ARE YOU READY TO WORK IN A RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP?

A self-directed guide to help assess your state education agency's potential to successfully engage in a research-practice partnership

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INTRODUCTION

This self-directed guide is intended for state education agencies (SEAs) interested in working with external research partners in the context of a research-practice partnership (RPP). RPPs are long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations between education researchers and practitioners in order to co-develop research agendas that prioritize problems of practice. Although they can take a variety of forms, RPPs commonly involve universities or research institutions and schools, districts, or SEAs.

While RPPs hold great promise to support education leaders' decision making, recent research suggests there are important initial conditions on the practice-side that may lead to more productive partnering (Farrell and Coburn, 2017). This guide walks readers through four dimensions related to an SEA's capacity to engage productively with an external partner, with a set of exploratory questions to help provoke conversations within an SEA or between an SEA and external partner around the potential to engage in RPP-related work.

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PART A: REFLECTIONS ON AGENCY CULTURE

1 CURRENT ORGANIZATIONAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE WITHIN THE SEA

IN THEORY

Prior to partnering, SEAs should first consider their **existing content knowledge or expertise within the topic** the SEA is interested in studying with external partners. Depending on the research question, relevant knowledge or expertise could involve different departments (e.g., curriculum & instruction versus accountability). Note that it is not necessary for everyone in the SEA to be content-experts; rather, it is important to **know where content experts reside within the SEA.**

IN PRACTICE

In **Tennessee,** the content teams that take part in the partnership carry as much of the responsibility for success as the research team. This means there is a significant time commitment required on the part of content experts - those in early literacy, in school turnaround, in middle grades math, and so on - but it also means **they become fluent in the research and build new understandings of their work** based on the engagement with the researchers.

After reading the above, take some time to reflect on your SEA's potential in this area:

- ✓ What are the current strengths and where is expertise available in the SEA?
- ✓ What are big challenges or needs on the horizon where additional, complementary expertise could be useful?

2 STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE SEA

IN THEORY

Strategic knowledge leadership is **one's ability to locate and incorporate existing knowledge sources within the organization, scan the larger field for relevant knowledge, and synthesize these two sources of knowledge and link it with the organization's current routines.** The degree to which SEA leaders **may be willing to engage with external partners** or **how much they value external expertise** is a critical aspect of strategic knowledge leadership. Additionally, **SEA leaders may need to serve as "knowledge brokers"** within the organization, helping others within the SEA understand how new knowledge or frameworks connect to their current work.

IN PRACTICE

In **Massachusetts, Carrie serves as a knowledge broker** in the partnerships she manages with the MA Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education, helping her practice-side team to navigate the research. Through this critical role, **she is able to facilitate effective communications across both the research and practice sides** of the partnership, as she is well-versed in the language, culture, and routines characterizing both contexts. While in Carrie's case she is internal to the SEA, she notes that in other cases **the knowledge broker role may instead come from the research side or even both sides of the partnership.**

After reading the above, take some time to reflect on your SEA's potential in this area:

- ✓ What's the history of partnering with external research partners in your agency? When have these partnerships been productive or not?
- ✓ Does the agency or the external research partners have someone who can serve in a knowledge broker role?
- ✓ Is there an "appetite" in the agency for research findings?

3 COMMUNICATION PATHWAYS IN THE SEA

IN THEORY

Prior to partnering, it is also important to **consider the existing communication pathways within the SEA.** Your agency will be more likely to engage productively with an external partner if there are ways to share learning, ideas, and questions **internally** with one another. These **pathways can be informal,** such as opportunities to meet in the hallways after meetings, **or more formal,** such as regularly scheduled departmental meetings or cross-departmental working groups.

IN PRACTICE

In Massachusetts, the state's turnaround work is led by the Office of the Statewide System of Support (OSSS) but **involves frequent and close collaboration with other internal experts,** such as staff focused on curriculum framework implementation, English language acquisition, and educator quality, in addition to the research team. **OSSS is responsible for coordinating these conversations** through regularly scheduled project-specific and cross-team meetings.

After reading the above, take some time to assess your SEA's potential in this area:

- ⊘ Where are there opportunities for departments to work together?

- ⊘ Where are there departmental silos, where there could be more cross-team work?

- ⊘ Are there times and spaces where different departments can learn from one another (either through formal meetings, cross-functional teams or less formally)?

4 RESOURCES FOR PARTNERING WITHIN THE SEA

IN THEORY

Beyond these organizational capacities to engage with external partners, there is the additional **logistical consideration for whether your agency may have the time or related resources to partner.** Coordinating schedules, negotiating research agendas, and developing a shared language that will be understood both by the research and practice sides all takes commitment and time, and are essential ingredients to building a successful RPPs.

IN PRACTICE

Patience is a virtue: Note that work in the beginning stages of an RPP may yield little return on investment, as partners will need to spend time building foundations of trust, negotiating roles and responsibilities for partnership efforts, and co-developing research agendas - all of which is necessary for a successful partnership but delays potential impacts. As Nate from Tennessee notes, **"Very little in our partnerships paid off for the first year and a half of work."**

After reading the above, take some time to assess your SEA's potential in this area:

- ⊘ Are there leaders within your agency that are particularly interested in working with external researchers?

- ⊘ Is there an opportunity to develop intentional structures for interacting with external researchers?

- ⊘ What's the level of urgency within your SEA towards demonstrating "impact" of collaborations with external research partners?

HOW DO WE START?

After going through this self-directed guide and reflecting and assessing your agency's potential to engage with external research partners in an RPP, a few additional questions your agency might consider prior to partnering include:

- Is your agency better positioned for a successful partnership effort along certain dimensions? Are there other dimensions where there is considerable work to be done? How might your agency prioritize these early on or prior to partnering?

- Looking at the bigger picture, are there additional considerations related to your agency's culture, structure, or processes that may promote or inhibit a successful partnership with external researchers? How might your agency support or address these?

Both Carrie and Nate note that in their experiences, there needs to be a **sufficient appetite or demand for research** within the agency in order to partner successfully with external researchers. And while it's certainly helpful if this type of culture is agency-wide, they also suggest that **one or a few critical roles within the SEA can create the necessary demand** for research to start a partnership with.

To that end, the **most straight-forward approach to getting a partnership up and running is to start with a small collaborative research project co-developed with external partners,** according to Carrie and Nate. Even if your agency's culture may not quite be fully supportive of collaborating with external research partners (yet), Carrie and Nate both suggest that developing key structures and processes within the SEA essential to supporting the partnership (such as those described in this guide) can help shift agency culture to one that is more receptive to partnership work over time.

CONNECT WITH NNERPP

The National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) aims to develop, support, and connect partnerships between education agencies and research institutions in order to improve the relationships between education research, policy, and practice.

Through its large network of members distributed across the country, NNERPP develops and implements critical services for ongoing shared learning opportunities across its members in order to build a sustainable infrastructure that supports the full development of individual partnerships and advances the field of RPPs as a whole.

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