



*Technical Report No. 1 • Executive Summary*

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

# **Findings from a National Study on Research Use Among School and District Leaders**

William R. Penuel • Derek C. Briggs • Kristen L. Davidson • Corinne Herlihy  
David Sherer • Heather C. Hill • Caitlin C. Farrell • Anna-Ruth Allen

**April 2016**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study reports on results of a nationally representative survey of principals and district leaders in the nation's mid-sized and large school districts. The survey focused primarily on how these educational leaders use research to inform their decision-making. In addition, the study examined leaders' attitudes toward research, their efforts to acquire it, and the culture of research use in their organizations. The National Center for Research in Policy and Practice, a center funded by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education, conducted the study.

A total of 733 different leaders responded to the survey from 45 states and 485 different school districts. The response rate for the survey was 51.5%.

An extensive survey development process to establish the validity and reliability of measures preceded the study reported here. Two different groups of advisors with practical and research expertise in the use of research reviewed items. The team conducted cognitive interviews with 40 different educational leaders to ensure items were comprehensible and to determine whether items elicited the focal constructs. We assessed the internal consistency of scales used and used item response theory to evaluate scales' ability to discriminate amongst different respondents. Overall, all of the scales showed good reliability.

## Definition of Research Used in the Study

Our survey provided respondents with a definition of research as “an activity in which people employ systematic, empirical methods to answer a specific question.” For this study, we differentiated between research, which involves systematic inquiry to answer a specific question, and the practice of looking at data from the district, school, or classroom, which is more open-ended and seldom addresses specific research questions. For instance, looking at state standardized test results to identify students who need extra support in the classroom would not be research. However, asking the question, “What is the relationship between fourth grade state standardized test results and high school graduation?” would be research.

## Uses of Research

The study distinguished among three types of research use identified in earlier studies:

*Instrumental use:* Research is applied to guide or inform a specific decision.

*Conceptual use:* Research induces changes in the way a person views either a problem or the possible solution space for a problem.

*Symbolic/political use:* Research is used to validate a decision or legitimate a decision already made.

Instrumental use was the most commonly reported type of research use. With respect to instrumental use, survey respondents were most likely to be involved with activities related to (1) designing professional development for teachers and administrators and (2) directing resources to programs. Among respondents involved with each activity, the vast majority indicated that research was used frequently or all of the time to make decisions in that activity.

With respect to conceptual use, 71% of respondents indicated that the research they encountered had expanded their understanding of an issue. Respondents were more mixed in reporting whether research provided a framework for structuring improvement efforts or that research provided a common language and set of ideas for discussions with colleagues. Respondents were least likely to indicate that the research they encountered often changed the way they looked at a problem or brought attention to a new issue that had not previously been under consideration in their district.

Of the symbolic uses presented to respondents, leaders reported using research most frequently to get others to agree with a point of view (68% said they did so “frequently” or “all of the time”) and that they used research selectively to support a particular decision (67% said they did so “frequently” or “all of the time”). Respondents were much less likely to indicate that they frequently used research either to mobilize support for important issues or to discredit a policy or program.

## Specific Pieces of Research Leaders Found Useful

The survey asked school and district leaders to name a specific piece of research they found useful. The pieces of research that school and district leaders named as useful were most often books, research or policy reports, or peer-reviewed journal articles. Most named research focused on instructional practices and learning in the classroom, though few mentioned research

pertaining to teaching and learning in specific subject matter content areas. Despite educational leaders' professed use of research to select curriculum materials and other programs elsewhere on the survey, this was the least common reason named for why the research was useful. Much more frequently, respondents claimed to use research to support their own learning, inform the design of programs, and provide instructional leadership.

### **Sources Leaders Used to Obtain Research**

The survey listed 14 different sources where leaders might obtain research and asked leaders to indicate from which sources they obtained research relevant to their work. Leaders were most likely to access research through professional associations and professional conferences. Leaders were less likely to access research through individual researchers or from three U.S. Department of Education resources: What Works Clearinghouse, the National Center for Education Statistics, or the Regional Educational Laboratories.

### **Attitudes Toward Research**

We asked leaders questions about the perceived relevance, value, and credibility of education research. Leaders who responded to the survey endorsed the idea that research can be relevant to practice, but they indicated that the time lag between conducting research and publication of research can decrease its usefulness to them. Survey respondents reported very positive attitudes about the value of educational research, with nearly all endorsing the ideas that research can address practical problems facing schools and that researchers provide a valuable service to educational practitioners. Leaders were more mixed in their perceptions of the credibility or trustworthiness of research. Over three-quarters agreed that research findings were trustworthy and objective, but were split as to whether researchers were biased. One in three agreed that researchers framed their results to make a political point.

### **Effort to Acquire Research**

We asked leaders to indicate whether they would seek out research under different conditions. Although a majority of leaders said they would look for research to inform a new problem or decision, few said they would contact researchers directly under these or other circumstances.

### **Knowledge of How to Interpret Conclusions from Research**

We asked leaders to respond to scenarios that presented summaries of quantitative or qualitative research studies. Leaders' application of their knowledge of research to assess the validity of study conclusions varied widely across topic areas. The majority of responses indicated understanding of the role of purposeful sampling in qualitative research and how to interpret effect sizes. Few leaders drew accurate conclusions about what can be learned from a case study. A little more than half of respondents did not accurately identify a key advantage of random assignment.

### **Culture of Research Use**

Although most leaders reported that research is viewed as a useful source of information in their district or department, a majority disagreed with the statement that people expected claims made in meetings to be backed up by research.

Learn more: [www.ncrpp.org](http://www.ncrpp.org) | @ncrpp

*This work has been supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant RC305C140008. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.*