The National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (NCRPP) studies how district and school leaders use research. In spring 2015, 271 central office staff members from 32 of the largest districts in the U.S. completed a survey about their attitudes toward research and how they use research in their work.

This report shares the results of that survey overall and by professional role in the district. Roles are categorized as follows (with number of participants and proportion of sample in parentheses) for Assistant or Deputy Superintendents, Directors, Coordinators, Managers, Supervisors, and Specialists whose primary responsibilities relate to:

- **Area & School Supervision** (65; 24%): Area supervision & school support
- **Curriculum & Instruction** (92; 34%): Curriculum, instruction, content areas, & professional development
- **Special Education** (46; 17%): Special education and exceptional student services
- **Assessment** (68; 25%): Assessment, accountability, evaluation, data management, & research

**Attitudes Toward Research**

Participants provided their opinions about whether they found education research to be valuable, credible, and relevant to their work. For each of the items, participants indicated their level of agreement with a statement about research.

**Is Education Research Valuable?**

The overwhelming majority of participants agreed that education “research helps identify solutions to problems facing schools” (99%) and that “researchers provide a valuable service to education practitioners” (95%). Virtually all did not agree that “education research is a waste of money.”
Is Education Research Credible?

The great majority of participants agreed that research claims are trustworthy (85%). Most did not agree that “researchers frame their results to make political points” (68%) and that research reports are inconsistent (84%).

Is Education Research Relevant?

Participants were split as to whether there is a disconnect between research and practice. However, contrary to common claims that education research is often not relevant to educators’ needs, the great majority of participants did not agree that education research is too narrow (87%) and/or untimely (88%) to be useful.
Research Use

District leaders may use research in different ways: to directly inform decisions; to gain insights into problems and solutions; and to persuade others or make a case for a course of action. The charts below show how often participants reported using research in each of these ways, overall and by role.

Leaders Use Research to Inform Decisions

Participants were first asked whether or not they took part in district decisions such as the design, selection, or scaling up of curricula and programs. The participants who responded affirmatively to these questions (indicated by “n” for each item in the chart below) were asked to indicate the extent to which they used research in doing so. Nearly all of these participants reported using research (99%), with most claiming to use research frequently or all of the time to inform these decisions. All participants in Special Education reported using research frequently or all of the time when adopting curriculum as did almost all in Area & School Supervision roles with regard to redesigning programs (95%).

Leaders Use Research to Inform Decisions

- **Adopting Curriculum (n=121):**
  - Never: 2%
  - Sometimes: 19%
  - Frequently: 39%
  - All of the time: 39%

- **Designing Professional Development for Teachers (n=213):**
  - Never: 1%
  - Sometimes: 20%
  - Frequently: 45%
  - All of the time: 31%

- **Purchasing Intervention (n=154):**
  - Never: 3%
  - Sometimes: 12%
  - Frequently: 41%
  - All of the time: 44%

- **Redesigning Program (n=160):**
  - Never: 2%
  - Sometimes: 22%
  - Frequently: 42%
  - All of the time: 35%

- **Scaling Up Program (n=159):**
  - Never: 2%
  - Sometimes: 28%
  - Frequently: 37%
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Leaders Use Research to Inform their Thinking

All participants were asked the extent to which they used research to inform their thinking and knowledge in a variety of ways. Most indicated that research had “expanded their understanding” of problems they faced in their work frequently or all of the time (77%). The great majority also reported that research at least sometimes “changed the way leaders looked at problems” (99%) or (to a lesser extent) “brought attention to a new issue” (89%).
Leaders Use Research to Persuade Others

All participants were asked the extent to which they used research to influence others’ understandings of an issue. Participants reported using research at least sometimes to convince others of their position (96%) or to help make a point (96%). Research was least often used to discredit or mobilize support for a program.
Research that District Leaders Found Useful
Of the 271 survey participants, 165 (61%) responded to an open-ended question that asked participants to name a piece of research that was useful to their work in the past year, including title, author, year, publisher, topic, and why it was useful. Within these 165 responses, 146 provided enough information to identify the specific piece of research. The information provided in the other 19 responses, such as the topic of research, was included in calculations for those categories.

Types of Research Named
Books were most frequently named, followed by research or policy reports and journal articles.

Books
Most frequent publisher of books named: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development

Research or Policy Reports
Most frequent author of reports named: Consortium for Chicago School Research

All Other
- Educational magazine articles
- Technical reports or working papers
- Research-based tools
- Dissertations

Peer-reviewed Journal Articles
Most frequent journal named: Educational Researcher

Books
146 Identifiable pieces of research
129 Different pieces of research

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Books were most frequently named, followed by research or policy reports and journal articles.
Research Topics: Teaching, Learning, Schools, Systems, and Assessment

Topics were coded for 157 responses. Because some research focused on more than one topic, a second topic was coded for 52 of these responses. The following graph shows the breakdown of all 209 topics represented in these responses. Participants most frequently named pieces of research that focused on teacher learning and instructional practices, followed by student learning and outcomes.

Content Areas

Content areas were coded for 151 responses. Because some research focused on more than one content area, a second content area was coded for five (5) of these responses. The following graph shows the breakdown of all 156 content areas represented in these responses. Most of the pieces of research named did not focus a specific content area. Of those that did, Literacy was the most common.
Student Subgroups

Student subgroups were coded for 150 responses. Because some research focused on more than subgroup, a second subgroup was coded for 12 responses. The following graph shows the breakdown of all 162 subgroups represented in these responses. Most of the research named did not focus on a specific subgroup. However, participants in Special Education roles often named research focused on students in Special Education.

Why Was It Useful?

The last question about particular pieces of research asked, “Why was it useful?” A total of 123 participants gave reasons related to supporting their own professional growth by developing their own knowledge, providing instructional leadership for others, designing or selecting programs, and supporting implementation. Those in Area & School Supervision roles especially gave reasons related to providing instructional leadership.