently say money does matter for promoting relevant research in the field of education – but it is only one part of the solution.

We also wondered: Is there an ideal amount of money for these grants to achieve the goal of getting more faculty engaging in the RPPs? Generally, we think it may be less about the amount of money, and more about the capacity, infrastructures, and supports that may prohibit or further support faculty from engaging in partnership work. Things like data infrastructure (simple access to administrative data), technical infrastructure (streamlined agreements), and social infrastructure (processes, routines, or events that support relationship development and maintenance) all play an important role in fostering faculty participation in an RPP. The grant funding from universities in our three cases mainly served the purpose of funding faculty and researcher time and did not account for the larger supporting infrastructure enabling faculty to work in the RPP. Taking this into account could make such programs even more useful.

As RPPs continue to make headway as a more useful approach to the production and use of relevant research, we hope to see the support for this kind of work grow as well so that the research-practice divide becomes, in turn, smaller and *less* dividing.

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WHEN RPPs IN CALIFORNIA WORK TOGETHER: LAUNCHING A REGIONAL SUBNETWORK

By Kim Wright | NNERPP

As a professional learning community for research-practice partnerships (RPPs), working and learning together across partnerships is part of NNERPP's DNA. Our [subnetworks](#) offer smaller, specialized learning communities for NNERPP members and friends who come together to discuss, learn, and build knowledge around important RPP topics or roles. The California RPP Subnetwork is the first of NNERPP's planned regional subnetworks, a new strand of subnetworks aimed at strengthening relationships across RPPs situated in the same state or region in order to advance policy and systems reform by

raising awareness of critical education research and increasing engagement with state or regional policymakers. This January, our NNERPP team was excited to co-host the first in-person convening of the California RPP Subnetwork together with [California Education Partners](#) on the Stanford University campus. Here, we share a few highlights from the gathering and describe how state- or regional-level subnetworks of RPPs might design processes through which research can be shared and leveraged synergistically to inform policy and practice beyond the scope of any individual RPP.

WHEN RPPs IN CALIFORNIA WORK TOGETHER: LAUNCHING A REGIONAL SUBNETWORK, CONTINUED

A SUBNETWORK FOR RPPs IN CALIFORNIA: CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

The idea for a state-wide or regional subnetwork within NNERPP first came up several years ago as an approach to leveraging the collective impact on regional/state policy of RPPs working in the same region. In particular, we noticed enduring challenges in meeting one of NNERPP's original stated objectives, "advance policy systems reform." Through conversations with our members and friends, we realized that the key to unlocking this aim was to focus on state boundaries as important lines of demarcation given state influence over educational policy and funding. Bringing together RPPs situated in the same state (or if not possible, the same region) to collaborate and amplify their efforts seemed like a natural next step with our subnetwork efforts; thus, the state/regional subnetwork idea was born.

California was a promising starting point for launching the regional subnetwork approach given the large presence of NNERPP members RPPs in the state (13 and counting!). At NNERPP, we live by the mantra that what we can accomplish together is so much greater than what we can accomplish alone. In that spirit, our California-based NNERPP members have been meeting virtually since spring 2023 with the goals of 1) synthesizing, producing, and using research aimed at impacting local and state practices and policies; 2) engaging with California school districts, county, state, and research agencies to increase access to and engagement in RPP collaboration; and 3) growing the number of California district and state leaders who use research evidence to inform decisions about equity-centered

changes in policy and practice. Following two online meetings in the spring and fall of 2023, the goals of the in-person gathering were to (1) build relationships across California RPP leaders, and (2) design and develop processes for synthesizing, writing, communicating, and engaging about RPP research.

TAKEAWAYS FROM OUR CALIFORNIA MEETING

Creating processes for synthesizing research across RPPs. Approximately 30 RPPers representing more than 10 California-based RPPs spent the morning iterating on a process for synthesizing research across RPPs. This important routine, i.e., the intentional weaving together of ideas and findings across the RPPs, was a priority goal for our first in-person meeting for two main reasons. First, collaboration and co-design are viewed as fundamental to any of NNERPP's efforts to support its members in *connecting* and creating the foundation for *community*. Although we had met virtually as a group a handful of times before coming together in person, we made the decision to facilitate a co-design opportunity for our first in-person meeting as working face to face in a mini design sprint approach created multiple touch points for people in the room to engage with each other. Second, we also made the decision to introduce this activity at a later meeting given the need to first sensemake with folks around the purpose, goals, and structure of the California RPP Subnetwork. Once those initial conversations took place, it was a good time to start thinking more about the *processes* and *routines* that might define our work together.

WHEN RPPS IN CALIFORNIA WORK TOGETHER: LAUNCHING A REGIONAL SUBNETWORK, CONTINUED

Our starting point was a draft of a research synthesis process based on ideas from a previous virtual meeting. In base teams of three to four, participants ideated on changes and improvements they would make to this process. After sharing their thoughts with another group, the base design groups had opportunities to use the feedback and ideas from other groups to enhance their suggested revisions to the synthesis process. As the morning unfolded, teams' thinking evolved in several directions, including teams designing unique prototypes for the synthesis process, teams merging similar prototypes to form "mega" teams, and teams focusing their design work on identifying checkpoints (i.e., important themes and questions to address) for any research synthesis process. The afternoon session provided opportunities for teams to reflect on prototypes across teams with a gallery walk.

Planning for policy impact. In addition to exploring and further refining prototypes, participants spent the afternoon thinking about how the subnetwork might connect its synthesis work to the efforts of a longstanding research center in the California education policy and practice space, [Policy Analysis for California Education](#) (PACE). PACE is led by faculty directors at five California universities (Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley) and focuses its work on using research to bridge policy and practice. Alix Gallagher, PACE's Director of Strategic Partnerships, provided the design teams with an overview of PACE's

work at the state level to positively influence equitable education practice by connecting research to policy. After hearing from Alix, designers revisited their prototypes and lists of checkpoints to specify their thoughts on the potential role of policy-level agencies and groups in connecting the work of the California RPPs to state-level policy decisions.

WHAT'S NEXT: LOOKING FORWARD

The California Education Partners and NNERPP teams are currently working to create a memo that summarizes the teams' ideas around the research synthesis process for the group's next meeting at the end of April. Next steps for the California RPP members will be to formalize the research synthesis process and decide which topic they want to explore using the synthesis process they design. We are excited to see the work of this subnetwork continue to take shape and grow, and look forward to sharing future takeaways for how several RPPs in the same region might work together for collective impact!

Special note: If you are a California-based RPP that would like more information about this subnetwork and/or NNERPP, please let us know [here](#)! The only criteria for joining this subnetwork is you are an RPP or an organization engaging in RPPs in California and you are a member of NNERPP.

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RESEARCH HEADLINES FROM NNERPP MEMBERS

CHARTER SCHOOLS

EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW ORLEANS

examines what happened when New Orleans' all-charter system was returned to a locally elected school board

COVID-19

GEORGIA POLICY LABS

examines the pandemic's impact on student achievement growth during SY 2022-23

CTE

URBAN EDUCATION INSTITUTE AT UTSA

examines the relationship between high school career and technical education and college enrollment

ENGLISH LEARNERS

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

examines

- student enrollment at a middle school program serving newcomer students in Houston ISD
- student enrollment at a high school program serving newcomer students in Houston ISD
- high school choices and contexts of newcomer students in Houston ISD
- high school academic performance, course-taking patterns, and school engagement of students that attended a middle school program serving newcomer students
- academic performance, course-taking, school engagement, and educational attainment of high school-aged newcomer students
- patterns and factors shaping English language acquisition among middle school newcomer students in Houston ISD

STANFORD-SEQUOIA K-12 RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

examines English Learner reclassification

EQUITY

DIGITAL PROMISE

shares insights from co-leading the research and design of innovative solutions to education challenges with students, parents, teachers, and district leaders

IMMIGRANTS

EDUCATION NORTHWEST

examines promising practices to support young immigrants' education and career pathways

LITERACY AND READING

THE VILLAGE@FCRR

examines

- the challenges and opportunities school leaders face when supporting the implementation of evidence-based reading and literacy practices in classrooms
- student reading achievement in the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness curriculum

MULTILINGUALISM

MULTILINGUAL LEARNING RESEARCH CENTER (MLRC) SCHOOL NETWORK

examines what international school teachers believe about multilingualism

POSTSECONDARY

TENNESSEE EDUCATION RESEARCH ALLIANCE

examines the implementation and impact of tnAchieves coaching in Tennessee community colleges

SCHOOL CHOICE

STANFORD-SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP

describes the design of a new student assignment system for greater diversity

SCHOOL TURNAROUND

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE

examines the infrastructure for instructional improvement in Michigan turnaround schools

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

EDUCATION POLICY INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE

examines student attendance and well-being in Michigan turnaround schools

STEM & CS

CHICAGO ALLIANCE FOR EQUITY IN COMPUTER SCIENCE

examines how computer science instructional coaches and teachers navigated remote professional development during the pandemic



RESEARCH HEADLINES FROM **NNERPP MEMBERS**, CONTINUED

HOUSTON EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

examines

- who chooses the high school stem endorsement in HISD high schools
- stem deserts in HISD
- the role of guidance counselors in narrowing the gender gap in STEM endorsements in HISD
- STEM endorsement completion and the pathway to college in HISD

INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

shares a framework for equitable lesson development in elementary science



STUDENT MOBILITY

SAINT LOUIS RESEARCH-PRACTICE COLLABORATIVE

examines

- which students are more or less likely to switch schools
- where students are going, when they leave, and outcomes as a result of transferring



TEACHERS

GEORGIA POLICY LABS

examines access to effective teachers

REL NORTHWEST

examines characteristics of teacher apprenticeship programs and outcomes of teacher residency programs



END NOTES

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