

This discussion group, hosted by the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) and funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, is the second of two that focused on the use of research in education policy and practice. Participants were provided with the opportunity to deepen their understanding of the definition, acquisition, interpretation, and use of research across the education policy, practice, and research communities. This discussion group focused specifically on the role of intermediaries in brokering two-way knowledge sharing between researchers and policymakers and practitioners. The goals of the discussion group included: distinguishing the different types and roles of intermediaries; identifying challenges and opportunities inherent in the intermediary role; and highlighting successful strategies used by intermediaries.

The Importance of Intermediaries

Dr. Vivian Tseng, Vice President of Programs for the William T. Grant Foundation, provided background information for the participants regarding the role of intermediaries in bridging the gap between researchers and policy and practice. She emphasized that communication between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should not be viewed as one-way communication. Instead, intermediaries have an important role in facilitating two-way communication. Specifically, intermediaries can help generate research agendas and research design and can also enable the use and interpretation of research. Because evidence rarely moves directly from the researchers to the policymakers and practitioners in a linear fashion, it is hard to identify when and how research is used effectively. Therefore, intermediaries can also assist in the effective integration of research into policy decisions and education practice. Finally, Dr. Tseng indicated that intermediaries could serve as honest brokers of research. School districts frequently lack the capacity to examine research claims, so intermediaries can assist in the integration of high-quality research into practice.

In the discussion that followed, attendees highlighted an underlying tension between finding research-based solutions that can be taken to scale and meeting the uniquely local needs of schools. Tensions between the rigorous research process and the relevance as well as the practical application of research were also touched upon. Training for researchers to effectively communicate evidence to education practitioners was considered. Participants discussed the role of intermediaries in assisting in the training of both researchers and school officials.

Participants then heard from three panels, the first of which painted the landscape of intermediaries. This panel included Senior Researcher **Peg Goertz**, CPRE, University of Pennsylvania and **Professor Cynthia Coburn**, Northwestern University.

Research on Intermediaries

Dr. Goertz discussed her work regarding the role of intermediaries in the use of research by state education agencies (SEAs). The study conducted by Dr. Goertz and others surveyed three SEAs staffs' acquisition of school improvement research knowledge. Dr. Goertz's study showed that about 30 percent of SEA staff named external sources of research, an average of 2.4 sources per respondent. The sources varied across the states studied but included the federal

government, professional memberships and higher education, among other sources. SEAs sought research that was specified, comprehensive, contextual and with source credibility. However, research acquisition by SEAs depended on SEA capacity, intermediary environments in the states, policy context and partnership history, as well as the qualities of external sources. Dr. Goertz concluded by discussing the need to build a culture of research in SEAs and encourage connections between SEAs and intermediaries as knowledge brokers.

Professor Coburn's presentation focused on the research-practice partnerships (RPPs) that exist at the district level. Dr. Coburn identifies such partnerships as long-term collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving system outcomes. These partnerships can be important to practitioners as districts and schools frequently define the research, which increases its usability at the local level. Such carefully structured and organized partnerships are increasing in number across the country and are providing local education agencies (LEAs) with original analyses. Dr. Coburn identified three types of research-practice partnerships: research alliances, design research partnerships, and network improvement communities. Research alliances, such as the Consortium for Chicago School Research, are primarily tasked with informing local policy, and frequently develop and maintain data archives. Design research partnerships focus on the co-designing and testing of new strategies to improve localized teaching and learning. Finally, network improvement communities use "improvement science" research to build capacity. The main role of all three RPPs is to provide access to research; however, access to research does not necessarily indicate the use of research and research is not always available when most needed by practitioners. RPPs can assist in building district capacity to engage with research and use it by improving district capacity.

Participants presented several questions to Dr. Goertz and Dr. Coburn in the discussion that followed. The question of actionable research was raised. "Actionable research" was defined as tools that can be used in the local context and has practical application. Additionally, a participant asked about the systemic rigidity that prevents schools from becoming environments in which research can be used and applied. The panelists identified district restructuring and the lack of resources (e.g. time and funding) as barriers to schools developing a knowledge base on the use of research.

Federally-Supported Intermediaries

The second panel included **Steve Fleischman**, Chief Executive Officer from Education Northwest and **Martin Orland**, Director of Evaluation and Policy Research at the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center WestEd.

Mr. Fleischman spoke about the focus of Education Northwest on promoting research alliances that encourage greater interaction among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. In the field of research alliances, the networks of individuals vary in composition, progress and practice but work together in partnership with Regional Education Laboratories (RELs) to apply research and data to education issues. Mr. Fleischman spoke extensively on the work by the

Alaska State Policy Research Alliance (ASPRA). Government officers, state legislators, school districts and other stakeholders work together to jointly design the research agenda. He also highlighted the work by the Oregon Leadership Network (OLN) research alliance, which is a network of school districts and professional organizations that provides knowledge resources to stakeholders. Mr. Fleischman indicated that one of the most important aspects of research alliances is to build trusting relationships among the participants. Education Northwest also identified four key lessons learned from working within research alliances that are critical for success: establishing a shared purpose; communicating efficiently and strategically; ensuring membership expectations are well-defined; and anticipating challenges involved in obtaining and using data. Mr. Fleischman shared key policy implications for increasing research use by making sure the research is contextualized, easy to absorb and aided by intermediaries. Policymakers should facilitate user engagement and research implementation, support the use of research through intermediaries, coordinate across government agencies and invest in evidence use.

Dr. Orland followed Mr. Fleischman to discuss the role of comprehensive assistance centers (CACs) as intermediary research organizations. CACs are sources of technical assistance and the current emphasis of CACs work is on state-level improvements and reform. The work is based on cooperative agreements and is client focused. CACs have short time horizons and are therefore responsive to present needs. The most prominent modes of technical assistance include in-person events, literature reviews, data collections and linking to relevant resources. Finally, Dr. Orland shared keys for successful work of intermediaries: building trust, understanding the local context, the importance of research timeliness, flexibility, and emphasis on sound research that can be used effectively. Mr. Orland emphasized the importance of honest research and strong communication in building relationships with policymakers and practitioners.

Reflecting on these presentations, a participant inquired about any collaboration across RELs and CACs. Both Mr. Fleischman and Dr. Orland indicated that such collaborations are necessary for the success of research dissemination. An attendee raised the issue of the capacity and research focuses of RELs and CACs. Both panelists indicated that state agencies could determine which intermediaries can best service their needs. A participant asked if the two-way communication link between researchers and policymakers and practitioners was being effectively implemented. Both Mr. Fleischman and Dr. Orland spoke on the evolving interactions that are occurring within states. There is still progress to be made in moving towards integrative use of research. Policymakers and state-level leaders must encourage the use of research and the work of intermediaries as well.

Intermediaries in Action

The third and final panel included **Ray Hart**, Director of Research, Council of Great City Schools and **Faith Connolly**, Executive Director, Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC). Ms. Connolly and Mr. Hart discussed the impact of the research-practice partnerships at the local level.

Mr. Hart spoke extensively on the role of intermediaries integrating research into practice at the local level. He indicated that the research partnerships go beyond the research and focus on developing support systems. Mr. Hart made it clear that research capacity at the district level is very strong but is rarely taken advantage of by outside researchers. He further stated that foundations can play a pivotal role in funding research and evaluation to tap into this local research capacity.

Ms. Connolly spoke on the participatory model of developing research agendas, which includes a variety of stakeholders. The BERC organizes monthly informal meetings with districts and cross-functional working groups with district staff in order to build two-way communication pathways. While Ms. Connolly highlighted several successful examples of collaboration, she stated that leadership and building trustful relationships among stakeholders are still areas of challenge for intermediary work.

Following the panel presentation, participants were provided with an opportunity to discuss questions with Ms. Connolly and Mr. Hart. A participant inquired as to what kind of research has the greatest value to the districts. The panelists indicated that qualitative research, such as focus groups with parents, provides some of the richest information. Another participant raised the question as to how public will can be built moving forward with research-based improvement strategies. The panelists encouraged the holding of symposiums and open conversation to start public dialogue. In addition, sharing information with all stakeholders is important to building public support for evidence-based reform efforts. When asked how data access and data use can be encouraged, the panelists spoke on the use of cross-agency data-sharing agreements for research across districts. Helping stakeholders understand the mutually beneficial aspects of sharing research data is important for building long-term relationships that can grow a culture of data and research use at the local level.

Major Themes

Following the three panel discussions, participants were broken into three groups to examine three key questions, as facilitated by AYPF staff: First, what are the key roles your organization plays in connecting research with policy or practice? Second, what is the biggest challenge to doing that work successfully? Finally, what is one strategy that has brought you success in doing this intermediary work?

After discussing the questions in small groups, the participants reassembled to share the major themes that arose during their discussion:

- Participants identified a critical need to move research from the academic base to the practitioner base. Intermediaries are vital for this effort; additionally, charitable foundations can serve as relevant intermediaries to broker research.
- Infrastructure, funding support and developing new and innovative ways to communicate in an easily digestible format is important to encourage the use of research at local levels.

- National organizations, local educators, researchers and school officials all have different perspectives on the use of research. Intermediaries can help facilitate relationships between different stakeholders to promote the integration of research into practice.
- Intermediaries may have different roles, including the brokering of research funding, the dissemination of research and building capacity at the state level to connect researchers with policymakers. These efforts are not without challenges and research still needs to be contextualized for local conditions.
- There is a major need for local political will to integrate research into practice.
- Researchers are not necessarily the best communicators of research evidence and conducting outreach; intermediaries are therefore critical in communicating the value of evidence-based decision making.
- Intermediaries should embrace the role of honest brokers and facilitate the adoption of evidence-based and research-based policies through apolitical efforts.

In closing the session, Dr. Tseng indicated four conclusions, derived from the discussion, as to when intermediary work can be successful: the research is contextualized to meet local needs; there is an emphasis on building trusting relationships among all stakeholders; there is an appropriate balance between the timeliness of the research and the rigor of the research; and there is a strong organizational capacity within agencies, at the district level, among intermediaries and among researchers.

Dr. Tseng also identified a major challenge moving forward: promoting strategies for doing intermediary work well. General consensus was achieved in defining the nature of the problem connecting researchers to policymakers and practitioners; however, taking action to encourage the use of intermediaries is the next critical step in integrating research into education policy and practice.