



Research-Practice Partnerships: Building Two-Way Streets of Engagement
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Vivian Tseng
William T. Grant Foundation

John Q. Easton
Spencer Foundation

Lauren H. Supplee
Child Trends

Abstract

People have long bemoaned the silos of research and practice. Researchers express frustration that practitioners do not use or misuse research. Practitioners respond that research is not relevant to their work, or is not easily accessible or understood. Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) across the country are seeking to undo these patterns. Many partnerships involve agencies working in long-term collaboration with external researchers. Others are partnerships between research and program offices within government agencies. In this paper, we discuss how partnerships challenge researchers and practitioners to work together in new ways in order to improve education and human services, and ultimately to enhance child and youth outcomes. Discussion covers various types of partnerships, strategies and conditions for success, and exemplar models.

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From the Editor

Kurt Lewin, prominent 20th century social and applied psychologist, notably said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” This sentiment applies well to the relationship between researchers and practitioners working to advance programs designed to improve children’s lives. Vivian Tseng of the William T. Grant Foundation, John Q. Easton of the Spencer Foundation, and Lauren H. Supplee of Child Trends are three leaders in our field engaged in providing research funding and data to accomplish that goal. Their Social Policy Report focuses on research-practice partnerships (RPPs) and provides an extended discussion of how to improve the outcomes of that relationship between researchers and practitioners.

Research-practice partnerships are “long term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving outcomes.” Through examining two examples of such RPPs—the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (one of the oldest RPPs) and a more recent governmental partnership between the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE)—the authors highlight both the qualities that can improve such partnerships and the pitfalls that can impinge on success.

The UChicago Consortium has changed significantly over the past several decades, demonstrating the need for constant iteration and reiteration of goals and desired outcomes. And the current challenges facing the federal inter-agency RPP provide relevant guidance for those looking to start a new research-practice partnership. Across these examples, it is clear that when asked to provide evidence-based analyses of public policies, such as an evaluation of a school- or community-based interventions for children or an assessment of environmental influences on developmental outcomes, researchers must turn to practitioners in order to successfully engage stakeholders with different perspectives.

There are concrete lessons offered here that are important for all researchers. Perhaps most importantly, the authors argue that RPPs provide an approach that can improve interactions between researchers and practitioners. They offer three major principles for such success, as gleaned from examining past and current RPPs: First, collaborations must be mutually beneficial to both the practitioners and the researchers, and such mutualism is easier to achieve when RPPs start with a jointly defined research agenda. Second, they note that single, stand-alone studies rarely influence practice, but when there is “an accumulation of knowledge” over time, i.e. ongoing research in a particular practice area, there is a higher likelihood of addressing the problem. Indeed, the RPP elicits an iterative process of research and implementation of practice, or what the authors call “an ongoing cycle of learning and doing.” Third, successful RPPs engender trust among the partners; agreements are not violated, and all partners are striving to help each other succeed. Other elements for success include having appropriate funding and infrastructure to do the work.

In sum, as the authors note, RPPs are a demonstrable way to use research over time to help implement best practices for improving child and youth services and policies. This report speaks to all who are interested in such an impact for their work.

Research-Practice Partnerships: Building Two-Way Streets of Engagement

Over the past two decades, efforts to promote the use of research in practice have emphasized a one-way street approach: bringing research *to* practice (with a heavy focus on evidence-based programs). These efforts have fostered significant advancements while also revealing limitations. The one-way-street approach has directed overwhelming attention to three strategies: 1) improving research rigor (i.e., by setting standards of evidence); 2) improving strategies to push out research (i.e., dissemination, scaling, communication, and marketing); and 3) increasing incentives and requirements for the adoption of evidence-based programs (Tseng, 2012). What the one-way street approach neglects is the need for practice concerns to drive research at the outset.

The proliferation of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) represents a major shift in ideas about research production and use (Spencer Foundation, 2016). The focus in RPPs is on building two-way streets of engagement. It is not about bringing research to practice, but about sustaining a dynamic relationship between research *and* practice (Granger, Tseng, & Wilcox, 2014). Instead of focusing primarily on research-push strategies, RPPs seek to pull from practice so that key problems of practice shape research agendas. Such partnerships strive for mutual understanding and shared commitments from the outset as partners identify their joint research goals. They foster continued engagement as findings emerge and are rendered into changes in programs, curriculum, or professional development. They integrate research and practice perspectives on mutually traveled two-way streets.

What Are Research-Practice Partnerships?

This paper is guided by the definition of *research-practice partnership* offered by Cynthia Coburn, William Penuel, and Kimberly Geil (2013): long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving outcomes.

There are many types of research-practice partnerships. Coburn, Penuel, and Geil (2013) identify three types in education. *Research alliances* generate research findings on important policy and practice questions facing school districts, often with a focus on building a longitudinal data archive and maintaining an independent perspective. According to the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (2017), the field has exploded since 1990, when the Consortium on Chicago School Research was established, to over 20 research alliances across the country today. *Design research partnerships* engage researchers and practitioners in co-designing and testing new innovations. Examples—including the Strategic Education Research Partnership and the Bellevue School District-University of Washington partnership on elementary science—have been bolstered by support from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in the U.S. Department of Education. *Networked improvement communities*, pioneered by the Carnegie Foundation for Teaching and Learning, draw on improvement science methods to unite practitioners from different sites with researchers and other content experts in order to generate and test practice improvements.

Still other forms of RPPs are taking shape in education. The U.S. Department of Education's Regional Education Laboratories are creating different types of partnerships that bring multiple states or districts—or a state and its local districts—together with an external research partner. The Spencer Foundation's Research-Practice Partnership Program supports a variety of long-term partnerships between researchers and non-profit providers as well as state and local agencies.

RPPs are increasingly discussed in child welfare, child mental health, and criminal justice settings. In child welfare, RPPs often seek to disseminate and implement evidence-based practices, and thus partnership work focuses on research and technical assistance to support implementation of those interventions (Palinkas, Short & Wong, 2015). An exemplar in child mental health is the partnership led by Kimberly Hoagwood and Mary McKay at New York University and the New York State Office of Mental Health. That RPP seeks to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the state's rollouts of evidence-based practices and quality improvement initiatives, as well as provide technical assistance to improve the quality of mental health care children receive (Palinkas, Short & Wong, 2015). In criminal justice, interest has been buoyed by a recent grant program to support Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships through the National Institute of Jus-

tice (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). The RPP work in child welfare and child mental health has largely been supported through various project and center grants from the National Institutes of Health.

While the field of RPPs is diverse, we argue for the importance of three key principles that set these partnerships apart from other types of endeavors. These principles include mutualism, commitment to long-term collaboration, and abiding efforts to build and maintain trusting relationships (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships, 2016; William T. Grant Foundation, 2016).

Mutualism

RPPs depart from the typical ways researchers and practitioners work together by striving for collaborations that are mutually beneficial (Coburn, Penuel & Geil, 2013; Palinkas, Short & Wong, 2015). Under typical circumstances, an agency may have a particular piece of work it needs done and contracts with a researcher to do it; alternatively, a researcher may have a grant to conduct a study and goes in search of a place to carry it out. Research-practice partnerships have a different starting point: Researchers and practitioners jointly define the research agenda. Collaboration on the front end yields an agenda that meets practitioners' needs and researchers' interests. Because practitioners are at the table in developing the agenda, the projects are more likely to focus on the issues that are important to their work. At the same time, researchers are at the table to ensure that the research agendas are on topics that fit their interests and expertise.

Commitment to Long-Term Collaboration

Projects between researchers and practitioners are too often transient and ad hoc, but research-practice partnerships are distinguished by a commitment to sustained collaboration (Coburn, Penuel & Geil, 2013; Palinkas, Short & Wong, 2015). Knowledge is built over time as researchers and practitioners delve more deeply into complex problems. Rarely does a single study have a major influence on practice and policy. Instead, change is informed by an accumulation of knowledge—from studies that build on those before them. Partnerships foster iterative work to understand and address key problems of practice. The work does not end with the production of research findings. After findings are shared, practitioners still need to integrate the new information into specific changes, such as modifying professional development, curricula, or program implementation. Changes can also include codifying research into tools or protocols that can be readily integrated into daily practice. After changes are implemented, further research may reveal whether the intended goals were met. Those findings lead to further changes, thus fostering an ongoing cycle of learning and doing.

Trusting Relationships

Trust is the cornerstone of effective partnership (Tseng & Nutley, 2014). Trust engenders faith that partners can rely on each other to come through on agreements and to understand—and even anticipate—each other's needs and interests. Trust enables partners to continue coming back to the table together, even when evaluations and data analyses deliver bad news. And when agreements are breached, disagreements occur, or expectations are not met—challenges that inevitably arise—a solid relationship allows researchers and practitioners to repair the damage and continue working together. As Lopez Turley & Stevens (2015) note, building trust requires considerable time and effort but the returns on those investments can be well worth it; relationships initially developed between individuals and teams can become institutional ones, and those institutional ties may help the partnership weather changes in leadership.

Making Partnerships Work

Figure 1 illustrates the complex elements that we have observed coming together in RPPs. These pieces are rarely predetermined at the outset of a partnership, but evolve as partnerships mature and adapt. For example, RPPs start in a variety of ways. An agency leader might reach out to a local university to help with a problem, or a researcher seeks a practice partner because she wants her work to have a local impact. However they begin, all RPPs must at some point decide how they will structure their collaboration. Research and practice partners must negotiate the roles that each partner will play and determine who will staff the various responsibilities. Most RPPs set out written agreements through charters, operating principles, and memoranda of understanding. Some also establish steering committees to set their agendas and provide periodic input on the partnership work.

Other elements must also fall into place for RPPs. In addition to defining their partnership structure, RPPs must develop shared commitments. This includes defining the longer-term agenda they will pursue, as well as delineating particular projects within that agenda. The research agenda is more than a collection of research projects; it solidifies a focus that enables partners to align their work and interests over time. Partnerships must develop their processes, routines, and “ground rules” for producing and using research evidence. Successful partnerships foster vibrant back-and-forth engagement in defining research questions, interpreting preliminary results, adjusting data collection and analysis plans to address emerging questions, and determining the implications of research evidence for practice change. Many RPPs adopt a “no surprises” rule, wherein the agency partners have an opportunity to review a research report before it is released to the public. This allows practitioners to form a thoughtful response to the findings rather than react to a media frenzy about them. Fourth, many partnerships explicitly specify capacity-building as a goal. Capacity-building can focus on enhancing the agency’s capacity to use research, bolstering researchers’ capacity to conduct and communicate useful research, or shoring up the capacity of the partnership itself through staffing or collaboration tools. Fifth, RPPs must configure their funding portfolio so that it covers partnership infrastructure as well as projects (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil 2013; Lopez Turley & Stevens, 2015). Project funding is often easier to come by, but the daily work of building relationships, maintaining trust, and negotiating joint interests also requires fiscal and administrative support. And as all of these elements come together, a partnership identity often emerges wherein research and practice partners develop a shared sense of what their partnership is and what it does.

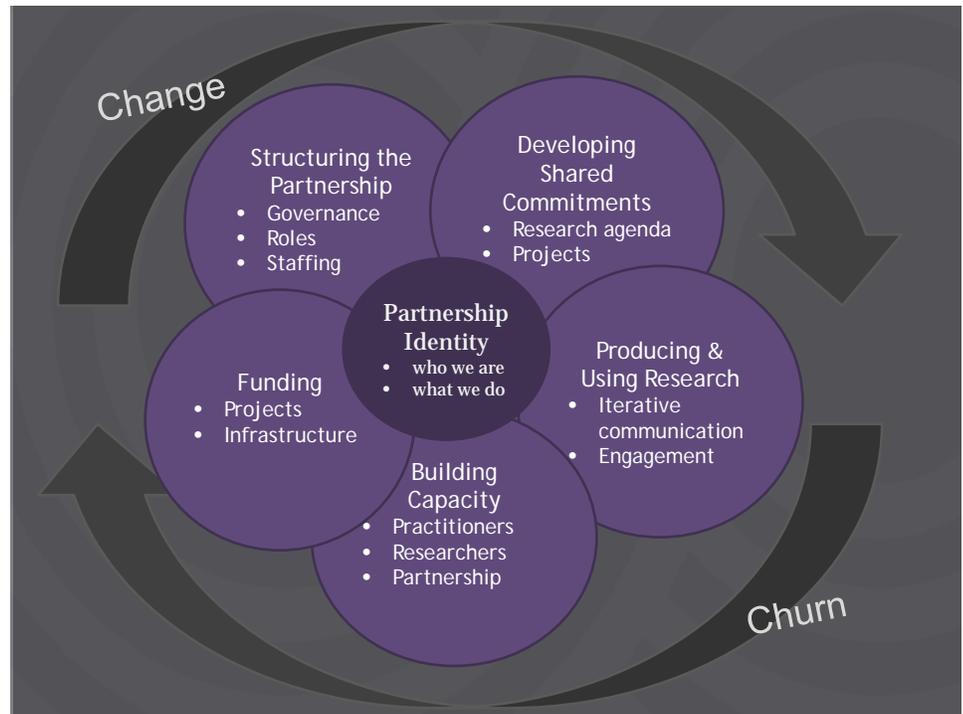


Figure 1. Elements of RPPs

Below we illustrate these RPP elements through two exemplars. The Consortium on Chicago School Research is an example of a long-standing partnership that offers the field lessons on how RPPs can evolve and adapt over time. The second is a newer form of partnership forged between the research and program offices within a government agency. In the latter example, we consider how the Office of Family Assistance and Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services negotiated the early stages of a partnership.

Below we illustrate these RPP elements through two exemplars. The Consortium on Chicago School Research is an example of a long-standing partnership that offers the field lessons on how RPPs can evolve and adapt over time. The second is a newer form of partnership forged between the research and program offices within a government agency. In the latter example, we consider how the Office of Family Assistance and Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services negotiated the early stages of a partnership.

University of Chicago Consortium on School Research: An Evolving Partnership

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, now the UChicago Consortium (CCSR), recently celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2015. It is the senior citizen in the family of research-practice partnerships between a large school district and university-based researchers. Like most organizations, its mission and goals have gradually changed over time.

Structuring the partnership. UChicago Consortium did not start out as many of the later partnerships would. Rather, it was created as an independent, nonpartisan, and objective reporter and analyst of an unprecedented, state-legislated reform of the Chicago Public Schools in the late 1980s. This reform radically changed school governance and shifted substantial authority away from the central office to local schools. Among other elements of the reform, school principals lost tenure and instead were granted four-year contracts by elected local school councils. The city—its business and political leaders, news media, foundations, grassroots advocacy groups, as well as the school district itself—was

eager for reports on the progress of reform from a trustworthy source. The UChicago Consortium saw the broad Chicago community, rather than solely the district, as its partner. From the beginning, a steering committee with members drawn from all constituent groups across the city guided and vetted its research.

Developing shared commitments. The consortium's research agenda was created in a year-long process that involved broad stakeholder input. The early leaders held focus groups with teachers, principals, parents, reform advocates, business and civil rights coalitions, as well as with school district leaders. A culminating public forum drew a large number of participants. This process allowed topics to emerge that might not otherwise have been among the school district's own highest research priorities. The UChicago Consortium saw itself as serving the broad civic welfare, not just the school district.

Over the years, the mission has evolved from the initial focus on “public informing” to the research-practice partnership termed by Coburn, Penuel, and Geil (2013) as a *research alliance*. This evolving mission was described by CCSR researchers in *A New Model for the Role of Research in Supporting Urban School Reform* (Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009). This paper argued that CCSR acted as a partner to Chicago Public Schools by providing research and analytic support for its school improvement efforts. While never losing its focus on broad public engagement and its call to “inform reform,” there was a shift toward closer direct collaboration with the school district, with the district becoming more involved in setting the research agenda and more often requesting assistance in the form of probes into specific technical questions.

One factor in this evolution in UChicago Consortium's mission was the development over time of strong relationships and trust. Even in light of sometimes critical and negative findings about district programs or progress in general, the district appreciated the value of UChicago Consortium research and frequently used findings to guide program and policy development. Two cases described below show how these relationships deepened.

Producing and using research. One widely cited example is the use of the “freshman on track to graduate” indicator developed by UChicago Consortium researchers (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). This simple binary indicator (based on two variables: number of credits earned and number of courses failed in freshman year) predicts high school graduation more accurately than all other predictor variables, including prior test scores and demographics. Chicago Public Schools adopted this indicator in its high school accountability framework, incentivizing schools to focus efforts on improved programming for freshmen students. Over time, the school district built better information systems to track freshman progress beginning with the earliest weeks of freshman year, alerting schools to troubling signs such as poor attendance and failing grades. Schools in turn responded with “on track coaches,” mentoring programs, buddy systems, tutoring, and after-school programs for students in danger of falling off track. In the years since the on-track indicator became a focus of attention, the citywide on-track rate has steadily increased, as has the citywide high school graduation rate. In this case, UChicago Consortium initially developed the indicator for its own research purposes. The initial validation results were so robust that they catalyzed both action from Chicago Public Schools and additional research by UChicago Consortium, resulting in a long-term body of work around the on-track indicator. The district responded first by signaling the importance of the indicator and then, over a span of several years, by building better information systems and supporting school efforts to intervene with students in danger of falling off track.

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Another, less known example occurred in the mid 2000s. Chicago Public Schools had long puzzled over seemingly contradictory findings: test score results in elementary schools were looking relatively strong according to the state test, while high school scores were substantially weaker. There was moderate consensus that elementary schools had improved somewhat since the early 1990s and that high schools were more impervious to improvement. There was also some evidence of a “brain drain” after elementary school when higher-achieving students left the district for private schools or their families relocated to suburban districts. Even so, the test score discrepancies between elementary schools and high schools needed to be better understood. District leaders requested that UChicago Consortium researchers investigate this question.

Given the availability of student-level longitudinal data sets linked with achievement test scores, this was a relatively simple task. UChicago Consortium researchers tracked several cohorts of students from elementary into high school and compared their test scores across time, looking at the state test (the Illinois Standards Achievement Test, or ISAT) in elementary school and ACT’s EPAS (Explore, Plan, and ACT) system of tests in high school. Of course test scores within students over time are very highly correlated: This is a known maxim in education research. Then why the gap? It turned out that the problem was entirely an artifact of where the state set cut scores for “meeting” or “exceeding” the state standards on achievement. Large numbers of Chicago elementary school students “met state standards” simply because the bar was set so low. Students who met the eighth-grade standard on the ISAT had only a 10-12 percent chance of reaching a score of 20 on the ACT in the 11th grade. (CPS had set a goal of 20 on the ACT because students with this score could gain admission to four-year colleges in the Illinois State University system.) Students who exceeded state eighth-grade standards had a 60 percent chance of reaching a 20 on the ACT three years later. The low bar set by the state board of education for “meeting state standards” was in fact misleading students, teachers, parents, and the public in general. The district responded to the UChicago Consortium research findings first by communicating them broadly within the system and then by lobbying the state board to set more realistic standards (Easton, Ponisciak, & Luppescu, 2008).

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In both of these examples, UChicago Consortium researchers were very proactive in their communications efforts, reaching out to Chicago Public Schools on a regular basis. Briefing senior staff was only the beginning. In each case, there were dozens of interactions between the researchers and Chicago principals and teachers, intermediary groups that worked regularly with schools, teacher and student organizations, and community-based organizations. Often Chicago Public Schools and other constituent groups invited the researchers to describe their work, but just as often the researchers asked practitioners for the opportunity to meet with them.

Funding. The Consortium was a very “bare bones” organization in its earliest days, getting formally off the ground with a small start-up grant from the Illinois State Board of Education. Its first big project was funded through in-kind contributions from participating researchers and organizations across the city. Money began to follow the Consortium’s early successes, and Chicago’s largest foundations enthusiastically supported the work. (More than once, a foundation returned a grant proposal with the request to increase the budget.) In addition, a small number of influential program officers from these foundations provided both intellectual and political support to the work of the Consortium, which proved to be very useful.

Three core local funders continued to support the Consortium through the first 12-15 years, providing general operating support, rather than funding specific research studies. Core operational funding can support valuable work that is not directly funded by a research grant. At CCSR, for example, grants from these three local funders enabled ongoing research that resulted in a well-received book, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010), which would not have been possible otherwise.

Even in the early days, however, the need to diversify funding streams became apparent. Some of that has come about through outreach to smaller local foundations, and dollarwise, a larger amount has come from large national private foundations. Occasional grants from NSF and IES have also been important sources of funding for specific research studies. A small number of generous individuals have also provided support over the years and enabled the creation of a modest endowment, the income from which helps support the Consortium data archive.

Creating a consistent and steady stream of income is very difficult, however. Many private foundations are reluctant to keep supporting the same organization year after year. Potential sources of revenue bring inherent dangers: doing work that is “off mission” in order to generate income; facing financial cliffs when large grants end—or worse, end prematurely; accepting support from foundations with a “point of view” about a topic that is at odds with research findings; taking on work that requires the ramping up of staff without the ability to sustain the increased staffing level at the end of the grant. Except in rare cases (providing specific technical assistance, for example), the Consortium does not accept money from the Chicago Public Schools in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest. Despite these funding challenges, the Consortium continues to thrive, seeking and obtaining funding from a broader set of foundations and individuals. Recently, it created an “Investor Council” to raise money for behind-the-scenes activities that are not typically funded by research grants. These include building the data archive, seeding new studies, replicating previous studies, and augmenting communications strategies to help educators fully understand the research and put it to use. This new funding strategy appears to be promising, as several funders have agreed to provide multi-year support to the Council.

Similar partnerships. In the more than 25-plus years since the UChicago Consortium was established, many other partnerships have been created and are quite robust. In January 2016, several partners banded together to create the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP). NNERPP is housed at the Kinder Institute at Rice University, which is also home to the Houston Education Research Consortium (see <http://nnerpp.rice.edu/>), and was launched with support from five private foundations: the Annie E. Casey, Laura and John Arnold, Spencer, Wallace, and William T. Grant Foundations. As of this writing, NNERPP has 23 members that have joined together to learn from each other and to collectively identify ways to improve their partnership practices, conduct joint research, and synthesize and share findings across sites. Funding strategies are a prominent theme in NNERPP discussions.

The Offices of Family Assistance and Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation: A Dawning Partnership

While the UChicago Consortium was at the leading edge of partnerships between school districts and outside researchers, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has been creating a new form of partnership between the research and program offices *within* a government agency. Located in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, ACF supports children, youth, and families through a broad range of services aimed at preventing child maltreatment, improving school readiness, preventing teen pregnancy, improving youth career development, and supporting adults through employment-skills programs.

Structuring the partnership. Similar to many federal and state agencies, ACF houses program offices that provide oversight and funding for services and research offices that fund new research and draw from existing research in order to inform the agency's programs. The partnership described here brought together the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the program office that oversees grants to local communities to provide healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood services, and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE).

The OPRE-OFA partnership arose in the midst of controversy over evaluations of OFA's programs. In the early 2000s, the Bush Administration had created a new discretionary grant program to promote two-parent, married families, and OPRE launched two large-scale, random assignment evaluations to test whether these programs improve outcomes for children in low-income families (Dion, 2005). While the evaluations yielded some positive findings, the results were not nearly as positive as the OFA program staff and the grantees they funded would have hoped (Lundquist et al., 2014; Wood,

Quinn, Clarkwest, Kilewald, & Monahan, 2012). The findings generated considerable controversy in the practitioner community and contributed to tension between the OFA and OPRE staff. For the program staff, the evaluation findings did not reflect the changes that had occurred in the decade since the studies were launched. The Obama Administration had shifted the program's focus from marriage to healthy relationships (including but not limited to marriage) and fatherhood. Over the span of a decade, the practitioners in the program office and in the broader field had become invested in the program, and the research question they were interested in was no longer "Could these programs work?" but "How can we make them work?" A misalignment had emerged between what the research offered and what the program office wanted.

It was at this time that the leaders of OPRE and OFA sought to forge a new partnership between their offices, with the goals of building trust, promoting greater valuing of research, and providing more timely answers to the questions of interest to the program office—all so that research could better support program oversight and policy development.

While OPRE had long wanted research to be useful to practice, reality was more daunting. There was mistrust of the research team to provide useful information. Negative stakeholder reactions to the evaluations had left program staff with unfavorable impressions of research. And the staff in the two offices had very different training, goals, and experiences: Whereas OFA staff had experience providing services and developing policy, OPRE staff were masters- and doctoral-level researchers.

To build a partnership that provided timely, relevant research to the program community, Lauren Supplee, then director of the Division of Family Strengthening at OPRE, and her OFA counterparts sat down to discuss program needs. Supplee and Charisse Johnson, Branch Chief of the Office of Family Assistance, had worked together previously and had built mutual respect and trust. Johnson had just come from another office where research was embedded routinely into program operations. She felt OFA staff had the potential to change their perspectives about research. Rather than seeing it as intrusive and negative, research could be a tool to guide their thinking and work. On the OPRE side, new staffing also provided an opportunity to create a new vision. Supplee hired and trained staff in collaborative work. The new staff were expected to invest time in building relationships with OFA leadership and practitioners. Relationship building included a range of ongoing activities from attending joint leadership briefings to responding to ad hoc requests for data or research to helping program staff understand research results.

Together, Supplee and Johnson set a new vision along with other OFA staff and leadership. They knew that structuring the partnership had to be a conscious effort, specifically tailored to their collaboration. The partnership would require structures to ensure that OPRE work was relevant to OFA staff. These structures included a culture of collaboration, a vision for research-practice integration, and joint planning and execution. The partnership would require staff at all levels to support this vision.

Developing shared commitments. The OPRE and OFA leaders developed an annual Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to codify their shared commitments and to lay out the year's projects, estimated budget amounts, and staff allocations. The MOU was critical to ensure that the researchers and practitioners had a shared understanding of their work both in the near and long terms. To build the research agenda, the OPRE staff facilitated ongoing discussions with OFA staff about program operations, as well as specific structured meetings around annual research planning. Supplee's

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goal for these discussions was to raise questions from program staff's work that research could answer. Sometimes these questions could be addressed utilizing existing data or empirical findings. Other times program staff's questions revealed gaps in existing data and thus prompted conversations about ways to improve the required data reported by the program office's grantees. Still other times, the questions required new research or evaluation projects involving primary data collection. By providing useful, timely, and applied research and evaluation, the utility of the research could be enhanced.

Producing and using research. Early in their joint work, OFA identified a gap in the data collected by the program providers they were funding. Johnson had concerns that the data did not allow the program office to truly understand the grantees' activities and their successes and challenges. The lack of relevant data hindered OFA staff's ability to provide program oversight and to tell a compelling story about the program to internal and external audiences. At the same time, Johnson was interested in shifting the program from discrete, disconnected discretionary grant clusters to an integrated federal program that embedded learning and knowledge throughout the program to accomplish the policy goals and achieve service outcomes.

To support this change, OPRE began facilitating sessions to build logic models for how the program should operate. They then proposed changing the data collection system and measures to map onto the logic model's inputs, outputs, and outcomes. The change in measurement and reporting was dramatic. The new data collection system better aligned with the grantee program design and populations, thereby improving data quality and utility. The data collection shifted from only including outputs to including outcomes, providing information for OFA staff to monitor grantee performance for all the program's pieces. Finally, the data collection system was redesigned to allow OFA staff to obtain regular data reports on grantee progress in meeting benchmarks on elements, such as recruitment and participation in program services. Knowing program providers' negative reactions to past research, Supplee encouraged OFA to disseminate the proposed measures to grantees to obtain their feedback, signal changing expectations, and secure their buy-in. The program staff were pleasantly surprised to find mostly positive feedback on the changes. This reaction further bolstered the argument with ACF and OFA senior leadership on the benefits of this shift.

Recently, the partners made another conscious shift. In the past, funded research and evaluation projects were overseen by OPRE staff and did not regularly engage OFA staff. The research teams developed their own relationships with sites and often did not involve OFA staff in conversations. This contributed to a disconnect with, and lack of trust in, the researchers. As a new group of studies was designed and executed, Supplee and her staff began supporting OFA staff in their conversations with grantees about their local evaluations. For example, each time the OFA staff spoke with their grantees about evaluation, they included an OPRE staff on the call or spoke to the OPRE point of contact prior to the call to ensure mutual understanding of the question and issue. From the research office, OPRE oversaw the contract to provide technical assistance to the grantees related to evaluation design. To ensure mutual understanding and trust, OPRE facilitated regular calls between the contractor team and OFA staff about the progress of their grantees and any questions or concerns that may have arisen. Together, OPRE and OFA were a joint team with shared decision-making that all parties needed to understand and accept. In this way, research and evaluation became integrated instead of divided from the program.

Over the last five years, OPRE has transformed the way it thinks about producing and using research. Rather than creating a long, detailed report that sits on a website with the occasional download, the reports from OPRE projects were designed from the beginning to take into account the intended stakeholder audience, the questions they have, and the format that maximizes the utility of the findings for them (ACF, 2012; Macoubrie & Harrison, 2013). To support more effective communication of research findings, the OPRE and OFA teams also hold regular meetings to discuss project status, to facilitate conversations between the research teams collecting data and the program staff working with sites to ensure timely information sharing, and to create brief products such as quarterly newsletters and blog posts during and at the end of projects (e.g., Chamberlain, 2015; Parents and Children Together Study, 2015).

In overhauling the data collection system, OFA wanted grantees to use the data they collected to improve program administration. To facilitate this request, OPRE issued a contract to a research firm in which the contractor created a web-based system for data entry and just-in-time reports for grantees and federal staff to look at the data. Over the coming years, OFA and OPRE staff and contractors will work together to provide technical assistance on how to use the data to inform program operations and how to use data for technical assistance. Supplee hopes this timely, relevant data will be seen as useful and create a positive feedback loop of producing and using research and data.

Leadership is another critical support for producing and using research. The process must be supported by program office leaders who understand the value and purpose of research. When findings emerge that may be surprising or disappointing, program leadership can work to help their staff understand the results and determine what to do with the results moving forward. For example, a recent qualitative study published by OPRE shared the voices of men in fatherhood programs. What the men shared was perceived by some OFA staff to be misaligned with the program's goals. Their first reaction could have been to discount the research as not useful because the researchers did not understand the program. Instead OFA leadership discussed with staff how this perception of a disconnect between the program's goals and participants' perceptions uncovered a need to clarify the program objectives with grantees. Without leadership support, this opportunity to learn from data would have been lost.

Research office leadership must also provide the necessary resources to make the partnership successful. Conducting effective research-practice partnerships requires substantial time from research staff—time that some leaders may want to allocate to other activities. Similarly, in making decisions about allocating resources to research projects, leadership needs to be open to multiple evaluation designs

to support a multiprong, applied learning agenda, which may include many different kinds of research data and designs. Without this support, the opportunity to build a trusting partnership responsive to program office needs would not be possible.

Funding. Funding for research-practice partnerships within agencies is critical. Funding is needed to support the human capital to engage in time-intensive collaborations and the technical assistance to build the capacity to understand and to use data and research. Funding also needs to support data collection, research, and evaluation projects. Often in federal agencies, the funds for program services versus research activities are not clearly delineated and must be negotiated each budget year. High-quality research is an expensive endeavor. When local programs are asked to conduct data collection and evaluations, the proportion of grantee funds for those activities can be significant: estimates of the funds needed to support high-quality research and evaluation have ranged from 15-25 percent (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013). Without clear buy-in from agency leadership, these research expenditures can be seen as detracting from service provision. To maintain buy-in and support, the research and practice partners must continually find ways to share research findings, feed them back into program work, and highlight the grantees' successes in using data or evaluation to support high-quality services.

Each year, OFA and OPRE must jointly determine the annual funding for research and evaluation on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood services. Sustaining the partnership is critical to ensuring that funding for these activities remains a priority during each annual negotiation. In addition to project funding, leadership support for the partnership is key. The collaboration requires an intensive amount of staff time and resources. Though the collaboration is necessary for success, some agency leaders, at times, have questioned the return on investment for the partnership, particularly when it has meant sacrificing another activity. It is important, therefore, to recognize the level of effort and to document the added value of the collaborative work.

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Building on Experience: An Expanding Field of RPPs

We sit at an exciting moment in the field of RPPs. After many years of being a unique “one-off” organization, CCSR has served as a model for research-practice partnerships in districts across the country. Baltimore, New York City, and San Diego were among the first cities to establish partnerships, and they were soon followed by Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Newark, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. State education agencies are also developing partnerships with researchers (Conaway, Keesler, & Schwartz, 2015), and many other less recognized partnerships are working quietly to conduct and use research to improve schools.

IES catalyzed some of the recent development when it began a grant program for Research-Practice Partnerships in 2011. Since its inception, the program has awarded 33 grants to partnerships for the “startup” work of beginning jointly designed studies and building infrastructure to continue the collaboration. The Regional Education Laboratories—also supported by IES—have created research-practice partnerships to bring researchers, state policymakers, and local decision makers into closer contact. Support for partnerships has continued with a second set of five-year contracts for the Labs, which began in early 2017. Private foundations are also actively supporting partnerships; the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, for example, supported the creation of Research Alliances modeled on UChicago Consortium in Houston and New Orleans. Other foundations are also supporting local partnerships in Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia.

The partnership approach to school improvement has gained considerable momentum and support since Chicago’s initial experiment a quarter century ago. We have ample anecdotal accounts of partnership success, yet there are no agreed upon measures of success or rigorous studies of their impact (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). This is the next step for the field, as partnerships will need evaluation to guide improvements to their own work, funders will want to see evidence of impact, and independent researchers will want to assess the influence of RPPs on the use of research evidence in practice. The seeds for that work are beginning to be sown with the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships and several foundations.

The emergence of research-practice partnerships within agencies, at the federal and state level, is newer but has significant potential. The OFA/OPRE partnership benefited from the Obama Administration’s focus on evidence building and use in policy. There was a dramatic rise in leadership support to use research and data to build more effective program administration. Research staff were more frequently at the table with program staff, offering ways that prior research could inform policy and that new data and research could support future policy. If continued, these partnerships have the potential to further strengthen federal program administration and improve child and family outcomes.

The Next Generation of Partnerships

RPPs represent a sea change in the way we think about research, practice, and the use of research to benefit children, youth, and families. Partnerships generate relevant research by fostering engagement among stakeholders with different perspectives, but the work itself is not without challenges. To the extent that RPPs expand the cast of characters who contribute to the design, execution, and use of research, the difficulty of managing and sustaining these partnerships is multiplied. But as we have seen through the examples above and their influence on burgeoning RPPs across the country, researchers and practitioners are learning from and building on the experience of others who are traveling the same two-way streets.

Fulfilling the promise of RPPs will require taking the long view on research and practice improvement. Learning and innovation will be required on all sides. Researchers will need to adopt new ways of working in order to produce more timely and useful research. Different approaches to research will be required, such as improvement science from manufacturing and



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health care (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015), novel methods for synthesizing research evidence and translating it into practice (Lipsey, 2014), and new ways of sequencing or designing experimental trials (Collins, Kugler, & Gwadz, 2015; Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013; Knowles & Ludwig, 2013). Researchers will also need to acquire nontraditional skills, including communicating with diverse audiences and imagining research agendas from a practice perspective. Training programs will be needed to build the human capital pipeline for partnership work (Fleischman, 2013).

Practitioners, too, will need to work in new ways. They will need to build the organizational conditions that allow research evidence to be used more systematically and seamlessly in their work (Coburn, Honig, & Stein, 2009; Tseng, 2012). This will include developing routine ways for research to enter into program and policy deliberations, planning for practice improvements, and budgeting decisions. At the same time, policymakers will need to address the bureaucratic and funding barriers to research-program collaborations within agencies and between public agencies and external research partners.

Perhaps the most challenging roadblocks ahead for RPPs pertain to capacity and sustainability. The field is still fragile, and organizations struggle for operational funding. To preserve the progress that partnerships have made, both public and private funders will need to invest for the long term. Raising money for operating costs and infrastructure development is especially difficult in comparison to gaining funding for specific research studies (Lopez Turley & Stevens, 2015), but RPPs need resources for outreach, communications, and relationship building—activities that are time consuming and personnel intensive. Most partnerships will also need to withstand frequent leadership changes in public agencies. More often than not, elected officials and their appointees bring new priorities and visions, and RPPs will need to adapt to shifting policy priorities and needs. Funding for relationship development and planning can be critical in those moments of transition.

It is not clear what the best funding solution is for these partnerships. Partnership organizations need stable funding streams to build and develop a strong team to conduct the research at the core of their mission. Many research alliances have robust but unwieldy data archives that contain data from multiple sources and that require considerable, ongoing effort to clean, test, and document. RPPs also conduct many nontraditional, resource-intensive activities to enhance their communications and outreach efforts such as in-person meetings and relationship-building activities. Many partnerships now seek funds to embed researchers inside public agencies in order to reduce burden on agency staff.

The federal government is playing a small but important role in supporting research-practice partnerships, but those funds will not sustain these organizations over a long time span. Since RPPs arguably provide an important public service, it is reasonable to expect that public funds should support them. Philanthropy is increasingly recognizing the value of research-practice partnerships as well. What would be ideal is a reliable combination of funds: government support for operating costs and large-scale research studies, private support for infrastructure maintenance and behind-the-scenes internal “R&D” activities, and additional local foundation support for general operating costs and context-specific research and evaluation projects.

Research-practice partnerships are not paths for the faint of heart. But acknowledging and addressing the challenges inherent in the work can enable us to close those notorious gaps between research and practice—and to build two-way streets that improve work on both sides of the divide. RPPs allow researchers and practitioners to build joint, actionable research agendas, to embed data and research in ongoing work, to build knowledge from one project to the next, and to integrate lessons learned into practice and policy. When mutual trust forges confidence in research, we can collectively bring about more effective services and enhance outcomes for children and youth.

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About the Authors

Vivian Tseng is the Senior Vice President, Program, at the William T. Grant Foundation—a national foundation that supports research to improve the lives of young people. Tseng leads the Foundation’s grant-making and spearheads its initiatives to connect research, policy, and practice. In 2009, she launched the Foundation’s focus on the use of research evidence in policy and practice, and in 2012 created a national network of partnerships between school districts and researchers. Tseng has a deep interest in mentoring young researchers and is committed to strengthening the career pipeline for scholars of color. Under her leadership, the William T. Grant Scholars Program has broadened its diversity and deepened its support for early-career professionals. Prior to joining the W.T. Grant Foundation, Tseng was on the faculty in psychology and Asian American studies at California State University, Northridge. Her research has focused on the role of race, culture, and immigration in child development; improving youth’s social settings; and evidence-informed policy and practice. Tseng currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Forum for Youth Investment, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, and the international journal, *Evidence and Policy*. She received her doctorate from New York University and her bachelor of arts from the University of California, Los Angeles.

John Q. Easton is Vice President, Programs at the Spencer Foundation in Chicago. At Spencer, he developed and leads a new grant program for Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships. From June 2009 through August 2014 he was director of the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education. Prior to his government service, Easton was executive director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. He was affiliated with the Consortium since its inception in 1990, and became its deputy director in 1997 and executive director in 2002. Easton served a term on the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policies for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). He is a member of the Illinois Employment Security Advisory Board, the Illinois Longitudinal Data System Technical Advisory Committee, and the Chicago Public Schools’ School Quality Report Card Steering Committee.

Lauren H. Supplee is a program area director for early childhood research at Child Trends. Dr. Supplee has devoted her professional career to working on research and evaluation with the goal of applying the knowledge to policy and practice. She is committed to conducting research and evaluation that can contribute to program improvement and improved outcomes for children and families. Her research has focused on evidence-based policy, social-emotional development in early childhood, parenting, prevention and intervention programs for children at-risk, and implementation research. Prior to joining Child Trends, Supplee worked for the federal Administration for Children and Families in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation for ten years, with the last four of those as the director of the Division of Family Strengthening. She began her career as a research associate at the University of Pittsburgh. Lauren received her Ph.D. from Indiana University in educational psychology with a specialization in family-focused early intervention services.

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