

IMPROVING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The William T. Grant Foundation is committed to supporting research that can inform policy and practice to improve the lives of young people. These projects make up the majority of our grants, at more than 80 percent. Still, a small but essential portion of our funding supports advocacy, communications, and program development activities to improve our research work and further its influence. Such activities are focused on an “action topic,” which for the past eight years has been improving the quality of after-school programs. As that work winds down (see essay on page 6), we are looking toward our next focus.

In 2011, we selected a new action topic—improving research-practice connections. Common parlance describes a need to move research *to* practice, as illustrated in the diagram to the right. The underlying logic here is that researchers need to produce high-quality research, communicate and disseminate it to practitioners, and then practitioners will apply it to their work. The problem is that this framework connotes a one-way street that risks privileging researchers’ perspectives and relegating practitioners as targets for research and dissemination efforts, not as active agents who should inform research agendas.

Through this new work, we hope to foster reciprocal relationships in which practice informs research in significant ways, as illustrated below. These relationships would help the research community better understand practitioners’ concerns and research needs while helping practitioners enhance their interpretation and use of high-quality research.



The prevailing research-to-practice model suggests a one-way street of moving research to practice. To strengthen research-practice connections, however, we need to build a two-way street with reciprocal exchanges.



The cornerstones of this new focus are two learning communities to improve research-practice connections in education. These communities will convene twice a year for three years.

In August 2011, we and the Spencer Foundation launched a learning community for grantees from the Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) Fund. These projects require program developers to partner with evaluators to test the effectiveness of their innovations as they seek to scale them up. In these meetings, program developers, implementing agencies, evaluators, and consultants will discuss how to balance program fidelity with local adaptation, sustain programs through volatile economic and staffing conditions, and manage developer-evaluator relationships. Our hope is to capture practitioners' insights in order to inform future efforts to scale up evidence-based programs.

This May, we will launch a second learning community for partnerships between researchers and urban school districts. There is burgeoning interest in establishing long-term institutional collaborations to address persistent problems of practice in education. These partnerships confront thorny challenges around building and sustaining trust; constructing research agendas that balance multiple stakeholder interests; and producing research that is rigorous, timely, and actionable. Our learning community is designed to enable a small group of partnerships to learn from each other about ways to build stronger partnerships and to collaborate on future projects. We hope to capture lessons for others in the field on partnership strategies, producing high-quality research that meets multiple stakeholder concerns, and supporting practitioners' use of research.

To complement these activities, we have commissioned Cynthia Coburn and Bill Penuel to write a paper describing the landscape of research-practice partnerships in education. This paper will discuss various approaches to partnership work and challenges to building and sustaining them. We are also supporting a handful of small grants to address the broader goal of enabling researchers to learn from practitioners. Bridget Hamre, for example, will convene state, district, and school leaders to garner their perspectives on using evidence-based tools in redesigning their teacher evaluation and support systems; she will write a brief based on that meeting.

These activities will inform, and be informed by, research endeavors. Several of our grantees are systematically studying factors that facilitate or constrain districts' use of research, as well as the types of research practitioners find useful and the limits they see in existing research. We are also supporting several researchers, who are examining why program impacts vary across different populations and contexts—their work may be particularly helpful for scale-up efforts.

Calls to improve the connections between research and practice are growing louder. We hope that this work will facilitate rich, respectful discussions between researchers and practitioners. Ultimately, we believe this will yield lessons for both groups and our collective work to improve the lives of young people.



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