**Title:**
How does one "build practitioner capacity" to use evidence when the practitioners are researchers?

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

**Session organizer**:
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**Moderator:**
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**Panelists:**

- Norma Ming, San Francisco Unified School District, MingN@sfusd.edu
- Joy Lesnick, School District of Philadelphia, jlesnick@philasd.org
- Matt Linick, Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Matthew.Linick@clevelandmetroschools.org

**Session justification:**

Interest in research-practice partnerships has grown quite rapidly in the last decade: new funding streams have recently become available (i.e., Spencer, Hewlett, Overdeck), several new RPPs have emerged (i.e., Cleveland Alliance for Education Research, Madison Education Partnership, Tennessee Education Research Alliance all formed in 2016), and a national network of RPPs recently launched (NNERPP). This surge in interest is likely attributed to the promise RPPs hold in improving the use of research in practice, especially by changing the way research is produced; as many partnerships might agree, this is perhaps their key objective.

To that end, many RPPs conceptualize this goal as "building practitioner capacity" to make evidence-based decisions. Indeed, the challenges to evidence use in practice are typically formulated around a practitioner's (in)ability to acquire research, interpret it, and actually use it to inform decision making (see Nelson, Leffler, and Hansen, 2009, for example). By forming a collaborative partnership that explicitly connects researchers and practitioners to conduct research together, RPPs thus offer some possible solutions to these barriers: practitioners help construct research questions, they are involved in all stages of the research process (to varying extent), and plenty of time is dedicated to interpreting findings together.

While many of these activities will likely improve practitioners' use of evidence in plenty of agencies, there are nonetheless several cases where this framework is not applicable and entirely irrelevant. In particular, this conceptualization of the problem overlooks the distinction between *organizational capacity* to use research and practitioners' *individual capability* to use research.

What matters more for evidence use in practice -- the *capacity* of the organization (i.e., structures, supports, and resources) or individual *capabilities* (i.e., the challenges listed earlier)? Moreover, what is the role of an RPP vis-à-vis "building capacity" when practitioner partners already have a dedicated research department or are staffed with Ph.D. trained researchers?

In this proposed panel, we bring together three "practitioners" -- Ph.D. trained district staff who are all additionally actively involved in place-based university-district RPPs -- to engage in a rich discussion of these issues. First, we will introduce a new framework that expands "research" to also include *improvement* and *evaluation* (both important goals for the district that can lead to evidence use), outlining the district conditions in which these needs emerge and proposing appropriate roles for internal versus external researchers. Next we will further develop our discussion on the differences between "organizational capacity" and "practitioner capabilities," and hear about two examples where an RPP was instrumental in helping spark organizational change in the district to improve evidence use. Finally, the panel will explore how to mobilize cross-district learning by explicitly leveraging the capacity of internal research staff to generate/use research -- and suggest a reimagining of the RPP as one made up of inter-district collaborations, where the lines between "researchers" and "practitioners" are even more blurred. What is the role of university-based partners, in this case?

**Outline for 90-minute session:**

- We will first introduce the concept of RPPs and do a quick scan of the room to gauge audience participation in RPPs (how long have they been involved, their perception of how research is being used as a result of the partnership, and any immediate challenges to efforts in changing how evidence is used they have observed in their work).

- Next we will hear from the three panelists in the order described above.

- Finally, the moderator will facilitate a discussion between the audience and panelists; in particular, she will circle back to the audience for feedback on the framework, encourage discussion of how their experiences relate to the panelists', and brainstorm around next steps for RPPs in light of this new knowledge.

**References**

Nelson, S.R., Leffler, J.C., & Hansen, B.A. (2009). Toward a research agenda for understanding and improving the use of research evidence. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. [Retrievable at www.nwrel. org/researchuse/report.pdf].

**Abstract #1**
**What are the dimensions of district capacity that enable effective evidence-based decision-making?**
Norma Ming
San Francisco Unified School District

Much of the academic discourse around building practitioners' capacity to engage in evidence-based decision-making (EBDM) presumes that external partners produce research for which practitioners need to increase their knowledge and skill to use it effectively. This overlooks four critical distinctions. First, an organization's *capacity* goes beyond just the sum of the *capabilities* (knowledge and skills) of the individuals within the organization, and includes important system-level structures and resources. Second, *research* is only one form of inquiry producing useful, rigorous evidence for educational agencies; *evaluation* and *improvement* provide valuable methods addressing other important goals. Third, the *use* and *generation* of evidence are distinct activities requiring different elements of EBDM capacity. Fourth, such evidence may be generated from sources that are *internal*, not just *external* to the organization.

Understanding the importance of these distinctions first demands articulating districts' EBDM goals, to define success. We would not expect a district to use evidence for its decision-making (a) if high-quality evidence exists but is not relevant, or (b) if no such evidence exists that is relevant. Whether evidence is relevant depends on its decision-making goals.

We can conceptualize these goals in three categories: *improvement*, *evaluation*, and *research*. Most urgently, educational agencies need to improve how well they serve their students; these improvement goals drive their need for information and action. A simplified sketch of this process consists of three stages: (1) identifying students' needs (outcomes), (2) meeting those needs (practices), and (3) strengthening the structures and supports for meeting those needs (systems). Some of the questions that emerge during these stages invite research, while others motivate evaluation, and still others are simply improvement questions.

For example, for the outcomes stage, developing valid instruments, determining indicators of long-term outcomes, and characterizing subgroups of students' needs are all possible *research* questions whose answers directly inform the district's work. However, elucidating the specific obstacles impeding a district's assessment process addresses a local *improvement* need that is less likely to interest the broader research community. In the practices stage, determining which types of interventions best serve which needs is a *research* question, while deciding whether a particular program implementation is effective is a traditional *evaluation* question. In contrast, characterizing who receives a particular intervention or the variability in how providers deliver a given intervention would address *improvement* questions. Similarly, in the systems stage, identifying productive supports may be a *research* question, while measuring the effectiveness of their delivery is an *evaluation* question, and understanding what impedes the district in aligning and coordinating its resources is an *improvement* question.

This illustrates the most important prerequisite for practitioners to *act* on useful evidence: namely, that relevant evidence is <u>available</u> that is aligned to their decision-making needs. A district's capacity to utilize such evidence then requires having a <u>knowledge management system</u>

for finding it, as well as <u>decision-making structures</u> in which such evidence can be shared, interpreted, and applied to the district's local context. That requires <u>access to expertise</u> to ensure <u>valid interpretations</u> of the findings when formulating implications for action.

In the absence of sufficient relevant evidence, a district seeking to engage in EBDM must be able to lead or co-lead its own analysis and inquiry in order to *generate* useful evidence. This capacity depends on developing a useful improvement, evaluation, and research <u>agenda to prioritize its inquiry needs</u> and guide projects toward those needs. Conducting analyses requires <u>access to expertise</u> in the relevant content and methodological areas to <u>produce</u> valid evidence; a reliable <u>data infrastructure</u> for providing comprehensive, high-quality data suitable for research; and <u>alignment</u> between the inquiry questions, available data, available content and methodological expertise, and timelines of expectations. If the relevant expertise is external, coordinating productive collaborative inquiry requires another set of conditions: communication, trust, flexibility, and compatibility between internal (often practitioner) and external (often researcher) partners. Discovering and developing these requires not just the good fortune of alignment of interests and availability, but also significant time and resources. This motivates understanding when it is worthwhile to nurture external partnerships, and when it is more efficient to allocate resources to generate the evidence internally.

Examining specific cases suggests a variety of possible factors to consider. In revising our assessments, practices, and supports of students' socioemotional learning (SEL) and behavior, we relied on external research partners with relevant expertise to help validate and refine our measurement of these skills, and to recommend practices demonstrated as effective in the research literature. Since the items still need further revision, these data are too formative for us to feel confident sharing with other external partners seeking to use them as evidence of students' SEL outcomes or growth. Similarly, our growing database of details on disciplinary referrals and behavioral interventions is both formative and highly sensitive, and thus not ready for sharing with external researchers. Instead, we are analyzing these data internally to share tentative findings with practitioners best positioned to make sense of the context and act on the results.
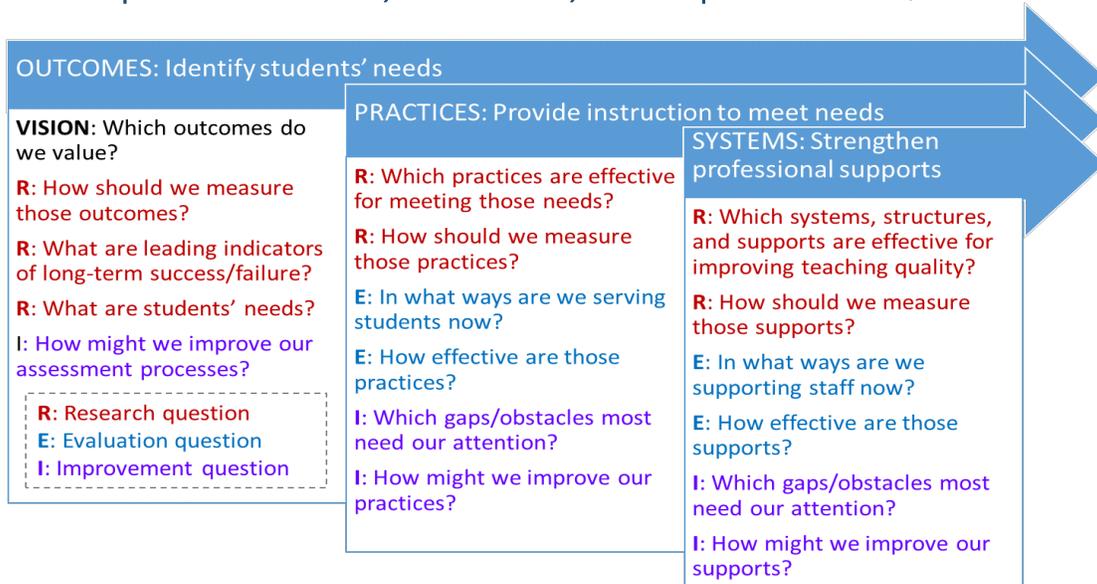
Multiple projects between our math department and external partners leverage those partners' content expertise in math education research, for developing assessments as well as for identifying, measuring, and establishing collaborative structures for supporting effective pedagogical practices. For initiatives with a high funding profile, we have engaged external evaluators to conduct observations and interviews. Our focus has been on analyzing longitudinal data that would require extensive matching across multiple levels and timepoints, as well as supporting the math team in rapid continuous improvement cycles to collect, analyze, and act on formative evidence. This last example illustrates how practitioners themselves can generate useful evidence to guide their own inquiry and action.

These cases reveal several pressures toward internal inquiry: (1) short timescale for decision-making; (2) early-stage measures; and (3) high sensitivity or cost of sharing data; as well as these pressures toward external inquiry: (4) specialized content expertise, (5) high-stakes evaluations demanding external independence, and (6) large scope requiring personnel-time beyond what the district has available.

Together, these dimensions highlight the important role for and factors supporting internally-generated evidence to guide districts' decision-making.

Figure 1.

## Examples of Research, Evaluation, and Improvement Questions

**OUTCOMES: Identify students' needs**

**VISION**: Which outcomes do we value?

**R**: How should we measure those outcomes?

**R**: What are leading indicators of long-term success/failure?

**R**: What are students' needs?

**I**: How might we improve our assessment processes?

> **R**: Research question
> **E**: Evaluation question
> **I**: Improvement question

**PRACTICES: Provide instruction to meet needs**

**R**: Which practices are effective for meeting those needs?

**R**: How should we measure those practices?

**E**: In what ways are we serving students now?

**E**: How effective are those practices?

**I**: Which gaps/obstacles most need our attention?

**I**: How might we improve our practices?

**SYSTEMS: Strengthen professional supports**

**R**: Which systems, structures, and supports are effective for improving teaching quality?

**R**: How should we measure those supports?

**E**: In what ways are we supporting staff now?

**E**: How effective are those supports?

**I**: Which gaps/obstacles most need our attention?

**I**: How might we improve our supports?

**Abstract #2**
**Towards a mutually beneficial relationship: What is the role of district-based research staff in research-practice partnerships?**
Joy Lesnick
School District of Philadelphia

District-based research staff often find themselves in between the labels of researcher and practitioner. To our district colleagues, we're seen as researchers, and to our external research colleagues, we're seen as practitioners. In actuality, it's a necessary and perfect intermediary role. But how does this in-between role work with external research partners - and whose capacity are they/we trying to build?

In this panel presentation, I'll describe two recent examples where projects conducted within research-practice partnerships led to opportunities for system-level capacity building. In both cases, the complementary work of external and district researchers helped to build the organizational capacity of the district. Rather than building the *individual capabilities* of researchers or practitioners, the projects provide examples of ways in which the district is learning from research, making connections across district program offices, and extending to new opportunities for using research evidence in meaningful ways.

In both examples, opportunities arose out of RPP projects that were initiated with program offices. The first, a partnership between the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (PERC) and the School District of Philadelphia's (SDP) Office of Education Technology focused on the implementation of a district-wide blended learning initiative. Discussions of research and evidence were key parts of early project meetings, and the district's deputy chief for Ed Tech was very interested in using evidence to inform future procurement decisions. When the time came to write the solicitation for vendors, the district research office was asked to be at the planning table and to contribute suggestions for how evidence could be included in the solicitation (so that vendors would be required to provide evidence that their proposed approach had supporting evidence). Although the deputy chief already had an interest in using research/evidence, the RPP project helped to make a timely connection - and opened a window of opportunity for growing organizational capacity for evidence use.

A second project example was a partnership between PERC and SDP's Office of Multicultural Programs. The descriptive study provided information about time to proficiency for Kindergarten English learners (ELs) across the district. Since the publication of the report and additional dissemination opportunities (including media attention and a forthcoming podcast), we have changed how we internally classify ELs in our performance management dashboards; in particular, this classification now explicitly informs actionable next steps at the school and district levels, and generates additional internal/external ideas for exploring early warning indicators for students at risk of becoming long term ELs.

Both projects could have been completed by the district research team (we had the capability to do so), but the RPP brought both additional capacity (person-power) to do the work. More importantly, the combination of internal and external research capacity, communication, and creativity provided opportunities to extend the influence of the project and increase

organizational capacity to learn from the results and to develop processes that support thoughtful evidence use.

**Abstract #3**
**The School District Department of Research and Evaluation: The Original RPP**
Matthew Linick
Cleveland Metropolitan School District

The concept of "building practitioner capacity" to conduct or use research can often vary in how it is defined. For example, some organizations (such as the Strategic Data Project) seek to *develop* the capacity of school districts by placing trained researchers within the district itself, while others (such as the Regional Education Laboratories) seek to *lend* capacity by supporting districts externally. In both of these examples, however, it is often the assumption (and many times the case) that the targeted school districts have little or insufficient capacity to begin with.

What about the cases in which the school district has already invested in building its capacity internally and without the assistance of external partners? Many school districts, for example, have established and developed in-house departments of Research and Evaluation. These departments are typically staffed by Ph.D.-trained researchers who are often actively involved in formulating, conducting, and disseminating internal research projects that are not only of interest to district leaders, but will most certainly inform decision-making given their origins and motivation.

As research-practice partnerships (RPPs) increase in popularity and receive more and more attention from foundations, governmental organizations, and education leaders, determining what is meant by a "research-practice partnership" becomes increasingly important. While the term RPP typically applies to partnerships between districts and universities or other research organizations, it is important to recognize that in many larger school districts, departments of Research and Evaluation represent an older, more entrenched version of the RPP--one where the job roles of "researchers" and "practitioners" are most certainly blurred. What research projects are appropriate for this version of an RPP and when is it more appropriate to engage with external partners? If engaging with external partners, does it need to be with universities or other organizations purely devoted to research? Are there opportunities to instead collaborate with other similarly structured school districts, generating cross-district research and reimagining the concept of RPPs altogether (and forming RPPs where again, the roles of "researchers" and "practitioners" are quite fluid)? Could this lead to the development of *district-based* research and evaluation strategies, and the "building of practitioner capacity" driven *by districts*?

In this panel, I will discuss how the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) uses original, internally produced research and evaluation evidence to drive district decision-making. This model of the in-house research department could serve as a good example of best practices for external partners in RPPs that are interested in learning how to support evidence use in practice.

Second, I will share an inter-district project on enrollment projection methodology. In particular, I will discuss how CMSD worked collaboratively with another large school district to conduct original research on this topic, and more broadly, how CMSD worked with additional districts to support their efforts in improving their own enrollment projection methods. This project provides

a good example of a practical problem that is faced by many large districts, and how cross-district supports could best serve the needs of districts.

Finally, I will discuss a vision for what cross-district research and evaluation sharing could look like. Are there models of evidence sharing that can be used to improve cross-district collaboration and support? Can we build a district-driven and utilized "What Works Clearinghouse"? Could districts support and assist each other through a research sharing system like the Ask-A-REL program?