Title: Tangible Improvements in Schools through Research-Practice Partnership in Chicago

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Section: Alliance for progress, the utility and potential replication of research alliances and consortia

Symposium justification

The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) has been working in partnership with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) for two decades, and has become a model for emerging partnerships in cities across the country. This symposium will highlight lessons learned about the practices that led to tangible improvements in urban schools through sustained partnerships with practitioners and policymakers.

The first paper, “The Five Essentials: Helping Schools Organize for Improvement,” shows the development of CCSR surveys from theory to validation to tool that provides a way for schools to diagnose their organizational strength and develop plans for improvement. This line of research began in the time of decentralization, when local school councils were asking for a guide to school improvement efforts. It has grown into a feedback system for individual schools, and a way for the district to track key organizational elements in schools, including instruction, school climate, leadership, and teachers’ professional capacity. Other school systems across the country are now starting to use this survey system, while the CPS is increasingly focusing on the five essentials as indicators of school quality and improvement planning.

The second paper, “The On-Track Indicator as a Focus for Student Support in High Schools,” discusses the evolution of research around high school graduation in Chicago, and the ways in which the district developed systems to improve high school graduation rates by focusing school attention on the ninth grade on-track indicator. Sustained focus on the issue over time, across different researchers and groups of practitioners, building off of each other’s work, has led to innovative practices around data use through real-time student tracking reports and school-by-school strategy analysis. The use of these reports has been accompanied by large improvements in ninth grade performance in Chicago high schools.

The third paper, “Working at the Nexus of Research and Practice: Building the Capacity of Neighborhood High Schools,” describes partnership formed between the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) to address the aspirations-attainment gap and improve students’ chances for success in college. This paper describes the evolution of a new model for building capacity in high schools to enact whole school change. The paper highlights the ways in which working at this nexus between research and practice contributed to striking improvements in postsecondary outcomes for students, while also underscoring some key lessons learned about the challenges such work entails.

These three papers demonstrate the process of developing and using research findings in ways that lead to substantial improvements in schools. Central to the success of these efforts were the
sustained and coherent focus on problems over time across different researchers and school district practitioners, ongoing engagement of researchers and practitioners around the work, the development and testing of theory around difficult problems, and the development of new ways of measuring key constructs. James Kemple, Executive Director of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools will discuss implications for the work of the partnership in New York.

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The Five Essentials: Helping Schools Organize for Improvement  
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The On-Track Indicator as a Focus for Student Support in High School  
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Working at the Nexus of Research and Practice: Building the Capacity of Neighborhood High Schools  
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