Panel Title: What do we really know about business as usual? How researchers and practitioners can work together to improve the evaluation of program effectiveness.

Panel Justification: Successful program evaluation using experimental methods requires the comparison of treatment to an appropriate control group. The textbook estimate of a treatment effect compares outcomes between those who receive a program and those who receive nothing, but evaluators are more likely to compare a program against the “business as usual” counterfactual. If business as usual is misunderstood, the external validity of the findings—whether statistically significant or null—is called into question. Business as usual looks very different from one district to the next, so findings reported relative to an inaccurate counterfactual can lead districts to erroneous beliefs about the likelihood of success in their context.

This topic fits with the conference theme by highlighting the challenges researchers face trying to understand business as usual, a topic rarely if ever discussed in peer-reviewed journals. Researchers should be acutely aware of the plenitude of assumptions they bring to the table based on their own schooling experiences. This panel promotes researcher-practitioner partnerships that are deliberate about planning how they will describe business as usual early in the evaluation process. The panel provides researcher and practitioner perspectives on how to best accomplish this work through reciprocal and sustained partnerships.

Panel Outline:
Moderator introduces purpose of panel, participants, and plan for session (10 minutes).

Kristin Klopfenstein discusses how her unrecognized assumptions about business as usual came to light in unexpected ways in two evaluation studies (10 minutes).

Tonya Wolford discusses best practices regarding researcher-practitioner partnerships from her perspective in the School District of Philadelphia. She discusses what she wishes all academics understood about effective partnerships that meet district needs while recognizing staffing and resource constraints, and what Klopfenstein and Thomas did well and could have done better when submitting an IES proposal with her district in summer 2016 (10 minutes).

Matthew Lenard discusses challenges academics face understanding business as usual when the bulk of their interactions are with district officials. He bases his discussion on experience cultivating partnerships in Wake County, North Carolina, a school district heavily invested in evidence-based decision-making (10 minutes).

Moderator asks follow-up questions of the three panelists (20 minutes). Potential questions include:

- What do typical interactions between school personnel and researchers around understanding business as usual look like? Who initiates them?
- When are reports from district-level administrators about business as usual practices sufficient and when should researchers seek corroborating evidence? In general, can an evaluator be confident of their portrayal of business as usual without observing
classrooms and/or speaking directly with teachers/students? This isn’t typically something budgeted for in a project proposal—should it be?

- IES is investing heavily in RPPs, but there are often counter-incentives on both the higher education and K-12 sides that make reciprocal partnerships difficult to sustain. Given these structural barriers, what else can be done to facilitate this valuable work?

Moderator will entertain questions and comments from the audience (30 minutes).

**Abstract, Panelist #1**

**Title:** What do we really know about business as usual? The importance of reciprocal Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships for understanding current practice

**Background/Context:** Evaluating evidence of promise for a developing program or the efficacy of an established program in an authentic education setting requires a thorough understanding of the status quo, or “business as usual.” In its request for applications, IES clearly articulates the importance of describing current practice for all Goal 2 Development and Innovation grants and the counterfactual for all Goal 3 Efficacy and Replication grants. However, describing business as usual is often an afterthought while researchers focus their attention on the intervention. The panelist discusses unexpected challenges she has faced understanding business as usual in sustained, trusted partnerships with two school districts.

**Purpose:** To critically examine what researchers think they understand about business as usual after conversations with district staff. To increase awareness of a researcher’s assumptions about business as usual based on their own schooling experiences.


**Intervention:** In the School District of Philadelphia, the intervention is “Music for the 80 Percent” which is designed to reach the forgotten 80 percent of students not meaningfully engaged in music education. By making music education personalized, culturally relevant, and engaging through the class Modern Band, the intervention is hypothesized to improve attendance, grade promotion, and graduation among students attending relatively low-performing, urban high schools. The challenge for describing business as usual is determining whether the counterfactual is traditional band classes, music history classes taught out of a textbook, or all classes that meet the Arts and Humanities graduation requirement.

In Greeley-Evans District 6, the intervention personalizes instruction using a Blended Learning model where basic content is delivered through interactive software on tablet computers. The intervention is designed to free teachers to engage in targeted instruction based on formative data generated by the software and to focus on developing students’ higher-order thinking skills. The challenge for describing business as usual arises from the fact that many control teachers are doing some version of blended learning, perhaps without realizing it, and generally doing it poorly.

**Research Design:** The pilot study evaluating Music for the 80 Percent in high schools is an underpowered cluster-randomized control trial at the school level. The Blended Learning study is a cluster-randomized control trial at the grade level in six elementary schools.

**Findings:** In Philadelphia, the researchers’ understanding of the counterfactual to the Modern Band class was unduly influenced by their own school experiences leading them to mischaracterize business as usual as passive desk-learning. In fact, the appropriate counterfactual was another potentially engaging arts class (e.g. visual arts, dance, or theatre).
In the Blended Learning study, business as usual was assumed to be a traditional classroom with direct instruction provided largely, if not exclusively, by the teacher. In fact, the counterfactual is much more complex with control teachers trying various components of blended learning independent of the evaluation (e.g. through Khan Academy). To the extent that teachers across the nation are incorporating blended strategies as part of their regular practice, it is unclear whether the most appropriate counterfactual is no blended learning or blended learning implemented piecemeal without fidelity to a larger model.

**Conclusions:** Both evaluation studies discussed here are being conducted as part of reciprocal Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships, and the research questions were clearly articulated by the school districts. However, descriptions of business as usual derived from extensive conversations between researchers and district staff were inaccurate in ways that threatened the external validity of the studies. In both cases, misconceptions occurred in spite of the best efforts among both parties, and the partnerships determined that the best solution was to document business as usual directly through classroom observations.

**Abstract, Panelist #2**

**Title:** Forming reciprocal Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships: What school districts wish academics understood

**Background/Context:** Rigorous evaluation of a program’s impact in an authentic education setting usually requires collaboration between school districts and academic researchers. Large school districts have systems in place to direct or oversee the numerous evaluation studies that take place in their schools every year, but often find themselves at odds with university researchers facing their own constraints. Requirements established by universities and external funders and imposed on academics conducting sponsored research are generally not sensitive to the time and resource constraints school districts face. Furthermore, correctly comparing an education intervention against the business as usual counterfactual requires a thorough understanding of current district practice. External researchers must be prepared to invest the time and effort necessary to form a complete picture about what is happening on the ground and be willing to form sustained and meaningful relationships with their district partners.

**Purpose:** To discuss best practices regarding researcher-practitioner partnerships from the school district’s perspective and how districts and external researchers can work together to understand business as usual.

**Setting:** School District of Philadelphia, an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse school district.

**Research Design:** Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT) or development work for RCTs where a thorough understanding of business as usual is necessary to evaluate an education program against the appropriate control group.

**Conclusions:** Evaluators will not obtain a deep understanding of business as usual if they view researcher-practitioner partnerships as a mere formality to gain access to district data, and they run the risk of producing estimated impacts with no external validity. This fails the district that needs to know if the program warrants further investment, the students who deserve programs proven to improve education outcomes, the larger education community that seeks evidence about scalability, and the researchers who want to engage in scholarship that can stand up to rigorous peer-review. The solution is a long-term, truly reciprocal researcher-practitioner partnership where both partners respond to feedback and recognize researcher and school district constraints.
**Abstract, Panelist #3**  
**Title:** Digging deeper: The challenge of accurately describing business as usual control groups in RCTs  
**Background/Context:** When preparing to evaluate an education program, researchers and practitioners are often hyper-focused on the program: understanding key program components, how those components are theorized to change outcomes, and how the program can be implemented with fidelity in authentic education settings. Yet, accurately evaluating a program’s impact against the business as usual counterfactual requires an equally thorough understanding of current practice. Even for programs randomized at the school-level, evaluators often need to understand the typical classroom experience. District-level administrators can provide general insights into what happens in control classrooms, but there has been little discussion in the evaluation community of whether this level of understanding of the control group is sufficient to establish external validity of an RCT. District personnel and evaluators should be pragmatic about the limits of their knowledge and the assumptions they bring to describing the control group. Indeed, working together to improve knowledge of business as usual practices may require funding that is typically allocated elsewhere in the research process.  
**Purpose:** To discuss what district officials and evaluators typically understand about business as usual and how they might coordinate better to describe current practice accurately.  
**Setting:** Wake County Public School System, an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse school district.  
**Research Design:** Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT) or development work for RCTs where a thorough understanding of business as usual is necessary to evaluate an education program against the appropriate control group.  
**Conclusions:** Evaluators will not obtain a deep understanding of business as usual if they view researcher-practitioner partnerships as a mere formality to gain access to district data, and they run the risk of producing estimated impacts with no external validity. This fails the district that needs to know if the program warrants further investment, the students who deserve programs proven to improve education outcomes, the larger education community that seeks evidence about scalability, and the researchers who want to engage in scholarship that can stand up to rigorous peer-review. The solution is a long-term, truly reciprocal researcher-practitioner partnership where both partners respond to feedback and recognize researcher and school district constraints.