Opportunities and challenges in state-level research partnerships of scaling up: Lessons from Tennessee and North Carolina

Moderator: John Papay, Brown University
Panelist 1:   Ellen Goldring, Vanderbilt University
Panelist 2:   Laura Booker, Tennessee Department of Education
Panelist 3:   Gary Henry, Vanderbilt University
Panelist 4:   To Be Determined, North Carolina Dept. of Public Instruction*

*NOTE: Because of state budget changes, there have been some changes in relevant staff. These personnel changes should be resolved soon and we expect to have a practitioner from North Carolina join the panel.

Panel justification
In recent years, researcher-practitioner partnerships have proliferated around the country, largely engaging researchers to work in partnership with local urban school districts. State-level researcher-practitioner partnerships are much rarer; for example, of the approximately 20 members of the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERP), only two operate at the state level.

In 2015, the Institute of Education Sciences put forth a special call for proposals designed to build research-practice partnerships in service of studying scaling up well-formed educational interventions. Two of these grants were awarded to researchers working with Tennessee and North Carolina as partnership collaboratives with state agencies. These partnerships have been active for approximately three years.

These partnerships are interesting to explore for several reasons. As state-level partnerships, the scope is quite large and complex in terms of the process of scaling up educational programs, the multiple agencies and actors involved, and the possible scope of influence. At the same time, state actors have fewer direct policy levers to pull than district officials. Politics also plays a unique role at the state compared to the district level.

Furthermore, each of these particular partnerships was funded to study the scaling up of a specific educational intervention, and required the use of approaches designed to draw robust causal inferences about the program's impact on student outcomes. This in and of itself has had important implications for these state level partnerships and how they have unfolded. For example, interestingly, state actors were interested in lessons and implications of program implementation in a much broader sense than simply knowing the impact of a specific program. Thus, they have pushed the researchers to explore questions that will yield broader insights of use to the state. Both partnerships have worked to meet these dual goals of assessing impact with rigor while attending to changing state priorities.

As the interest in building state-level partnerships grows, it is an opportune time to explore the opportunities and challenges that such partnerships present.

For this panel, we propose a conversation between researchers and practitioners from the Tennessee and North Carolina partnerships (described in more detail below). Our panel will include one researcher and one practitioner from each state. The conversation will explore the following questions:
- How has the research developed in these partnerships and how has it informed policies, practices, and research for all partners?
- How and who decides what aspects of the interventions/programs/policies should be studied?

- How does the focus of scaling up of programs at the state level influence the nature of these partnerships?
- What are the limitations (from both the research and policy perspectives) of using rigorous causal designs to study fully-formed state programs at scale? What are necessary conditions for states to implement programs that can be studied with rigorous research methodologies?
- How could the design and implementation of state –university partnerships, and federal funding to support them, be improved?

We are particularly interested in exploring the similarities and differences across state contexts.

Four panelists (a researcher and practitioner from each partnership) will provide broad and varied perspectives. We do not plan for each panelist to offer long opening remarks. Instead, we envision that each partnership will spend approximately 5-7 minutes providing initial context on the research project. We will then engage in a moderated conversation centered on these questions and others that emerge from the discussion. Below we describe each state partnership.

Tennessee Department of Education: Instructional Partnership Initiative
This research-practice partnership has engaged in three years of studying the effectiveness and implementation, at scale, of the Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI). IPI aims to harness teacher expertise within schools to supplement the feedback that teachers receive through the evaluation system. TDOE uses indicator-level teacher evaluation data residing in the state data system to identify possible collaborative teaching partners in each school based on an algorithm. Teachers with low scores in particular areas of instructional practice (e.g., "Questioning" or "Lesson Structure and Pacing") are paired in partnership with teachers in the same school who have demonstrated success in those areas. Principals are then provided the proposed matches and asked to support their peer collaboration. Results from a small-scale experimental pilot study showed that the program improves teachers' evaluation scores, their views of the evaluation system, and student achievement.

A team of researchers has been studying the IPI for the past several years. This work has taken three main forms. First, as part of this research partnership, the state rolled out IPI to half of the schools in the state. Schools were chosen to receive IPI or not through random assignment. Thus, this design enabled robust causal inferences of the impact of offering IPI, at scale. Unfortunately, limitations including low program take-up and the state cancelling testing in the first year of implementation have limited our abilities to draw conclusions about impact.

A second strand of research has studied program take-up itself. Because the state did not mandate participation in IPI, it needed to encourage schools to take-up a promising but voluntary program at a time when it was asking schools to take on many other new initiatives. Thus, the partnership has taken up the question of how to encourage take-up when programs are voluntary.

Third, our research has had a particular focus on program implementation, seeking to explore not only whether and how the program is implemented, but also the conditions that contribute to its

adoption and success. Here, we have explore key constructs from the statewide survey data and have conducted detailed fieldwork in a range of schools implementing IPI across the state. This work has directly informed modifications in the program and its roll-out for each year of implementation.

North Carolina State Board of Education: North Carolina Turnaround
The North Carolina State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction (DPI) have been working to turnaround the state's lowest performing schools since 2005-06 when a judge declared that high schools with proficiency and graduation rates below 55 percent were committing "academic genocide". The school turnaround effort continued in 2010-11 when 118 schools were identified as the state's lowest performing and entered turnaround, which was funded by a federal Race to the Top award. As the federal funding ended, the North Carolina State Board of Education (NC SBE) began a tiered school improvement process that included intensive services to 75 of the lowest performing schools using a legislatively established definition of low performing schools and districts in 2016. The turnaround services were similar to previous rounds of school reform in NC, and included a comprehensive needs assessment built upon observational and extant data, feedback on school improvement plans, and instructional, transformation leadership, and district leadership coaching.

In an IES-funded partnership, NC SBE and DPI along with researchers from Vanderbilt University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and RAND Corporation collaborated on a process of assigning schools to treatment based upon their overall proficiency rates, know as their Performance Composite (PC) in order to be able to implement a robust design for estimating casual effects, regression discontinuity. Although the partnership included members who had worked together for the evaluation of the Race to the Top funded turnaround, the services and the evaluation processes for the partnership grant were redesigned to take advantage of lessons learned during the previous evaluation.

Noteworthy changes to the process included semi-annual briefings with the leadership and staff implementing the turnaround services to receive information on implementation fidelity and quality. Each of the three briefings held to date have resulted in development and consideration of ways to adapt the delivery of services to improve fidelity and local receptivity to the services. Another line of research has been to statistically identify types of schools receiving services using their characteristics at baseline and to work collaboratively to develop plans for how services can be tailored to groups of schools with particular characteristics, such as high rates of student absenteeism or very high teacher mobility rates. In spring 2018, the briefing will include preliminary information on outcomes and tests of moderation or suppression of the effects in order to better understand the factors that may be associated with more or less improvement of student and teacher outcomes.