

Abstract Title Page

Title: The Strategic Data Project: Improving strategic and management decisions in educational agencies through the effective use of data

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Abstract Body

Background / Context:

Description of prior research and its intellectual context.

Launched in 2008, the Strategic Data Project, housed at the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, seeks to bridge the divide between educational research and practice in order to transform the use of data in education to improve student achievement. Through the project, we build robust research partnerships with educational agencies – currently including 32 school districts, state education agencies, charter management and other non-profit organizations – in order to grow the analytic capacity of the agencies while also fostering more strategic and informed use of data for informing policy and practice.

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

Description of the focus of the research.

The proposed panel on the Strategic Data Project will have two primary aims. First, we will share background on the genesis of the Strategic Data Project, provide an overview of its key components and highlight how these components contribute to the effectiveness of each partnership overall. The Strategic Data Project's theory of action is that by bringing together the right people, assembling the right data, and performing the right analyses, it is possible to improve the decision making in educational agencies. We pursue this theory of action through three primary strategies, each of which is integral to the project's overall success. First, we recruit, place, and support analytic leaders to serve as data fellows in each partner agency. We also invite partners to enroll existing employees as agency fellows in the fellowship to build analytic capacity further and faster. Together, data fellows and agency fellows form a core analytic team within each partner agency. Second, we conduct rigorous descriptive (or diagnostic) analyses related to two high-leverage areas: teacher effectiveness and college-going success. These analyses are intended to frame actionable questions for leaders within each of the partner agencies in addition to serving as a demonstration for what agencies are able to learn from the increasing amount of data that they amass. Third, we disseminate our tools, methods and lessons learned to additional education agencies beyond our explicit partners. This part of the panel presentation will run for approximately 20 minutes and will include lessons learned about building effective research relationships with educational agencies and a short summary of key findings to date

After providing a broad overview of the Strategic Data Project, including a summary of selected diagnostic analyses across several partner agencies, we will turn to the second aim of the proposed panel: to highlight the work of data fellows placed within two of our partner agencies. We will first focus on work in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) that grew directly out of the Strategic Data Project diagnostic analyses focused on teacher effectiveness. The teacher effectiveness analyses in CMS sought to answer several questions, such as: Which teachers

taught and were successful with which groups of students? Was teacher retention really an issue for the district? Where should the district look to begin to understand the strengths and weaknesses of its human capital practices (e.g., teacher recruitment, retention, development and evaluation)? The fellows in CMS collaborated closely with the Strategic Data Project research team to assemble the necessary CMS administrative data and to conduct analyses that served to illuminate the district's understanding of these and other related questions.

Several administrative and policy changes emerged from this work. For example, the district founded its own Center for Human Capital Strategies within the CMS Office of Accountability. This center is led by a former SDP data fellow. In addition, the district changed decisions around the timing of teacher hiring, in response to a finding that late-hired teachers were less effective than those hired prior to the start of the school year (even after the initial year of hire). This segment of the panel presentation, which will run for approximately 20 minutes, will highlight the process, development and key outcomes of the research relationship between the Strategic Data Project and CMS. In addition, it will highlight that an ancillary benefit of this partnership with CMS has been a very open and ongoing research relationship from which several academic papers and dissertations, in addition to the policy-focused work highlighted above, have emerged. This part of the presentation will highlight the aspects of the Strategic Data Project-CMS relationship that allowed for such openness in data sharing and exploration.

The panel presentation will then turn to share the work of Strategic Data Project fellows in the Fulton County (GA) Schools that grew out of the diagnostic analyses focused on the college-going success of the district's graduates. One set of findings from these analyses revealed that graduates were not matriculating to postsecondary education at the rates assumed by the district. Rather, descriptive analyses revealed that many high school seniors who reported intentions to continue immediately to college failed to enroll in the fall. Supported by Strategic Data Project-affiliated faculty and researchers, the Fulton fellows designed, implemented and evaluated (using a random assignment design) a summer college counseling program called Summer PACE (Personalized Assistance for College Enrollment), aimed at supporting students with summer-specific hurdles to timely postsecondary enrollment. This work was funded in part by a grant from the Spencer Foundation. Results from the evaluation found that while summer outreach had little impact on wealthier students in the district, it improved on-time college matriculation among low-income, college-intending students by a statistically significant margin of approximately 10 percentage points. In addition to sharing the details of the program's implementation and results of its evaluation (to be included in one or more academic publications co-authored by fellows inside the district and researchers outside of the district), this component of the panel presentation will emphasize the fellows' efforts to gain buy-in for the project and research design at all levels within the district as well as the district's plans to strategically expand the Summer PACE program, given its success with low-income high school graduates in Fulton.

Conclusions:

Description of conclusions, recommendations, and limitations based on findings.

Following the three panelists' presentations, 30 minutes will remain for an opportunity for audience participation and questions. In the absence of questions from audience members, the panelists will also be invited to consider and respond to the questions such as the following:

1. What challenges did you face, particularly with regard to communication, coordination and collaboration in using data and research to drive decision making in the partner agencies?
2. What strategies did you employ to overcome these challenges?
3. What steps did you take to gain buy-in for the policy response you aimed to implement?
4. Given your experiences, what are critical approaches to fostering and facilitating the effective use of data and research to guide agency policy and practice?
5. How was the partnership with the Strategic Data Project useful in improving data use in the district? Did the partnership create any unanticipated barriers or challenges? Unanticipated benefits?
6. How do district partners anticipate sustaining the work that was launched under the auspices of the Strategic Data Project partnership? What is required for sustainability?