

Five Ways RPPs Can Fail and How to Avoid Them

Applying Conceptual Frameworks to Improve RPPs

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Introduction

After a number of years on the front lines in our respective agencies, we value the ability of RPPs to help us systematically improve our agencies' work. We believe that students and schools are better served in Tennessee and Massachusetts because of our agencies' deep participation in shared research projects on our highest priority strategic initiatives. Nevertheless, our experiences leave us skeptical that most RPPs will realize their full potential to deeply integrate research and practice in ways that produce stronger educational outcomes.

This is not because we doubt the intentions of either the researchers or practitioners who are entering into these partnerships with increasing frequency. On the contrary, our agency colleagues are eager to learn about and improve their work through research, and our research partners focus on education policy and programs because they hope their research will make a difference for students and teachers. RPPs offer an opportunity to channel these desires and build productive relationships that improve student outcomes through rigorous, relevant research. Yet, even when both parties enter a partnership with the best of intentions, we have been struck by how difficult it is to make the most of this opportunity.

While partnerships have the potential to move research and practice beyond the status quo, partners are often pressured by their immediate environments toward the opposite: actions or inactions that unintentionally undermine nascent RPPs. Over time, prospective partnerships can quickly degenerate into something that looks a lot like indifference. Academics, working to build upon broader bodies of knowledge, seek data or subjects to interrogate

and look for opportunities to use rigorous research methods. Practitioners, knowing that they face constraints outside the scope of the research, plunge forward with the assumption that the research will either validate or help them fine-tune their approach—and, if it doesn't, they often find reasons to explain away the findings.

We worry that without purposeful effort on avoiding these and other common stumbling blocks, RPPs will go the way of prior attempts to better integrate research and educational practice, such as laboratory schools and action research: viewed as a fad or relegated to the margins of the research and policy discourse. To us, RPPs are too promising to deserve that fate.

In this article, we connect our own efforts and missteps to two theoretical frameworks for understanding and improving the connections between research and practice as a means of illustrating how easy it is for researchers and practitioners to fumble this work. Our goal is to add to the frameworks the specificity of our own experiences in state education agencies. In doing so, we demonstrate the value of these frameworks for describing these complex relationships, offer practical lessons about how attempts at RPPs can go wrong, and provide strategies for overcoming such challenges and engaging jointly in genuine, meaningful partnerships.

Conceptual Frameworks for Connecting Research and Practice

RPPs are defined as “long-term collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving schools and school districts” (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Observers of RPPs argue that this collaborative approach has the potential to create a new type of research relationship in which both the researchers and the practitioners get better at what they do because they are co-constructing an agenda that improves over time, drawing on the complementary expertise and earned trust of the different partners (Penuel, Allen, Coburn, & Farrell, 2015).

What does it take to get these relationships right? Two frameworks provide useful ways of conceptualizing how research and practice connect in the real world of education:

- Elizabeth Farley-Ripple and colleagues (2018) posit that researchers and practitioners differ in perspective on “the usefulness of research products; the nature and quality of research; problems that research addresses; the structures, processes, and incentives surrounding research production and use; and the relationship between communities” (including direct and indirect relationships) (pp. 240-241). Wider gaps in assumptions and perspectives between researchers and practitioners correlate with shallower depth of production and use of research in organizational settings.
- William Penuel and colleagues (2015) argue that RPP success depends on the ability to create new identities and routines that blur the lines between researcher and practitioner, building a mutual understanding that expands the subjects’ scope of work and their expertise. “The joint work of partnerships requires participants to engage in boundary crossing, and that joint work is accomplished through boundary practices, which are routines that only partially resemble the professional practices of researchers and practitioners,” the authors write. Further, “boundary crossing may also be accomplished through specific moves, often purposefully employed in the context of interaction to help navigate cultural differences.”

We believe that strategic and purposeful attention to key dimensions of partnerships as articulated by these frameworks can help turn RPPs into a well-defined strategy for systemic improvement. Next, we describe five ways in which we have seen research-practice partnerships stumble, and link them to the concepts and predictions outlined in the two frameworks above.

Five Ways RPPs Can Fail

1) Expecting agencies to set the research agenda

Many prospective research partnership conversations begin with a good-faith request offered by a research team to agency leads to “tell us what you need to know.” While well-intentioned, these offers do nothing to create a mutualistic footing (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). More often than not, the conversations simply expose the extent of the gaps in initial assumptions that Farley-Ripple and colleagues describe around the nature and quality of research, with practitioners giving preference to research connected to their context and researchers favoring research that employs more rigorous methods.

Why is this? Put simply, the questions that agencies ask are often the wrong ones for researchers to answer. As program administrators, agency personnel tend to be first and foremost concerned with the outcomes of their ongoing work: They want to know whether the work they are doing is the right work (Henrick, Cobb, Penuel, Jackson, & Clark, 2017). Yet their ongoing work has rarely been designed with research in mind. Researchers are placed in the difficult position of having to gently explain their inability to address the questions, creating a dynamic where practitioners seem to be offered the opportunity to study anything they want, only to have that offer taken back.

Placing the agency as the primary partner responsible for setting the agenda does not serve the researcher well either. Just as practitioners hold specific areas of

expertise, so do researchers, in terms of both methodology and content. Proposed studies should draw on both problems of practice and researchers’ strengths.

For us, the process of determining the right research questions has tended to be messy. For example, working with Matt Ronfeldt at the University of Michigan, TDOE originally proposed a series of studies to create a methodology for assessing the success of educator preparation programs. During the period that Ronfeldt took on these studies, Tennessee had to rapidly publish an online report card for preparation programs, which ended up being driven largely by both timing constraints and the need for readability and simplicity. While Ronfeldt’s analysis offered validation and informed TDOE’s understanding of analyzing differences between providers, his more rigorous methodology was not directly used in the final report card.

Meanwhile, Ronfeldt had become interested in the quality of clinical mentors for student teachers, a potentially crucial lever for improving preparation outcomes. He proposed a study to assess the impact of different clinical mentors on student teachers. TDOE pushed back that knowing this answer alone would not actually influence policy since it would offer no insight into how to change the pool of clinical mentors. Together, TDOE and Ronfeldt applied for a new research grant focusing on this key problem of practice. Several years into the partnership, Ronfeldt and TDOE are now jointly engaged in both secondary data analysis and a series of randomized control trials in

partnership with Tennessee districts and educator preparation programs aimed at improving the mentor recruitment and training process. Ronfeldt’s initial exploratory research provided a strong foundation for developing a shared understanding of the context and problems at hand (Henrick et al., 2017).

Though TDOE has now been working with Ronfeldt for over five years, the partners still often ping-pong back and forth on the research questions as they take new steps forward in the partnership. Scheduled biweekly calls between Ronfeldt and TDOE research and program staff provide ample opportunity for hashing out the big picture and the smaller details, as well as ensuring ongoing mutual engagement of all partners (Penuel et al., 2015). Being deliberate up-front about tackling questions that can actually inform policy in practice is necessary, but so is recognizing that agenda-setting doesn’t just happen at the start of a project.

Strategies for setting joint research agendas

- Start by discussing the agency’s context and upcoming work. Questions to ask include:
 - What are your major priorities? What problems is the agency trying to solve?
 - What are you uncertain about or wish you knew more about with regard to those priorities?
 - What decisions are on the horizon?
 - What makes this work challenging?
- Use set templates for project planning that require the partnership to think through how a particular project will connect to broader strategy and related research. The Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA), for example, has created a series of project planning tools with conversation prompts to encourage these discussions (TERA, 2018). For each project, TERA asks:
 - How does answering these research questions complement or build on previous research? How will it fit into current policy priorities? Prompt: “On this topic, we’ve already found _____. But that doesn’t tell us _____ and without knowing that, we can’t _____.”
 - For each research question, what are possible findings that would help the primary audience understand core challenges, design and improve solutions, and/or evaluate results? Prompt: “If we found _____, that would suggest _____. But if we instead found _____, that would suggest _____. But we still won’t know _____.”
- Revisit the project plan and broader research agenda regularly—particularly at points of transition.

2. Excluding critical partners from the table

In the early years of our tenure, both of our agencies focused on minimizing the burden associated with research studies. We tried not to bother department leaders and staff with research needs or small updates, engaging them mostly for annual presentations. As a result, most department personnel had little connection to or deep understanding of the work. Several times per year (or sometimes less frequently than that), they would dutifully attend presentations and consider the implications. But they were unlikely to draw connections between study findings and their everyday decision making, and they certainly weren't willing to speak up about the importance of the research and the partnership since the research seemed to have very little bearing on the majority of their work.

Researchers too often make the mistake of connecting only with the staff who provide data for their work and neglecting to engage those who are implementing and making decisions about the policies and programs of interest. But the Farley-Ripple et al. framework suggests that if the research is to have an impact, the partnership must attend to the relationship between the communities involved: the researchers and the practitioners alike. That is, it must get the right people to the table and build their investment in their work.

In Massachusetts, the DESE's first study of educator preparation and licensure was conducted in close collaboration between its research partner, the Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER), and the program office that oversees educator preparation policy. The researchers and program staff co-designed the research questions, looking at preparation and licensure pathways into the profession and how they correlated with later outcomes, such as teacher evaluation

ratings, teacher attrition, and student performance. The findings were generative for the program office, informing several dimensions of their plans for how teacher performance data were used in preparation program approval and monitoring.

Towards the end of the project, DESE also asked the research team to generate individualized reports so that each educator preparation program could see how the teachers they trained later performed in the classroom and how that compared to other programs statewide. DESE and CALDER co-hosted a webinar for preparation programs to share the high-level study findings and orient them to their individual reports. Yet not a single person asked a question on the webinar, and very few preparation programs appear to have actually reviewed or acted on the findings.

Why? DESE had invested in the study itself, but it hadn't invested in engaging the field and developing buy-in from program stakeholders. Representatives from preparation programs weren't involved in the study design or the development of the deliverables; program-specific reports were a nice idea, but an afterthought. As a result, the study met its goal of informing state policy, but missed a potential opportunity for broader impact in the field.

Building buy-in for the work is a continuous process, since connections often need to be rebuilt multiple times as staff shift positions or leave the agency (Tseng, Easton, & Supplee, 2017). The average tenure of a state education chief is 3.2 years, shorter than many research grants (Manna, 2012). In an analysis of partnership grants from the Institute of Education Sciences, Farrell et al. noted that two of the main challenges reported by RPP practitioners are turnover of program-area staff and leadership and having the "right people at the table" in terms of decision making authority to act on findings.

In Tennessee, a brainstorming session on teacher evaluation and feedback with researchers from Brown University (John Papay and John Tyler) and Harvard University (Eric Taylor) led to a study on the effects of pairing teachers together based on data from the statewide teacher evaluation system to work on specific areas of instructional improvement. The department leadership overseeing educator evaluation became heavily involved and invested in the study, helping to originate research questions, recruit a district and its schools, and generate a manual for the partnerships. The pilot impact study showed positive gains for schools in the district that were randomly assigned to the initiative (Papay, Taylor, Tyler, & Laski, 2016) and was viewed as successful by TDOE's leadership. TDOE and the researchers applied for additional funding to scale the intervention statewide.

However, as the application was submitted, TDOE experienced a change in commissioner and assistant commissioner, as well as nearly the entire team overseeing educator evaluation. The new leadership, not invested in the scale-up project, saw it as just one of several possible priorities—and one that would require substantial additional work in recruiting treatment schools for the scale-up, which sometimes felt like work for the sake of research. At the same time, the state legislature required portfolio evaluation models for kindergarten and first-grade teachers, drawing the educator effectiveness team's attention away from scaling the partnership initiative. Statewide take-up of the evaluation initiative would have required leveraging the department's limited social capital with districts and schools at the expense of other priorities.

Unfortunately, in this case, TDOE was not able to adequately bridge the gap in values between the two communities around the nature and quality of the research that Farley-Ripple et al. describe. The intervention was never fully incorporated into TDOE's strategic priorities, and

only a relatively small sample of schools signed on to pilot the intervention, diminishing the statistical power of the study and making it difficult to analyze whether the intervention worked at scale.

Strategies for building and sustaining buy-in

- The goal should be to build project champions across the agency and among external stakeholders who understand the ways that the project could make impact and will be willing to advocate for change in response to the findings. Plan who should be involved from the beginning of the project, along with contingency plans for potential turnover. Guiding questions include:
 - Who from the program team and among external stakeholders will act on these findings now?
 - What policy or practice levers can they pull to change behaviors of groups or individuals?
 - Are they likely to leave their current roles? If so, who else should be involved to increase the chance of a smooth transition?
 - Who will implement the program if it is scaled up more broadly? How should they be involved in the project now?
- Draw and discuss an organization chart of all the people, both internal and external, involved in the work affected by the research. All partners should understand who has the power to make key decisions, who influences others' thinking, and who could potentially stand in the way of change.

- Involve the champions frequently so that the project remains top of mind and they have an opportunity to influence its direction and impact in the field. (See the strategies for agenda-setting.)
- Revisit the partnership team configuration, particularly at transition points, and reflect on whether all key players are still invested. Repeat the above activities as needed.

3. Overlooking the power of descriptives

The Farley-Ripple et al. framework suggests that gaps in perspectives between researchers and practitioners can derive from their differing views of the usefulness of research products and the nature and quality of evidence (p. 240). In our experience, this is particularly true when it comes to descriptive data. While the priority in research is for novel, sophisticated analysis, often the most powerful analysis from a policy perspective is a simple descriptive statistic that illuminates an issue in a new, more contextualized way. Producing those statistics is an opportunity to earn a “quick win” by encouraging partner investment from the earliest phases. What’s more, these data often light the initial spark of inquiry in a policymaker or practitioner that can lead to a more sophisticated analysis—and more effective research partnership—down the road.

TDOE has a multi-project research partnership with several researchers (Rip Correnti, Jennifer Russell, and Mary Kay Stein) at the University of Pittsburgh’s Learning Research & Development Center. This partnership has included a study of math instruction in grades 3-8, a study of a math instructional coaching model, and a study of the alignment of student performance on a variety of assessments. For the math instruction study, the research team

conducts regular presentations to TDOE leadership. The first of these presentations was very academic, with p-values and regression models, showing how survey measures could be lumped into different teacher typologies and were aligned to other metrics like assessment and supports. The presentation did not include any basic descriptives on how teachers responded to the survey items, e.g., how many teachers agreed that teachers should explain an idea to students before having them investigate it. Yet these simple statistics tend to be what sticks with those who are not heavily involved in the day-to-day research work. Using knowledge of the audience, TDOE research staff provided feedback to the LRDC team on how to revise the presentation to draw in the audience and build investment to move the work forward.

Recently, the LRDC partners shared a simple statistic with TDOE leadership: Half of Tennessee teachers categorized their student task assignments as high quality when experts rated them as low quality. This statistic has led to prioritization on student tasks as part of statewide teacher evaluation, TDOE mathematics guidance documents, and a campaign around what high-quality instructional tasks. Both the presentation and its far-reaching impact show that, with time and trust, the partnership learned how to share data that stakeholders value.

Researchers can amplify the power of their descriptive statistics by making them specific to a context that decision makers care about (Finnigan et al., 2012; Supovitz & Klein, 2003). Massachusetts has used this approach to good effect with its work on equitable access to effective educators. DESE has produced studies describing the statewide differences between student subgroups in assignment to experienced teachers, teachers rated highly on the state’s evaluation framework, and so forth. It also worked with a research partner, the Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, to produce

a policy brief demonstrating the impact that inequitable access to effective teachers can have on student outcomes. But the power of these reports is amplified because DESE also produces individual, confidential reports for districts showing them exactly how big these gaps are in their local context. This helps districts generate local discussion and action about an important equity issue, armed with evidence on why it matters generally, as well as how much it matters for their own students.

Researchers sometimes feel uncomfortable with this level of disaggregation, rightfully pointing out that school- or program-specific estimates can be based on small sample sizes and therefore may be imprecise. In our view, this concern is greatly outweighed by the value of seeing an issue contextualized in local data.

Strategies for harnessing the power of descriptives

- Convene the program and research staff to co-develop a single sentence that describes the main finding, including a number. This “elevator speech” version of the findings is critical to basic communication about the results for all audiences.
- Ground reports with simple descriptive statistics, even if they also include more sophisticated statistical work. These descriptives can be based on regression-adjusted estimates rather than raw averages or differences in means where appropriate, but they should still be straightforward to interpret and easy to remember.
- Look for opportunities to disaggregate findings (by district, school, subgroup, region, etc.) as a means for stakeholders to see themselves in the data and engage

in the study’s findings, either in the report itself or in an accompanying data tool. Disaggregations should also include relevant comparison points: e.g., the average for the state or the district, or the range of findings across all settings.

- Consider providing customized confidential reports to stakeholders if the data are politically sensitive. That way recipients can see their own data and where they fall relative to others without revealing others’ individual identities.
- For public presentations, share findings via an anecdote that tells a story consistent with the overall results but grounded in a more specific, relatable context.

4. Producing the wrong deliverables at the wrong times

Even if a partnership is collecting the right information at the right times to inform decisions, getting the resulting products wrong can still doom its efforts. Traditionally, researchers take on narrow, answerable questions and publish findings in academic journals, which are often inaccessible without a subscription. But policymakers tend to look for simple, accessible reports that identify broad themes and that they can use with a variety of constituents. Farley-Ripple et al. (2018) describe this issue as a difference in perspectives on the usefulness of research products.

Abt Associates’ changing partnership with the Massachusetts DESE is an illustrative example of the importance of products. DESE’s initial relationship with Abt was a contract for an evaluation of Expanded Learning Time, a state

grant program in which the state funded about 20 schools each year to extend their school year by 300 hours, with the additional time focused on academics, enrichment, and teacher collaboration. The project included student and teacher surveys and interviews with stakeholders, along with a comparative interrupted time series analysis of impact on student outcomes. The researchers were in schools frequently and generated findings throughout the year. Yet all the state requested was an annual report: the standard 200-page snoozer. And, because the study included state test outcomes, the report couldn't be finalized until the assessment data became available and the research team had sufficient time to analyze it and write up findings. That meant the state got the report on what happened in one school year in roughly February of the next school year—far too late to have an impact on policy or program decisions.

The state's next project with Abt was another contract, this time to study the study implementation of educator evaluation. The state took the lessons learned from the first project and requested a much more timely, useful set of deliverables. The partnership produced just-in-time preliminary findings, often in the form of verbal briefings, so that the state could inject those results immediately into the program office's supports for districts. Recognizing that the research team had insight into evaluation implementation on the ground, the state asked Abt to go beyond traditional research to help identify promising practices that it could highlight statewide. The project initially produced some annual public reports of findings, but eventually migrated to producing only summaries intended for district end users, combining research insights with programmatic commentary in short, visually attractive documents.

As the deliverables became more sophisticated, briefer, and more field-oriented, the relationship morphed into a deeper partnership. The Abt team was the first group the state called for insight on what was happening in the field. In turn, Abt responded quickly to state needs, for example producing advance analysis of key survey questions when the commissioner wanted to use them in a public address. Each side of the partnership was equally invested in ensuring that the study asked the right questions and produced relevant findings and products. Eventually the relationship became so strong that it was able to successfully compete for a Spencer Foundation RPP grant, arguing that, although it had started as vendor and client, the relationship was now much deeper.

Strategies for producing the right deliverables

- Work together to develop a timeline for the research project and for any related decisions and communication opportunities, so that the researchers can plan to have a variety of deliverables ready on a schedule that meets the practice partner's needs. Check in on and update the timeline frequently to ensure all are aware when plans and needs change.
- Share preliminary findings internally as early as possible, and in an informal way before any reports are written. A discussion about preliminary findings invariably uncovers important contextual information and misunderstandings on both sides, and the nature of the findings may drive the desired product. This reflects Penuel and colleagues' (2015) argument that sharing findings should be "joint work" so that partners can pool their individual expertise and make better decisions about what data might be most meaningful to their audiences.

- Early reports could also be summaries of prior research on related topics—but only if they are written to focus on what is known and not known across a body of research, rather than reciting the findings of individual papers in the manner of a traditional literature review. Carnegie’s Knowledge Brief series provides a strong example of such summaries (Carnegie Knowledge Network, 2018).
- Prioritize findings over questions, and themes over individual results, in briefings and written products. These elements should get greater word count, visual space, and effort. For example, the titles of Powerpoint slides should be findings, not labels: “35% of high school graduates took a remedial course in their first college semester,” not “First-semester college remediation rates.”
- Co-produce short, visually attractive summaries of findings, particularly when the results are meant to influence field-based practitioners with less familiarity with research design and statistical methods. These summaries can sometimes even substitute for a longer field-oriented report, saving time that can then be used to develop technical versions for academic publication.
- Look for opportunities to turn data collection methods into tools. For example, if a study required creating a rubric to rate the quality of program implementation across districts, that rubric could be turned into a self-assessment tool for districts to identify areas of strength and weakness in their own implementation.
- Co-develop additional resources and tools beyond report summaries that help the field engage in the work—e.g., videos, case studies, or other ways of bringing to life what “good” looks like in practice and why the research is significant.

5. Undervaluing brokers

Successfully operating an RPP takes more than just being aware of potential issues and pitfalls. In order to implement many of the specific practices that we describe above, partners on both sides must be willing to cross organizational boundaries—to engage in “intentional efforts...to make space for and enter into joint work with partners whose work involves responsibilities, expertise, pressures, and strategies different from one’s own” (Penuel et al., 2015). The practice partner must be willing to see the world from the stance of research, and the research partner must be willing to see the world from the stance of practice. And they must be willing to work together in uncharted, at times uncomfortable terrain. This takes dedicated resources and purposeful, sustained effort. Our experience and the theoretical frameworks we’ve employed in this essay both suggest that partnerships should create broker roles to attend to the relational aspects of partnering across organizational and cultural boundaries—that is, the *connective tissue*.

Where we have been able to successfully bridge the gaps that present obstacles to many RPPs, it has been because of strategic moves by brokers. Take, for example, the role that the research staff at TDOE played in improving the process of agenda-setting for their projects with researcher Matt Ronfeldt. Without the research office’s involvement, Ronfeldt’s first project related to educator preparation might have been his last, or the second project about clinical mentors might have produced a study that was interesting but not actually useful for the needs of practitioners. Similarly, the research team at DESE pushed Abt Associates to produce non-traditional, but more timely and relevant, deliverables from its study on educator evaluation, and in so doing put the partnership in a better position to influence practice.

Figure 1: A Spectrum of Roles and Practices in RPPs

Purely Policy/Practice

- Advising on existing and anticipated policies and practices and local context
- Anticipating likely concerns of stakeholders
- Advising on the right research design and products to meet stakeholder needs, but also adjusting to meet their needs

Brokering and Boundary Crossing

- Protecting and strengthening the partnership, not an individual partner
- Facilitating connections and interactions
- Creating organizational routines, establishing norms and expectations
- Prioritizing resources
- Communicating relentlessly
- Building agreement, resolving conflicts, and finding middle ground
- Giving difficult feedback and pushing individuals beyond their comfort zones
- Develop everyone's skills to build, use, and share data and evidence
- Moving fluidly between "we the researchers" and "we the practitioners"

Purely Research

- Conducting original analysis
- Advising on data collection and research design, but also adjusting to meet policymaker needs

Figure 1 illustrates the spectrum of roles and practices that must be covered in any successful research-practice partnership, from advising on policy context and anticipating stakeholder concerns to designing and conducting data collections and original research. As Penuel et al. notes, a good bit of this work is in the intermediate, unstable ground between traditional research and traditional policy and practice (2015).

Brokers take responsibility for the health of the partnership itself. To do this, they must develop boundary practices: “the more stabilized routines, established and sustained over time, that bring together participants from different domains for ongoing engagement” (Penuel et al. 2015:190). Specifically, brokers build the relationships, practices, and skills that increase the likelihood that the research the partnership produces is valued and used and that maintain the long-term sustainability of the partnership by:

- Ensuring that the partners collaboratively generate the research agenda.
- Investing the right people in the work, and reinvest people as staff turnover and projects shift.
- Harnessing the power of descriptive data for engaging partners, especially in early phases of the work.
- Ensuring that partners produce the right products at the right times.

Building out explicit broker roles, however, is not always easy within the structure of many emerging partnerships. Many states do not have strong research offices that have the time or capability to facilitate long-term RPP work. Many research grants are not designed to fund individuals that can fill an intermediary position within an agency. And few academic research programs offer training that

is designed to build researcher expertise in viewing the world from the point of view of a state or district policy-maker.

In Tennessee, many of our partnerships started as collaborations with individual researchers. However, brokering across several individual partnerships increasingly began to consume more time and effort that members of TDOE could provide. In response, the state has developed a formal relationship with the Tennessee Education Research Alliance, an external institution that coordinates work across its research partners and spreads the brokering effort. TERA synthesizes findings across individual research studies to build more comprehensive knowledge and solutions. Massachusetts, on the other hand, has chosen to keep its primary broker role within the agency. Our experience suggests that where the broker role sits organizationally is less crucial than its existence somewhere. Whatever the structure, ideally over time every partnership participant should take on greater responsibility for and facility with boundary-spanning, so that the RPP is more sustainable and not dependent on the relational skills of just one or two people.

Good brokers don’t just break down boundaries, however; they also help maintain the boundaries that are core components of each partner’s organizational identity. Practice partners need academics to respect that not every possible research question is one to which an agency wants an answer, whether because of competing priorities or political concerns. And researchers need practice partners to recognize that their ability to publish results irrespective of the nature of the findings is crucial for them to maintain their professional integrity. Brokers communicate and advocate for these boundaries, so that the partnership itself can endure.

Strategies for Building Brokering Capacity

- Individuals don't have to be on a research or data team to be a research broker. Create a list of individuals who excel at data-based decision making and who are constantly seeking evidence to drive both overall vision and daily work. Engage these potential brokers in research partnership work.
- Make sure RPPs include people whose strengths lie in communicating and outlining expectations and developing clear timelines. Project management skills are critical on both the research and the practice sides of the equation, and a good broker can shepherd the work along by implementing strategies aimed at avoiding the pitfalls mentioned in the earlier sections of this paper.
- On the research side, identify individuals who are particularly good at communicating technical findings and interacting with practitioners. Consider letting these people take the lead on sharing findings. While it might feel unfair to let someone other than the person who conducted the work share the findings, it might be what's in the best interest of the partnership.
- Organizations that serve as research partners like the Tennessee Education Research Alliance and the Chicago Consortium on School Research provide a great training ground for graduate students who are interested in becoming future education research brokers.
- Brokers should network with each other for role-alike professional learning. The National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships is a great mechanism for connecting those working in the RPP space.

Conclusion

RPPs require large, sustained investments of time and effort. They are heavily relationship-driven. They work against the traditional incentives and norms of their researcher and practitioner participants. And they require their participants to stretch beyond their existing skills and to take on roles and tasks for which they were not trained. Frankly, it's much easier to get them wrong than to get them right.

Because they require so much work, we find that RPPs are particularly valuable for informing our highest priority strategic initiatives: areas where the agency is investing a great deal of human and financial resources and where we know effort will be sustained for multiple years. But none of us limits our research work to just what our RPPs can produce. We have far too many questions for any one organization to have the expertise or time to answer them all, and at times our questions are smaller or more singular in nature than what works well in an RPP structure. Some of these relationships may eventually grow into RPPs, but many will not—and that's okay.

At the same time, when executed well and focused on the right priorities, we find that RPPs are one of the most effective tools for producing more relevant, useful research and increasing its integration into policymaking. Indeed, in Farrell et al.'s study of RPPs funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, the majority of partnerships agreed that RPPs are worth the investment and that they would participate in another RPP in the future. Certainly, the requirements of RPPs—building relationships, shifting incentives, and stretching skills—are demanding. But the work required to meet these demands also means that the research we produce through our RPPs stands the greatest chance of changing our agencies' policies and practices, and ultimately of improving outcomes for students.

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