How School and District Leaders Access, Perceive, and Use Research

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Context for Research: The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; Public Law 114-95) calls on leaders to adopt and implement “evidence-based” programs that demonstrate potential to improve student outcomes. This Act follows nearly two decades of federal policymaking focused on increasing leaders’ opportunities to access and use high-quality research evidence (Haskins & Margolis, 2015; Haskins, Paxson, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). At present, however, there is limited knowledge about how often and where local education leaders access research and the purposes for which they use it. A review of studies of school and district leaders’ research use indicates that research is difficult for leaders to access, rarely used, and only sometimes consulted to make decisions about program adoption (Coburn, Honig, & Stein, 2009). However, we do not know whether and how the findings described above generalize to the larger population of school and district leaders in the United States. Further, few studies have employed measures that allow us to characterize variation in individuals’ levels of research use. To understand the potential for ESSA and similar policies to influence research use, this study uses a nationally representative sample to establish a baseline understanding of education leaders’ research use, and includes measures designed to capture the range of leaders’ approaches to this topic.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine how school and district leaders access, perceive, and use research. We adopted Weiss and Buculavas’ (1980) typology of instrumental, conceptual, symbolic, and imposed use to characterize the frequency and patterns of leaders’ research use. We also assessed where leaders accessed research, their perceptions of the value, credibility, and relevance of research, and individual and organizational correlates of research use.

Setting: We surveyed leaders from schools and central offices of school districts with 10,000 or more students in the United States.

Participants: The target population of education leaders consisted of principals and central office leaders from mid- and large-size U.S. urban districts who were likely to be involved in K–8 instructional decision making. We chose K–8 because there is
more research available on effective programs and interventions at these grade levels and because more variety exists in the curricular materials, assessments, and other instructional programs districts may adopt. We focused on principals and central office leaders because they make the majority of decisions regarding what programs and interventions to adopt in schools. A total of 733 school and district leaders participated in the study. Respondents came from 485 school districts across 423 cities and 45 states.

**Research Design:** This survey study used a representative sample of school districts across the United States with enrollments of 10,000 students or more.

**Instrument Development.** We began by bringing together project staff, scholars, and education leaders with expertise in the area of research use. We refined our survey constructs and developed items associated with each construct, then tested these items in two sets of cognitive interviews with a total of 40 school and district leaders. We also solicited expert feedback from two sets of advisors through a formal survey and discussion. We then piloted a revised instrument with a convenience sample of 265 education leaders from our target population. We used this pilot test to generate initial scale reliabilities and revised the instrument again.

We identified a set of over 41,000 school and district leaders from a sampling frame purchased from an educational market research firm. The vast majority of individuals in the sampling frame (80%) were school principals. We reduced the target population to 14,276 by taking a random sample of 10 principals for any school district with more than 10 principals. We then created 14 strata by crossing role with districts that were above and below the median school district student enrollment of 17,860.

We defined a total of 8 variables as a function of related item sets on the survey. Each of these variables was created as the mean of anywhere from four to eight discrete items with scores ranging from one to four or one to five within a given set. Reliability was estimated using Cronbach’s alpha (Cronbach, 1951) for data from the main study (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Use</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instrumental Use</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Use</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Use</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imposed Use</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Correlates of Use</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisition Effort</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Occasions to Discuss Research</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Culture of Research Use 0.87
Attitudes: Relevance of Research 0.67
Attitudes: Value of Research 0.82
Attitudes: Credibility of Research 0.74

Data Collection and Analysis:
Anticipating a 60% response rate, we established two stratified random samples: a primary field test sample and a reservoir field test sample, each containing 168 potential respondents by role or 84 for each role by size stratum. Additional cases were pulled from the reservoir sample either because of lower than anticipated response rates or because we were not able to obtain up-to-date contact information for some members of the primary target sample. We contacted districts by phone to confirm our roster and to acquire email addresses for respondents or for their replacements. The overall response rate was 51.5%. We used sampling weights to take into account that proportions of survey responders in our role by size strata did not match the population proportions in our sampling frame.

Results: In contrast to past studies suggesting instrumental use was relatively rare, leaders reported using research often for instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic purposes. They reported using research instrumentally in a range of leadership activities, not just selecting programs, such as designing professional development for teachers and leaders. We found that attitudes toward research were generally positive. Leaders accessed research primarily through their professional networks more than through web sites like the What Works Clearinghouse. Leaders in research, special education, and federal programs departments and those pursuing or holding an advanced degree were more likely to use research, and leaders who reported a strong organizational culture of evidence use reported higher levels of research use.

Conclusions. These findings suggest that policy efforts to promote evidence use among leaders will be welcomed but that policymakers need to take into account the use of research for a variety of purposes in designing supports for evidence use. The prevalence of conceptual use in particular merits stronger attention in policies in order to support leaders in interpreting and using research.