

# Partnerships: Shifting the Dynamics between Research and Practice

Vivian Tseng, Ph.D.

Vice President for Program, William T. Grant Foundation

In May, the William T. Grant Foundation launched a learning community aimed at strengthening research-practice partnerships in education. The idea was simple: convene a small group of researchers and urban school districts working in long-term institutional collaborations. The first meeting demonstrated the potential for partnerships to improve research, practice, and connections between the two.

The meeting harnessed participants' diverse expertise and approaches in order to forge stronger, collective knowledge of how to build and maintain successful partnerships. District leaders discussed the usefulness of research partners who can study problems over time, help them use research to make improvements, and provide targeted syntheses of research on key topics. In a session on how partnerships add value, the Middle School Mathematics and the Institutional Setting of Teaching (MIST) and Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) shared their strategies for producing research to improve practice. MIST collaborates with districts to study their strategies for improving middle school math in order to inform district leaders' understanding of how their theories of action play out in classrooms and ways to adjust their work. CCSR identifies key indicators that the district and schools can use to drive improvement. For example, their "on-track indicator" has helped the district and schools reduce the high school dropout rate. Throughout the meeting, participants shared strategies for building strong relationships and trust, developing shared commitments, and creating an open dialogue to improve research and its use.

These partnerships challenge the way the field has traditionally thought about research and practice, which I discussed in our 2011 Annual Report. Significant effort has focused on getting practitioners to adopt and implement evidence-based programs and practices and on getting researchers to improve their communication, distribution, and marketing of research to practitioners. The focus in all these cases has been on pushing research out.

Research-practice partnerships shift that dynamic. Instead of asking how researchers can produce better work for practitioners, partnerships ask how researchers and practitioners can jointly define research questions. Rather than asking how researchers can better disseminate research to practitioners, partnerships strive for mutual understanding and shared commitments from the beginning. Successful partnerships enable researchers to develop stronger knowledge of practitioners' challenges, their contexts, and the opportunities and limitations for using research. And they allow practitioners to develop greater trust of the research and deeper investment in its production and use.

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Partnerships, however, face challenges. They must develop joint research agendas that meet multiple stakeholders' needs, navigate the different timeframes between research and practice, maintain trust even when research findings can damage districts' public images, and preserve collaboration as leadership changes. Several partnerships have developed strategies to combat these obstacles. Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) has non-negotiable ground rules: districts have the final say on the research questions, researchers determine the best methods for studying the questions, and SERP ensures that the work is relevant across districts. CCSR has a longstanding "no surprises" policy under which key reports are shared with the district before they are made public. This allows the district to prepare a response rather than scramble in the middle of a media frenzy. The Carnegie Foundation's Networked Improvement Communities seek to accelerate improvement in education by re-engineering the research and development process. Their networks identify core problems of practice and test change ideas in rapid cycles of research and action.

Going forward, partnerships like these can sharpen the field's understanding of how to build stronger connections between research and practice. One issue is how research can inform systems change. In the area of teacher evaluation, for example, researchers and practitioners work at different scales. While researchers focus on small, discrete elements such as how to measure effective teaching, district leaders need to design systems for using those measures at scale. District administrators look to research to help them make design choices, monitor their implementation, and understand their effectiveness.

Over the next several years, we will continue to work with the Forum for Youth Investment to support this learning community of research-practice partnerships. As partnerships become more popular, the field needs stronger knowledge about what it takes to foster effective collaboration. This community should yield lessons about successful partnership strategies and the conditions that support joint work. We also hope these partnerships may provide insight into how the broader research and practice communities can build stronger bridges. We look forward to sharing those lessons with the field.

*See the Forum for Youth Investment's Annotated Bibliography for more resources on Research-Practice Partnerships.*