

Partnerships in Action: A New RPP Highlights the Field's Evolution

Reflection

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Even to a casual observer, the research-practice partnerships “tent” has expanded considerably since the seminal 2013 paper by Coburn et al., *Research-Practice Partnerships: A Strategy for Leveraging Research for Educational Improvement in School Districts*. Whereas RPPs today operate at multiple levels of policy and practice and may comprise a wider range of partners than in the past, Coburn et al.’s scan of the relatively nascent landscape of partnerships was intended to focus on RPPs between researchers and school districts. What’s more, notions of equity—now central to the work of many RPPs—were largely absent from analysis. Altogether, in the shadow of today’s big tent, the rigorously constructed typology described in 2013 looks narrow.

Drawing from a considerable body of recent evidence, including multiple studies funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, a new overview of the field seeks to build upon Coburn et al.’s original framework to refresh how we define RPPs and conceive of their variability. Describing their approach to and rationale for taking stock of today’s RPPs, Farrell et al. write in the introduction to *Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: The State of the Field*: “It made greater sense to break down strategies and approaches to highlight the key dimensions along which RPPs can vary, rather than hold tight to a typology that no longer captured the complexities of RPP work” (2021, p. 4). They continue, “...Naming the diversity of organizational styles can inform choices on how to design [RPPs]. It can also shape future scholarship on the effects design features may have on outcomes” (2021, p. 13).

Farrell et al. identify the four key points of variation among contemporary RPPs as: goals, composition, approaches to research, and funding sources. To give a practical example of how one might situate an RPP using these four dimensions, we describe below the creation, development, and first steps of a brand new RPP, the Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC).

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We believe that this short case study illuminates differences between the place-based “research alliances” described by Coburn et al. and the current vision of RPPs put forth by Farrell et al., among them the centrality of equity and greater involvement among newer RPPs in promoting positive change.

IWERC was many years in the making. After a false start during the Race-to-the-Top era, serious efforts resumed in 2015 to create a state-wide organization loosely modeled on the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. The Illinois Longitudinal Data System had become more viable as a source for research data sets, and a large and diverse Steering Committee demonstrated considerable interest among multiple stakeholders statewide. As more funders and supporters embraced the idea, the organizers (current Advisory Board members and others) sought a home for IWERC. Fortuitously, in its infancy, the Discovery Partners Institute (DPI), an arm of the University of Illinois System, recognized commonalities in missions and welcomed IWERC in March 2020, providing it with ready-made university-based infrastructure. It took approximately five years of intensive effort of many people to get IWERC off the ground. Last September, IWERC hired its first staff member, Meg Bates, as director, followed up by seven more hires this spring.

Goals

Within Farrell et al.’s continuum of goals, IWERC’s scope is broad rather than narrow. IWERC was designed to study educational issues from cradle to career, and its funders and Advisory Board have different interests (and expectations for research output) across the span of early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce development. The “practice” end of the “research-practice partnership” is also broadly defined. While other statewide RPPs (such as EPIC in Michigan and TERA in Tennessee) have formalized relationships with state government and take their research questions largely from those units, IWERC is intentionally independent from the state. This allows IWERC the freedom to pursue questions that might be politically difficult for the state, but it also means that IWERC must identify and define the most pressing research goals for the state.

To do this, IWERC established a Research Advisory Council of 84 stakeholders across the state. This Council included three subcommittees of policymakers (from state government, advocacy groups, teachers unions, and so forth), educators (spanning early childhood through workforce training), and other researchers conducting educational projects in Illinois. Bates spent six months meeting with over 100 educators, researchers, and leaders across the state to create a list of potential research topics. The Council then reviewed this list and winnowed it down to the most pressing issues, which have become IWERC’s formal research agenda. As such, this Council is the statewide “practitioner” partner in IWERC’s RPP model, and IWERC will continue to report its progress and refine its agenda with this group.

To Farrell et al.’s discussion of equity as a goal of RPPs, IWERC has listened to its Council and taken a broad view of equity as well. IWERC has adopted a core

principle that “research centers the unique experiences and perspectives of diverse populations and communities. The research seeks to provide findings that can promote equity through many processes, ranging from improving systems incrementally, to innovating and re-envisioning systems for all learners, to dismantling fundamentally unjust systems.” IWERC has also committed to conducting core research projects that engage communities in defining “effective” educational institutions and their outcomes for diverse populations.

Composition

IWERC has already begun a close collaborative relationship with the Illinois State Board of Education, Board of Higher Education, Community College Board, Student Assistance Commission, Department of Human Services, Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Department of Employment Security, and Governor’s Office. Working with the Illinois Longitudinal Data System, IWERC has developed several approved data sharing agreements. With such a broad range of partners, relationships and trust are more important and must be managed carefully. This responsibility falls not only on the director and staff but also on Advisory Board members who are well familiar with the Illinois education and workforce development landscape. Fortunately, several state agencies leaders have stepped forward as “IWERC Champions” furthering its support and outreach potential.

Except for the Research Advisory Council, much of IWERC’s direct communication up to now (June 2021) has been with agency, governmental, and university officials. Going forward, IWERC hopes to engage successfully with multiple tiers in Illinois’s education landscape. Of course, as Farrell et al. point out, this will be challenging, yet IWERC intends its work to engage and assist multiple stakeholder groups. Some of IWERC’s research studies will be conducted by staff, and others in collaboration with university partners and other research organizations, including the UChicago Consortium.

Approaches to Research

IWERC plans to conduct large-scale quantitative studies, more modest qualitative studies (such as comparative case studies), mixed-method studies, and research reviews on topical issues. In hiring staff, Bates selected personnel highly qualified in each of these areas. IWERC’s first research agenda reflects all these approaches to research.

Funding

IWERC was fortunate to launch with over \$4,000,000 in awarded grants and commitments, with more in the pipeline as of June 2021.¹ Several Chicago-based foundation officials (including Easton) were among the first advocates for the creation of IWERC. These foundations awarded planning grants to support early

¹ Funders are named on the IWERC website: <https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/iwerc/>

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outreach, a feasibility study, and budget projections. As it became more apparent over time that IWERC could fill expressed needs in Illinois, the foundations made large grants to ensure a successful start. Having these funders at the table and advocating for the creation of IWERC surely played a significant role in the early funding success.

Yet, as Farrell et. al. describe so clearly, RRP funding is precarious: foundations tire of funding operating costs; foundations change their priorities and their staff; RPPs become wary of mission-drift in responding to RFPs and RPAs; and fund raising itself takes considerable time and energy in cultivating donors and writing proposals. Aware of these pitfalls, Bates worked with members of the Advisory Group to create a Sustainability Plan. In addition to seeking support from private foundations and individuals, and writing grant proposals for government agencies, the plan focusses on IWERC's "value-add" to Illinois. Examples include partnering with other researchers as sub-grantees, working with DPI in the same fashion, and accepting state contracts to conduct research studies that the agencies are unable to. Many people have recommended that IWERC create an "Investors' Council" like one at the UChicago Consortium. Such a council can engage foundations and individuals who do not typically support research projects but find their results helpful to them. IWERC's Sustainability Plan seeks to diversify funding sources as early as possible in its development.

Since IWERC is loosely modelled on the UChicago Consortium, at first glance it looks very much like a place-based "research alliance." Yet there are critical differences—deliberate choices made based on lessons learned over time from established RPPs.

We chose to describe IWERC here to highlight evolving thoughts about the mission and work of RPPs. The most obvious difference between an original "research alliance" is that IWERC aims to work with an entire (diverse and large) state rather than with a single district. Yet, there are other equally important differences, especially IWERC's explicit emphasis on equity, both in terms of outcomes and in terms of providing evidence to help systems become more equity oriented. There is also a deliberate focus on creating an "improvement orientation" by working with stakeholders to create change. Finally, though fortunate to kick-off with generous funding, IWERC has invested time and effort in creating a sustainability plan, after seeing other RPPs struggle. Early enthusiasm suggests that IWERC is filling a critical need for the state, and time will tell if IWERC's model can turn enthusiasm into sustained impact.

References

Farrell, C.C., Penuel, W.R., Coburn, C., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). *Research-practice partnerships in education: The state of the field*. William T. Grant Foundation.

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