

## What is a Research-Practice Partnership?

By Paula Arce-Trigatti on May 1, 2017 6:00 AM | [No comments](#)

*This week we are taking a break from our regularly scheduled programming to reintroduce the concept of research-practice partnerships and allow those who are just joining us to catch up. In today's post, we take a deeper dive towards sharing what it means to be an RPP as defined by the [National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships \(NNERPP\)](#).*

*Stay tuned: On Thursday, we'll reflect on and recap our posts from the last four weeks.*

### What is a research-practice partnership?

I've heard this term tossed around quite a bit recently, coinciding with the emergence of several new efforts and a greater interest overall in trying to break away from how "traditional" research is done.

From what I've seen, there isn't consensus around the definition.

This can be somewhat problematic, as there are some key features of partnerships that require cultural and work-related shifts to happen on the part of both researchers and practitioners engaging in this work. Without these, those adopting the term "RPP" to characterize their efforts are essentially laying claim to a working relationship they are not entitled to (referring to yourself as a "gym junkie" because you occasionally walk the treadmill while talking on your cell comes to mind). In some cases this can be harmless, but generally speaking, it tricks one into thinking he/she is achieving a certain result without actually doing any of the hard work required to do so.

In this post, we'd like to clarify how we (from [NNERPP's](#) perspective) define RPPs.

### You might be in a research-practice partnership if...

As with the [Spencer Foundation](#), we've chosen to adopt and adapt the working definition first put forth by Cynthia E. Coburn, William Penuel, and Kimberly E. Geil in a 2013 white paper prepared for the [William T. Grant Foundation](#).

In "[Research-Practice Partnerships: A Strategy for Leveraging Research for Educational Improvement in School Districts](#)," the authors define district-level RPPs as "[l]ong-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving district outcomes" (p. 2).

Let's unpack this.

First, **partnerships should have the intention of being long-term**. While some might start from a one-off research project, RPPs should be working towards establishing long-term relationships around multiple projects. The longer time horizon permits an actual partnership to develop, where important relationship building activities that result in trust and respect can be continually cultivated.

This is one reason why "true" RPPs are challenging to maintain—researchers and practitioners will at times face research findings that are disappointing or must deal with policy changes that can disrupt a research study in progress. Representatives from both sides must come together repeatedly to help each other understand these obstacles, work through their implications, and manage communications to a variety of stakeholders, all while protecting and reinforcing their trust in each other.

One-off projects do not demand this type of commitment, nor do they allow for the necessary depth in relationships that must be present when encountering difficult situations or conversations around research.

This brings us to the second key feature of Coburn, et al.'s definition: **partnerships should consist of mutualistic collaborations between researchers and practitioners**. The most important two words in that sentence are "mutualistic collaborations." One of the main drivers for why people typically engage in this type of work is the additional benefits they receive relative to working in more traditional roles.

For researchers, placing data and policy into reality by having practitioner-teammates brings life to information that is otherwise commonly reduced to "just numbers." Expertise from those working in the field can contribute to deeper understanding of theoretical concepts, can help clarify unexpected findings, and can spark previously unexplored directions for research.

For practitioners, the opportunities and capacity to engage with research is often expanded with RPPs. Larger school districts may very well have researchers on staff that could do some of this research internally—however, their time is usually already accounted for by district demands. RPPs enable these districts to not only extend their researching abilities, but they can also serve as a valuable independent, third party role for some evaluations. In other cases, practitioners may not be able to conduct their own research at all, and the partnership can thus act as the research branch.

Note that these benefits only accrue to those working in a partnership: researchers who "work with practitioners" by using them only as a data source, and later, send over the finalized report (or, as I've often heard, a copy of the academic journal paper or even dissertation) doesn't