Title:
Effectively engaging practitioners: Strategies to expand the toolkit from three research-practice partnerships

Session organizer:

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Panelists:

• Lisa Shimmel, REL Midwest, lshimmel@air.org
• Lindsay Weixler, Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, lweixler@tulane.edu
• Rosemary Hughes, Philadelphia Education Research Consortium, rhughes@researchforaction.org
• Tonya Wolford, School District of Philadelphia, twolford@philasd.org

Choice of Conference Section:

1. Research to Practice
2. Evaluation of programs/policies
Panel Justification

The reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) continues the federal push for education agencies to access, consult with, and use research evidence to inform improvement decisions. The greater emphasis on using research evidence in practice is a step in the right direction. However, policy designs typically assume a simple pathway from research to practice: research is readily available; districts easily access this research and interpret it; research is thus directly applied to their local problems of practice and decisions follow (Honig & Coburn, 2008). Recent research by Coburn, Honig, and Stein (2009) suggests the process, in reality, is quite complex and often messy, which could leave education agencies without an effective plan of action. Lessons from efforts to bridge the gap between research and practice across multiple disciplines (education, child mental health and welfare, justice) suggest that frequent, intentional opportunities for collaboration and mutual exchange among researchers, policymakers and practitioners increases the propensity of research use in decision-making (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Masiolek, 2015; Palinkas, Short, & Wong, 2015; Tseng, 2013).

In this panel, we will discuss innovative strategies utilized by three education research-practice partnerships (RPPs) to illustrate how RPPs can increase practitioner engagement with research evidence. Our three examples represent a wide range of approaches, from simple to comprehensive, so that conference attendees have a diverse set of examples to draw from when thinking about expanding their own approaches. The three strategies include: (1) general practitioner engagement using infographics; (2) convening a group of practitioners and policymakers to discuss a broad area of research; and (3) building a topic-specific research agenda with multiple stakeholders across the community.

First, Lisa Shimmel from REL Midwest will describe their team’s development process for infographics as a tool to increase both stakeholder interaction with research and buy-in for policy. This example illustrates how RPPs can extend practitioner capacity to effectively process research beyond a simple policy brief or technical report. Next, Lindsay Weixler from the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA) will describe ERA’s recently convened Early Childhood Summit, which brought early childhood practitioners and policymakers in southeast Louisiana together to learn about recent research on the state’s young children and to discuss gaps in knowledge and places to improve systems serving young children. Finally, we will hear from Rosemary Hughes (Philadelphia Education Research Consortium) and Tonya Wolford (School District of Philadelphia), who will share their comprehensive effort involving a multi-year research agenda to inform programming for ELLs aimed at closing persistent achievement gaps between ELLs and native speakers. This particular strategy illustrates how an RPP can effectively mobilize many important stakeholders throughout the community to work together on a common problem.

Through a moderated discussion across the panelists and with the audience, the timely information presented in this session will provide attendees with greater options to consider in their own work. Our hope is that the presentation of these strategies sparks further innovations to effectively engage practitioners with research evidence.

Outline for 90-minute session:

- We will start by asking audience members to think about personal examples where they attempted to increase the use of research evidence in practice. In particular, we’d
like them to comment on the challenges or success of these types of effort. During the panel discussion, we’d like audience members to think about whether the strategies presented would work in their local cases; if not, we’d like them to think about why that might be.

- Next we will have the panelists discuss their projects: First, they will describe their partnership structure and give a brief overview of the types of research they engage in, they will then describe the particular strategy utilized to increase practitioner engagement with research evidence, and finally, they will share how practitioners or stakeholders were able to engage with research evidence.
- A facilitated conversation between panelists and audience members would then take place, encouraging questions and comments from the audience.
- We will ask audience members to consider these strategies in light of their local conditions: what possible challenges do they foresee?

Abstract 1:

- **Using infographics to increase stakeholder engagement with research and buy-in of policy**
- Presenter: Lisa Shimmel
- Organization: REL Midwest

REL Midwest has implemented numerous strategies that make it easier for research alliance members and regional stakeholders to engage with the research process and findings through a best-fit format for their goals, time, and other preferences. These approaches include (1) developing a collaborative process for communication and engagement planning, (2) developing a communication and engagement plan, (3) developing strategies for communicating and engaging with alliance members and external audiences (for example, workshops, briefings, video, social media), and (4) developing tools and guidance to support staff in growing these communication and engagement skills (for example, how to develop an engagement plan).

While all research reports include both a 20-30 page technical report and a 5 page brief, we found that our stakeholders often need a shorter summary to share with others in initial conversations about research findings. As a result, we now work with alliance members to craft 1-page infographics that capture findings in a visually engaging, easily understood format. Lisa will discuss the development of infographics as a tool for stakeholders to use within their organizations or with their constituents to share research findings and build buy-in for policy or program responses. Using examples from the Virtual Education Research Alliance (VERA), Lisa will describe the collaborative process used to create one page infographics to highlight key findings. She will then share how VERA members used infographics created from alliance research studies to push for changes in programming.

Abstract 2:

- **Convening stakeholders to address research and data limitations in early childhood education**
- Presenter: Lindsay Weixler
ERA is committed to understanding the landscape of early childhood education in New Orleans and how early experiences in local programs shape young children’s development. However, the early childhood landscape is fragmented, making information difficult to find and research challenging to conduct. Louisiana recently passed a law requiring all districts to provide unified oversight and enrollment for publicly funded early childhood programs. In New Orleans, the law resulted in the creation of the New Orleans Early Education Network, which oversees and evaluates all early childhood programs that receive public dollars (including schools, Head Start centers, and childcare facilities). Additionally, all school-based and Head Start seats are assigned through a centralized lottery process after income-eligibility screening.

The centralized oversight and enrollment processes present an excellent opportunity for research on parent preferences in early childhood, barriers to access, and short- and long-term outcomes for children. However, major barriers still exist. First, the state’s student enrollment system only exists for public schools, making it impossible to track students from non-school-based programs into the K-12 system. Second, Louisiana has a strict student privacy law that prevents the state from accessing a good deal of student-level information. This restriction makes it difficult for researchers to get student-level data and connect different data sets to answer critical research questions, and it creates challenges for program administrators who are often prevented from accessing information about the children they serve.

Making systemic changes requires buy-in and effort across sectors that are often disconnected and siloed. In order to bridge this gap, ERA convened an Early Childhood Summit in New Orleans in August of 2016, convening stakeholders from different sectors, including state and local government, education, non-profit, and research, to discuss research findings and challenges from all perspectives. In bringing these groups together with a focus on research, we hoped to establish ERA as a trusted partner for the early childhood community, learn from them about their research needs, and lay the foundation for a coalition that would push for critical systemic changes.

The conference included several research and data presentations that were directly relevant to practitioners, including summary statistics on child well-being in the state, an overview of the new early childhood enrollment system, and results from the pilot study of the state’s new accountability system. Additionally, we invited a panel of local leaders to discuss the challenges they saw in early childhood education, and had participants engage in small group discussions about these issues. In the final session, we worked as a group to create priority issues that the community should work to change. ERA is now working to address one of the top-priority concerns expressed at the conference – the state’s privacy law that has created barriers to accessing information for both research and programmatic purposes.

Feedback from the conference was overwhelmingly positive, with 86% of survey respondents saying that the conference was a good use of their time, 90% saying that they learned something they planned to share with their organization, and 80% saying that the conference helped them understand the perspectives of other sectors. One teacher who attended told us that the conference gave her a much more positive view of research, which she tends to think of as something that is forced on her in an
unhelpful way. Additionally, we received multiple invitations from programs to contact them for future research projects. The Summit succeeded in establishing ERA as an early childhood research partner, and we are currently working with multiple groups to develop a mutually beneficial research agenda.

Abstract 3:

- **Designing and implementing a multi-year research agenda to inform programming for English Language Learners (ELLs)**
- **Presenters:** Rosemary Hughes and Tonya Wolford
- **Organizations:** Philadelphia Education Research Consortium and the School District of Philadelphia

The Philadelphia Education Research Consortium recently launched a multi-year research agenda to inform programming for ELLs and close long-standing achievement gaps between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers. The first phase of this research agenda focused on gaining a better understanding of the current models and instructional practices in use among schools experiencing success, identification of the most prominent challenges these schools face and an analysis of student and school factors associated with time to reclassification using a Tobit model. As we reflected on what we learned, we recognized the need to inform and engage a broader range of stakeholders to work more collaboratively.

Through a community forum ground in the key findings from our first phase of research, PERC partnered with two prominent education media outlets in Philadelphia (WHYY and the Philadelphia Public School Notebook) to launch a public conversation and call to action, focused on ways stakeholders can work more effectively together to share best practices, resolve core challenges and funding issues and inform subsequent improvement efforts. More than 100 teachers, community leaders, university faculty and members of the non-profit and philanthropic communities (including some from districts outside of Philadelphia and representatives from the Pennsylvania Department of Education) dug deep into the most salient findings, established new networks, and committed to work collaboratively in response to our early findings. The forum was a true collaborative effort where teachers, district administrators, researchers and university faculty co-planned and co-facilitated the event. Discussions during and after the forum have been instrumental in expanding the reach of our work; and shaped our strategic plan for stakeholder capacity building to use research in practice and more robust stakeholder engagement throughout the research process. As a result of the forum:

- The Philadelphia Public School Notebook to dedicate an entire monthly edition focused on education issues of importance to ELLs to continue to inform civic engagement efforts,
- out-of-school time providers are exploring ways their programs can provide additional supports and services for ELLs and their families to compliment what is happening during the school day,
- new working relationships were created between university faculty with strong content expertise and ELL Coordinators who are redesigning their school-based model,
• new social networks emerged among educators across schools and sectors who are sharing best practices and collaborating to resolve challenges and
• new relationships with funders interested in supporting Philadelphia’s improvement efforts are emerging.
References


