Title:
What matters for district learning? Exploring the conditions that lead to greater use of research in two research-practice partnerships

Section preferences:
1. Research↔Practice: University-Based Collaborations
2. Research↔Practice in Local Education Agencies

Session organizer + moderator:
Paula Arce-Trigatti, National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), parcetrig@rice.edu

Panelists:
- Caitlin Farrell, University of Colorado, Boulder, / National Center for Research in Policy and Practice, caitlin.farrell@colorado.edu
- Kyle Fagan, REL Midwest / Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance, kfagan@air.org
- Carl Frederick, Wisconsin Department of Instruction / Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance, Carl.Frederick@dpi.wi.gov
- Erin Henrick, Vanderbilt University / MIST Project, erin.henrick@Vanderbilt.Edu

Session Justification

Research-practice partnerships, often conceptualized as a departure from “business as usual” in terms of research production, typically require both researchers and practitioners to adopt new skills in service of collaboration across research and practice. Plenty of resources have emerged recently (see, for example, the “RPP Tool Kit” produced by the R + P Collaboratory, the RPP microsite maintained by the William T. Grant Foundation, or the NNERPP RPP Knowledge Clearinghouse) that highlight these critical skills, including the need to develop trust between partners, having different strategies for engaging with multiple audiences, and tips on how to structure the work.

While these advancements in our knowledge of how to build successful RPPs represent great strides for the field, some key questions still remain. First, what do we really know about the district conditions necessary that lead to effective partnering with external researchers? Although the practices mentioned earlier are likely instrumental for RPP success, much less is known about how districts learn from external partners. Moreover, while the goal of many RPPs is to increase evidence based decision making, we currently lack the tools to measure this in practice. How do we know what “success” regarding practitioner use of research looks like?

In this proposed panel, we bring together research on evidence use in practice and two RPPs that will draw from their deep knowledge and varied experiences on how to effectively engage with practitioners to facilitate evidence-based decision making. First we will hear from Caitlin Farrell, Director of the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice, who will share recent research done in collaboration with Cynthia Coburn and Seenae Chong. Caitlin and her
colleagues have studied the conditions under which school districts are able to learn from their external partners, applying the concept of ‘absorptive capacity’ to frame their analysis. We will then contrast this theoretical framework and the findings of the study with the experiences of those working in two different partnerships. Kyle Fagan (representing the research side of the Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance [MAGRA]) and Carl Frederick (representing the practice side of MAGRA) will first describe the structure of their RPP, including the partnership’s goals and activities related to supporting the use of research in decision making. They will then share lessons learned from the first year of the partnership and discuss how their early efforts to foster greater evidence-based decision making are playing out. Next, Erin Henrick, Project Manager of MIST, will share how their team measured whether or not their district partners adopted research recommendations made throughout the nearly 10-year old partnership. She will also reflect on the findings of this analysis, and provide thoughts on why some recommendations were implemented while others were ignored.

Through a moderated discussion among the panelists and audience members, we hope to extend our knowledge around how to impact the use of research evidence in practice, particularly through research-practice partnerships.

Outline for 90-minute session:

- We will first ask audience members to think about instances where they have attempted to work with external partners on the production of research (in cases involving either researchers or practitioners). Were these collaborations or partnerships successful, in terms of engagement with the research? How do they know? We will come back to these questions after the panelists have shared.

- Next, each panelist will discuss their project as described in the panel justification.

- The moderator will then facilitate a conversation between the panelists and audience members, offering reflections on how the three presentations relate to each other, and calling upon audience members to share out the personal experiences they were prompted to think about earlier.

- The collective knowledge generated in this session through panelist and audience discussion will hopefully help us be more attentive to important activities that should be incorporated as part of any RPP aiming to effectively increase evidence based decision making in practice.
Abstract 1:
When and Under What Conditions Can a School District Central Office Learn from External Partners?

Panelist:
Caitlin Farrell, University of Colorado, Boulder / National Center for Research in Policy and Practice

Policymakers and education leaders are increasingly interested in leveraging external organizations to support district improvement efforts (Finnigan & Daly, 2014). For example, the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) encourages states and districts to partner with institutions of higher education and other local partners (ESSA; Public Law 114-95). Indeed, external partners can support reform efforts by providing advice, professional development, technical assistance, or curricular materials. Research suggests that external partners can have positive impacts on district capacity and improvement efforts at scale (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; Glennan & Resnick, 2004; Marsh et al., 2005).

Not all relationships between districts and external partners are productive or beneficial, though (Firestone & Fisler, 2002; Freedman & Salmon, 2001). Partnerships can introduce a set of ideas that run counter to other district messages, leading to incoherence and confusion (Hatch, 2001); they can take a good deal of time and energy (Donovan, Wigdor, & Snow, 2003); and they can run into problems when there are differing timelines, incentives, or norms (Bickel & Hattrup, 1995; Coburn et al., 2008). Given the proliferation of these organizations and actors, there is remarkably little research on when and under what conditions engagement with external partners contributes to shifts in a district’s policies or routines, markers of organizational learning.

In this presentation, Caitlin Farrell will share recent work exploring important initial conditions on the district side that leads to learning from external partners. Bringing together theories of organizational learning with existing scholarship on school districts and highlighting the concept of absorptive capacity, Caitlin and her co-authors ask: when and under what conditions do district departments take up the guidance from external organizations, and with what consequences for organizational learning? Absorptive capacity is an organization’s ability to learn new information from external sources and adapt it in productive ways (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990).

To investigate when and under what conditions district departments take up guidance from an external organization, the authors relied on interviews, observations, and artifacts collected as part of a larger, two-year study focused on research use and decision-making in three districts working with external partners on middle school mathematics. The study finds that the degree to which a department can leverage an external partner’s ideas in their policies and routines depends on both their pre-existing organizational conditions for absorptive capacity and the nature of the interactions between the department and external partner.

This study contributes to our understanding of organizational learning in school district central offices. The authors explore why some district departments learn and make use of guidance from external partners in their policies and routines, while others do not. Drawing on the theory of absorptive capacity from organizational theory, Caitlin and her co-authors develop a more robust
conceptualization of the capacity to learn from external sources of knowledge, one that considers the interactions among different organizational conditions. The study also provides new insight into how absorptive capacity can shape the different ways district leaders and external partners interact, and with what consequences for organizational learning.
References


Abstract 2:
Setting up for success: Reflections on how evidence was used in practice in a first-year partnership

Panelists:
Kyle Fagan, REL Midwest / Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance
Carl Frederick, Wisconsin Department of Instruction / Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance

Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest is part of a network of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences. The RELs work in partnership with school districts, state education agencies, and others to conduct applied research that seeks to solve practical problems and advances fundamental understandings of education challenges and processes. The Midwest Achievement Gap Research Alliance (MAGRA), one of four of REL Midwest’s collaborative research partnerships, supports efforts in Wisconsin to close the Black-White achievement gap. The goals of MAGRA are to increase the region’s capacity to access, conduct, interpret, and make sense of achievement gap research and to support the use of research in decision-making at the state and local levels.

MAGRA is rooted in a strong partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and includes alliance members from schools, districts, and equity-oriented organizations. To work toward its goals, the MAGRA developed a shared research agenda to guide current and future projects and the direction of the alliance. Year 1 projects include a systematic literature review of evidence-based strategies to improve educational outcomes among Black students, an environmental scan of state and district policies, programs, and practices aimed at closing the Black-White achievement gap around Wisconsin, and an in-person event focused on supporting school and district personnel to utilize culturally responsive practices. The projects are intended to work in tandem to inform how MAGRA and DPI work together to support stakeholders in addressing the Black-White achievement gap.

In this presentation, Kyle Fagan (REL Midwest, MAGRA Research Liaison) and Carl Frederick (Wisconsin DPI Research Analyst, MAGRA Member) will discuss lessons learned from the first year of the collaborative research partnership, specifically focusing on gaining consensus for a shared research agenda, building relationships, and planning and engaging in mutually reinforcing, collaborative research activities.
**Abstract 3:**
Measuring the extent to which research-based recommendations are adopted/implemented in practice: Instruments and Findings

**Panelist:**
Erin Henrick, Vanderbilt University / MIST Project

MIST stands for Middle-school Mathematics and the Institutional Setting of Teaching. MIST is an ongoing project that is investigating the following question: What does it take to support mathematics teachers' development of ambitious and equitable instructional practices on a large scale? The project has two major phases.

The first phase of the MIST project was conducted from 2007-2011 in collaboration with four large, urban districts that serve a total of 360,000 students. The districts were all implementing ambitious instructional improvement initiatives in middle-grades mathematics (three of the districts had partnered with the Institute for Learning (IFL)). Participants included 6-10 schools in each of the 4 districts, 30 middle-school mathematics teachers in each district, and 15-20 school and district leaders in each district. The primary product of the first phase was a provisional theory-of-action for district-wide instructional improvement in mathematics. In addition to this product, we provided the districts with feedback each year on how their Theory of Action for instructional improvement in mathematics was playing out in their schools, and made actionable recommendations about how it might be revised to make it more effective.

The second phase of the MIST project began in the 2011-2012 school year and involves a four-year collaboration with two of the districts that participated in Phase 1. The primary goal in this phase is to test, revise, and elaborate conjectures inherent in the theory-of-action for district-wide instructional improvement developed in Phase 1. To this end, we are collaborating with district leaders to co-design and co-lead coordinated professional development for teachers, coaches, and school leaders. The participants in this phase include 12 schools in each of 2 districts, 60 middle-school mathematics teachers in each district, and 25-30 school and district leaders in each district. During Phase 2 we continue to provide feedback to districts every year on how their Theory of Action for instructional improvement in mathematics is playing out in their schools, and will continue to make actionable recommendations about how it might be revised to make it more effective.

One of the goals of the MIST Project was to inform district partners’ improvement initiatives. To do this, MIST partners from the research side planned to document annually each district’s improvement goals and the related strategies to accomplish their goals, and share findings and recommendations to revise their improvement strategies to make them more effective in May of each year. MIST researchers conjectured that the districts would use the findings and recommendations when planning over the summer to refine their plans for the upcoming year and implement the revised strategies the following school year.

In order to better understand the extent to which annual feedback and recommendations reports and meetings supported district partners’ efforts to improve math instruction, the MIST team conducted an analysis of the recommendations they gave districts over the eight years of the MIST partnership in relationship to changes in districts’ improvement strategies. In particular,
they asked: Are there things we can learn related to why some MIST recommendations were taken-up or not, and why some recommendations were implemented well or not, that could be useful for other RPPs seeking to positively impact district improvement efforts?

The MIST team first conducted an analysis to determine whether or not each of their partner districts acted on, or “took up” recommendations. Recommendations could be coded “taken up,” “somewhat taken up,” or “not taken up.” The data was then scanned for themes related to why some recommendations were taken up and others were not. Over the course of the study, 162 separate recommendations were made. Looking across all districts and years, the MIST team found that the districts attempted to act upon 67% of the recommendations (109/162). All of the districts attempted to act upon at least 50% of the recommendations, but take-up varied, ranging from 82% of recommendations attempted in one district to 56% in another.

In this presentation, Erin will share details on how the analysis was conducted as well as provide lessons learned from the findings. In particular, Erin will describe the patterns that emerged for cases in which the districts chose to take up recommendations and when they did not.