



*Technical Report No. 3*

**National Center for Research in Policy and Practice**

# **A Descriptive Study of the IES Research-Practitioner Partnerships in Education Research Program**

**Final Report**

Caitlin C. Farrell  
Kristen L. Davidson  
Melia Repko-Erwin  
William R. Penuel  
Mary Quantz  
Hayla Wong  
Robbin Riedy  
Zane Brink

University of Colorado Boulder

**July 2018**



**School of Education**  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**



## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank our wonderful colleagues who contributed to this study.

At the University of Colorado Boulder, Anna-Ruth Allen and Stephanie Brown provided valuable feedback on early drafts.

At Harvard University, Fallon Blossom and Corinne Herlihy provided crucial technical support necessary to manage the sample and online survey instrument. They were central to managing multiple waves of survey administration. Fallon also led the design and layout for this report.

We thank the principal investigators of the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice—Heather C. Hill, Cynthia Coburn, and James Spillane—for their feedback on the report. Colleagues at Research for Schools provided helpful feedback on early survey drafts.

We drew on absorptive capacity survey items, with some adaptations, developed by Megan Hopkins, Lok-Sze Wong, Cynthia Coburn, William Penuel, Yukie Toyama, and others. These scales were developed as part of projects supported by the William T. Grant Foundation, grant numbers 180922 and 184067.

Finally, we appreciate the thoughtful reflections of the educators and researchers who participated in this study.

Preferred citation for this report: Farrell, C. C., Davidson, K. L., Repko-Erwin, M. E., Penuel, W. R., Quantz, M., Wong, H., Riedy, R., & Brink, Z. (2018). A descriptive study of the IES Researcher–Practitioner Partnerships in Education Research Program: Final report (Technical Report No. 3). Boulder, CO: National Center for Research in Policy and Practice.

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*This work has been supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305C140008. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute of Education Sciences or the U.S. Department of Education.*

## Executive Summary

This report presents results from the second phase of a descriptive study of the Researcher–Practitioner Partnerships in Education Research program. This two-year grant program, funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) at the U.S. Department of Education, supports exploratory research within a partnership context. In each funded partnership, researchers collaborate with practitioners from state or local education agencies on a research project that investigates a problem of practice and identifies strategies to address the key issues. The National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (NCRPP), which is funded by IES, conducted the study. As a descriptive study, no inferences about the partnerships’ success or the program’s overall impact can be made.

### Research Design and Methods

We studied the first three cohorts of researcher–practitioner partnerships (RPPs), funded in 2013–2015, using a mixed-methods, cross-case design. A summary of Phase I findings can be found in NCRPP Technical Report No. 2, *A Descriptive Study of the IES Researcher–Practitioner Partnerships Program*. For Phase II, we developed two survey instruments, one for researchers and one for practitioners. The surveys included five previously-tested scales of items from NCRPP’s national survey of educational leaders’ research use as well as new items related to partnership goals, prior relationships, and future work together. New items were tested and revised through a cognitive piloting process. We also developed, pilot-tested, and implemented an interview protocol for each group, and we conducted a systematic document review of grant applications.

A total of 114 participants completed the Phase II survey (response rate = 78%), including 62 researchers (25 of whom were principal investigators) and 52 practitioners (28 of whom were co-principal investigators). Ninety-five of these individuals also participated in an interview (response rate = 65%) including 53 researchers (21 of whom were principal investigators) and 42 practitioners (24 of whom were co-principal investigators).

### Context

Each RPP in this study focused on a central educational issue, most often related to improving K–12 teaching and learning (12 of 27 RPPs). Three RPPs addressed issues of K–12 teacher quality or evaluation, and two centered on K–12 school improvement. Four RPPs identified early childhood education as their main issue, five pursued postsecondary access and success, and one RPP focused on improving coordination across state service providers and education agencies.

The majority of RPPs focused their work on research questions that were descriptive or exploratory in nature, in accordance with the aims of the broader program. These projects sought to understand a particular education problem or issue, such as why a particular group of students was underperforming, and to identify possible intervention strategies. A few RPPs focused on understanding causal relationships or validating measures or constructs. Most partnerships used mixed-methods approaches that drew on both new and existing data sources.

The partnerships were given only two years of funding, and resources were not provided to set up or test interventions at scale. Rather, the purpose was to lay a foundation for future intervention research grounded in a more thorough understanding of the problem.

### **Progress on Goals of RPPs**

The RPPs pursued a range of goals in their work together, including and extending beyond those emphasized in the program's request for applications (RFA). Partnerships reported that they were closest to accomplishing goals related to building a foundation of work together, followed by developing a deep understanding of the focal problem, researchers' capacity to work in partnership, and a deep understanding of how researchers and practitioners can work together. In terms of growth over time, participants reported making progress on almost all goals, including those related to developing findings that apply to other organizations and improving students' socio-emotional/non-cognitive outcomes.

### **Perceived Benefits of Participating in a Partnership**

Researchers and practitioners alike highly valued their participation in partnership work, with almost all of those surveyed either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would participate in another RPP in the future.

RPP members reported that partnerships provided local policymakers with new ideas or frameworks or supported the design of professional development, programs, or practices. Participants from about one-third of partnerships reported that their work had contributed to a new or revised policy within the educational organization.

Both researchers and practitioners contributed to the research effort and to dissemination. More precisely, both were involved in collecting, organizing, and analyzing data as well as presenting at conferences, including both researcher- and practitioner-oriented events. About half of the partnerships had members who had written for traditional research outlets (i.e., articles, book chapters, or books) or who had contributed to new media platforms.

### **Shifts in Researchers' and Practitioners' Engagement with Research and Practice**

On surveys, the majority of practitioners reported becoming better at using research in their work and were more likely to do so because of their participation in the partnership. Almost all of the researchers agreed that they had become better at conducting research that meets the needs of practitioners. Both researchers and practitioners agreed they would feel confident leading a future partnership.

In interviews, participants further described practitioners' increased appreciation for the value of research, their openness to participating in and using research, and their expanded skills related to developing, conducting, and disseminating findings from a research study. Likewise, researchers reported having developed expanded understandings about practitioners' contexts, the value of their input in the research process, and the skills needed to adapt research methods and timely reports of findings to practitioners' needs. Both groups noted that they had improved their skills in communicating with stakeholders.

## Practitioners' Use of Research

The ways that RPP district leaders reported using research are similar to those reported by district and school leaders in a nationally representative sample. In both samples, educational leaders reported using research in multiple ways including to make decisions (instrumental use), to inform how they thought about issues (conceptual use), to persuade others of a particular point of view (symbolic use), or to integrate research processes into their own work (process use). Compared to the national sample, RPP district leaders reported less frequent symbolic use of research and more frequent process use. Within the RPP sample, practitioners in research roles were significantly more likely to report higher levels of process use of research than their peers in non-research roles.

Among the activities research evidence might inform (i.e., instrumental uses of research), RPP practitioners were most likely to be involved in directing resources to a program, scaling up a program, or designing professional development. Although practitioners least frequently reported participating in purchasing an intervention or targeted program, they reported the highest frequency of research use for this activity. On average, RPP practitioners in non-research roles reported being more involved in activities related to purchasing an intervention or targeted program, redesigning a program, and designing professional development than did their colleagues in research roles. When these activities occurred, RPP practitioners reported that, in the past year, about half of their RPP research partners were involved in designing professional development or directing resources to a program.

## Useful Pieces of Research

We asked RPP practitioners to name a piece of research that was useful to them, and we compared their reports to those of district leaders from a national survey with the same question. RPP practitioners most often named journal articles, whereas national survey respondents most often named books. Research named by RPP survey respondents focused on particular student subgroups more frequently than did research named by national survey respondents. RPP practitioners most frequently named pieces of research that focused on student learning and school organization but that did not have a disciplinary content focus. Finally, RPP study respondents noted that the piece of research they had named was useful because it helped with the design of programs, policies, and initiatives; national survey respondents, by contrast, frequently named reasons related to supporting leaders' professional learning.

## Nature of Relationships Prior to the IES Grant

The partnerships that received IES funding between 2013 and 2015 were not, for the most part, new collaborations. The majority had participants who had worked together before receiving IES RPP funding, and most participants knew at least one person in or had worked on a project with the partner organization before the grant started. Beyond these relationships, many partnerships had some infrastructure in place already. For example, 19 partnerships had established formal data-sharing agreements, 18 had established broader research agendas beyond the focus of the IES grant, 16 had established memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and 11 had established decision-making boards prior to receiving the IES grant.

## Conditions for Starting and Maintaining a Partnership

The top two conditions for launching an RPP were mutual organizational interest and trust among RPP members. Other conditions that supported starting an RPP included a data-sharing agreement or MOU, individual expertise of RPP members, and organizational leadership. Holding regular meetings, mutual organizational interest, and trust among RPP members were top conditions for maintaining a partnership.

## Promising Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

RPP practitioners reported three main challenges in their partnerships: (1) turnover of positions for those involved in the partnership as well as leadership turnover within educational organizations more generally; (2) differences in researchers' and practitioners' typical timelines or pace of work; and (3) having the "right people at the table" in terms of active members in the partnership with decision-making authority to act on the partnerships' findings. In interviews, RPP participants shared strategies they felt were useful in navigating these issues. The strategies included building strong, trusting relationships, communicating regularly, and being flexible enough to adjust course based on changing circumstances.

## Organizational Conditions in the Practice Organization

*Culture of research use.* In terms of organizational culture for research use, the majority of RPP practitioners agreed that research was seen as a useful source of information in their organization, but fewer indicated that they were expected to back up claims with research in a meeting. Overall, RPP district leaders reported their organizational culture was less research-oriented than did the national sample subset of district leaders.

*Conditions that support learning in a partnership.* Prior research suggests that some practice organizations may be better positioned than others to engage productively with their external partners. Specifically, internal communication may be a challenge in some practice organizations. Only half of RPP practitioners reported having enough time and space to make sense of new information from their partners or that new knowledge was regularly communicated across departments. A majority of practitioners reported that it was easy to see the connections between their organizations' initiatives and work with external partners. However, two-thirds of RPP practitioners reported that organizational leadership did not coordinate work effectively enough to limit conflicts or reduce overlap between their organizations' initiatives and partnership work. Finally, having the organizational resources (e.g., time, staff) to support partnering seemed to vary in practice organizations as well.

## Plans for Ongoing Work Together

The majority of partnerships had continued working together past the end of the IES RPP grant or planned to continue to do so. Six of the 27 partnerships had successfully applied for and received additional funding; another five applied for additional funding but did not receive it. Ten ongoing partnerships had plans to apply for additional funding, while the remaining six did not have plans to apply for additional funding at the time of the Phase II survey.

Partnerships pursued future funding from the following organizations: IES, the Spencer Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, local and national foundations (e.g., Annie E. Casey Foundation; James S. McDonnell Foundation; William T. Grant Foundation), and state agencies.

## **Recommendations**

We offer some specific recommendations to the IES RPP program regarding the structure of the grant program, the support offered by IES during the application process, and the RFA and proposal guidelines.

The program could consider a differentiated approach to RPP funding so that there are different goals, timelines, and funding amounts for newer partnerships compared to well-established ones. Further, IES may want to consider offering workshops for prospective teams to help them develop key skills related to RPPs. This may broaden the base of applicants and result in more successful new partnerships.

In terms of the RFA and proposal guidelines, the IES RPP program may want to consider naming the range of short- and long-term goals that the partnerships have specified in the past, without limiting the possible goals that might be pursued. Further, many RPPs do integrate design into their plan of activities, but this could be encouraged explicitly in the RFA in order to reach impact on students more quickly. The grant application could ask for additional information related to the conditions that tend to support a partnership's launch or ongoing work, and applicants could be asked to offer initial ideas of how they might navigate common challenges, should they come up in the course of their work together. Finally, proposers could be asked to consider whether their list of participants includes those in the educational agency who have decision-making authority or involvement in implementation related to the problem of practice.