

Philanthropic Support for a Research-Practice Partnership

Jacqueline Jones

Summary

Many if not most research-practice partnerships depend to at least some degree on funding from philanthropic organizations. In this article, Jacqueline Jones discusses how and why the Foundation for Child Development decided to invest in such a partnership, the New York City Early Childhood Research Network, as the city was building its universal prekindergarten program. She also explains why the foundation chose the type of partnership known as a *research alliance*—a long-term, mutually beneficial collaboration that promotes the production and use of rigorous research about problems of practice.

Funders, Jones writes, are primarily concerned with the impact of the work they support. Yet traditional research activities may take years to be complete, and it may take even longer to determine whether the research had any impact on policy or practice. In a place-based research-practice partnership, collaborative construction of research questions ensures that the work is relevant, and rapid response research models mean that policy makers and practitioners begin to get answers to their questions—and funders begin to see the impact of their investment—much sooner. In this way, Jones writes, research-practice partnerships provide context-relevant data that can lead to quick policy changes, making them rewarding investments for funders.

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Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) can be compelling experiments in connecting research and practice. But RPPs need financial support, which often comes from philanthropy. How can the philanthropic community help RPPs initiate, expand, and sustain their work?

Every philanthropic entity hopes that its investments will have a significant impact on the populations important to the organization, and local events can serve as the catalyst for funding opportunities. The Foundation for Child Development's mission is to build better lives for young children by bringing research to bear on matters related to improving policy and practice. We're based in New York City, where a push to make preschool available to all the city's four-year-olds inspired the development of an RPP, the New York City Early Childhood Research Network (ECRN).

The Context

September 2014 marked the beginning of the city's Pre-K for All initiative, spearheaded by the mayor. At about the same time, the Foundation hired me as its new president and CEO, and we began to rethink our programmatic goals and strategies. Fulfilling the Foundation's mission was guided by three overarching responsibilities:

- filling gaps in knowledge by identifying important areas of policy and practice that need more empirical evidence and by building new knowledge in those areas,
- influencing policy by providing policy makers with the research evidence necessary to make informed decisions about young children's learning and development, and

- exercising good stewardship of the Foundation's financial, human and reputational assets.

In this context, the board and I were also aware of growing national attention to the training and compensation of and support for the early childhood workforce: teachers, center directors, elementary school principals, and other early childhood professionals who work directly with young children and their families to provide high-quality early learning experiences.¹ Although the number of early childhood programs had significantly increased over several decades and a robust body of knowledge had developed, child outcomes remained modest and inconsistent.² The Foundation wished to examine the growing suspicion among researchers that the wide variation in early childhood teacher preparation programs and requirements for teacher certification and licensing were primary factors in the continuing disparities in early childhood program quality and child outcomes across a variety of settings. Our board and staff believed that if early childhood educators are to offer young children the kind of high-quality learning experiences that can make a significant contribution to closing opportunity and achievement gaps, those educators must be well prepared, appropriately compensated, and regularly exposed to meaningful professional learning experiences.³

The theory of change was straightforward: Enhancing the knowledge, improving the skills, and increasing the compensation of early childhood professionals had significant potential to improve program quality and lead to stronger outcomes for young children. The Foundation divided its programmatic focus on the early childhood

workforce into three areas. One was improving the quality of early childhood practice through implementation research, which isn't just a matter of studying a program's impact but also, as the research firm MDRC puts it, "investigat[ing] *how* the program produces those impacts," using "both quantitative and qualitative data to assess the programs and policies that are the subject of an evaluation."⁴ The Foundation's goal was to promote implementation research to provide a deeper understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions in early childhood education programs. New York City's implementation of Pre-K for All offered the Foundation an opportunity to pursue this goal.

The Foundation's involvement in Pre-K for All began after the Obama administration launched its Invest in US initiative in December 2014. Invest in US was intended to catalyze an increase in private sector funding for early learning initiatives across the country. Though the Foundation was founded and based in New York City, it had become national in scope and hadn't made significant investments in its home city for some time. Several board members felt strongly that Pre-K for All presented an opportunity to support a New York City initiative that was aligned with our emerging program focus on the early childhood workforce. Through Invest in US, the Foundation committed \$2 million to support the city's universal preschool effort.

Evaluating the program in the standard way—through a randomized controlled trial—could highlight differences between children who attended Pre-K for All and those who didn't. But we thought that the city might benefit from a more nuanced understanding: what components of Pre-K

for All were being received by and having an impact on specific subgroups of children and under what conditions? This type of information might better guide the city's efforts at continuous quality improvement. Since the Foundation is also interested in enhancing the early childhood workforce, we were particularly interested in the role that lead teachers, assistant teachers, coaches, and others play in providing high-quality experiences for children.

Why Invest in an RPP?

Beginning in the winter of 2014–15, our challenge was to develop spending guidelines for producing results that, from a research perspective, were aligned with the Foundation's mission and programmatic areas and, from a public policy perspective, were useful to the city in executing Pre-K for All.

From a research perspective, four factors prompted our interest in RPPs. The first factor was the potential of RPPs to build strong and meaningful connections between research and policy, a need that's been recognized for some time. The second factor was the potential to foster scholarship, especially to support early career young scholars. By 2014, the Foundation's Young Scholars Program, in operation since 2003, had already funded over 50 early career scholars to conduct empirical studies related to young children's wellbeing, and continuing that tradition was essential to the Foundation's board of directors. The third factor was the Foundation's emerging interest in implementation research. Few studies had been conducted on using implementation research in early childhood education, and our board and staff believed that supporting

an RPP could advance the Foundation's long-term goal of using implementation research to deepen the body of knowledge on early childhood programs.⁵ The fourth factor was the role that other philanthropic organizations, such as the William T. Grant Foundation and the Spencer Foundation, had taken in supporting RPPs.

Thus we began to seriously contemplate supporting some type of RPP that would resonate with the Foundation's history of funding research that connects to policy and practice. Historically, most philanthropic funding for such partnerships had been directed either to existing RPPs or to organizations that had decided to collaborate on their own. With these considerations in mind, we decided to proceed.

The Foundation approached this initiative in a learning mode. We hoped that developing and supporting a rather complex RPP could produce useful research information and offer the philanthropic community insight into the roles that funders might assume in connecting research to policy and practice. By the summer of 2015, a plan was emerging.⁶

Building an RPP Network

Though there are many types of RPPs, a *research alliance*—typically defined as a long-term, mutually beneficial collaboration that promotes the production and use of rigorous research about problems of practice—seemed the best fit for the Foundation's support.⁷ Such long-term partnerships between school districts and research organizations seek to solve specific problems of practice or policy. In these place-based RPPs, scholars and school districts construct research questions

together and continue to collaborate as the partnership matures. The RPP generally conducts the research and communicates its findings back to the district and other interested parties with the intent to guide policy making and improve practice in the district.

Engaging Multiple City Agencies

Working within a complex multiagency system, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) took the lead in developing Pre-K for All, but three other agencies were also involved: the Administration for Children's Services, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the Center for Economic Opportunity. To expand existing services to make full-day preschool programs available to all four-year-olds in the city, Pre-K for All was delivered not only in schools but also in private child care and federally funded Head Start centers.

As the federal grantee for several Head Start programs and as the administrative entity for the federal child care subsidy system, the Administration for Children's Services had programmatic authority over many community-based Head Start and child care centers. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene held licensing authority over such sites. In addition, the mayor had been the chief advocate for Pre-K for All, and the Center for Economic Opportunity, within the mayor's office, was deeply involved in the program's planning and implementation, which occurred in a highly political context. Though it would have been easier if only the DOE had partnered with researchers, the Foundation believed that the RPP it was funding needed representatives from

all four city agencies. This would allow a more complete picture by including voices that represented multiple aspects of the program's implementation. The Foundation was also interested in learning whether the RPP's research findings could be useful for other city agencies beyond DOE.

Engaging Multiple Research Partners

The New York City school district—the largest in the country—is no stranger to research studies. The city houses almost 120 higher education institutions and a school district of approximately one million children and thus offers many opportunities to explore the nature of teaching and learning. The Foundation knew that researchers from multiple institutions of higher education had established long-standing relationships with city agencies—for example, the collaboration between the DOE and New York University described by Rachel Abenavoli and colleagues elsewhere in this issue. However, we wondered if it was possible to enhance the district's research capacity by coordinating a group of researchers from multiple universities, all of whom had an interest in studying the implementation of early childhood programs in the city. We were particularly intrigued by the idea of a research alliance RPP with a network of university researchers from across the New York metropolitan area who could work together to collect and share data on the early implementation of Pre-K for All through a series of small-scale studies. Not only would this give the city access to richer data and facilitate cross-institutional collaborations, but it might also lead to the development of a larger birth-to-third-grade research agenda.

An Organizing Entity

It became clear early on that a backbone organization would be needed to develop the group's infrastructure and manage logistical tasks such as organizing convenings and setting agendas for meetings. The Foundation engaged the New York Professional Development Institute (PDI), an established and respected organization that understood the city's early childhood landscape and was capable of working with both the research community and with city agency personnel.

Research Parameters

The Foundation needed to be very clear about the purposes and potential consequences of the research to be funded. Before convening researchers and city agency representatives, we set important parameters for the types of research we would fund and the manner in which the work was to be conducted. These were communicated clearly and directly to researchers and policy makers alike.

Implementation, not Evaluation

The project didn't aim to evaluate Pre-K for All's effectiveness. We explicitly assured representatives of city agencies and researchers that studies funded by the Foundation wouldn't constitute a program evaluation. Rather, the project's primary intent was to give city agencies useful information to continuously improve the quality of Pre-K for All as it was being implemented. Researchers also understood that their studies were intended to give policy makers deeper information about how specific components of the program were operating. The Foundation worked to build an atmosphere of trust by strengthening

prior relationships with researchers and city officials as well as establishing new ones.

Constructing Research Questions Collaboratively

Because research findings needed to be meaningful to city agency representatives, it was critical that the research questions were important to policy makers and could be examined through empirical studies. Thus we aimed to form an RPP in which researchers and policy makers would work together to create the research questions.

Early Childhood Workforce

We made clear to both researchers and city agency representatives that a focal point of the studies was to be the role of various members of the early childhood workforce. Considering the broad nature of the early care and education workforce, the Foundation requested that the studies focus on the workforce from three broad perspectives: instructional practice, workforce status, and professional development.

Place-Based Strategy

Given the size and diversity of New York City, it was important to define the geographic areas in which the research was to be conducted. The Foundation was interested in understanding how Pre-K for All was implemented in high-, medium-, and low-income areas of the city. With assistance from New York University and the Center for Economic Opportunity, three community districts were identified at each income level, for a total of nine. All of the studies funded by the Foundation would be conducted in these nine districts.

Once the research parameters were set, representatives from the four city agencies

were told of the nature and intent of the work and asked to commit to attending regularly scheduled meetings with researchers. Everyone agreed, and PDI staff began the work.

Convening and Proposals

During the summer of 2015, 17 researchers representing eight universities in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area met with Foundation staff and the city officials representing the four agencies responsible for implementation of Pre-K for All in New York City. The Foundation's goals were explained, and the scope of work expected from the group was outlined. In August, we released a request for proposals from researchers.

After reviewing all the proposals but before making any awards, the Foundation's staff met again with the city agency representatives to review the proposals that we had targeted for funding and make sure the work was aligned with policy makers' needs and goals. The first three grants were awarded in November 2015. Another five were awarded over the next year, for a total of eight.

As proposals were being reviewed and the first set of grants were awarded, it also became clear that conducting multiple studies in nine community districts would require significant coordination to ensure that researchers didn't overwhelm educators with requests for access and jeopardize data collection. The Foundation decided to engage an external research firm, MDRC, to develop a coordinated sampling strategy for the eight research projects across the nine districts. MDRC researchers met with each research team, designed a sampling protocol for all the studies, and assigned sites

to each research project. City agencies then wrote letters of introduction and support to the assigned sites for the research teams. This approach ensured that the researchers were able to gain access to the number of participants they needed and that the burden to programs was minimized.

In line with the Foundation's goals, the studies concentrated on taking a close look at the initial aspects of the program's implementation. The nature of the questions developed in the very early stages of Pre-K for All reflected what policy makers needed to understand as the program took shape. From the Foundation's perspective, the initial studies set the stage for a more complete story that could be told about the development of New York City's universal preschool initiative. Study topics included practices to support dual language learners, men in early childhood education, and the use of formative assessments to guide instruction. After funding the eight studies and engaging PDI and MDRC for logistical and sampling tasks, the Foundation ended up committing approximately \$2 million more.

What Would Success Look Like?

The Foundation's decision to develop an RPP with multiple universities and multiple public agencies meant that the definition of success would comprise many elements and that understanding the RPP's successes and challenges would take some time. We turned to the five dimensions of effectiveness for RPPs developed by Erin Hendrick and colleagues for the William T. Grant Foundation to help philanthropic entities gauge the success of their investment in such partnerships.⁸ They include:

1. Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships.

2. Conducting rigorous research to guide action.
3. Supporting the partner practice organization in achieving its goals.
4. Producing knowledge that can guide educational improvement efforts more broadly.
5. Building the capacity of participating researchers, practitioners, practice organizations, and research organizations to engage in partnership work.

Table 1 shows progress to date in each of these dimensions.

The Foundation has also gauged progress with respect to important programmatic considerations. One of these was the intent to foster scholarship among its research members and support early career young scholars, which so far appears to be succeeding. It was important to the Foundation to support research by faculty in New York City's own higher education system, the City University of New York. These faculty typically have higher teaching loads than their colleagues in private institutions, limiting their ability to conduct primary research. So far, at least two tenure decisions and one promotion have likely been enabled by the Foundation's research funding. ECRN has also been able to launch an early career scholars program, which has supported one doctoral candidate and two postdoctoral researchers in their work in applied research that has implications for improving early childhood policy and practice.⁹

Another measure of success is the ability to attract support from other funders.

Table 1. Understanding the Foundation’s Investment: Five Dimensions

<i>Dimension 1: Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships</i>	<p>After five years of work, researchers and policy makers continue to meet regularly. Each New York City agency has seen key personnel changes, and the policy makers who helped create and signed on to the original research questions in 2015 often weren’t the same ones who received the initial study results in 2018. Incoming policy makers had to be brought up to speed on the history of the RPP and the rationale for the research questions. Thus building trusting relationships has been an ongoing process.</p> <p>DOE policy staff report that attending the research network meetings, hearing about the studies before results were publicly released, and collaborating on press releases reassured them that their work would be based on the latest research.</p>
<i>Dimension 2: Conducting rigorous research to guide action</i>	<p>Initial studies were primarily qualitative in nature, in line with the questions developed with city agencies. Though all studies were of good quality, more experienced researchers brought a higher degree of rigor to their work. However, junior researchers were able to hone their research skills and learn from exchanges with their more experienced colleagues.</p>
<i>Dimension 3: Supporting the partner practice organization in achieving its goals</i>	<p>The DOE used ECRN findings from Beverly Falk and Marianna Souto-Manning’s study <i>Quality UPK Teaching in Diverse Settings</i> and input from the researchers to help create their <i>Early Childhood Framework for Quality</i>.</p> <p>The descriptive findings of the collaboration between NYU and the DOE (see Rachel Abenavoli and colleagues in this issue) on the key role of leaders in the early childhood education centers’ advice networks (for example, in fostering professional development and informally modeling good practices) helped persuade the DOE that its leadership training initiatives were on target and should be continued and expanded. Descriptive findings regarding social and professional connections and teacher wellness confirmed the importance of the department’s interest in understanding and supporting teachers’ wellbeing, a critical focus during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>
<i>Dimension 4: Producing knowledge that can guide educational improvement efforts more broadly</i>	<p>DOE’s director of data and analytics for early childhood has consulted with ECRN members on research and resources related to costs associated with implementing high-quality prekindergarten programs in community-based sites.</p> <p>The work of the network is being disseminated to three audiences: New York City policy makers, the broader research community, and the philanthropic community. For example, presentations on the network’s development and progress have been made at meetings of the American Educational Research Association and the Association for Public Policy and Management</p>
<i>Dimension 5: Building the capacity of participating researchers, practitioners, practice organizations, and research organizations to engage in partnership work</i>	<p>The work of ECRN is still in its infancy, and whether its members value engagement in long-term collaborative inquiry enough to develop the capacity to support such engagement is still to be determined. The foundation is eager to learn whether city agencies will develop a solid culture around the use of research and evidence and whether they will continue to document any impact on public policy resulting from the partnership.</p>

Source: Erin Henrick et al., *Assessing Research-Practice Partnerships: Five Dimensions of Effectiveness* (New York: William T. Grant Foundation, 2017).

We understood from the beginning that sustaining and expanding ECRN would require investments from other members of the philanthropic community. After the Foundation alerted other early childhood education funders to the RPP's work, the Heising-Simons Foundation made a \$400,000 grant to support three research studies on infant and toddler development and to continue PDI's infrastructure work, and Early Childhood Partners NYC provided \$100,000 for PDI. The W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation and the Spencer Foundation have also provided funding.

Implications for Philanthropy

Although the Foundation used a somewhat unorthodox strategy for developing an RPP, our process has implications for other philanthropic organizations. What follows are several insights we've gained in developing ECRN that may be useful to others in the philanthropic community.¹⁰

Whether they're providing resources for direct services or for research studies, funders are primarily concerned with the impact of the work they support. Funders who support research activities must often wait several years for the research to be completed—and even longer to determine whether the research had any impact on policy or practice. The place-based nature of RPPs offers the potential to fund research that investigates real-world problems of policy and practice and is focused on a specific context. The collaborative construction of research questions ensures that the work is relevant. In an RPP, researchers can work to design studies that are aligned with policy makers' timelines. The use of rapid response

research models and continuous dialogue among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as the research is being conducted can reduce the time needed for policy makers to begin to get answers to their questions. Funders are exploring strategies that can shorten the time to bring relevant empirical evidence to policy makers and practitioners. During the COVID-19 pandemic, policy makers couldn't wait several years to develop research-based policies to slow the spread. As researchers worked on rapid response models, many funders expedited their proposal review protocols and were able to distribute funds faster than usual, thereby allowing researchers to tackle policy and practice questions as quickly as possible.

Conclusions

Based on the ECRN experience, we at the Foundation have come to understand that RPPs require cultural shifts for both researchers and policy makers. The researchers appear to be most successful when they view the primary goal of these partnerships as the search for empirical evidence that will assist policy makers as they struggle with difficult program- and policy-related decisions. Thus researchers would do well to gain an understanding of the issues that their key policy partners face and the scope and limitations of their authority. Those with the ability to implement researchers' recommendations may be several rungs up the hierarchy from the policy partners with whom the researchers meet. Recommendations that fall outside the parameters of a policy maker's authority can be more frustrating than helpful. However, the research results may provide powerful arguments that lower-level policy makers can draw on to

advocate to those at higher decision-making levels.

In addition, policy makers can support the effectiveness of an RPP when they are able to see the utility of using evidence as a basis for their decisions and when their participation is based on the conviction that the researchers are genuinely trying to help improve the quality of programs. These partnerships take time and require long-term

commitment, perseverance in the face of changing political landscapes, and ongoing external support. Yet RPPs clearly have potential to be rewarding investments for funders for the context-relevant data they can provide, the potential for quick policy changes, and the opportunity to build trusting relationships between researchers and agency representatives. They are well worth the investment.

Endnotes

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