

Case Study II

Research Alliance for New York City Schools

Supplement to the white paper:

Coburn, C.E., Penuel, W.R., & Geil, K.E. (January 2013). *Research-Practice Partnerships: A Strategy for Leveraging Research for Educational Improvement in School Districts*. William T. Grant Foundation, New York, NY.



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RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools has worked with the New York City Department of Education (DOE) and other key stakeholders since 2008 to “advance equity and excellence in education by providing non-partisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.”¹ Per a leader of the Research Alliance, its goal is “to conduct rigorous studies of questions that matter to policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders in New York City schools.”

Housed in New York University’s (NYU) Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, the Research Alliance’s work is guided by a governance board that represents the DOE (the Chancellor of New York City Schools), NYU (the provost), and representatives from district stakeholders (e.g., unions) and community-based organizations. This governing board sets the research agenda, which, in recent years, has focused on four key issues: (1) high school achievement, attainment, and post-secondary preparation; (2) achievement and development in the middle grades; (3) contexts that support effective teaching; and (4) data use for practice and policy.

Currently, the Research Alliance is staffed by an executive director, three full-time researchers, and several research associates and programmers. Research Alliance staff work primarily with the leadership of the Office of Research, Accountability, and Data at the DOE, with whom they meet monthly. They also work with staff in other departments at DOE when a given study addresses issues under their purview.

History

After years of conversations and convening with a range of interested parties in New York City, the idea of an independent research organization to provide nonpartisan information about New York City Schools began to come into view in the 2006–2007 school year. That year, New York University professor Richard Arum devoted his sabbatical year to creating such an organization. He began by creating a series of advisory groups with a range of stakeholders (area researchers, representatives from the DOE, unions, and community-based organizations) to focus on laying the groundwork for different aspects of the organization. Arum

then organized a conference to discuss a series of commissioned papers on different approaches to research partnerships and on the types of issues relevant to New York City schools. Finally, he convened a governance board made up of key leaders in New York, including William Bowen (then president of the Mellon Foundation, and a former president of Princeton University), Randi Weingarten (head of the American Federation of Teachers, and the former head of the New York City branch of the American Federation of Teachers), Joel Klein (then Chancellor of New York City Schools), the head of the New York City Chamber of Commerce, and directors of a number of community-based organizations and school reform organizations. The governance board was charged with focusing on the critical ingredients necessary to develop an independent research organization. They identified three tasks necessary for developing the independent research group: (1) identifying a sponsoring organization, (2) raising start-up funds, and (3) hiring an executive director.

The board was able to accomplish all three tasks. It secured a commitment from NYU to act as the sponsoring organization; was awarded a large start-up grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as smaller grants from 11 other foundations; and hired an executive director. In the four years since its inception, the Research Alliance has secured additional general operating support from the Robertson Foundation and more grants to fund specific research projects.

Nature of the Partnership

The Research Alliance works with the district in three main ways. First, it conducts evaluation studies on policy and practice issues associated with the research agenda set by the governance board. Recent studies have included an investigation of teachers’ use of New York City’s Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS), an examination of students’ transitions in and through middle school, and a look at the impact of the planned closure of underperforming schools on the achievement of students attending those schools. Second, the Research Alliance has developed a longitudinal data archive, thanks to data-sharing agreements with the DOE that give it access to a broad range of district data. Third, the Research Alliance has initiated “descriptive

and formative” work, which involves formative research in the service of capacity-building.

An example of this third line of work is a collaboration between researchers and DOE administrators to improve the measures of school environment on the DOE’s annual survey. According to district administrators, the survey is the second largest census-style survey in the country—second only to the U.S. Census. It is administered to nearly 2 million teachers, parents, and students in grades 6–12 at more than 1,700 schools. The DOE typically receives more than 900,000 responses, a 53 percent response rate.

The survey plays an important role in New York City schools. Staff at the school- and district-level use the survey results to inform their improvement work. In addition, measures from the survey, along with attendance figures, comprise up to 10–15 percent of the grades that schools get on their annual school progress reports. The grades, if low, can result in intensive support and intervention. High grades can result in bonuses for school principals. One DOE administrator explained:

The survey is not just an informational or research-driven survey. It has implications. One, in terms of being involved in the progress report, but two, also, it’s hopefully seen as a treasure trove of data for a school in terms of what their constituencies are getting or not getting.

The survey collaboration began when the Research Alliance initiated an analysis of the survey measures related to school learning environment. It embarked on this work because of its potential to have system-wide impact and because it met some research goals for non-academic outcomes and learning environments. At the same time, district administrators were getting requests from people in schools for more “actionable” information from the survey. The administrators saw an opportunity to work with the Research Alliance to update the survey, making it more useful to schools and improving its technical quality by better differentiating across schools.

Research Alliance staff first analyzed the validity and reliability of the school environment questions on the teacher survey. The researchers discovered that although the district had intended to measure

several distinct aspects of the school environment, the results in different categories of measures were highly correlated and were likely only measuring more global qualities. The measures also tended to find differences within, rather than between, schools. Thus, the survey did not distinguish between schools with strong versus weak learning environments.

Based on the analysis, the Research Alliance, with approval from the DOE, gathered and evaluated survey measures from other sources that had well-established validity and reliability and did a better job distinguishing between schools. After considerable discussion with a panel of survey and measurement experts (which the Research Alliance convened), the DOE selected new survey items, which were piloted on the 2012 teacher survey. The Research Alliance is now engaged in an analysis of the results of the new items. If they are an improvement over the existing items, they may become part of the measures used for the school progress report. The DOE has asked the Research Alliance to embark on a similar process with the student and parent surveys.

Challenges

There are, of course, challenges involved in developing a strong partnership. Individuals from the Research Alliance and the DOE identified three they had faced. First, research alliances involve new and different roles and relationships between researchers and district leaders. The researchers are not consultants. The district has not hired them, but they are not fully independent, either. The success of the work depends upon the ability to maintain relationships over a long period of time. One researcher described the situation:

We’re not consultants who have a contract. We’re not a branch of the DOE that has a vested interest in promoting or defending its policies and programs. There’s constant negotiation without clear parameters and ultimately, both of our organizations’ priorities need to be met.

Second, researchers are caught between being responsive to district timelines and maintaining their commitment to high-quality research designs and analytic techniques. As the relationship between the Research Alliance and the DOE has

matured, the DOE has increasingly requested assistance and additional analyses, often with a quick deadline. This has challenged Research Alliance staff to find ways to be responsive, while maintaining careful, deep analysis. As one researcher explained: “This is the danger ... the rush of what we need to use right now for this particular project. The price is the more formal research paper.”

Third, it can be challenging for the district to be responsive to research findings, especially in large urban districts in which decision-makers must take multiple factors into account in policymaking.² Findings produced by the Research Alliance have not always been used to craft DOE policy. A DOE administrator explained:

My team always tries to connect the Research Alliance researchers who are working on a particular subject area to the offices within the department that own that area. [The response] varies. Frankly, it depends on the type of report that they're doing, or the type of project. If it's a retrospective research report, I think they're always very interested to hear the findings and will file them away.

As other research alliances have discovered, it may not be enough to produce high-quality research. You may also have to create systems and structures to support implementation and follow-through.³ DOE administrators point to the survey work as a model for Research Alliance engagement in both research and implementation.

Benefits

The Research Alliance is a relatively new organization, and it may take some time for a full portrait of the benefits of the partnership to emerge. Individuals on both sides of the partnership, though, already identify several positives. The partnership has clearly resulted in improvements to the teacher survey. Given that the survey has “real-world consequences” related to accountability and decision-making, the changes to the survey can potentially influence policy and decision-making.

The process of working together to improve the survey has brought new resources and capacity

to the DOE. DOE administrators note that the Research Alliance’s efforts to find and evaluate questions from surveys across the country and its ability to convene experts to review them brought new ideas, expertise, and resources into the district. One administrator noted:

It was great to have partners with a lot of preexisting knowledge about the other surveys being used around the country, who also had the time and the expertise to dig up new examples, and develop new models that we could use. We don't have that expertise internally, and we don't have the time to do the extensive searching.

The partnership has also built DOE administrators’ capacity to do this work and led to the production of high-quality research on New York City Schools.

The long-term and sustained nature of the partnership between the Research Alliance and DOE has lowered start-up costs. Repeated contacts across a range of different projects have led to institutional agreements and relationships among partnership members. For example, Research Alliance and the DOE do not need to draft new “Memos of Understanding” or data-sharing agreements for each new project, because they are already in place. Working together over time also fosters the development of trust that enables freer and more productive exchange of ideas. Because the collaboration is long-term, the Research Alliance has been able to develop a sophisticated history and knowledge of NYC public schools. A district administrator explained:

We do have a lot of researchers who make use of our data, want to conduct studies in our schools, or get brought on to do evaluations. What's really unique about the [Research Alliance] is that it's a sustained relationship across multiple projects, over a long period of time. ... Having a thought partner about our data is really important.

For more information about the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, see: http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance

Endnotes

1. “Research Alliance for New York City Schools,” http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/.
2. Cynthia E. Coburn, Meredith I. Honig, and Mary K. Stein, “What’s the Evidence on Districts’ Use of Evidence?,” in *The Role of Research in Educational Improvement*, ed. John D. Bransford, Deborah J. Stipek, Nancy J. Vye, Louis M. Gomez, and Diana Lam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009), 67-87.
3. Lea Hubbard, “Research to Practice: The Case of Boston Public Schools, Education Matters and the Boston Plan for Excellence,” in *Research and Practice in Education: Building Alliances, Bridging the Divide*, ed. Cynthia E. Coburn and Mary K. Stein (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 55-72.

References

Coburn, Cynthia E., Meredith I. Honig, and Mary K. Stein. “What’s the Evidence on Districts’ Use of Evidence?”. In *The Role of Research in Educational Improvement*, edited by John D. Bransford, Deborah J. Stipek, Nancy J. Vye, Louis M. Gomez and Diana Lam, 67-87. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009.

Hubbard, Lea. “Research to Practice: The Case of Boston Public Schools, Education Matters and the Boston Plan for Excellence.” In *Research and Practice in Education: Building Alliances, Bridging the Divide*, edited by Cynthia E. Coburn and Mary K. Stein, 55-72. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

NYU Steinhardt School of Culture. “Research Alliance for New York City Schools.” http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/.