

# **TRAINING RESEARCHERS TO INFORM POLICY**

*Workshop Participant Supplement*

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This workshop is dedicated to every researcher who wishes to improve policy and strengthen democracy. Your work makes a difference.

*Hannah Reuter and Avi Green, **April 2018***

# WELCOME

Welcome to the Scholars Strategy Network's Policy Engagement Workshop.

Researchers who wish to use their expertise to inform policy need specific skills, above and beyond the ability to conduct rigorous research. Unfortunately, these skills are too rarely taught.

Since 2009, social scientists in the Scholars Strategy Network (SSN), a nationwide, nonpartisan, interdisciplinary association, have worked to increase the use of research and evidence in the policymaking process. Over that time, SSN members and staff have engaged in a learning community to share best practices and support each other. Today, SSN is made up of over 800 researchers in 44 U.S. states. The content of the Training Researchers to Inform Policy Workshop was created to bring together many of the lessons learned from the last eight years, supplemented and significantly enhanced by an extensive review of relevant literature and as well as interviews with more than 40 leading scholars and policy practitioners.

Skills taught in this training include:

- How to develop ongoing, reciprocal, trusting relationships with policymakers and civic intermediaries (groups that bring research to policymakers)
- How to assess the resources, needs, and opportunities of policymakers
- How to access the timing of the policy-making process in a given issue arena to identify windows of opportunity for different forms of engagement
- How relationships with policymakers that start early in the research process can lead to research questions that matter to researchers and policymakers
- How ongoing policy engagement can be a part of academic success for researchers

On campus, many professors present lectures and write books and articles. When academics think of sharing research findings with policymakers, some hope to use similar modes of communication – one-way channels that emphasize dissemination over interaction. The emphasis on relationships in this training marks a deliberate departure from that model. Of course, no approach will work for everyone. Policymakers vary tremendously, as do researchers. Still, across our research and experience, it has been clear that strong, reciprocal relationships increase the likelihood that research evidence will be used to inform policy and practice.

The nation has thousands of federal, state, and local policymakers. We hope that participants in this workshop will go forth to build stronger relationships with many of them, leading to the increased use of research evidence in policy at every level.

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## **KEY TERMS**

- Research Evidence** Evidence generated through systematic data collection and analysis.
- Policymaker** An elected, hired, or appointed leader working at the local, state, and national level. Policymakers create, shape, and execute laws and rules in the public sector.
- Broker** An organization or individual that links ideas, researchers, and policymakers to one another.
- Civic Intermediary** A type of broker. A civic organization or individual that links research creators to policymakers that may have a particular political agenda.
- Federated** A national organization with state and local chapters, offices or subsidiaries.
- Strategic Capacity** The ability to learn and adjust goals, strategies, tactics and activities to take into account new information, ideas, and experience.

# **POLICYMAKERS ARE PEOPLE**

Policy makers are human beings. They make decisions with the help of many inputs. They may use knowledge from earlier experiences, consult staff and key stakeholders, consume media, observe constituent preferences, assess political circumstances, or rely on their intuition, or combine any or all of the above. Research evidence is just one more piece of the puzzle. Yet policy makers do much more than simply make decisions, and research evidence can be used in many ways.

The following section covers some of the basics, laying out core principles for engagement, the various ways research evidence can be used in the policy process, and outlining the policymaking process.



# **RULES OF ENGAGEMENT**

While there are many ways to develop relationships with policymakers some principles are worth remembering however you proceed.

## **BE PRECISE**

Researchers should be clear. You conduct rigorous research; you should strive for equally effective communication. When speaking to policymakers, if time allows, you should state what your own research says and what other researchers have found. It is good to note disagreements between researchers and explain your judgment on the overall state of knowledge on a question. You *may* also offer recommendations, beyond what your research states. Note that policymakers will have to decide what to do whether or not you stating what you would do if you were in their shoes. Karen Bogenschneider, Rothermel-Bascom Professor Emerita of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin, recommends sticking closely to the findings of the research itself. While that recommendation makes sense in many situations, it may not be applicable to all circumstances.

## **DISCLOSE**

Researchers are often presumed to be making their own independent judgments, and to be representing their own findings and their own views. If this is not the case, or if any financial or organizational relationships or ethical issues may call that independence into question, you have a responsibility to disclose the issue.

## **TAKE A LONG VIEW**

For the past four decades, the ideological gap between elected officials from the two major political parties has been increasing. You may find that on issues you care about and research areas you study, policymakers on one side or the other are more or less likely to receive your ideas warmly. Think carefully about how you wish to proceed. Be careful before allowing yourself to be pigeonholed as a part of the left or the right. No major political party in the United States has utterly collapsed since the Whigs nearly 200 years ago. Both parties are likely to be with us for a long time to come. It may be unwise to do or say things that prevent you from being able to work with leaders on both sides. That said, nothing about being a scholar prevents you from choosing to participate in any of the full range of activities available to Americans, including voting, volunteering for issues or candidates, speaking in the public square, and running for office.

## **DEFINING POSITIVE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Everyone is familiar with relationships, but we rarely reflect on the art and science of relationship-building. Marshall Ganz notes that truly successful public relationships include exchanges and transactions but transcend those exchanges. Shared values are expressed, and the relationship itself becomes a thing of value.

Each party to a potential relationship arrives with interests (things they want) and resources (things they can offer). To identify a successful initial exchange requires explaining your interests and resources succinctly and asking questions to identify the interests and resources of your potential partner. Of course, research before the meeting can help.

The sociologist Mark Granovetter notes that relationships across difference can be very fruitful. Relationships with those most similar to ourselves (for example, your relationships with other researchers) are valuable, but people who are similar to you are liable to have similar resources to your own. Relationships across significant difference are particularly promising because the resources that you can offer to someone in a very different situation that your own may be uniquely valuable to them, and perhaps otherwise unattainable for them, and vice versa.

In the past few decades, a new world of online relationships has opened up. To pair researchers with policymakers, various online directories have been created, some specific to topic areas, others to individual universities or regions; and others national or international in scope.<sup>1</sup> This workshop recognizes that those tools can help make initial matches, but long-term research on the effectiveness of these digital tools remains limited for the time being. Regardless of whether relationships begin online or offline, the tools in the remainder of this book are based the notion that in-person time is extremely useful for relationship-building and collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example [Research4Impact.org](http://Research4Impact.org), a project created by Cornell researcher Adam Seth Levine and his collaborators.



# A TAXONOMY OF RESEARCH USE

Often people think policymakers use research evidence as a means to make decisions. A policy or a practice problem is identified, and then policymakers seek out research evidence to help them choose a solution.

In reality, there are many uses for research evidence. And observers of policymakers and practitioners have found it is difficult to isolate precisely how and when they come to their decisions. Research evidence melds with all the other sources policymakers use to make their decisions, sometimes unconsciously. When considering the use of research evidence by policymakers, we find it helpful to rely on four main categories defined by Carol H. Weiss, Sandra M. Nutley, and Huw T.O. Davies.

- **Instrumental:** Research evidence is used to inform specific policy decisions. For example, a governor who must decide whether or not to sign a bill that would abolish mandatory minimums for certain crimes might ask her staff to identify relevant research evidence on the costs, benefits, and likely overall impact of the proposed law on public safety and recidivism, perhaps based on the experiences of other states.
- **Conceptual:** Research evidence is used to help shape the way issues are perceived or discussed. For example, a mayor trying to address widening income inequality and increasing de facto racial and economic segregation in her city might seek research evidence to better understand the dynamics of the problem.
- **Imposed:** The use of research evidence by some policymakers or practitioners can be mandated by someone else as part of legal, regulatory, or funding requirements. For example, a federal law might make grants available to state or local jurisdictions to improve academic performance but require that applicants for grants show that they are using teaching methods that are supported by research evidence.
- **Tactical:** Research evidence is marshaled to support decisions that policymakers or practitioners have already made, usually for other reasons. For example, a Member of Congress who has been urging his colleagues for years to increase the Earned Income Tax Credit may share new research evidence on the benefits of the current credit with reporters, constituents, and other stakeholders in the hopes of building momentum behind her proposal.<sup>2</sup>

While not used in actual decision-making, tactical uses of research evidence should not be dismissed. In a democracy, it matters how stakeholders justify their decisions. During debates over pressing issues, for example, society is only strengthened by the presentation of rigorous research evidence in the media.

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<sup>2</sup> Davies, H.T., Nutley, S. M. & Weiss, C.H. (2015). Studying the use of research evidence in policy & practice. *William T. Grant Foundation*. Retrieved from <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/09/Studying-the-Use-of-Research-Evidence-in-Policy-and-Practice.pdf>

# THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS

Having a working knowledge of the steps in the policymaking process can help you be a more effective public scholar. The process is iterative. Steps often overlap in time. Research evidence can play a role at any point – or multiple points – in the process.

Generally, policy debates are only covered in the media relatively late in the cycle, at a point when many policymakers are mainly interested in using research evidence tactically to help them explain and justify their positions. Conceptual and instrumental uses of research are likely to occur earlier in the process, during agenda setting and policy formulation. Because these processes often occur without notice in the media, creators of research evidence (or intermediaries who promote the use of research evidence) must find ways to connect with policymakers long before public debate begins.

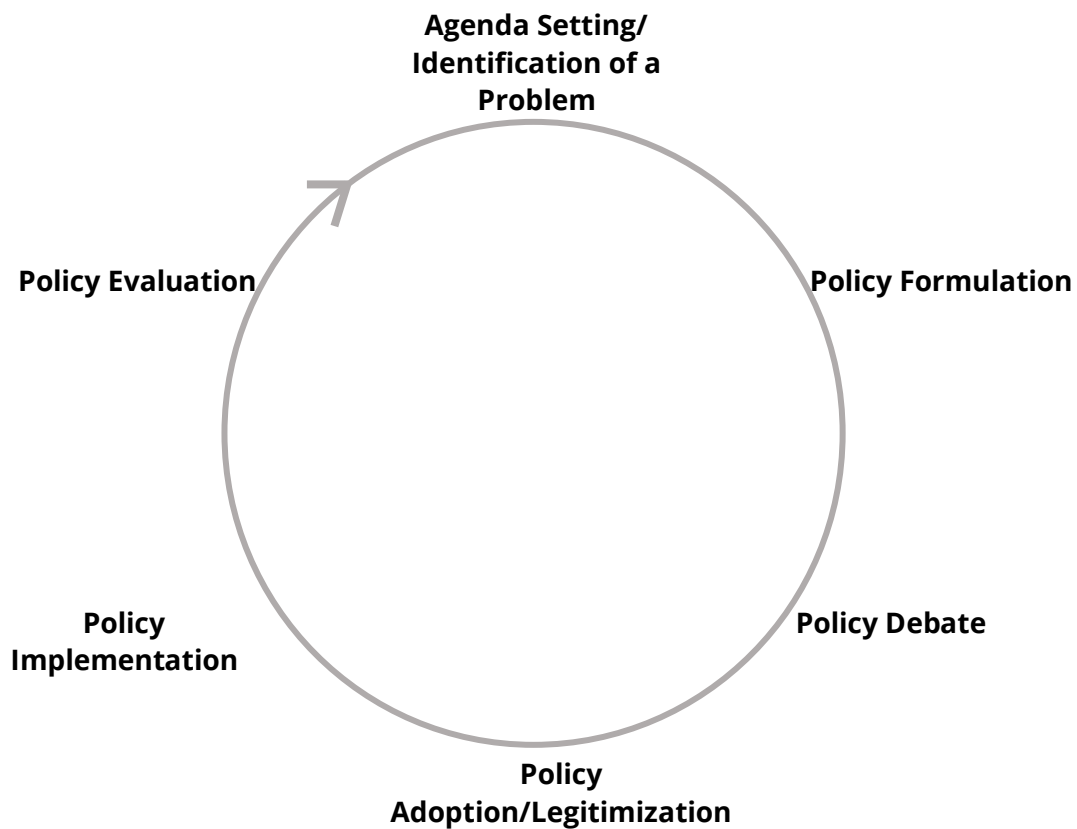


Figure 1: The policymaking process. Adapted from Sidick, Y.M. (2013). Policymaking Process, Slideshare. Retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/yhamskiey/policy-making-process>.

# HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

In most U.S. states and in Congress, any legislator can introduce a bill. Often governors and other state executives can introduce bills as well. The journey from introduction to passage is long. Most bills never make it. In most legislatures, fewer than 10 percent of bills are passed in a given session.

A simple path that a bill may follow through a legislature is outlined below. The precise path will vary. For example, bills that require spending often travel through Ways & Means Committees. To respond to a sudden crisis, or for a bill deemed trivial, a legislature may dispense with its usual process and pass a bill in just a few days. Complex legislation often takes years. To track state legislation, visit state legislative websites or [openstates.org](http://openstates.org). For federal legislation, [govtrack.us](http://govtrack.us) is an excellent resource.

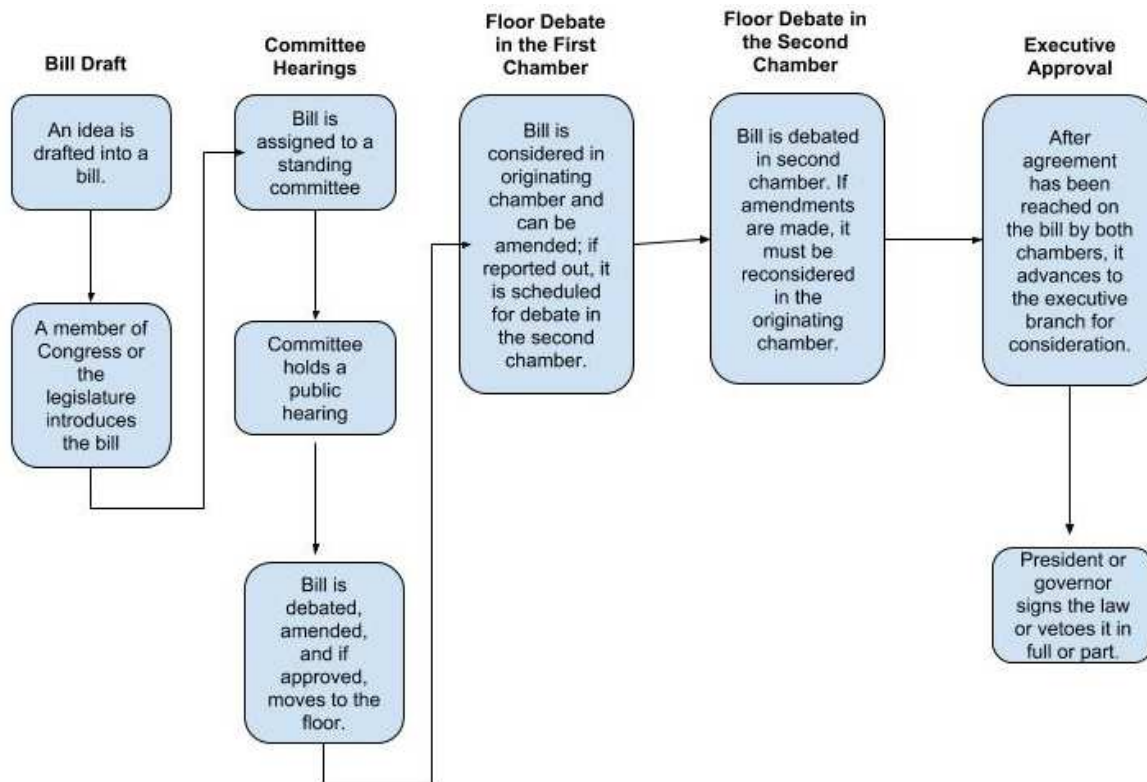


Figure 2: How a Bill Becomes a Law. Adapted from Bogenschneider, K. (2014). Family policy matters: How policymaking affects families and what professionals can do. New York: Taylor and Francis Group.

# WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

Policy change is a complex, dynamic process. Policymakers must decide which issues to act on, which to defer, and which policies to adopt. They do not make these decisions independently. Political scientist John Kingdon highlights the importance of “policy windows” – specific moments when three factors converge to push an issue to the top of the policy agenda.

- The **problem stream** refers to conditions or situations that stakeholders feel need to be addressed.
- The **political stream** refers to political considerations that favor certain solutions over others.
- The **policy stream** refers to specific policy solutions or ideas that can address the problem.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 3: Multiple Streams Framework. Reprinted from Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. United States: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc.

Sometimes the opening and closing of policy windows are predictable. Policymaking is cyclical. Elections, annual budget processes, and the reauthorization of legislations are regular events that you can usually count on.

**Focusing events** are uncommon, sudden events that change the policy stream and the problem stream. For example, natural disasters, public health crises, and economic recessions can swiftly shift the attention and priorities of decision makers.

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<sup>3</sup> Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. United States: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc.

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Windows may open when...

- Elections lead to changes in executive or legislative leadership.
- Public sentiment shifts dramatically.
- A new problem catches the attention of government officials.
- A focusing event makes a longstanding problem more acute.

Windows close when...

- Policymakers feel they have addressed the problem.
- Policymakers deadlock.
- Other challenges pull away policymakers' attention, for any of the reasons above.

Rarely, a new solution or policy innovation can help policymakers open a window. More frequently, a solution or innovation is founded and shared with policymakers and stakeholders, who then must often press their cause over time until the problem stream and political stream finally align.

## **IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS**

When a window is open, researchers who wish to participate in the policy process may need to move very quickly. In doing so, it is valuable to consider which players you may wish to work with. The following questions can help you see the big picture and reverse engineer a network:

- Who suggested this proposal or idea? Who wrote the bill?
- Which organizations are working to get it passed?
- Who opposes it?
- Who favors it?
- Where do the talking points cited in advocates' talking points or publications come from?
- Who is reporting on the issue in the media? Who are they quoting, what are their sources?
- What groups are affected by this proposal?
- Who will ultimately decide the issue?
- Which stakeholders are likely to have the strongest influence over the decision maker(s)?
- Are there important players who are still on the sidelines?<sup>4</sup>

## **IF YOU ARE NEW TO THE PROCESS...**

When a policy window is open, it is often too late for a researcher just becoming engaged with policymakers to partner with them on anything except the tactical use of research evidence. These tactical opportunities, if engaged thoughtfully, can lay a foundation for other forms of collaboration later.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Badgett, M. (2016). *The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World (1st ed.)*. New York and London: New York University Press.

## CO-CREATION

Policymakers often report that researchers arrive late in the policymaking process. By involving policymakers in question formation and research design from the beginning, research projects can be implemented in ways that are valuable to policymakers and researchers alike. By being consulted early in the process, policymakers become partners. Policymakers are more likely to feel like they “own” the research and feel more confident in acting on the results, and they are more likely to adopt a culture of the use of research evidence and seek research to help them conceptualize problems and make decisions.

In co-creation, appropriate stakeholders are made aware of results and initial findings over the course of the study. Research questions can be supplemented or even changed to adapt to changing situations and needs.

Rigor is paramount. But rigor never precludes relevance. Indeed, research can be methodologically innovative and address policymakers’ specific questions and needs. Findings that include key elements like cost and program effectiveness are critical to policymakers – without these things, policymakers can rarely justify action.

Because co-creation requires the development of trust and knowledge on both sides, successful co-creation relationships often involve multi-year, long-term research-practice partnerships focused on a specific governmental unit, like a school district or a state department of corrections.

Education researchers Cynthia Coburn, Bill Penuel, and Kimberly Geil define research-practice partnerships as long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and to investigate outcomes.

Researchers become trustworthy partners by:

- Providing reliable information
- Standing with allies
- Keeping confidences
- Allowing policy questions to guide research
- Showing up, repeatedly, when needed.<sup>5</sup>

For more information on research practice partnerships, the William T. Grant Foundation maintains a microsite that shares resources and best practices at [rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org](http://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org).

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<sup>5</sup> Coburn, C.E., Penuel, W.R., & Geil, K.E. (2013). *Research-practice partnerships: A strategy for leveraging research for educational improvement in school districts*. William T. Grant Foundation: New York, NY.

# **CASE STUDY: A RESEARCH PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATION**

## **A UNIVERSITY AND DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP CLOSES THE RESEARCH-TO-CLASSROOM GAP**

By Laura Wentworth, Richard Carranza, and Deborah Stipek

San Francisco Unified School District's Assistant Superintendent Bill Sanderson needed data. It was 2010, and the district's board of education had just passed a resolution to pilot an ethnic studies course in a set of its high schools. The goals for the course were ambitious: Reduce the achievement gap and increase graduation rates. The school board was considering longer term plans to make this course a graduation requirement. Sanderson needed data that would tell him whether the ethnic studies course achieved its intended goals.

For years, researchers have been working in school districts conducting studies that produce findings. Some of the studies address pressing policy and practice questions like the example above. But most of this research is read primarily by researchers; it rarely affects policy. Because educational research and the practice of education are centered in very different institutions with different expectations, incentives, and cultures, the connections have been tenuous at best.

Cynthia Coburn and Mary Stein document the challenges of researchers and practitioners in their 2010 book, *Research and Practice in Education: Building Alliances, Bridging the Divide* (Rowman & Littlefield). Coburn and Stein describe how incentives for professors and researchers clash. Time constraints and political pressure often prompt practitioners to use research to reinforce but not necessarily inform their decisions. The incentive structure for researchers drives them toward research that is valued by peer-reviewed journals and the academic community rather than research that has a high likelihood of being used by practitioners. Even when educational research can be used to guide educational policy and practice, decision makers may not be aware of it or the relevance may not be obvious.

Meanwhile, there is increasing demand for data-based decision making — careful analysis of information on what works and what doesn't. While a steady march toward improvement requires education leaders to learn from successes and mistakes and to share those lessons learned with the field broadly, practitioners do not usually have the capacity to conduct research. A shift toward using systematic research to guide practice thus requires new kinds of connections between the institutions in which researchers and practitioners work. It means creating new partnerships, new skills, knowledge, practices, and structures within these institutions, and a new, shared culture.

This article shares almost a decade of experience doing just that. The two institutions are the Graduate School of Education (GSE) at Stanford University and the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). We have developed a partnership between the two institutions, created new incentives for researchers and practitioners, and worked collaboratively to understand each other's culture and develop trust. Our goals are to conduct research responsive to specific problems of

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practice facing the district, develop knowledge that has broad application, and develop capacity within the district and within the university to serve in these bridging roles.

To achieve these goals, we first set up a process to identify matches between SFUSD's strategic priorities and the research interests of Stanford professors. As an example, we return to Assistant Superintendent Sanderson's pressing question about the ethnic studies course in San Francisco. Sanderson was connected to Stanford GSE Professor Thomas Dee, an economist, and postdoctoral fellow Emily Penner, who had the expertise needed to design a study that examined the effect of the ethnic studies course piloted in a set of schools. Dee and Penner's analyses suggested that the ethnic studies courses showed great promise; students in the pilot courses improved their GPAs and attendance significantly more than similar students not enrolled in the course. When San Francisco's school board commissioners needed to vote on whether to expand the ethnic studies course to all high schools, possibly laying the groundwork for making the course a graduation requirement, Sanderson and the SFUSD district leaders had the data and analyses they needed to inform their decision.

With numerous examples of researchers and practitioners like Sanderson, Dee, and Penner working together on mutually beneficial research projects, we are hoping the Stanford-SFUSD Partnership can be an exemplar for other university and district partnerships. While other partnerships exist across the nation, the Stanford-SFUSD Partnership has a number of unique features that we hope can inform other similar efforts.

## **RESEARCHER INCENTIVES**

The Stanford-SFUSD Partnership attempts to influence the culture of the Graduate School of Education — to give faculty a taste of conducting research in partnership with practitioners and seeing their findings used in important decisions while at the same time contributing to a knowledge base. To achieve this goal, Stanford Graduate School of Education offers strategically targeted research funding. In 2014-15, six projects received funding, including Sanderson, Dee, and Penner's on the ethnic studies curriculum. To get their projects funded under the program, proposals from Stanford GSE professors must address three qualities that have turned out to be critical to the success of the partnership.

**#1 Alignment:** Research projects must be aligned to district needs. A unique feature of this partnership is that SFUSD sets the research agenda for most Stanford SFUSD projects. Over time, SFUSD has developed the ability to articulate their research needs within the district and share them with Stanford researchers. SFUSD now describes their research guidelines within their district application to conduct research and the district reminds administrators of these guidelines each year at an internal presentation to the superintendent's cabinet. Additionally, the Stanford SFUSD Partnership hosts an annual meeting where the superintendent and deputy superintendent of instruction articulate the most pressing research needs for the district. Stanford researchers and SFUSD administrators attend this annual meeting where they discuss newly minted research findings through joint presentations.

With SFUSD administrators regularly participating in jointly developed research projects with Stanford researchers, a substantial number of SFUSD administrators have developed a heightened ability to articulate researchable questions. This is evidenced in the district's ability to integrate references to research when making policy decisions. For example, SFUSD's math department



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references research by researchers like Stanford Professor Jo Boaler and others in their rationale for changing the district policy for their course sequence in math (SFUSD, 2014). The SFUSD administrators have learned how to use research as evidence to guide and support their policy decisions and to identify their research needs.

**#2 Generalizability:** The research project needs to produce data that is likely to be relevant beyond SFUSD, to have some generalizability. Stanford researchers are asked to pursue research topics in a way that will be valuable to other urban school districts as well as the larger academic community that holds high standards of validity and generalizability for research. We have many examples of research conducted within the Stanford-SFUSD Partnership that has been subsequently published in peer-reviewed, academic journals. One example is doctoral student Avishag Reisman and Stanford Professor Sam Wineburg's study of the Reading Like a Historian curriculum in two high schools. The study showed statistically significant gains in high school student achievement in history and English language arts (Reisman, 2012a, 2012b; Reisman & Wineburg, 2012). With these robust findings from the study in SFUSD, schools and districts across the nation, including Los Angeles Unified School District, are adopting the curriculum with confidence (Watanabe, 2014). While some of the Stanford-SFUSD projects identify the site of the study, as in the case of the Reading Like a Historian study, most Stanford-SFUSD Partnership studies published in academic journals maintain the anonymity of the district, which is key to a trusting partnership.

**#3 Shared ownership:** The Stanford faculty and SFUSD personnel need to be centrally involved in the design and interpretation of the study. We have found that by having the research deeply embedded in the practice and policy needs of the district and someone from the district directly involved in it, the research is more likely to be used in district decision making. Collaborations often develop as a consequence of researchers and practitioners having opportunities to get to know each other. An example is a study that grew out of a conversation between Stanford Professor Susanna Loeb and SFUSD Chief of Early Education Carla Bryant. In one of their conversations, Bryant expressed an interest in an intervention related to parent engagement. Loeb was interested in testing the use of text messaging to influence parents' interactions with children.

The study that emerged was of an intervention designed to engage parents in pre-K students' literacy development through text messaging of literacy tips. Loeb and her Ph.D. student, Ben York, worked closely with Bryant's SFUSD team to operationalize the study. After seeing the positive effects on children's literacy skills from the first year, the group signed up for a second year of the study, this time focused on kindergarten parents.

This line of research has been in every respect a collaboration among researchers and practitioners with the different kinds of expertise needed to ensure the effectiveness of both the intervention and the research. The study was recently published as a white paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research (York & Loeb, 2014). National attention garnered by the study's findings (Rich, 2014) has led to cities across the nation signing up to participate in the next phase of York and Loeb's intervention.

## **PREPARE THE FUTURE ACADEMIC**

Many school districts throughout the country are endeavoring to base practice and policy decisions on systematic analysis of data. But many do not have personnel with the necessary research skills, and researchers in universities are not typically prepared to work effectively with district personnel.

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That creates a need for people who can straddle research and practice institutions — who have research skills and a deep understanding of the world of practice. The Stanford-SFUSD Partnership is designed to address this need.

The partnership provides the Stanford GSE with a training ground for its doctoral students working on their advanced degrees. Doctoral students have opportunities to engage in research designed to address problems in the district and to learn how to cultivate strong relationships with practitioners. In addition to involving doctoral students in the various partnership research projects, a team of Stanford students is embedded in the district working as research assistants in SFUSD's research department. Doctoral students experience the world of district decision making as they work alongside practitioners. From working on redesigning report cards to reflect research on social-emotional learning to an analysis of kindergarten readiness skills, the Stanford doctoral students are being trained to work effectively in district contexts while they cultivate their own career development.

With almost a decade of developing the Stanford SFUSD Partnership, we have learned the value of providing incentives for research directly relevant to the challenges encountered in our partner district, but that also helps build a knowledge base that has broad applicability. We also have learned the importance of ensuring that critical partners in the district are meaningfully involved in research projects, and that projects include a training component that builds capacity for these kinds of partnerships in both the district and the university settings.

The partnership provides SFUSD with valuable research capacity needed to inform key decisions and also produces research recognized for its advanced findings and rigorous methodology. The mutual benefit is what has made this partnership successful and sustainable. This win-win relationship allows a graduate school of education and a large urban school district to strategically leverage their relationship to advance their institutional goals. It also helps both institutions maintain their relevance by taking a leadership role in the advances in knowledge and skill needed to enhance educational experiences for students across the nation.<sup>6</sup>

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways did this partnership exhibit trusting relationships? Mutualism? Long-term collaboration?
2. How could this model work for partnerships in other fields?
3. What sorts of challenges might emerge when working in partnership with decision-makers?

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<sup>6</sup> Carranza, R., Stipek, D. & Wentworth, L. (2016). A university and district partnership closes the research-to-classroom gap, Kappan Magazine. Retrieved from <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/university-and-district-partnership-closes-research-classroom-gap>. Reprinted with permission.

## **CIVIC INTERMEDIARIES**

Developing relationships takes practice and time. Partners may be able to use or share your research, elevate your work, connect you to others, and inform the research that you do. The best partners are not always the most high-profile players.

Civic intermediaries are individuals and organizations that do not create research evidence, but that seek to encourage the use of research evidence in the policy process. Some civic intermediaries have very specific policy goals, ideological orientations, or partisan identities. Others may seek to serve as neutral “honest brokers” providing research evidence of all types. Many civic intermediaries specialize in an issue area, like K-12 education or criminal justice reform. For example, the What Works Clearinghouse seeks to serve as civic intermediary to link policymakers to research evidence on education.

The League of Women Voters is an example of an organization that often serves as a civic intermediary. In the years before and after passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution, local and state leagues worked to show that women could undertake the intellectual work of citizenship with as much wisdom as men. They put together reading groups to gather relevant research on issues to inform their role as citizens. To this day, many state legislators across the nation respect local league leaders and appreciate the League’s research-focused process.

In many state capitals, think tank affiliates of the left-leaning State Priorities Partnership and the right-leaning State Policy Network synthesize and publicize research evidence. These organizations also conduct their own original policy analysis and sometimes conduct or commission new research as well.

Civic intermediaries can be extremely helpful allies to researchers who wish to contribute to the policy process. They can transport ideas and information to places where researchers may not have the time or resources to visit. They can continue to focus on sharing a key research finding and ensuring that it is incorporated into practice after a researcher has moved on to other projects. They may pride themselves on their skill in translation, helping researchers and policymakers understand each other. They can sometimes compile evidence from several studies – or even dozens or hundreds of studies – into coherent summaries that imply specific action steps. Ideally, they are trusted by policymakers and researchers alike, and pass information without adding bias or losing important details. And they may serve as connectors and matchmakers, identifying specific policymakers and researchers who might fruitfully collaborate and helping them come together.

Researchers considering working with a civic intermediary may want to assess the organization’s reputation and capacity. Is it well-respected? Empirically rigorous? Would leaders at the organization change the organization’s positions, priorities, or strategies if presented with strong evidence?

As described in a later section, the Scholars Strategy Network itself is a civic intermediary that seeks to serve as an honest broker.

## GETTING STARTED

There are multiple ways scholars can make their voices heard in public debates. Being cited frequently in the media can make it easier for scholars to get busy policymakers and civic leaders to pay attention to their work, and lead to partnerships, collaborations, and new opportunities – but it can also lead to misinterpretations. We've included resources that may be helpful in finding your public voice and considering the range of possibilities for policy engagement.

Placement in the media can help build your reputation as a trusted and influential scholar. One way to engage in public scholarship is to build relationships with journalists and media outlets. Blogs, op-eds, twitter, are examples of tools to reach non-academic audiences, to frame conversations, and to translate evidence.

In this section, you will find:

- [Want to Get Research Used? Top Five Tips](#)
- [Identifying Partners Worksheet](#)
- [More Ways to Partner with Policymakers](#)
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## **WANT TO GET RESEARCH USED? TOP FIVE TIPS**

NOVEMBER 17, 2014

By Vivian Tseng

Researchers often ask how they can get their research used. Many of us have devoted our careers to research because we think research can and should make a difference in the world. And yet, we struggle with making those aspirations a reality. Here are five lessons my colleagues and I have learned through a decade of work at the William T. Grant Foundation to bridge research to policy.

### **Forget dissemination, foster engagement!**

If we think the challenge is dissemination, I fear that we have already lost the battle. Dissemination is unidirectional. It implies that researchers just need to spread their work to policymakers in order to have it used. But this model of communicating research relegates decision makers to the role of passive recipients. Consider this quote from Michael Marmot of University College London:

*"... a simple prescription would be to review the scientific evidence of what would make a difference, formulate policies, and implement them—evidence-based policymaking. Unfortunately, this simple prescription, applied to real life, is simplistic. The relation between science and policy is more complicated. Scientific findings do not fall on blank minds that get made up as a result. Science engages with busy minds that have strong views about how things are and ought to be."*

In order for research to be used, we need to foster engagement between researchers and policymakers. Dissemination is a one-way street. Engagement is a two-way street. Engagement requires that researchers and policymakers have back-and-forth interactions. They dialogue. They debate. They develop shared interpretations of what research means for particular policy problems.

### **Plan from the beginning, not at the end.**

If you want your research to be used, it helps to start out on solid footing. Don't wait to begin planning until the end of the project when you have research findings. Start the study by identifying whom you want your findings to inform. Which policymaker, making what kinds of decisions? Then craft research aims that speak to those audiences, their needs, and the questions on their minds. This will improve the chances that your research is policy-relevant and your findings have a receptive audience.

But don't lose sight of theory as you delve into policy-relevant work! At its best, research is cumulative—it builds and tests frameworks for explaining real-world phenomena. As you converse with policymakers, listen for their theories of action. Link what they are saying to what you know from social science theories and empirical work. Design research that tests their assumptions and your own. Build our aggregate knowledge.

### **Contextualize the research.**

In order for research to be used, it has to have meaning for particular policy problems and circumstances. It's not simply about passing research "facts" to decision makers. Research findings have to be interpreted, and they must be transformed into implications. Policymakers need to determine whether the research results have relevance to the issues they are facing and the

## **TRAINING RESEARCHERS TO INFORM POLICY**

specific decisions before them. They need to discern what research conducted elsewhere suggests for their children and families, local context, and available resources. Researchers and policymakers can be jointly engaged in that interpretation.

### **Build trust.**

To do any of the above, researchers and policymakers need to trust one another. Too often, academic researchers are seen as outsiders looking in, with a wagging finger and pronouncements of what should be done; and policymakers are viewed as political actors who don't value evidence. Policymakers want to work with people who are sensitive to the issues they face and the context in which they work. They go back to people who consistently demonstrate that understanding and haven proven helpful in the past. They consider whether the researchers will share findings with them before releasing the results to the media or others. Agencies want time to develop a thoughtful response rather than scramble in the midst of a media frenzy.

Policymakers work in a political context (so do researchers, but that's a topic for another post). It shouldn't be surprising when political calculations shape a decision. Instead of treating politics as the enemy of evidence, let's focus on how politics matters and how research can enhance the political process.

### **Partner.**

No one can do it all. Partner with the policymakers you seek to influence or collaborate with the advocacy organization that is pushing for reform. Develop joint research agendas that meet your shared interests, draw on pooled expertise, and establish a joint commitment.

For early career researchers, I suggest starting small. There is no shame in building your research skills and credibility first—after all, those are the assets you bring into a partnership. But even as you hone your researcher credentials, spend time learning about the policy issues that matter to you. Whenever possible, go to the source—don't just learn from books, articles, and pundits. Spend a day shadowing an agency leader, see what challenges and opportunities they face on a daily basis, and observe how they navigate the policy process.

And for more senior researchers and institutional leaders, let's build the organizational and professional capacity to produce more useful research and to collaborate with policymakers. Let's create the learning opportunities that so many young researchers seek and that propels them to pursue research careers in the first place. We can do a much better job of lining up our incentive and training systems with our aspirations for research us.

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**IDENTIFYING PARTNERS WORKSHEET**

Using the Identifying Partners Table below, identify specific people with whom you wish to develop new relationships or strengthen existing ones. Imagine how you might work with them. This activity builds upon the network mapping activity conducted during the workshop and allows you to systematically think about how you can work with current and future partners.

Person/ Organization*	What is your current relationship?	What kind of future relationship might you have?	Which intermediaries (people or organizations) could connect you to this person?	What research questions might they have? In what ways might you or your research be useful to them? Consider tactical, instrumental, conceptual use of research, co- creation, and non- research-related resources you might offer. Could you imagine a joint research project? If so, along what lines?	What specific next step might you take to get this relationship moving?	How hard might it be to create this relationship? (1 = very easy, 5 = very hard)	How impactful might this relationship be? (1 = not very impactful, 5 = very impactful)	Rank your priorities  (1 = highest priority)

### **MORE WAYS TO PARTNER WITH POLICYMAKERS**

Here are additional ways that researchers can offer value to policymakers and encourage the use of research evidence in policymaking.

#### **Act as an Information Broker**

Policymakers value learning from scholars. SSN members have briefed top White House and agency officials and federal and state lawmakers and their staff on issues including implementation of the Affordable Care Act, data collection problems in the criminal justice system, the efficacy of various kinds of voting rights reforms, higher education affordability measures, and many more topics. Policymakers are not interested in random information or highly general background. They typically want knowledge that is relevant to issues and decisions they must soon face, or about topics they could usefully take on in the near future. Researchers are often well equipped to survey and summarize relevant literature.

#### **Help Practitioners Recognize Quality Research**

Policymakers and their staff advisers sometimes value learning about research methods to be able to distinguish good studies from bad and to better understand the power and relevance of various research findings.

#### **Offer Policy Ideas**

Scholars may want to pitch a policymaker on becoming the champion for a particular policy in an area they have studied in detail. Lawmakers, especially new ones, are always looking for specific policy niches in which they can lead and advocate new ideas – by sponsoring a bill or chairing a caucus addressing an issue. When other legislators have already staked out issues over the years, finding a unique policy niche can be difficult for a rising newcomer, and that creates an opening for scholars. Offering a new policy hook could be extremely welcome, especially if the idea is accompanied by an offer to provide continuing support and assistance. It is easiest offer new policy ideas at times when your policy area is not at the center of debate, for example, when the state legislative session is over and lawmakers are beginning to mull ideas for the next session.

#### **Write Joint Op-eds**

A great way to build a relationship with a policymaker is to offer to write a joint Op-ed. The Op-ed should be about an issue that both you and the policymaker know well. It could comment on a big news story, or draw attention to an issue on which you and the policymaker are establishing leadership. Only suggest a joint Op-Ed if you are willing to write a 600 word first draft free from jargon. Legislators will expect you to take the initiative. Neither the legislator nor their staff will edit your 1,200 word piece down to 400-700 words that most opinion sections require.

#### **Invite Your Policymaker Partner to Campus**

Local, state, and federal policymakers often make good co-hosts, moderators or speakers for events. Bringing the policymaker into your university can add another dimension to your relationship – although it is always wise to check with colleagues and university leaders first. Often times, policymakers are delighted to speak to constituents like students and faculty about issues,



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and structured forums can gently remind policymakers that they have constituents who want them to use research evidence.

### **Contribute to Committee Hearings**

In state capitols and in Washington, legislative committees hold hearings to delve into policy issues by listening to expert witnesses. Although various state governments operate differently, at the federal level, hearing witnesses are selected by committees through a careful vetting process. When you meet with policymakers or staffers on a committee dealing with topics related to your expertise, it is appropriate to offer to the possibility of participation in hearings when witnesses are needed. SSN's policy team can help guide scholars through the process, including the preparation of testimony.

Even if not selected to testify, scholars can still offer input for hearings by providing briefs and other information that committee members could use for opening statements or to frame their questions for witnesses. Scholars may even want to suggest research-based questions that legislators may ask.

### **Provide Feedback and Help Shape Policy**

When drafting legislation or regulations, policymakers want to hear from advocacy groups and experts. Feedback from independent scholars is particularly valued as it is viewed as independent and based on research. Scholars may be contacted to provide specific ideas or thoughts on draft legislation or regulations. However, individual SSN members, chapters, and working groups can also proactively weigh-in on policy in several ways. This can be done by sending a comment on a proposed regulation, or by writing a letter to a legislator to recommend certain principles, policies, or language that should be included (or not) in a bill.

### **Support Work Policymakers are Already Doing**

Many times, policymakers are already working on legislation and other efforts to advance policies supported by scholars and their research findings. Scholars can bolster these efforts by writing letters of support, referencing sound legislative efforts in a positive matter during public speeches, discussing good legislation in Op-eds, or offering themselves as media sources to speak about the worth of the initiative. If a scholar finds it appropriate to provide support in one of these ways, he or she can let the policymaker know. This is an excellent way to open doors for further relationships. Of course, scholars may also want to speak or write in a critical way about regulations or legislation that does not make sense based on their expert knowledge and research.

### **COMMUNICATING WITH LEGISLATORS**

#### **Communicating with Legislators: The Power of the Fact Sheet**

Kirsten Widner, Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at Emory University and SSN Graduate Fellow 2017-2018.

Policy should be informed by the best available research. However, legislators are generalists who are asked to consider policies on a dizzying array of topics. They don't have the time to read detailed research reports, and many lack the training to understand the details of academic research even if they had the time to read it. Fact sheets can help provide the key points of policy-relevant research quickly, clearly, and with clear implications for action. Thus, researchers who wish to inform the public policymaking process should master the art of the fact sheet.

**What it is:** A fact sheet clearly and simply breaks down the key information about an issue or related bill. Ideally, it should fit on one side of one page; it should never be no more than two pages (so that it fits on one sheet of paper). It uses bullet points, graphs or other easy to read and visually pleasing tools to communicate its message quickly and concisely.

**How to construct a fact sheet:** The policy communication experts at the Opportunity Agenda suggest that communications should follow the VPSA format:<sup>7</sup>

- **Value:** Briefly state the underlying value that makes this issue matter
- **Problem:** Give a short, concise description of the problem with the current law or situation
- **Solution:** Briefly describe what we're proposing and how it fixes the problem
- **Action:** Clearly state what you want someone to do about this information (e.g. introduce legislation to address an issue, vote for a specific bill, fund a specific program, etc.)

#### **Fact sheet dos and don'ts:**

- **Do** frame the issue around the values of your audience, not just your own. You're trying to make your reader care about the issue, not tell them why you do.
- **Do** simplify your language and graphics. Wording needs to be accessible to a person who knows nothing about the subject, and graphics need to be clear to a person who knows nothing about statistics.
- **Don't** be equivocal. While scientists want caveats and scope conditions, legislators want a clear answer.
- **Do** clearly identify what you want the policymaker to do with the information.
- **Don't** provide full citations. Citations clutter up the limited space and take away from the clarity of the message. But...

Do provide information about how to follow up to get more detailed information if it will be helpful to the reader. This can be a link to your SSN brief or your research website, or just your contact information.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://opportunityagenda.org/approach/why-values-based-messaging>

### **TIPS FOR BRIEF WRITING**

SSN Briefs are tools for scholars to introduce ourselves and share the highlights of our research with fellow citizens, members of the media, and policymakers in ways they can immediately understand and use. Briefs do not “dumb things down,” but they are never written in abstract or insider language. Instead they use clear, everyday language, free from jargon.

There are two main types of SSN briefs: Key Findings and Basic Facts. Both are no more than two pages long. Key Findings briefs present the core ideas and findings of a book or article, a doctoral dissertation, or a paper presented at a professional conference. Basic Facts briefs draw on a scholar’s own work plus the work of others to highlight the most important things civic leaders and members of the public need to know about an important topic. Oftentimes, they include specific policy recommendations.

Briefs are fun to write once you get the hang of it. The first step is to submit a rough draft of up to two and a half single-spaced pages to Ben Miyamoto at [ben@scholars.org](mailto:ben@scholars.org). A typical finished brief usually has around 950 words; for a first draft, we request 1000 to 1200 words. If you have a particularly important chart or illustration, a smaller word count may be appropriate.

Here are steps you can take to make your draft effective and speed the editorial process:

- Start with SSN’s website, where you can look at SSN briefs that cover topics or publications similar to yours. Check out titles, language and examples, subheads and bullets. Imitation of good examples is the best way to learn any new format.
- If you work from an academic publication, realize that you will be writing in a different language. Insider jargon, abstract concepts, or ideological terminology – none of that will work. Think instead how you would talk with a neighbor or your Aunt at Thanksgiving Dinner. You have to catch their attention, say why the subject matters, and spell things out step by step. You can indicate how you did your research, but very briefly.
- Each brief needs an opening paragraph to draw in readers and signal where you are headed. Beyond that, you have two or three subsections, each with a clear title. You can use bullets to list examples or give specifics, but don’t over-do it.
- Include specific policy suggestions related to your argument, if appropriate. Now that the reader understands your argument, what can he/she do about it?
- If necessary, write the argument in scholarly terms and then spend time translating each part into everyday language. Use active, short sentences, short paragraphs, specific examples, and common-sense ways of saying things.
- Prune excessive out wordiness. Scholars often repeat things for precision, but that is not necessary in a brief.
- Come up with a title, perhaps a question or a simple declaration, that vividly captures the essence of your argument. Like a headline, a good title fits on one line.

### **SAMPLE SSN BRIEF**

*This brief is an effective example of using a compelling narrative to ground the importance of research that has direct policy implications.*

#### **How the Reproductive Justice Movement Benefits Latinas**

Rocio Garcia, University of California, Los Angeles

In early September 2015, Blanca Borrego, an undocumented Latina immigrant accompanied by her two daughters, arrived at a women's health clinic in Texas for a routine gynecological exam. Sitting in the waiting room for nearly two hours, Blanca's anxiety and impatience grew to the point where she almost walked out of the office. Eventually, Blanca was met by local law enforcement officials who escorted her out of the clinic in handcuffs for allegedly using a forged driver's license during patient intake. Blanca's eight-year-old daughter watched in tears while her mother was taken away and a deputy told Blanca's eldest daughter that their mother would face deportation. Blanca remains in county jail on a \$35,000 bond.

Scenarios like Blanca's – highlighting the impact of race, class, and immigration status on reproductive rights – are not always brought to the fore. Although reproductive rights activists say they advocate for *all* women, difficulties faced by white, middle-class, heterosexual women get more attention than those experienced by women of color, immigrant or transgender women, or those with disabilities. However, a movement for reproductive justice has emerged by and for women of color that offers new possibilities to bring previously neglected issues to light. Key challenges include tackling the reproductive experiences of Latinas – and looking for ways to do more to address their needs in reproductive health care and policy.

#### **Latina Realities**

Understanding Latinas' reproductive lives requires understanding how many forms of disadvantage intersect and create reinforcing disadvantages.

- Poor migrant women often flee interpersonal and institutional violence and poverty in their home countries, only to become susceptible to sexual assault at the hands of border officials, human traffickers, and others.
- Transgender Latinas are more likely than heterosexual Latinas to leave their home countries to escape interpersonal violence and economic disenfranchisement.
- Undocumented Latinas simultaneously face dangers of family separation through deportation and, because of their low-income status, have difficulty getting access to abortion services. There are too few abortion providers and many health care providers lack the language and cultural skills to help these women. Fears about seeking medical help can leave immigrant Latinas subject to deportation or life-threatening crises. Increasingly, anti-abortion "crisis pregnancy centers" pose as legitimate medical clinics in order to pressure Latinas to continue unwanted pregnancies.
- Both immigrant and U.S.-born Latinas are more likely than other women to lack health insurance coverage and live and work in unhealthy environments where they are exposed

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to air pollution, unsafe drinking water, agricultural pesticides, and lead and mercury contamination.

- According to a 2016 policy report by the organization California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, Latinas are the group of women least likely to attain basic or higher college degrees, making it difficult for them to attain well-paying, stable employment. Employed Latinas in California, specifically, earn 43.6 cents for every dollar earned by white men.
- While Latina/o communities have higher rates of young families compared to whites, many of these families experience stigma and poverty and suffer shortfalls in resources all parents need in order to raise their children safely.

### **When Abortion “Choice” is Not Enough**

Latinas’ experiences shed light on the inadequacy of any approach to reproductive rights that emphasizes abortion access above all. The “choice” framework that undergirds much reproductive rights advocacy in the United States assumes that women face few constraints in raising healthy families and so are mainly concerned about access to abortion when they choose not to have babies. But this perspective is grounded in white middle-class experience and ignores the pressures many poor women face. When poor and working-class women of color choose to continue a pregnancy rather than seek abortion, for example, they are often criticized for choosing a less economically sustainable path. Yet for many poor women, including immigrant and native Latinas, parenthood may signify a powerful means for self-determination, including resistance to pressures from public agencies to limit reproduction, such as coerced sterilization. At its core, the reproductive justice movement advocates for the right for poor women and women of color to have children or not have children as they see fit. Rather than only advocating for expanding access to abortion and contraception, the movement advances policies to help all people raise the children they want in safe and healthy environments.

### **Advancing Reproductive Justice for Latinas**

Research by California Latinas for Reproductive Justice shows that many in Latino communities support every woman’s right to choose an abortion, but also believe that advocating for abortion access is only one way to empower Latinas. In California, the movement works to repeal family cap limits on family welfare grants and supports a bill that would give parents extra benefits to pay for diapers. Both steps would help many Latinas in the state. Currently California limits on family grants prohibit extra financial support to children born while their families are receiving basic needs grants from the state’s welfare program. This limit is based on the racist and classist notion that poor women of color have children only to receive aid – and this denies poor women the right to choose to have more children.

U.S. reproductive politics is rife with controversy – and most public attention focuses on issues of access to abortion. But full reproductive justice for less privileged women and families, including Latinas’ families, requires socioeconomic support for raising children as well as further steps to ensure access to a full range of reproductive health services. Beyond the clash of pro-choice and pro-life advocates lies the goal to which we all should aspire: people’s right to parent when they choose and raise children in safe and healthy conditions.

### **THE FIRST MEETING**

Meeting face to face with policymakers is a key first step to building relationships. It can help you learn more about their priorities, their needs, and may provide an opportunity for collaboration. Like researchers, policymakers are busy, so it is always best to communicate clearly and do some research beforehand. The objectives of an introductory meeting are to begin to form a collegial relationship, gain a clear sense of a policymaker's priorities, and give the policymaker or staffers a clear sense of what you might be able to offer and exactly how a fruitful collaboration could proceed. That last point is particularly important. Although policymakers want the help of scholars, they often are not sure just how they can get such help or form a fruitful relationship. In addition to arriving prepared to ask "How can I help?" and to listen to the answer with an open mind, it is wise to bring some specific suggestions. Consider:

#### **Who are you meeting?**

Who is the policymaker you are speaking with? What do they support? What recent legislation or administrative action have they initiated, sponsored or supported? What are their key concerns and interests? Have they been in the news lately? If they are a legislator, what committees are they on? Answering these questions can help you hone your objectives and inform the kinds of things you might do together. Come to the meeting armed with questions, and ideas for ways you can help.

#### **Remember the value of staff.**

Although meeting with the policymaker herself may be ideal, a lot of the groundwork is done at the staff level. Many people clamor for policymakers' time. An introductory meeting with a key staffer can be just as productive as – or more productive than – a brief encounter with the principal.

#### **What are you looking to accomplish in the short term? What is acceptable to you?**

How might the first meeting open up possibilities for a mutually beneficial relationship? Can the policymaker provide you with information to inform your research?

#### **Are there things the policymaker is currently working on that are well supported by research evidence?**

If so, you might lend a hand by offering to write or speak about how research supports that initiative, perhaps in written testimony or an op-ed. Try to imagine other possible propositions a policymaker might make. It is important to know what you are willing and not willing to do. Often, policymakers may ask you to serve as an information broker by summarizing research or identifying other researchers in areas adjacent to your expertise.

#### **What might you hope to accomplish in the long term?**

Are you interested in co-creating research? Do you have suggestions for how the policymaker might think about an issue, or ideas for a policy change? Recognize that trust takes time to build. Small joint projects can lead to larger ones.

#### **Consider shadowing.**

If your initial meeting goes well, a good next step might be to see if you can walk a mile in the policymaker's shoes, by asking to shadow her through some of her routine. This form of qualitative

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research can do double duty, helping you both better understand the policymaker's point of view while helping you build a better relationship with the policymaker and their team.

**Policymakers often doubt generalized claims, especially when the stakes are high.**

You may be confident that findings from other nations or states may be portable. Policymakers may doubt them. This is especially true with research evidence that is offered to make an instrumental case for or against a pending high-profile decision. This type of presentation is sometimes necessary but is unlikely to make for a good start to a long-term relationship.

**Time will be short. What do you need to ask? What do you need to say?**

What is unique value do you offer? What do you need them to know? Many policymakers will appreciate it if you get right to the point. Be ready for the possibility that your one-hour slot might be delayed by 45 minutes and end after 10 minutes.

**There will be No's.**

And that's ok! You don't have to say yes to everything, and neither does the policymaker. Don't be afraid to come back later and ask again.

**But expect a Yes.**

Policymakers are short on time, staff, and expertise in your field. They will appreciate offers to help them get – or, better, to create – research evidence that might lead to better outcomes for their constituents and the issues they care about.

Before any meetings with policymakers, SSN members can get tips by consulting the SSN staff or specific ideas and advice.

### **BEST PRACTICES FOR CLEAR COMMUNICATION**

#### **First, Your Goal. Then, Your Audience.**

Before you write or speak, identify your communications objective and think about your audience. What are they hoping for when they choose to read your work or meet with you? What language will work best? How much time do they have? What might they already know or already think? After you have considered your audience, you may need to adjust your objectives.

#### **Let Them Speak**

If you are speaking to a group or meeting with a policymaker, think carefully about how you can let them speak, ideally before and after you speak. It is amazing how much “How can I make this meeting most useful for you?” can go to set things on a good path early. And it is impossible to create relationships without listening and asking questions.

#### **Keep It Simple**

The simplest way to explain your idea is usually the best. Ideally, your middle-school aged child should be able to understand everything you say.

- **Keep your argument straightforward.** There will always be more you want to say or more evidence you could provide. But usually less is more.
- Use **common words**. For example, instead of “analogous to” or “based on partisanship” use “similar to” and “based on political party”. If you take the time to prepare, you can express ideas with great precision without insider language.
- Keep your sentence structures straightforward. For example, **limit the use of adjectives, adverbs, and compound tenses**.
- Opting for **several simple words** is often better than one complex word. For example, instead of “disenfranchised” use “prevented from voting”.
- That said, **simplify and condense wordy phrases** where possible. For example, use “I am studying...” instead of “I am conducting an investigation of...” You are not a detective.

#### **Avoid Jargon and Be Careful Not to Talk Down**

Different audiences will have different levels of familiarity with technical language. Don’t make assumptions about your audience’s knowledge. In *The Sense of Style*, Steven Pinker suggests “...assume that your readers are as intelligent and sophisticated as you are, but that they happen not to know something you know.”

- **Avoid acronyms and abbreviations.** This depends on audience. Using “NOAA” (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) may be fine when speaking to a legislator who serves on an environment committee but not one on the finance committee. Err on the side of avoiding them. Even acronyms and abbreviations that you think are well known can make you seem elitist to someone who does not know them.
- Explain what **specialized or technical terms** mean or leave them out.
- **Provide context** – Even non-specialized terms may benefit from further explanation. For example, give titles and context when you use names.



### **Be Concrete and Give Examples**

Concrete examples are always better than abstract statements or generalizations.

- **Use vivid stories** from your life or from your research to help others understand your perspective.
- Choose your examples with your audience in mind.
- **Choose just the most important statistics.** Too many statistics can easily be overwhelming, reducing your persuasiveness. Never assume statistics speak for themselves. Explain why they matter. Illustrate them with other types of evidence, like stories.

### **Be exact, honest, and make it clear when you don't know the answer.**

Your reputation as a trustworthy authority is one of your greatest assets as researcher. It takes years to build. Protect it by always being clear about the difference between your findings, the findings of others, and your considered opinion.

**SAMPLE OP-ED**

*This Op-Ed almost certainly did not decide the outcome of the 2015 policy debate in Massachusetts about raising the state's earned income tax credit. It did, however, provide an opportunity for a scholar and a policymaker to work together, and tied them both closer to the civic intermediary that brought them together (in this case, SSN).*



Opinion

## **Eldridge, Tach: Big moment for working parents**

**By Sen. Jamie Eldridge and Laura Tach / Guest Columnists**

Posted May 19, 2015 at 11:31 PM

Updated May 19, 2015 at 11:31 PM

The recession is supposed to be over, right? You might not know it.

Today, there are still tens of thousands of working parents in our state on the job all week long who have a tough time making ends meet. You might be one of them, and if not, you've met her. She is working the register at the grocery store, watching your child at daycare, taking care of grandpa at the VA, or stocking shelves at Walmart.

This could be a big week for those working parents and their children. In other states in New England those families get some much needed help – a couple of extra thousand dollars around tax time. But here in Massachusetts, they get a lot less. This week that could change.

Here's what you need to know. The federal Earned Income Tax Credit, sometimes called the EITC, is one of America's most successful ways to make sure that, if you work for a living, you shouldn't have to live in poverty. For every dollar's worth of the federal EITC a working mom or dad receives, the state of Vermont adds in 32 cents. New York contributes 30 cents. Washington, D.C. does 40. In Massachusetts we're stuck at 15.

It's rare for Republicans and Democrats to agree on anything these days. But Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker, and State Senate President Stan Rosenberg have both said it is time to give working families a raise by increasing the state match.

This week, Beacon Hill debates the state budget. Massachusetts can lead the nation by setting a 50 percent match. Increasing the state match to 50 percent of the federal EITC would boost the maximum benefit for working families from less than \$1,000 to about \$3,000. The earned income tax credit is a big deal in Framingham and Marlborough, where about 1 in every 8 taxpayers claims the credit. Even in Hopkinton, a couple hundred taxpayers get the EITC.

Both of us have spoken to working parents in Massachusetts and seen that the Earned Income Tax Credit is an example of government doing something right. Nothing in this world is perfect, but this is a tax credit that rewards work, gives working parents a sense of dignity, and provides capital that families can invest wisely. And they usually do. In Laura's investigation of families who get the credit, she has seen parents do things like buy school clothes for their kids, purchase a used car to get to work, and pay off high-interest credit card debt.

An increase in the state's Earned Income Tax Credit would help a lot of working families. Helping working parents, protecting the middle class, investing in communities, and fighting inequality – this is what government should be all about.

*Jamie Eldridge of Acton is a Massachusetts State Senator. Laura M. Tach is an assistant professor of Policy Analysis & Management at Cornell University.*

**SAMPLE OP-ED**

*This is an example of a well written Op-Ed that was placed in a national newspaper and will likely be read by people across the country. After reading this article, do you feel that this article had an effect on policy change? Why/why not?*

## Los Angeles Times

### Hanjal: No Peace Without Representation

**By Dr. Zoltan Hajnal**

August 28, 2014

Before the media and the public shift their attention to the next pressing issue, we could use this opportunity to think about reforms that could prevent future Fergusons. One solution is easy to legislate and remarkably effective: increase representation.

There are many factors driving the anger in Ferguson. But the fact that African Americans had almost no representation in city government shaped much of what happened in that Missouri suburb after the shooting death of black teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer. The figures are stark. Blacks represent two-thirds of the city population, yet the mayor, five of six City Council members, six of seven school board members and 50 of 53 police officers are not black.

Ferguson is not alone on this front. Across the nation, racial and ethnic minorities are grossly underrepresented in city government. African Americans make up roughly 12% of the national population but only 4.3% of city councils and 2% of mayors. The figures for Latinos and Asian Americans are even worse.

By simply changing local electoral laws, we could radically alter who votes, who wins office

and the types of policies that local governments pursue. My research shows that altering the timing of local elections, shifting from nonpartisan to partisan contests, changing from staggered to consolidated council elections and switching from at-large to district elections all have important effects on local politics.

Moving from stand-alone local elections — the system that is in place in Ferguson — to on-cycle elections that occur on the same date as statewide and national contests has the most potential to increase the number of voters. Across the nation, turnout in cities with on-cycle elections is, all else being equal, almost double that of turnout in cities with off-cycle elections.

What makes timing especially appealing as a policy lever is that there are strong incentives — in addition to increasing participation and minority representation — to switch to on-cycle elections. The primary motivation for this move usually has been cost savings. In most states, municipalities pay the entire administrative costs of stand-alone elections but only a fraction of the costs of on-cycle elections. The city of Concord, Calif., for example, estimated that the cost of running a

stand-alone election would be \$58,000, while an on-cycle one would be only \$25,000.

But other small steps toward more inclusive local elections could have big impacts as well. By adding partisan labels to local electoral ballots, we can make it easier for voters to know what each candidate stands for. By having all council seats up for election at the same time rather than staggering them across two contests, we can make each election more meaningful by having more offices up for grabs. And by electing each council member by district or ward instead of by a citywide at-large vote, we can give minorities a real chance to elect a candidate of their own.

Cities with higher turnout and greater minority representation tend to enact policies that are more in line with racial and ethnic minority preferences.

With a few easy steps, we could move from local elections with a tiny and generally unrepresentative electorate to elections with broad and significantly more representative participation. Given that the majority of cities have electoral institutions that tend to generate low turnout, the potential to expand participation is enormous.

All of this has critical ripple effects for minority representation in office. Higher-turnout cities elect city officials who are much more representative. My analysis shows that increasing turnout could eliminate up to a third of the underrepresentation of minorities on city councils and in mayor's offices.

Cities with higher turnout and greater minority representation tend to enact policies that are more in line with racial and ethnic minority preferences. In particular, higher turnout is associated with greater social welfare

spending and greater hiring of minorities in city government.

Coming back full circle to Ferguson, my research with Jessica Trounstein of UC Merced shows that these kinds of changes can reduce frustration among blacks. Our analysis of local surveys and U.S. Census data shows that African Americans are generally less happy than whites with the performance of their city governments. But those same surveys show that when local governments spend more on social welfare and hire more African Americans, black dissatisfaction declines and blacks are as happy as whites with local government.

In most cities, a simple municipal ordinance would suffice to change local electoral laws. A survey in California found that more than 40% of cities had made a change in the timing of municipal elections in recent years. States can also get involved. In 2012, Arizona passed legislation mandating that many of its cities hold local elections that coincide with statewide contests. Citizens can also contribute. In states with direct democracy, they could put local election timing, district elections or other reforms on the statewide or local ballot.

Entrenched officeholders would probably resist such reforms. But the changes would be too powerful to be ignored. With a few small measures, we could do much to prevent future Fergusons from erupting across the country.

Zoltan Hajnal is a professor of political science at UC San Diego and the author of "America's Uneven Democracy: Race, Turnout and Representation in City Politics."

### **MEDIA OUTLETS**

Working with media can be a fantastic tool for gaining public name recognition, getting the attention of local policymakers, and building relationships with various stakeholders. Depending on your policy goals, certain media outlets are better suited than others. This list offers suggestions on which outlets can help you accomplish your policy goal.

**USA Today** USA Today is a paper with wide, national reach. This paper reaches more moderate audiences and is part of a large network of papers, allowing your piece the possibility of being republished in multiple local outlets. This is a good outlet for op-eds

**The New York Times** The New York Times is a great outlet for getting the attention of other scholars, urban elites, Democrats, and groups that align ideologically with the left. NYT op-eds typically feature stories as well as facts.

**Vox** Vox has national reach and is best suited for longer, explainer pieces, like giving the historical context of a social issue or current policy debate. Useful for framing issues conceptually.

**The Monkey Cage** Monkey Cage is great for pieces centered on research and is an excellent place to share new findings. This is a great place to get the attention of other scholars and other policy wonks.

**Local outlets** Local outlets are a great way to get the attention of your local legislators. Use local media to praise, critique your local elected, or offer insight on how a local, state, or federal policy would affect that community.

**The Conversation** The Conversation only publishes pieces written by researchers and places them in local papers throughout the country. They are mostly interested in pieces that comment on or contextualize current events.

**The Hill** A great place to write on federal policy issues. The Hill is widely read by staff and legislators and can be an excellent way to create name recognition or signal your interest in working on federal policy.

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**The LA Times** A national news outlet with a California focus, the LA Times is a more moderate outlet that has the fourth-largest circulation among U.S. papers.

**Washington Post** Like the New York Times, editors at the Washington Post like when op-ed pieces use stories to illustrate research findings.

## **SAMPLE RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT**

*Policymakers often request research evidence that goes beyond the results of a single study. Here is an example of a short research summary compiled by a pair of scholars in response to a request from policymakers in Utah. In the original online version, the blue sections link directly to the underlying studies.*

### **Causes and Consequences of Teacher Turnover**

*James Curry, University of Utah*

*Amanda Bertana, University of Utah*

*November 2017*

Here are causes and consequences of teacher turnover in the United States – outlined by several nationally prominent scholars based in universities across the nation.

- **Pay Matters.**

Teachers are altruistic in many respects. However, they also respond to the same incentives as workers in other industries: Pay matters. Numerous [studies](#) find higher salaries relate to lower rates of turnover. Although, both high- and low-income schools face some turnover, [lower-income schools suffer higher rates of turnover](#). However, lower-income schools [can overcome turnover in part by paying teachers higher salaries](#).

Low pay can cause early retirement among experienced teachers, particularly if pensions and other retirement benefits are substantial. [Generally](#), if financial incentives to retire (such as pensions) outpace the incentives to continue to work, schools lose [high-quality, experienced teachers](#).

Compensation is not one size fits all. It matters in different ways for different teachers. Retention of teachers early in their careers is driven by expected salary growth rate. However, for teachers later into their careers the salary level matters more. Either way, pay affects retention.

- **Working Conditions Matter, Too.**

Pay is important, but not the only factor in turnover. Like other workers, teachers not only want good pay, but a good work environment. Characteristics of schools and students also influence turnover.

Student population: Turnover is higher in schools with challenging student populations, including schools with more [low-achieving students](#), larger populations of [economically disadvantaged and minority students](#), and larger immigration populations. In particular, schools with large populations of low-achieving students see new teachers [leave the occupation entirely](#).

Neighborhoods and communities: Teachers are more likely to [seek jobs with and remain at schools](#) in better-off communities with less crime. This reinforces other patterns driving better teachers to schools with better-off student populations, independent of pay.

Facilities and working conditions: The [working conditions](#) at schools influence rates of turnover, including class sizes, the quality of facilities, the availability of textbooks, and more.

School leadership: Studies find that [principals providing effective leadership](#) can help mitigate turnover by successfully identifying and [retaining high-quality teachers. While also selectively replacing ineffective teachers](#) with ones who are more qualified.

Teacher support and autonomy: Teachers who report [a lack of administrative support are more likely to leave](#) their jobs or pursue other careers. Other studies find that mentorship in the form of [on-the-job training and support](#) simultaneously helps teacher performance and retention rates.

Teachers' unions: Teachers unions improve teacher retention in nuanced ways. Unions assist teachers in advocating for higher pay and more benefits, which helps schools retain teachers. However, unions also help schools retain high-quality teachers and replace lower-quality ones. Schools with strong unions know they will be paying tenured teachers a good amount, [and so are more likely to fire low-performing teachers, pre-tenure](#).

Licensing standards: Different licensing standards across states impedes teacher mobility. A study [in Washington and Oregon](#) found in-state mobility was much higher than cross-state mobility, due in part to [significant penalties for cross-state mobility](#) for teachers, including having to adapt to a new state's specific licensure requirements. This may help states keep teachers within their borders, but it also impedes the ability of states to lure high-quality teachers across state lines.

- **Turnover has Consequences.**

Teacher turnover is not necessarily bad. Turnover replacing [poor performing teachers with better teachers](#) can be a net positive. The supply of high-quality teachers is rarely large enough to replace all lower-quality teachers, but where it is, turnover can [actually improve student achievement](#).

But mostly, turnover has adverse effects on students. High rates of turnover [negatively affect student achievement](#) and result in [higher dropout rates](#), in part, because [less experienced teachers tend to be less effective](#). Turnover also disrupts the performance of a school's retained teachers. In years of high turnover, schools see the [effectiveness of teachers who stay decline](#). Turnover disrupts staff



cohesion and places additional burdens on teachers to help mentor their new colleagues. Turnover is also costly, with at least one projection finding each case of teacher attrition [costs a school system 30% of that departing teacher's annual salary](#) in related expenses.

Too much turnover can result in teacher shortages, which negatively affects student learning. This is truer for some subjects than others. For instance, in Washington State over a long stretch of time [the production of STEM teachers was too low, so the state had to import teachers](#), a difficult and costly solution.

- **A Nuanced Problem Requires Nuanced Solutions.**

Turnover has numerous causes and a variety of consequences. It is a nuanced issue. Simply increasing salaries across the board might encourage poor performing teachers to stay put. Increases in teacher compensation need to be strategically targeted and sized. Salaries need to be linked to adequate measures of teacher effectiveness and coupled with policy changes that improve working conditions in schools, including better school leadership, better facilities, and more teacher support. Retirement benefits also need to be balanced against salaries so as not to [inadvertently incentivize retirement](#). Compensation structures [designed to keep experienced teachers on the job](#) help mitigate turnover.

Teacher turnover is a nuanced problem that requires nuanced solutions. Without smart action, state lawmakers can expect teacher turnover to negatively affect student achievement.

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## **SAMPLE RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT**

*Policymakers often request research evidence that goes beyond the results of a single study. Here is an example of a short research summary compiled by a group of scholars in response to a request from policymakers by Massachusetts Senate Leadership. In the original online version, the blue sections link directly to the underlying studies.*

### **Thirteen Ways Massachusetts Can Combat Inequality**

Avi Green, SSN

Shira Rascoe, SSN

*September 2014*

Here are thirteen research-based ways Massachusetts can combat income inequality and boost the economic fortunes of workers and their families – outlined by SSN member scholars including economists, sociologists, and others based in universities across the state and the nation.

#### **Reforms in Social Investments**

- **Raise the minimum wage.** Repeated, modest [minimum wage increases](#) are the best way to pull up wages and reduce income inequality. Massachusetts recently raised its minimum, so the next step is to pass enabling legislation to let municipalities set higher minimums.
- **Raise the state Earned Income Tax Credit.** A proven way to help working families is by increasing the state [Earned Income Tax Credit](#). Specifically, Massachusetts could raise the rate for childless workers to 200% of the federal level.
- **Provide universal preschool.** Other states have already invested in publicly-funded preschool, childcare, and parent coaching. [Universal preschool offers a triple win](#): it improves long-term life prospects for children, gives parents more freedom to participate in the workforce, and creates good jobs for preschool teachers and educators.
- **Increase the supply of housing.** Housing in Massachusetts is too expensive, eating up wages and preventing low and middle class families from becoming home owners and building assets. Bold zoning and regulatory reforms could make it easier to build tall, multi- use, multi-family buildings near transit routes. The state could increase subsidies for low- income buyers and renters and create incentives for developers to build affordable housing.
- **Invest in higher education.** [High college costs](#) prevent many students from attending and leave others crippled by debt. Increased public investment could reduce costs for students and strengthen state universities and community colleges. The state could also increase workforce training by funding apprenticeships and career and technical high schools.

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- **Reform the criminal justice system.** Sentencing reforms could help Massachusetts reduce inequality, reunite families, promote public safety, and save money for other programs. Decriminalizing and taxing marijuana could also reduce incarceration.
- **Streamline benefit applications.** Many residents do not know about their eligibility for public benefits, social services, and housing assistance. To help, Massachusetts could streamline application processes, provide access online, and fund more and better-trained caseworkers, including some based in schools.

### Reforms in Taxes

- **Fund government in a way that reduces inequality.** By taxing low-income families at higher rates, the Commonwealth's current revenue structure makes economic inequality worse and exacerbates need for government programs. Increasing taxes on capital gains, corporate profits, and large estates – and reducing tax loopholes that benefit the wealthy – could reduce financial burdens on low- and middle-income families.
- **Embrace fair but politically viable tax solutions.** A graduated income tax, where people pay higher taxes if they earn more, could reduce inequality. But this approach requires a five- year battle for a constitutional amendment and several campaigns have failed in the past. Another way to generate state funds while not burdening low- and middle-class families would involve a statewide property tax on very expensive homes. This tax would be imposed on the amount of a home's assessed value above a certain point – for example on home values exceeding double the current median home price in the state.
- **Connect taxes to investments.** Taxes earn more public support when the revenues raised are committed to popular purposes – such as “a tax on mansions to fund early childhood education and improvements in public transportation.”

### Encouraging Worker and Citizen Empowerment

- **Support unions.** In regions where labor unions are strong, most workers enjoy [higher wages and better benefits](#). State laws can support existing unions and encourage further unionization, for example for as many public employees as possible. They can take steps to facilitate other kinds of collective bargaining by worker groups.
- **Boost turnout.** To reduce class bias in voter participation, Massachusetts can [enact Election Day registration](#) and move municipal elections to the same November days in even years as federal elections, when turnout is higher and more representative.
- **Encourage working class candidates.** [Grassroots civic groups](#) should encourage candidates from working class and white-collar occupations to run for office, because research shows that such candidates are more likely to speak for broad public concerns.

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