

How Education Leaders Can Rethink Data, Evidence, and Research-Practice Partnerships to Serve Their Students



The COVID-19 pandemic has presented profound challenges to the education field; educators and leaders are struggling to assess their students' learning, provide meaningful instruction and supports, address trauma and nonacademic needs, and confront systemic inequities exacerbated by ongoing disruptions. But while the need for data and evidence to meet these challenges has never been greater, state and district education leaders are struggling with how to generate insights and act.

As a result of the pandemic, ongoing state and local research efforts have faced new challenges:

- School closures disrupted many relationship-building and data collection activities. This disruption left researchers struggling to continue ongoing research that decisionmakers and practitioners rely on to inform educational practices.
- As state and local leaders address the effects of the pandemic, they are asking new, pressing questions, and research partnerships are uniquely built to provide evidence-based solutions for these emerging needs.

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs)—ongoing, formal partnerships between education researchers and practitioners (often through research institutions and education agencies)—provide a unique structure that state and local leaders can use to meet the challenges of this moment. State and district leaders can look to existing and new RPPs to:

- Adjust current research practices to account for data collection disruptions during the pandemic;
- Design new research agendas and plans that can withstand future disruptions; and
- Share findings in ways that allow educators and policymakers to take action.



What Are RPPs?

RPPs create space for researchers and education leaders to collaborate across sectors to conduct and apply research and to discover unmet needs, let go of conventional norms that are no longer effective, and identify innovative teaching and learning approaches. Ideally, RPPs ensure that education practice is informed by research and that this research is informed by real-world conditions and perspectives.

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

1. Typically extend their impact beyond a single research project. They aim to produce innovative research and **continually work toward educational improvement.**
2. Address **problems of practice** by engaging education leaders and practitioners in research. They may be organized to address specific education dilemmas or broader challenges that involve a number of education issues.
3. Are designed with **collaboration in mind.** Partnerships tend to include state and local education agencies alongside research institutions, but successful partnerships often include other groups (e.g., local organizations such as [StriveTogether](#), nonprofits, community members, knowledge brokers, and design experts) to ensure that there is a diversity of expertise.
4. Translate their research findings into **insights that communities own and can use** to effect change. This work includes facilitating professional learning opportunities during which best practices are shared widely among practitioners.
5. Are a **two-way street.** They allow researchers to inform practice, while relying on policymakers, educators, and communities to co-create research agendas, findings, and methods.

This focus on community-informed data work, flexibility, and connecting research and practice make those involved in RPPs uniquely suited to pivot their questions, methods, and dissemination efforts during the pandemic.



What New, Pressing Questions Are States and Districts Asking?

As a result of the pandemic, many education agencies have needed to reorient their research questions to focus on the immediate needs of educators and policymakers. Although each state and district has its unique challenges and strengths, many education leaders are facing the same three broad categories of questions:

1. What happened in the 2020–21 academic year?

After a tumultuous year, state and local leaders want to understand what students, families, and educators experienced over the past 18 months and how these disparate experiences have affected learning and well-being.

In seeking to understand the 2020–21 academic year, education leaders are asking questions like:

- Which modes of learning (e.g., in person, remote) did different students engage in, and how was their learning affected?
- What barriers to learning (e.g., food insecurity, lack of technology, trauma) did different groups of students face last year?
- What state and local supports were most helpful to teachers, administrators, and district leaders?

2. What are students' most pressing needs, and what supports can help?

In addition to the pandemic's impact on students' academic needs, educators and support staff are raising the alarm about students' social and emotional needs. State leaders are looking to research to help them maximize their resources and meet the needs of the students most adversely affected by the pandemic.

In seeking to understand evolving student needs, education leaders are asking questions like:

- How can educators identify student needs, growth, and outcomes amid data disruptions?
- What research-based academic supports can best address students' unfinished learning?
- What research-based supports can best tackle students' nonacademic needs (e.g., food, housing, social and emotional health)?

3. What are the long-term impacts of the pandemic on education and the workforce?

State and local leaders are asking new questions about the long-term impacts of the pandemic and the ways it changed education. Many high school students are reimagining their post-high school plans, and state leaders face uncertain workforce needs. School leaders want to know what remote learning practices have worked for which students and how these practices could be incorporated into regular practice.

Educators need information.

In a 2020 [national poll](#), **91 percent** of teachers agreed that they need to collect new data in 2021–22 to evaluate student progress.¹ And **87 percent** of teachers want information about how school closures and other coronavirus-related interruptions have affected students' long-term outcomes (e.g., high school graduation, college enrollment, or future wages).

EXAMPLE

Nevada's pandemic recovery efforts include students' overall well-being.

In their [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief plan](#), leaders in Nevada included working with researchers to provide an evaluation of students' overall well-being and to determine the extent of their unfinished learning, all in hopes of targeting resources to those most affected by the pandemic.

The pandemic is changing students' needs and pathways.

In a 2021 [poll](#), **81 percent** of parents agreed that schools must address students' social-emotional learning needs before they can address their academic needs.² In [another poll](#), **80 percent** of principals agreed that the pandemic has changed how they view their students' options after high school.³

In seeking to understand the lessons learned for the future, education leaders are asking questions like:

- Were there practices during the pandemic that were effective and should continue?
- How has the pandemic changed different students' post-high school plans?
- How can education and workforce leaders prepare students for success after high school?

EXAMPLE

Kansas collects best practices.

Leaders in [Kansas](#) are compiling districts' lessons learned about effective pandemic practices into a statewide clearinghouse of potentially scalable best practices.



How Can RPPs Answer These New, Pressing Questions?

Because of how they are structured and whom they bring together, RPPs are uniquely built to pivot and address new research needs.

- With **collaboration** at their foundation, RPPs provide opportunities for education leaders, researchers from across different fields, and community partners to communicate directly about their emerging questions and how research may be able to find answers.
- Researchers in these partnerships also focus their work on **problems of practice**. This focus connects them to the current opportunities and challenges in schools and communities—allowing them to quickly adjust research methods to the current context and translate their findings into **actionable solutions** that meet the immediate needs of students and families.
- RPPs are designed to be **long-term endeavors**, creating trust among researchers, policymakers, and the community. This setup means that in times of upheaval, these partnerships are able to lean on long-standing relationships and support to effectively meet the moment.

Using these assets, RPPs disrupted by the pandemic are uniquely positioned to:

- Adjust practices to account for data collection disruptions;
- Design research plans that are flexible enough to withstand future disruptions; and
- Produce findings in ways that allow educators and policymakers to take action.

1. How can RPPs adjust to data collection disruptions?

Interruptions to regular data collection can be disruptive, but they also provide education leaders and researchers the opportunity to rethink how they define student success and the ways to measure it. **Communities are experts on their own experience and have essential insights into what kinds of data best reflect their experience.** Engaging with families, community leaders (e.g., faith leaders, parent groups, coaches), and local organizations will help researchers learn what data is relevant to improve education and meet students' needs.

Alongside assessment data, the move to remote learning interrupted attendance tracking, classroom observations, and other in-person data collection methods. RPPs may be able to consider new data collection methods to continue existing research or to begin looking at new issues.

Qualitative methods

Consider collection methods such as:

- Parent, teacher, or student surveys;
- Focus groups;
- Interviews; and
- Local case studies.

EXAMPLE

Washington uses surveys.

The University of Washington and the Washington Health Care Authority, along with other state partners, worked together to [create and analyze a student survey](#) in March 2021. The survey results were provided to districts to target supports for students facing housing and food insecurity, emotional distress, and unfinished learning.

National sources of data

Consider data sources such as:

- ACT, SAT, or other assessments;
- National Student Clearinghouse;
- FAFSA filings;
- Census data; and
- National Assessment of Educational Progress 2021 School Survey.

Other creative uses of data

Consider other ways to use data:

- Analyze pre-COVID-19 data to look at new questions;
- Create new assessments; and
- Review and translate existing literature into actionable insights to meet current needs.

TIP: Include community input when considering new data.

As state and local leaders consider using new data, they must weigh the benefits of the data with the burden that collecting it places on communities. Asking about sensitive topics—like grief, mental illness, joblessness, or substance use—can cause emotional distress or expose communities to harmful scrutiny. Engaging community leaders and organizations can help ensure that any data collection instruments provide value and avoid harm. Earning trust and support from community leaders and organizations can also help increase the legitimacy of the data collection process and assure community members that providing accurate information can ultimately improve their lives.

EXAMPLE

Chicago uses a national data source.

The UChicago Consortium on School Research used [National Student Clearinghouse data](#) to determine how the pandemic changed college enrollment and retention for Chicago Public Schools graduates.

EXAMPLE

Kentucky uses existing research.

Based on existing research from the RAND Corporation and the Wallace Foundation, the Kentucky Department of Education put out [new guidance for educators](#) about how to create accelerated learning programs for the summer with follow-up supports during the academic year.

EXAMPLE

Researchers, educators, and students create data together.

[Shirin Vossoughi](#), an associate professor at Northwestern University, has been partnering with the Exploratorium and Boys & Girls Clubs in San Francisco to study the development of [afterschool tinkering programs](#). The data for this research included videos of the lessons and the interpretations of instructors, teen educators, and program participants about what they saw in the footage. Their thoughts were used to better understand the ways the tinkering programs could more equitably and effectively serve students.

2. How can RPPs design research plans that are flexible enough to withstand future disruptions?

Although widespread disruptions associated with the pandemic are unique, schools and communities are always facing new challenges, and research plans need to be able to handle these ever-shifting landscapes. For example, in 2016 Tennessee had to cancel its annual state assessments when its vendor was unable to provide tests—forcing researchers in the state to find other sources of academic growth data.

To ensure that research can withstand unforeseen events, RPPs can consider several aspects of their research.

Can the research rely on *multiple sources of data*, in case a source becomes unavailable?

Consider research that:

- Uses both qualitative (e.g., interviews, focus groups) and quantitative data (e.g., percentages, scores, counts);
- Makes use of remote and in-person settings for data collection; and
- Pulls quantitative data from multiple levels (i.e., local, state, and federal sources) or uses its own formative and summative assessments, alongside state or federal assessments.

EXAMPLE

The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) uses multiple sources.

MERC, located at Virginia Commonwealth University, [studies teacher retention](#) using a variety of data sources. Researchers analyzed the Virginia Department of Education's teacher survey, developed their own exit survey, conducted interviews, completed a cost-benefit analysis, and examined quantitative teacher workforce data. This research allowed MERC to produce a series of resources examining the role of principals, working conditions, and other factors on teacher retention.

Can the research design be *scaled down* if statewide or regional analyses are not possible?

Consider research that:

- Includes relationship-building activities at the local and classroom levels;
- Has a sampling plan to address how communities can be represented if data can't be collected from all students;
- Includes case studies, focusing on local experiences alongside statewide analyses, or incorporates data from other states to provide relevant insights; and
- Shares updates or releases available data throughout the process, so practice can be adjusted in real time and does not have to wait for the final publication.

EXAMPLE

The Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) researches six districts with statewide implications.

Given the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was challenging for Tennessee researchers to make sense of data across the state. Instead, [TERA worked closely with six school districts](#) to analyze their data (e.g., enrollment, attendance, teacher retention) and conduct student and teacher surveys. TERA used this analysis to advise district and state leaders about the impacts of the pandemic.

TIP: Include diverse types of researchers.

RPPs can also help ensure their flexibility by building partnerships with diverse types of researchers. The pandemic has shed light on how interconnected students' academic and nonacademic needs are. Just as state data governance bodies bring policy leaders together across the different sectors that serve youth, RPPs can provide a structure for education leaders to collaborate with researchers across multiple disciplines (e.g., child development, public health, economics).

EXAMPLE

Kentucky leaders use available data to analyze career and technical education programs.

In Kentucky, state education leaders were not able to analyze trends in students' post-high school trajectories over time like they have done in prior years because they did not have baseline data that accounted for the context of the pandemic. Despite the setback, leaders remained committed to measuring the impact of their career and technical education programs. They were still able to compare the post-high school outcomes of 2020 graduates who participated in these programs to those who did not and focused their analysis on those measures.

3. How can RPPs effectively share findings?

Successful RPPs not only produce research, but they also share it in ways that allow educators and policymakers to take action. Often, research is published in highly academic sources, which cost money to access and are intended mainly for academic audiences. But findings published in these sources may not reach those who need it to inform their practices and better serve students. To get this information into the hands of the people who need it, RPPs need to find new ways to engage with education leaders about findings, seek the input of the communities represented in the data, and make decisions that benefit students.

Thoughtful engagement work can also help provide clear context for the findings—ensuring that RPPs share findings with an [asset frame](#), which defines communities by their aspirations and contributions, rather than their challenges or perceived deficits.

RPPs can create displays and co-host events to share research findings with the community.

RPPs and other groups with a trusted role in the community—such as religious organizations or schools—can help facilitate opportunities for community members to learn about research findings and add their interpretation.

RPPs can work with external partners and intermediaries to reach their intended audiences.

Groups like educator membership associations, advocacy organizations, and the media can help to translate and disseminate research to policymakers and the public. By working with these external partners, RPPs can turn their findings into newspaper articles, professional development opportunities, infographics, memos, interactive online tools, and podcasts.

RPPs can share research findings by participating in external community groups and conversations.

Not all research needs to be disseminated solely through publications or formal partnerships. Researchers can themselves be emissaries for their RPP's research. Researchers can use their own voice to write opinion pieces for local newspapers, serve on school or workforce boards, or provide testimony on proposed state legislation related to their findings.

EXAMPLE

The Urban Institute hosts data walks.

The Housing Opportunity and Services Together project from the Urban Institute, an effort to improve the lives of youth and adults who face the highest obstacles to success, worked with community organizations to help facilitate [data walks](#), interactive events during which participants walk through data displays and reflect on the findings in small groups.

EXAMPLE

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) invites researchers onto its podcast.

NCSL created [Our American States](#), a podcast on topics of interest for state legislators. Episodes sometimes feature researchers who share their insights with state legislators. In one episode, for example, Dr. Paul Manna, a researcher from the College of William and Mary, outlined his research on school leadership pipelines.

EXAMPLE

The University of Denver supports faculty engagement on the uses of their research.

[Dr. Apryl Alexander](#) is on a tenure track at the University of Denver and is a leading researcher on topics including intervention and prevention services for girls involved in the juvenile justice system. Unlike many institutions, the University of Denver has encouraged faculty to participate in public conversations and even created a Public Impact Fellows program that gives faculty access to training and information about how to best communicate research to the public, including the use of blogs, radio, television, op-eds, and social media. While Dr. Alexander has published many academic articles, she has also shared her research through writing op-eds, serving on Denver's Citizen Oversight Board, and testifying in front of the Colorado State Legislature.

RPPs can share research findings through professional development opportunities for practitioners.

They can also communicate their findings directly to those working with students. This work can be done by designing and facilitating professional learning opportunities during which best practices are shared widely among practitioners.

EXAMPLE

The University of Texas at San Antonio develops training about online learning.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Urban Education Institute at The University of Texas at San Antonio began to research online teaching practices by surveying faculty and students. The researchers turned their findings into [short, easily understood recommendations on online learning](#) and included suggestions about what types of training faculty needed to be most successful.



Conclusion

RPPs are uniquely designed to bridge research and practice in ways that build collaboration and produce actionable discoveries. These benefits are more important than ever during the disruptions and ongoing recovery of the COVID-19 pandemic. By reassessing their data resources, keeping their methodologies flexible, and reexamining how they disseminate results, RPPs can effectively navigate the pandemic and continue to provide invaluable insights that support students and schools.

Where Can I Find Out More about RPPs?

About RPPs:

- [Research Partnerships Are Key to Improving Practice](#)
- [When Researchers Have Access to Data, Students Succeed](#)
- [Improving Education Outcomes by Building Data-Driven Relationships](#)

Information on Current RPPs:

- [Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: The State of the Field](#)
- [National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships](#)

RPPs in Response to COVID-19:

- [Using Data to Understand What Works: Research and the COVID-19 Crisis](#)

RPPs and Their Role in Fighting Inequities:

- [Racial Equity and Research Practice Partnerships 2.0: A Critical Reflection](#)
- [Research-Practice Partnerships for Racially Just School Communities](#)
- [Equitable Data Practice | Urban Institute](#)
- [The Consumer's Guide to Data](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Source: Online survey conducted within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Data Quality Campaign from April 27 to May 8, 2020, among 750 full-time teachers in the United States, all of whom were currently employed teaching grades K–12.
- 2 Source: Online survey conducted within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Data Quality Campaign from April 29 to May 5, 2021, among 1,514 parents of children ages 5–17 whose children attend school.
- 3 Source: Online survey conducted within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Data Quality Campaign from May 5 to May 11, 2021, among 504 full-time principals and administrators in the United States, all of whom were currently employed teaching grades K–12.



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).