

Research Partnerships Are Key to Improving Practice



States and districts face challenges around the construction, production, and use of research in education. And without research partnerships, most state and district leaders are left to make policy and practice changes based on anecdote rather than evidence. Stronger connections between researchers and practitioners, more meaningful and accessible circulation of relevant research to decisionmakers, and governance systems and processes that grant researchers appropriate access to data from state and local systems are all steps to ensure that research partnerships can provide states and districts with the evidence-based information they need to benefit students. In short, research partnerships present a real opportunity to improve student outcomes.

Research partnerships create space for researchers and education leaders to collaborate across sectors to discover unmet needs, let go of conventional norms that are no longer effective, and trail blaze by identifying innovative teaching and learning approaches. Research partnership agreements involve guidelines for designing, accessing, using, and protecting the research. And the organizing principle with these partnerships is a commitment among researchers as well as state and local leaders to translate the data-driven evidence into meaningful policy and practice.

By integrating the expertise of researchers, research partnerships reduce the burden on educators and legislators to generate best practices and policies on their own. Alongside researchers, leaders of state and local education agencies can tap into state and local data systems and investigate, analyze, and produce findings to inform education policies and practice. At their best, research partnerships can help address gaps in research capacity as well as

- provide technical support to educators and legislators;
- strengthen data governance or the existing state guidance for managing and accessing data;
- improve data quality and privacy; and
- reorient data collections to better address policy and practice questions.

What is a “research partnership”?

We use the term “research partnerships” to encompass all the diverse partnerships that bring education researchers and practitioners together to create and use evidence to inform practice. Research partnerships can be traditional research–practice partnerships or other improvement-focused collaborative research models like collective impact, design-based implementation research, and networked improvement communities.



Core Characteristics of Research Partnerships

While research partnerships consist of different models, participants, and topic areas, they share five core characteristics:

1. No matter the scope of the research, central to these partnerships is the commitment to **address problems of practice**. Partnerships may be organized to address a specific education dilemma or a broader challenge that involves a number of education issues. For example, the [Better Math Teaching Network](#) is a collaborative of 40 urban and rural educators working specifically to improve algebra comprehension among high schoolers, while the [Florida Career Readiness Research Alliance](#) focuses on improving graduation rates and workforce readiness programs.
2. Research partnerships **are designed with collaboration in mind**; involved parties understand that their exchange of knowledge and evidence molds future policy and practice. Partnerships tend to include state and local education agencies alongside research institutions, but they can also include community organizations, knowledge brokers, and design experts such as collective impact organizations like [StriveTogether](#).
3. Research partnerships **decode their research into accessible and actionable findings**. Partnerships focus on the creation of evidence for the purpose of effecting change. For example, the [Midwest Career Readiness Research Alliance](#) works to access

and conduct research on student career readiness to strengthen the field’s evidence base but also helps to interpret and use this research in state- and local-level decisionmaking.

- 4. Research partnerships **facilitate professional learning opportunities** during which best practices are shared widely among practitioners. For example, the [Tennessee Education Research Alliance \(TERA\)](#) recently convened researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to discuss the state of professional learning in Tennessee schools based on evidence from the partnership’s statewide educator survey.

- 5. Research partnerships create long-term sources of knowledge to **continuously help improve education outcomes**. Partnerships typically aim to extend their impact beyond a single research project or a single set of activities; the hope is to produce innovative research perpetually. For example, while the [New York State Literacy Zone Researcher-Practitioner Partnership](#) was a time-bound partnership, it used research to improve how adult education program case managers use data to make decisions. The work led to the creation of new professional development materials that can continue to affect practice in the state.

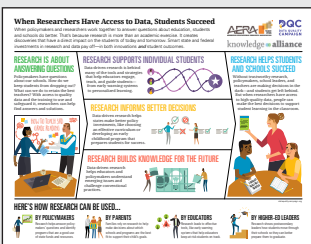


Drivers of Research Partnerships

Research partnerships can take shape in a few different ways. Typically, the difference in models depends on the driving force that supports and advances the work. Four main drivers fuel the landscape of research partnerships on the state and local levels:

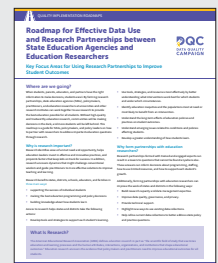
- **Philanthropic foundations** play a major role in supporting the creation, maintenance, and longevity of research partnerships. Several foundations support their own portfolio of partnerships; for example, the Hewlett Foundation supports [10 research partnerships](#) across seven states.
- **Academic institutions** play a significant role in research partnerships through allocating or helping secure funding along with providing researchers and expertise. Notable examples include partnerships like Vanderbilt University’s TERA and Harvard University’s [Proving Ground](#), which are both housed within a higher education institution.
- **State policies** can mandate investments in not only data systems but also education research. For example, Washington, DC, passed [legislation](#) to create its own education research partnership through a competitive proposal process. Additionally, through the Every Student Succeeds Act, Ohio is providing its districts the opportunity to create a peer-to-peer network to conduct and use research.
- **Federal policies** can result in federal investments in research centers that play a key role in advancing research partnerships. Federal agencies like the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) work through their [Regional Educational Laboratories](#) to run research partnerships. IES also [provides grants](#) to independent research partnerships.

Any existing challenge in education—from serving English learners to diversifying the teacher workforce—requires evidence-based strategies to generate solutions. With this in mind, the most helpful research for educators to put into practice examines the landscape of education and identifies strategies that are proven to help students succeed. The knowledge and evidence building that results from this research is critical to shaping the experiences of future learners.



When Researchers Have Access to Data, Students Succeed provides an illustration of how research can affect students in the classroom.

The Roadmap for Effective Data Use and Research Partnerships between State Education Agencies and Education Researchers lays out eight focus areas for education leaders looking to build meaningful collaborations with research partners.



The Data Quality Campaign is a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization leading the effort to bring every part of the education community together to empower educators, families, and policymakers with quality information to make decisions that ensure that students excel. For more information, go to www.dataqualitycampaign.org and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (@EdDataCampaign).