REL Research Alliances: Convening Diverse Stakeholders to Improve Education through Collective Inquiry and Collective Action

Julie Petrokubi, David Stevens and Christopher Mazzeo
Education Northwest

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are an increasingly popular strategy for encouraging evidence use in education. RPPs bring researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders together in long-term, cooperative relationships to examine and address educational problems (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Coburn & Penuel, 2016). With recent investments from foundations, universities, and federal agencies (Arce-Trigatti, 2016; Wentworth et al., 2016), RPPs are growing in number and frequency.

One recent high-profile example comes out of the federal Regional Educational Laboratory program. Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) are funded by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and charged with building the capacity of states and districts to use evidence to improve policy and practice. RELs build capacity by conducting research and evaluation studies, assisting regional stakeholder in using their data systems, and supporting practitioner use of evidence when making decisions. Since 2012 RELs have provided their services primarily through research alliances—collaborative groups of regional stakeholders working together on a shared educational problem or concern. To date, more than seventy research alliances are operated through the REL system.

While research alliances have become the primary strategy for how RELs help regional stakeholders incorporate evidence into their improvement efforts, there are few written accounts of what occurs within alliances. Early published reports focused on key lessons for managing the collaborative process of research alliances, adding to a growing body of researcher-generated tips for partnering with practitioners (Barton, Nelsestuen, & Mazzeo, 2014; Kochanek, Scholz, & Garcia, 2015). Absent from these discussions are extended descriptions of how REL research alliances are structured, the issues they address, or the specific activities they pursue. In addition, practitioner perspectives are not incorporated into these accounts, leaving the field with little sense of how they perceive the contributions of REL research alliances to evidence use in school improvement efforts.

Given the REL program’s national role in promoting evidence use in educational improvement, it is important to document and understand how REL research alliances actually work in practice. In what ways are REL research alliances organized and structured? What activities take place within them? What roles do REL staff and regional stakeholders perform in carrying out alliance work? And what are the initial
outcomes of this work? This report explores these questions drawing on data gathered from a developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010) of alliances in REL Northwest. The evaluation activities were designed to facilitate organizational learning and provide multiple stakeholder perspectives (e.g., REL Northwest staff, alliance steering committee members, and project partners) on the processes, practices, and contributions of REL Northwest research alliances.

From 2014-2015, the evaluation team explored the questions above through in-depth cases studies of three REL Northwest research alliances—the Alaska State Policy Research Alliance (ASPRA), the Oregon College and Career Readiness Alliance (OR CCR), and the Washington-based Road Map Project Partnership (Road Map) Alliance. This case study design was informed by the broad principles outlined by Yin (2003) along with guidance from Stake (1995) on interpretative case study. The cases were selected as exemplars with positive outcomes as well as lessons learned that may be of use to similar initiatives. The alliances share a similar focus but differ on key variables such as size, geographic focus, and membership composition.

The cases studies employed multiple methods including document review, interviews, and observation. To provide a holistic view of alliance work, data was collected from REL Northwest staff, alliance leadership, and project partners. A total of 29 interviews (10 with REL Northwest staff and 19 with alliance members) and 11 observations of alliance events were conducted during this period. We used typological analysis to examine both within- and cross-case patterns. Interview transcripts and field notes were entered into Atlas Ti qualitative software program. Excerpts were labeled according to broad themes that paralleled the interview protocols. The process facilitated data management, allowing us to easily sort and retrieve data for further analysis. Working with general themes individually, we coded excerpts inductively for emerging patterns.

In this paper, we draw on this evidence to identify the characteristics of REL research alliances. We show that REL research alliances are not a specific partnership arrangement, since alliances vary in their organizational structure and membership composition. Alliances do, however, engage in a common set of activities - convening, collective inquiry, and collective action - that go well beyond conducting original research studies. These activities develop out of the particular demands of creating long-term partnerships among voluntary members, who frequently span multiple sectors and geographic areas. We also find evidence of shared responsibilities and roles between REL staff and alliance members. The ways that researchers and practitioners work together in REL research alliances appears driven in part by the needs of individual projects, variation in individuals’ skills and knowledge, and contextual factors. Finally, we show that in addition to expanding the regional and national knowledge base, REL alliances can help expand practitioners’ understanding of how to
access, use, and work with evidence. REL research alliances also strengthen regional social networks as members collaborate across systems and sectors.

This examination of REL Northwest alliances finds that REL research alliances share some commonalities with other forms of RPPs, in terms of their use of long-term relationships and mutualism to support research and evidence use. However, this paper highlights several opportunities and challenges involved in taking these types of partnership arrangements to scale across a region, and nationally. Exploring these issues will help place REL research alliances in relation to other types of RPPs and identify strategies for strengthening partnerships through the REL program. Understanding how REL research alliances work will also contribute to efforts to support evidence use in education more generally.
References


