

Steps for Maximizing Research Use

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Even high-quality research often fails to have an impact on practice and policy, as researchers tend to focus on research rigor while largely ignoring practical use. Education research-practice partnerships (RPPs), such as those between research institutions and entities like school districts, state education agencies, or individual campuses, make efforts to create conditions which result in maximizing research use. This brief highlights nine bridging strategies implemented by an RPP, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University. Over the past twelve years, HERC has served as an RPP between Rice and 11 Houston-area school districts, conducting research projects related to student equity, student mobility, long-term English learners, prekindergarten, and many other efforts that aim to benefit hundreds of thousands of students in the region. HERC researchers engage with school district partners to bridge the research-practice-policy gap, ensure that research questions speak to real challenges that school districts want to solve, and enable research to have an impact beyond academic intellectual contributions. This research model involves collaborating and communicating extensively with school district partners prior to, during, and after each research project is completed, in addition to sharing research findings with the broader community to empower other stakeholders to use and build upon the findings. The primary issues this brief tackles are the traditions and systems in place and how they do or do not allow for engagement between education practitioners and researchers as partners in education research. Highlighted are strategies to overcome some of these challenges and an example of a case illustrating how a post-research, district-wide meeting built stronger connections and spawned additional research questions for future collaborative work.

Based on the experiences of partnership between researchers and practitioners, HERC has developed a set of recommendations for impacting policies and practices in school districts, research institutions, and philanthropy to increase the use of research evidence in decision making, including:

- **Practitioners** should build explicit opportunities to engage in partnership work to increase the voice of practitioners in developing research as well as identifying opportunities to use research in decision making.
- **Researchers** should expand the types of research that are valued in the academy by teaching the next generation of researchers strategies for partnership research and providing support to scholars engaged in partnership research through resources and opportunities for advancement.
- **Funders** should identify opportunities to explicitly support work conducted in the partnership model to increase the likelihood of the use of research by educational entities, especially as federal agencies and national and local philanthropic organizations are developing their funding priorities.

The Research-Policy Gap in Educational Decisionmaking

Too often, education research is conducted in academic research settings by researchers who are focused on their own re-

search agendas or topics they find interesting. In a time of limited funding available to school districts, research-informed decisions can help practitioners maximize the resources they do have in an effort to serve students equitably.

In order to increase the likelihood

that high quality research is used by decision makers at all policy levels, from campus level programming to state-level education policies, researchers must be willing to engage with practitioners in a different way. The creation of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are one strategy for creating this bridge between research and policy. In an RPP, researchers and practitioners come together to set a joint research agenda, which is mutually beneficial, and involves conducting research and communicating in a different way than the traditional academic research model. Further, RPPs differ from traditional academic research in that they are (1) built as long-term relationships, (2) specifically focused on educational outcomes or equitable transformations based on research findings, and (3) intentionally organized to allow for diverse viewpoints and expertise to aid in the research process and evaluation.¹

In recent years, RPPs have grown from being a newer, promising approach to scale the use of research in improving educational programs, policies, and practices, to being a more widespread and trusted process to connect different stakeholders across the educational ecosystem.^{1,2} Furthermore, interest and investment from philanthropy, foundations, and the federal sector has helped fuel research-practice partnership growth and reach in the past decade.³ This growth has led to a wide range of partnership types, processes, and evaluation methods and metrics. While many different kinds of RPPs have been successful, HERC's long-standing and growing relationships suggest that their process is an example of how school districts and researchers can benefit when bringing together researchers, practitioners, and other educational stakeholders.

This policy brief outlines ways in which HERC has approached partnership research that contributes toward furthering academic research and improving educational and equitable outcomes for students in the Houston region.

The case examples and recommendations in this policy brief are intended for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and educational researchers engaged or planning to engage in RPP work. Educational researchers and policymakers or practitioners often do not have well-established communication channels or feedback loops,^{4,5} space for open and honest conversations about their joint work and evaluation,^{4,6,7} nor clear plans of action based on the RPP project or future work to further advance educational outcomes and reduce inequities in school systems.^{2,5} Because one of the main focuses of an RPP is to advance equitable outcomes and transformations based on academic research findings, RPPs that do not consider the perspectives of both researchers and practitioners involved in the partnership may not fully address the specific challenges that prompt the partnership in the first place. Furthermore, lack of communication, trust, or planning may result in unintended consequences or outcomes of well-intentioned work. For example, practitioners may become skeptical of academic research that does not support their lived experiences or that is not produced in a timely matter,² or researchers may avoid partnerships if practitioners do not implement work that directly reflects their findings.

RPP Strategies & the Houston Education Research Consortium

The Houston Education Research

Consortium (HERC) aims to improve the connection between education research and decision-making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities. HERC started as a partnership with the Houston Independent School District (HISD) in 2011, and it has since grown to partner with 10 additional school districts in the Houston region, serving over 700,000 students. HERC projects span pre-k through 12th grade and beyond and have included topics such as student equity, student mobility, long-term English learners, prekindergarten, social and emotional skills, postsecondary readiness, and wraparound needs and services. HERC aims to bridge three elements of the research-practice gap: (1) to ensure that knowledge produced by researchers is used by practitioners to benefit the broader community, (2) to align timelines for both researchers' evaluations and practitioners' decision-making processes, and (3) to match the context and application of a research study to the population(s) or region(s) where programs or policies are needed.

A. Before Any Research Project

Prior to the start of any new research study, HERC establishes and maintains a partnership with the school district, secures the funding required for the research, and co-develops a research agenda with the researchers and district leaders.

1. Establish the partnership

Most importantly, HERC sees their partnership as doing research with the school district rather than on the school district. This means that researchers work with the partnering school district to understand con-

text, build trust, be transparent in research motivations and work capacities, and plan for ongoing communication and engagement throughout the research process. For example, it is important for both the researchers and the school district partners to understand the school or unit's mission, needs, constraints, and capacity to continue the work after the research project. In this way, the partners can clearly identify how the research project benefits students. This likely involves having evidence to support ongoing or new initiatives, policies, or programs, but this can also involve benefits such as having HERC act as a third-party evaluator or political buffer to support new initiatives. Having research that directly speaks to school district partners' needs helps the researchers understand elements that affect student outcomes and helps the practitioners better support initiatives, programs, and policies with data from their students.

2. Secure funding

Additionally, HERC secures funding for their research from grants, corporate sponsorships, foundations, individual donors, and endowment revenue. When the research side is able to bring funds to support the partnership, it lowers any possible financial burden on the district and allows for the research to be seen as neutral and impartial. Over the course of the 12 years HERC has been in existence, school districts in the region have received approximately \$30 million worth of research support, at no financial cost to them. Important in this type of partnership work is the ability to secure some flexible funding. This allows for research to occur in a timely manner, based on the needs of the partner, rather than waiting for a topic-specific research proposal to be written, reviewed, and awarded.⁸

3. Co-develop a research agenda

Once the partnership is established, but prior to any research project work, researchers and school district leaders co-develop a research agenda and a theory of action for the desired student outcomes. Because the purpose of the RPP is to bring together diverse forms of expertise, both parties work together to jointly develop research questions based on the site of the research project. Researchers and practitioners co-develop a Theory of Change template to help guide conversations and clarify the school district's current state, desired end goals, and key questions they want to answer together. Asking questions about a research question to school district partners such as: what decision are you trying to inform with this research question, how will answering this research question help you make that decision, and when are you making that decision, can help align the researchers and the practitioners and ensure that the research questions being asked empower the practitioners to make the decisions that are important to them and increase the likelihood of the use of research evidence.⁹

B. During the Research Partnership and Project

Due to the long-term nature of RPPs, HERC sees regular communication, flexibility in project scope and timelines, and shared discussions about preliminary findings as crucial elements of a successful partnership with Houston-area school districts.

4. Communicate regularly

In addition to clear and collaborative communication prior to the start of a research project, it is just as important for researchers

and school district partners to maintain regular communication throughout the research project process. Being transparent, respectful, and honest about the process and goals can help build trust throughout the research process. This means that researchers and practitioners feel comfortable sharing any challenges or mistakes that happen throughout the process, which can help foster long-term relationships, and, ultimately, research projects that help practitioners in a real way.

5. Maintain flexibility with process and timelines

Because partnerships between researchers and practitioners can be challenging due to different norms of interaction, roles, or responsibilities,¹⁰ HERC understands that being flexible with and responsive to new challenges that might disrupt the initial timeline is important for long-term progress. Both parties want to solve problems and ultimately improve and transform educational practices, and this sometimes involves re-assessing the feasibility and work for the project. The most recent example of this was during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Houston-area school districts noticed that, despite concerted efforts to engage students and families during the transition to online instruction, students' enrollments declined and the number of students failing at least one class dramatically increased.¹¹ HERC shifted current work to make room for new, urgently-needed work. Building on a pre-existing project, researchers developed a student engagement survey that aimed to measure obstacles preventing students from attending or engaging in school and potential supports that the school districts could enlist.¹¹ The survey findings allowed school district leaders to understand how the pandemic changed situations

for Houston-area families and enabled them to shift resources to support students in need of support.

6. Share and discuss preliminary findings

The nature of long-term and trust-driven partnerships allows HERC researchers to engage with school district partners throughout the research process to share preliminary findings of smaller parts of the research project. Because HERC understands the full context of the school district partner's needs and goals, their regular engagement and genuine buy-in with the project allows both parties to pivot based on preliminary findings or changing priorities. This was prevalent in the COVID-19 pandemic student survey where school district leaders were able to quickly understand how major challenges differed across students of different race/ethnicity, economic status, and language minority status, which allowed them to change their course of action for providing support to students.¹¹ Furthermore, because some projects span several years, sharing some preliminary findings before the end of the project scope can help school district partners take action in a more timely manner.

C. After the Research Partnership and Project

Because the goal of research-practice partnerships is to ensure that the research conducted helps practitioners with real and important questions in the field, the communication for both parties after the completion of any research project is an essential step to ensure that the findings help the school district partner, the students in particular, and the community at large.

7. Share and discuss findings with the partners

HERC researchers first share the findings of all research projects directly with the

school district partners. Their main goal is to inform the decision-makers and to make suggestions for their challenges, in their contexts. This means that HERC researchers share findings with school district partners even before a report is published to allow for the district to act on findings that align with their needs and timelines and to be prepared to respond to the public.¹¹ Although HERC researchers stay in regular contact with school district partners, the completion of a project is an opportunity to share the full findings with the relevant leaders and have a conversation about what they mean for the district and potentially future research projects. Higher turnover in the district can be a challenge to ensure that all of the necessary leadership is informed at all times, but institutionalizing the partnership across departments can help keep the partnership going strong even during leadership transitions.

8. Share and discuss findings with the school district board members

To act on the findings of the research-practice partnership, for some projects HERC researchers also present their findings to the school board, which makes the final call and recommendations for particular programs, initiatives, policies, and related communication. Having an established research partner at Rice University is helpful to aid in the validity of the work. As one senior administrator mentioned: "I appreciate having [HERC] as a partner in this. Luckily, in our case, we have a Board who is largely interested in equity, but we also still answer to a Board, right? So how much we are pushing a particular sort of focus on equity is dependent on leadership, and I know in different districts this may look very different. I would just name that it's very helpful to have Rice University, as an external partner,

saying we are focused on this because this is important. And here's why, in ways that can supplement what we, what we believe or what we say about that.”

HERC can help add credibility to research in areas that may be controversial or politically charged. The work of this partnership is viewed as impartial and non-partisan, yet it is also viewed as an advocate for the district and its students.

9. Share and discuss findings with the broader community

After HERC completes a report about a research study, the Kinder Institute's communications team publishes it on the institute's website, which is linked to the school district's website, and they share it with local media and related stakeholders to engage the broader community about the research and implications for Houston-area school districts. Some research briefs are accompanied by blogs, op-eds, community meetings, and other efforts to ensure broad access and impact. They view their work as a public good. Stakeholders and the broader community have access to all research briefs and reports so that they can advocate for themselves, their organizations, and their children in a research-driven way. This advocacy spans beyond education and what the school districts can accomplish on their own. Other social institutions related to employment, housing, and healthcare also learn from their research findings to help students in the Houston region thrive in every aspect of their lives.

D. An Example of Strategies for Sharing Research: The Equity Project Event

As the previous sections show, having practitioners use research requires intentional

planning on how to share out and communicate results in a way that speaks to non-research audiences. This section details an example of one such share out that HERC facilitated at the conclusion of a study called the “Equity Project.”¹² The Equity Project was a multi-year, multi-topic study conducted in partnership with various departments across the district, in areas district leadership identified wanting to have more information about how and whether students had equitable access to resources and programming ranging from pre-k to technology to advanced course-taking.¹ This example highlights specific and intentional strategies to facilitate deeper engagement with research among school district partners, board members, and broader community as outlined in the last three strategies above. While this event was hosted within the context of an RPP, the facilitation strategies outlined below may also be used by anyone presenting research to a practitioner-facing audience.

Sharing Findings as a Strategy to Foster Cross-Departmental Collaboration

Though presenting findings intermittently throughout the course of a project has always been standard practice at HERC, hosting an event at the end of the Equity Project provided an opportunity to convene multiple departments within HISD to have a shared discussion about research findings. Often, departments in the central office of the district do not have many opportunities to cross paths and build connections. To facilitate this, we invited all chief officers and department leads to come together to learn the main takeaways from the Equity Project and create a space where those in Central Office could initiate new partnerships. These cross-departmental conversations allowed the space to jointly develop action steps to address areas of growth and reflect on how

1 For more information on the Equity Project, visit <https://kinder.rice.edu/initiative/the-equity-project>

organizational practices could change to break down departmental silos in ways that would streamline coordination across these various departments around a common goal. To ensure that members of different departments were in conversation with one another, attendees were asked to designate different members of their team to join one of five topical breakout groups so that perspectives from multiple departments were represented in every group. Furthermore, attendees were given time after the breakout groups to reunite with their department teams and debrief what they had discussed in their respective breakout groups. Through this facilitation structure, district partners were able to draw upon the wealth of knowledge already present in-house to prompt more purposeful dialogue on how to best serve students in the district.

Sharing Findings as a Strategy to Generate Action Items

In addition to presenting high-level findings from the Equity Project, another key goal of this event was to have district partners consider how they would use these findings to reflect on action items. This was especially important because HERC was slated to present findings from the Equity Project to the school board the following month, and the board would inevitably ask district administrators how HISD had acted upon these findings. Throughout the Equity Project Event, attendees were asked multiple times to brainstorm potential change ideas with members of their own department, members from different departments, and altogether as a group. Thus, the Equity Project event also acted as a call to action for district partners so that they would be poised to respond to the school board with concrete changes they had made based on these findings.

Sharing Findings as a Strategy to Demonstrate Responsiveness and Gauge Future Research Use

The Equity Project Event was not included as a deliverable in the initial Theory of Change for the project. Rather, it came from requests from department leaders, who wanted an opportunity to share much of these findings with colleagues in other departments and have a chance to engage with them in a systematic way to utilize the information to drive decision-making. Given the partnership model, it was important to exercise flexibility in ways that would prioritize the use of research evidence. While the conceptual use of research occurring at the event was clear (the research either confirmed what leaders had observed or expanded their understanding of the topics as it related to their district), it was a reminder that capturing instrumental use of research (research which is used to make decisions), may occur after a study concludes and is far more difficult to measure.^{13,14} In realizing HERC had not been capturing instances of instrumental use well in the past, there are now plans with the liaison embedded within the district to do more follow up with departments, at set intervals following the conclusion of a study, to try to better understand the variety of ways in which research is used.

Policy Recommendations

Encouraging the multi-directional engagement necessary for effective research use requires a fundamentally different approach to how the research process is structured. As such, creating the conditions for partnership work will require shifts from multiple stakeholders to build capacity for this kind of work, such as:

For Practitioners: Create structures to allow

for engagement in RPP work.

Those working in school districts often wear many different hats due to the nature of their work and have very limited time available to focus on RPP work. Without having people who are explicitly tasked with liaising with researchers, the time needed to sustain an effective partnership may be hard for someone to fit in their daily schedule. School districts and education practitioners could invest in evidence-based research use through their hiring decisions and allocation of personnel time to ensure there are dedicated brokers mediating the relationship between researchers and practitioners. If possible, the RPP may also fund a liaison at the school district.

For Researchers: Expand the types of research which are valued by academic institutions.

The research outputs and timelines that are typical within academia are often not aligned with the needs of practitioners. For example, peer-reviewed articles that can take multiple years to publish or presentations given at conferences intended for academics - accomplishments that are highly regarded in the tenure process - are often not accessible to education practitioners due to time constraints, paywalls, and lack of relevance to their specific context or concerns. Research institutions could support effective research use by expanding the kinds of research activities that are considered and rewarded in assessing academics' produc-

tivity such as research briefs, presentations with non-academic audiences, and convenings of multiple stakeholders within the school district about research findings. They could also support research-practice partnerships through resources like data storage infrastructure, communications and public relations, facilities, and funding. An additional way to demonstrate the value of partnership research is by building courses and training opportunities into programs of study that will help train the next generation of scholars in doing this type of work.

For Funders: Expand funding that supports RPP work.

As mentioned before, RPPs are established on the basis of long-term partnerships rather than one-off projects. Funders can incentivize effective research use through partnership research in two key ways. First, funders could encourage joint projects between researchers and practitioners by either giving priority to these kinds of projects or making them a requirement for applying for funding. Second, given that RPPs are meant to foster sustained relationships between researchers and practitioners, funders could provide funding opportunities that are not directly tied to projects but instead could be used for general operating expenses. This would provide RPPs with the flexibility to co-construct a research agenda that is relevant, timely, and actionable to all stakeholders in the RPP.

HERC's model for research-practice partnerships focuses on clear communication, trust-building, and co-working throughout the entire RPP relationship. While this is not the only model of successful research-practice partnerships, identifying elements prior to, during, and after a research project can help school district partners buy into the research project, work with researchers to ask and ultimately answer questions that can be actionable by practitioners, and to share the research findings that may also spark new partnerships and

allows HERC to serve as a coordinating and connecting force between district leaders and departments who might have related purviews but do not typically interact with each other. Furthermore, the partnership element of the RPPs also helps generate new research ideas that both the researchers and district leaders can collaborate on in future years. While HERC has found success in this model, general challenges in school districts such as higher turnover rates of school district leadership can hinder the partnerships, projects, and future actions, but the strategies listed above can help overcome these challenges. Through these strategies, we can help bridge the research-practice-policy gap and ensure that research is actionable and impactful.

Endnotes

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