



---

## SIX TIPS FOR IMPROVING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND K-12 EDUCATORS



Done well, partnerships between K-12 educators and researchers can be transformative, leading to better student achievement, the centering of previously marginalized voices in educational decisionmaking, and the dissemination of data that helps other districts and schools make improvements of their own, according to *Learning at the Boundaries of Research and Practice: A Framework for Understanding Research-Practice Partnerships*, an [article](#) published last month in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Researcher*.

Poorly executed, however, these partnerships waste resources and time, and they can create environments that make it challenging for future efforts at cooperation to succeed.

Federal funding and investments from philanthropic organizations have [contributed to the expansion](#) of this model, which typically pairs school districts and schools with academics who cooperate in explorations of issues relevant to local communities, according to the *Educational Researcher* article, authored by Caitlin C. Farrell, NEPC Fellow William R. Penuel and Annie Allen of the University of Colorado Boulder, Eleanor R. Anderson of the University of Pittsburgh, Angel X. Bohannon and Cynthia E. Coburn of Northwestern University, and Stephanie L. Brown, of York College of Pennsylvania.

As a result, it has become increasingly important to implement research-practice partnerships in ways that maximize the odds of success. Examples of existing research-practice partnerships range from formal and longstanding (e.g., the [UChicago Consortium](#)) to briefer, less intensive efforts that pair one or two researchers with individual teachers or schools.

Drawing on the framework presented in the article, below are six recommendations for negotiating the sometimes tricky boundaries between educators and academics, to create productive and equitable partnerships.

- 1. Treat differences as opportunities, not obstacles.** It's not difficult to come up with professional, cultural, or institutional differences between K-12 education and academic research. However, it's important to treat these differences not as obstacles to be bulldozed or gaps to be closed but as learning opportunities that can lead to better results. The authors of the article suggest addressing these differences using what they call "boundary infrastructure," people, practices, and objects (e.g., rubrics, or research reports developed via collaboration) purposefully designed to negotiate these gaps. Boundary infrastructure may also be required within organizations. For example, an extremely siloed organization may need so-called "boundary spanners" who negotiate communication. Boundaries are a core aspect of partnership work. "Whether partnerships stall and disband in the face of difference or move forward depends on what happens when partners encounter boundaries," the article's authors note.
- 2. Acknowledge that partnerships require investments.** Whether it's money, time, or both, partnerships come with a cost. Acknowledge this reality upfront, identify the necessary resources, and ensure that they exist or can be obtained, prior to delving too deeply into this work.
- 3. Pick the right partner.** "The potential for learning is greatest when knowledge resources across partners are complementary, similar enough to enable communication and facilitate learning but dissimilar enough so that there is value to the partnership," the article authors suggest. When there's too much overlap between the expertise of the partnering organizations, toes can get stepped on and learning can be limited. Too little overlap in expertise may initially appear to be less problematic but may also pose challenges in that it requires "more extensive or elaborate boundary work to support idea sharing and learning."
- 4. Consider capacity.** Specifically, partners should consider their organizations' so-called "absorptive capacity," which is their capacity to interact with others "to make sense of information and construct new knowledge through activity and social interaction." An organization with limited absorptive capacity may have trouble implementing and maintaining lessons learned from the partnership.
- 5. Plan ahead.** It can be tempting to jump quickly into the work itself, especially when the problems to be addressed are pressing or urgent. However, the end result will likely be better if partners start by assessing their existing absorptive capacity, then brainstorming what boundary infrastructure, if any, is needed to expand this capability.
- 6. Keep track.** Are the partnership's efforts having an impact on outcomes? How, if at all, has absorptive capacity changed in the organizations involved? Is there a need for different levels or types of boundary infrastructure? These are the types of information that partners should collect in an ongoing improvement effort.

## NEPC Resources on Research Issues

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>