Lessons Learned

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Addressing the Challenges of Building and Maintaining Effective Research Partnerships

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The use of research and data in decision making has become a popular mantra in education circles, but putting it into practice presents some real challenges. Often, educators and policymakers may not have the time or skills to identify, access, analyze, and apply data, or the capacity to use analysis to inform policies, programs, and resource allocation decisions. In addition, they may find that the available research evidence doesn't specifically address their problems, fails to relate to their specific context, or isn't presented in user-friendly language.

A popular and growing approach to overcoming these challenges is the creation of partnerships between educators and researchers designed to promote data and evidence use. Such partnerships, whether organized around the work of districts, states, or cross-regional networks, have proliferated in recent years. Research partnerships bring practitioners, policymakers, and researchers together to develop questions, share data, conduct analyses, and use results. Across the country, diverse partnerships are working together to solve problems and bridge the worlds of practice, policy, and research.

REL Northwest, one of 10 regional educational laboratories supported by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES), is working with eight research partnerships in our five-state region (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington). The goal is to build the capacity of our partners to identify, access, and apply data and research to make sound decisions that improve educational outcomes. Our ongoing collaboration with alliance members has yielded a range of initial lessons about building and maintaining effective research partnerships. These lessons are intended to inform others as they engage in this work.

Lesson #1 Establish a shared purpose and maintain focus.

Research partnerships are motivated by big problems (e.g., increase graduation rates, decrease the achievement gap, prepare all students for college). They're also driven by the expectation that research and evidence can help solve these problems. It is critical that partnerships keep this shared purpose in mind and ensure that each activity is connected to that purpose.

In our experience, the road to a shared purpose has not always been quick or direct. Initially, some of our research alliances constructed their purpose too hastily or without the involvement of all members. In other cases, there was broad initial interest in a topic, but over time members found little traction around the issue. Digging deeper into a topic, some alliances uncovered competing agendas that stalled their efforts. In all of these cases, the research alliances regrouped and revisited the focus of their work.

Engage key decisionmakers

The shared purpose must also be supported by key agency decisionmakers. Without their understanding and support, a research partnership may lack the power to affect change. Recognizing this need, one of our alliances started their work at the leadership level; seven superintendents formed a research alliance and articulated the shared purpose. The superintendents then identified the stakeholders who should

Lessons Learned About Effective Research Partnerships

1. Establish a shared purpose and maintain focus.
2. Communicate efficiently and strategically.
3. Ensure membership expectations are well-defined.
4. Anticipate the challenges involved in obtaining and using data.

The Prime Directive: Build Trusting Relationships

"In the universe of *Star Trek,* the Prime Directive, Starfleet's General Order number 1, is the most prominent guiding principle of the United Federation of Planets. The Prime Directive dictates that there can be no interference with the internal development of alien civilizations" ("Prime Directive," 2013, para. 1).

In our experience, if research partnerships have a Prime Directive, it is: Partners must establish, build, and guard trust. A partnership cannot flourish in an environment in which motivations are suspect, commitments are unclear, and capacity and capabilities are not employed fully to achieve the desired goals.

participate. While most of the day-to-day work was done by those stakeholders, the superintendents were kept updated and involved at a leadership level. Another alliance started by trying to reach consensus across all members, but reconfigured their structures to form a steering committee made up of one leader from each participating agency. Because of the political context in which the alliance operates, it is important to remain neutral and to ensure equal leadership representation.

Establish concrete goals

All of our alliances have made purpose tangible through written goals. For example, one research alliance composed of six districts has a goal to "decrease discipline disparities among student groups and decrease overall suspensions and expulsions." All member districts share this goal, although each district sets their own specific, measurable target (e.g., decrease the overall student suspension rate by 30 percent). Every alliance activity has been directly related to the overall goal: Products have included a descriptive research study of discipline disparities in member districts, a systematic review of district discipline policies, and a summary of research-based practices that can reduce disproportionate discipline.

Our alliances have also established goals that articulate *how* they work towards their shared purpose. As a regional educational laboratory, we are charged with "... increas[ing] the capacity of education policymakers and practitioners to use the knowledge generated from high-quality data analysis, research, and evaluation" (Easton, 2010). Therefore, our alliances have goals such as:

- Build common awareness and knowledge of research evidence about college and career readiness
- Increase the use of evidence and research in making education policy decisions
- Develop the capacity of the state's rural schools to use existing state and local data for decision making and program improvement

Finally, it is important to stay focused on the shared purpose. There are so many pressing issues, interests, and agendas that it can be easy for a research partnership to veer off course, change the agenda, or suggest activities that aren't aligned with their purpose. Consequently, keeping the goals at the center of the work is critical. Other strategies that have helped our research alliances stay focused include establishing a clear work plan, using a logic model, revisiting goals at each meeting, and using clear communication (described in Lesson 2).

Lesson #2 Communicate efficiently and strategically.

While it's important to share the work of your research partnerships with a broad range of external audiences, we've found that it is equally—if not more—important to pay attention to how you communicate with partnership members themselves.

At the outset, partnership organizers should clarify expectations about how frequently communications should occur and determine the preferred methods. The goal should be to update members and receive their feedback often enough to maintain interest and connections, but not so frequently as to become burdensome. Our alliance members have stressed to us the need to make communications "purposeful" and "meaningful"; to follow through on commitments; and to communicate realistic time lines about the progress of the work. Through member surveys we've also learned that we need to "be smart" about how we use online communications platforms, particularly to engage members of our region who live in remote, rural locations with limited bandwidth. And, while most communications will occur virtually because of financial and time constraints, in-person contact remains the most powerful way to connect with alliance members.

Tailor communications to fit the alliance's structure

Dealing with alliances that range from a half dozen principals scattered across two states to administrators and policymakers from more than 30 institutions and agencies, we've discovered there's no one-size-fits-all approach. To be effective, communications strategies must reflect the size of the partnership, the geographic dispersion of members, and the complexity of the group's agenda. For example, some of our larger alliances with representatives from many diverse organizations use robust, web-based Extranet sites that members can access with a password. The sites offer an interactive platform to pose discussion questions, solicit feedback on work in progress, post resources, maintain a record of meeting notes and activity plans, and announce upcoming events. One alliance lead hosts a monthly blog on the Extranet that summarizes recent activities and allows members to catch up if they aren't able to participate in meetings.

Another alliance with members drawn from a large network of school districts and partner organizations publishes regular updates in the network's biweekly enewsletter that goes to 40 stakeholders. Alliance members also give presentations at twice yearly network institutes that attract up to 300 people from school districts impacted by the alliance work.

Smaller alliances have found success staying in touch through regular phone calls and emails that supplement virtual and in-person meetings. In one alliance made up primarily of personnel within a state department of education, a single "champion" serves as the main point of contact. Alliance staff conducts phone conversations with this individual every two weeks to plan and report progress and to gather input. These calls offer an opportunity to touch base in between monthly meetings, reflecting on the past month's work and planning future activities. Alliance staff report that identifying one "go-to" person is an efficient way to move things forward and also helps build buy-in from members who are communicating with and through a trusted peer.

While it may not be practical or desirable to use a single champion as the main contact, we have found that the frequency and intensity of communications can vary depending on the alliance members' participation levels. Almost all of our alliances have tiered memberships, with communications tailored to each tier. Some information (e.g., announcements about upcoming in-person meetings, webinars, and evidence events; the publication of studies; and the availability of external funding) are broadly communicated to all alliance members. Information pertaining to meetings and ongoing studies conducted with advisory subgroups is communicated only to those involved in the work. The most frequent, in-depth communications occur between alliance staff and a select group of core members who provide strategic direction.

Seek input from members to create useful products

The need to establish two-way communications has been a common theme in surveys of our alliance members and in problem-solving sessions such as those held during REL Northwest's convening of alliance representatives. As one alliance member stated, "Researchers need to listen … not just guess or tell [people] what the researchers think is important." This requirement helps to reinforce the ultimate purpose of research partnerships to forge strong partnerships among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to work together and address the partners' self-defined problems of practice or policy.

In addition to coconstructing research agendas, we have tried various strategies to ensure alliance

Supporting Early Warning Systems in Montana
An example of creating "useful products"

Every 26 seconds a teenager drops out of school in the United States, according to a report by America's Promise Alliance. Montana is tackling that problem through Graduation Matters Montana, an ambitious statewide initiative that seeks to decrease dropout rates, particularly for non-White students.

As part of that effort, the state is developing an early warning system (EWS) to identify at-risk students while there is still time to provide the necessary supports to get them to the finish line. REL Northwest and its Montana Data Use Alliance are playing an important role by providing research, tools, and training in EWS implementation.

At the state's request, the alliance produced a report that examines different early warning systems across the country and highlights their structures and implementation practices. In response to alliance members' needs, REL Northwest developed a series of four, interactive, online modules that help districts systematically organize EWS teams, develop data reporting mechanisms, track interventions, and evaluate the system's effectiveness.

The online format is particularly well-suited to alliance members' needs: Montana districts are geographically far apart and some parts of the state are highly rural and remote. The modules allow members to work through materials at their own pace. Regular check-in calls by REL Northwest technical assistance experts help the districts customize the resources to their own contexts and a planned online chat room on a password-protected website will enable members to share their experiences as they use each module.

members' needs and wants drive the work. For example, as part of one alliance's regular meeting, REL Northwest staff conducted a focus group to elicit comments on useful data displays. A PowerPoint presentation set the stage, posing questions that small groups of members should ask themselves as they did a gallery walk of three stations featuring displays (e.g., pie charts, bar graphs, pictograms, etc.) drawn from actual research reports. At each station, a staff member recorded detailed qualitative feedback about which audiences would find the displays most useful, whether there was too much or not enough detail, and how the titles could be more meaningful. The group's preferences will guide how we present findings in an upcoming report for the alliance.

A final takeaway about communications: Document the evolution of the research partnership so that you will be able to reflect back on critical junctures. By tracking important ideas, progress, challenges, and opportunities on a regular basis, you will be able to paint a more complete picture of what it takes to successfully lead this work. And, you will be able to share with members the important contributions they are making to this still-emerging field.

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Lesson #3 Ensure membership expectations are well-defined.

The new vision of research partnerships emphasizes *mutualism,* a term that means practitioners and researchers authentically work together toward a common goal, common aims, shared values, and equal authority (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). This way of working is quite different from the past, when practitioners were often the recipients of, not partners in, educational research. In many of the alliances we support, the transition to mutualism has not happened automatically. Defining the expectations of membership for *both* researchers and practitioners has been an important step towards mutualism.

To illustrate the concept of mutualism more concretely to our partners, we used a race car analogy. In the "old" partnership model, the researchers drove the race car while practitioners waited for the results at the finish line. In the new model, the practitioner drives the car, with the researcher team serving as "support crew," supplying the research tools that help the driver around the track. While this analogy was well-received, it did not immediately result in a transformation to the new model: Both practitioners and researchers were somewhat set in their existing roles. It took time to build explicit expectations for membership and for the roles of specific members.

For example, one alliance established a work flow plan with explicit tasks assigned *in between* bimonthly meetings. Members agreed to identify specific data variables that should be available across all departments. The next month, they checked the status of their progress by asking each other questions such as: What have you done? What challenges have you encountered? Members brought their variable lists to the next in-person meeting for discussion. The cycle was then repeated, reinforcing the expectation that members would participate in alliance-driven work between meetings.

Find strategies for making time

Lack of time remains one of the toughest challenges to achieving mutualism. We have tried multiple strategies to address this barrier. First, we schedule a minimal number of meetings and try to keep them short and focused. "Short" can mean as brief as a 15-minute phone call or a webinar when members are really pressed for time. These check-ins keep the work flowing, without requiring a substantial time commitment. When half-day or full-day meetings are necessary, organizers gather member input on the agenda. The meeting organizers also hold practice sessions, seeking feedback from colleagues to help ensure that the agenda is precise and well-organized.

We've learned that not all alliance members can participate at equal levels all of the time. Therefore, membership expectations need to be differentiated to meet various types of involvement. In many alliances we have established "tiers" of membership. For example, members in one large cross-district alliance who choose tier 1 participation are active in work groups and help shape the alliance's direction, activities, and products. Members choosing tier 2 do not participate in work groups, but receive and discuss the products and lessons learned from the tier 1 cohort.

Expect change

Membership changes are also inevitable: Retirement, promotions,

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or transfers result in turnover and new members who must be briefed on the alliance history, goals, and membership expectations. This was the case in an alliance where half of the district leaders changed after the first year. The alliance coordinator relied heavily on returning members from those districts to keep momentum going. She also individually briefed each new superintendent on the purpose and structure of the alliance. And, the first alliance meeting with all of the new members was restructured so there was time to revisit the purpose and expectations of the partnership.

The above example illustrates a final lesson we have learned about establishing well-defined expectations: It takes time and resources. Personal relationships with members, outreach through individual phone calls, and on-site visits are labor-intensive but contribute to reinforcing mutualism and developing a well-defined, active partner membership.

Lesson # 4 Anticipate the challenges involved in obtaining and using data.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has called data "the road map to reform" (Duncan, 2009). Finding and using the most salient data sources to address educational issues is at the heart of what research partnerships do. In some instances, however, this may be easier said than done.

One potential issue is simply securing data in a timely manner. Our various alliance partnerships require us to develop and maintain data-sharing agreements with more than 40 state and local agencies. Not surprisingly this can be a time consuming and frustrating exercise for everyone involved. To address this challenge, we now engage the relevant state and local data staff in alliance deliberations from the beginning. If data administrators are not part of the alliance membership, extra communication may be needed to explain which data are required, when they're needed, and how the secure transfer of those data will be accomplished.

Likewise, alliance members need to be kept updated on how long it may take to obtain and clean data, complete the analysis, and ultimately disseminate the findings. Consider incorporating useful, shorter term activities that yield more timely results.

Working with your research partners to identify data sources across different institutions can be one helpful approach to building members' ability to find and use the data they need to inform policy and practice. For example, we worked with one statewide alliance of higher education, state education agency (SEA), and governmental representatives to gather information about relevant data on college and career readiness that are currently available in the state, their quality, and their potential usefulness for answering specific education policy questions.

Through a series of small-group meetings, alliance members

Reaching Out to a Wider Audience

In our lessons we focus on communications within research partnerships. It's important, also, to consider communicating about the partnerships and their activities to a broader audience. Members can be the most effective ambassadors for the work. Consequently, they need well-crafted products that reflect local contexts and appeal to an array of audiences.

Both research (Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen, 2009) and an independent evaluation of our alliance work stress the need "to produce useful and timely things." Among the specific recommendations of our alliance members are:

- Create shorter publications such as data briefs that can be shared quickly
- Focus research reports on answering questions that more directly inform policy and practice
- Seek feedback from stakeholders on the utility of reports
- Develop materials with broad cross-audience appeal that schools and districts can use with parents, students, policymakers, business leaders, and others
- Consider creative dissemination methods such as videos and organize forums timed to precede legislative sessions

Your research partnership members comprise a valuable focus group to help you target dissemination efforts for maximum impact.

developed a definition of college and career readiness and discussed the indicators to measure it. These technical assistance activities led to an annotated data codebook that describes the availability and quality of data elements in different systems—from individual school districts to the SEA, to postsecondary institutions, to the state labor and workforce agency. Included in the codebook is a list of specific policy questions and where to find the answers.

Framing actionable questions

Another challenge of partnership work is identifying questions that are meaningful to practitioners and policymakers in the partnership, and can be answered with the available data. Often partnerships produce research questions and agendas that are too broad, too general, or cannot be answered through available data (Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009). To address this challenge, researchers may need to develop their own capacity to facilitate productive conversations about potential research topics and questions and help partners develop clear and succinct questions that are specific to policy and educational needs. Much of our own internal professional development with staff has focused on building their capacity to facilitate conversations with practitioners and policymakers that produce actionable research questions that are enthusiastically owned by alliance members. We also pay intense attention to this skill set in hiring researchers and technical assistance experts.

Summary

Using relevant data and research evidence to improve decision making is a core value shared by most educators, policymakers, and researchers. Yet, living up to this value can be devilishly difficult, owing to time, knowledge, and the professional cultures and relationships that too often wall off these communities from each other.

In our experience, research alliances and similar partnerships offer a highly promising strategy for bringing these worlds closer together and realizing the ambitious goals that bring us to this work. We hope these lessons ring true to those engaged actively in partnership work, and provide food for thought to those just setting out in this challenging and rewarding space.

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