

Building Productive Research Partnerships

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INTRODUCTION

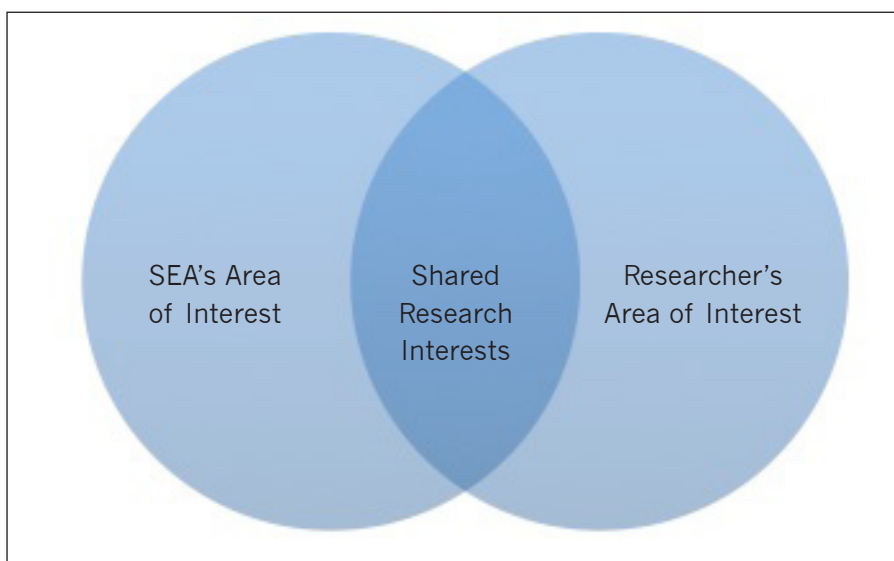
State education agencies (SEAs) have increasingly shifted the focus of their work from compliance monitoring to performance management. Inherent in this shift is a need to use data and information on “what works” to drive decision-making. Leading states are not only investing in longitudinal student data systems that can help track key outcomes over time but also in research partnerships that allow states to make use of their data in sophisticated ways to advance state policy. This chapter focuses on these research partnerships—why they are needed, what it takes to build and sustain them, and the common challenges involved.

THE VALUE OF RESEARCH PARTNERS

As Nate Schwartz discusses in this volume, states can and should build their internal research capacity. But external research partners offer states unique benefits. By leveraging both internal and external resources, SEAs can more effectively and efficiently meet the demand for quality research.

External partners give states unbiased and politically neutral research results that are independent of the state’s policy environment. They can add to (and complement existing) analytic capacity. They integrate both policy and academic approaches to analysis and problem solving. And they can provide needed specialized expertise to support state policy. Think of the SEA-external research partner relationship as a Venn diagram (Figure 1), with the overlap representing shared topics of interest.

Figure 1. External Researchers Can Complement the SEAs’ Research Needs



Flexible Source of Expertise

Research is a specialty field: most researchers focus on just a few areas and become expert in them. Partnering with external researchers allows SEAs flexibility to get the “best of breed” in diverse expertise areas and skill sets. Depending on the question or task at hand, an SEA may need someone who is expert at randomized control trials, survey development, or quasi-experimental designs with longitudinal data. Alternatively, an SEA may want someone steeped in turnaround research, teacher induction practices, or school safety. Finding this breadth and depth from the limited number of in-house SEA researchers is impossible. When SEAs partner strategically with external researchers, they can match agency needs with the person (or organization) with the best mix of technical skills, content knowledge, and interest in policy work.

In our Michigan agency, we faced research questions about the impact of school choice policies on sending and receiving districts that our agency was not methodologically equipped or politically positioned to answer internally. We partnered with a local university researcher who brought the right skills, interest, and profile as an independent observer with no vested interest in what findings the research revealed. In other projects, we have been able to partner with researchers armed with expertise in longitudinal data analysis, methods of estimating “effects” over time while controlling for many factors, and specific econometric modeling skills.

Partnerships with external researchers also establish mutually beneficial connections between research, policy, and practice. An external research partner can serve an SEA as both a source of expertise and as a good critical friend. This can help both the SEA and the researcher cultivate a more nuanced, grounded, politically neutral, and long-range view of how to tackle a problem than might not be possible if each party worked alone. A prime example is the educator evaluation work going on in many states. States are tasked with building the educator evaluation system; researchers in many external institutions have been considering for decades the components of educator quality and how to measure those components. The conversation is enhanced when we have it together—SEAs need to know how to do this work and researchers need their theories to have real-world application.

In my Michigan agency, an initial partnership with an external researcher interested in the impact of mandatory college-entrance exams evolved into a much more elaborate intervention strategy to improve the college matriculation of at-risk students. As the researcher was working through his initial questions, we were developing a postsecondary transition plan. This gave us a chance to try some new strategies and study their effectiveness at the same time. We were also able to connect the researcher with the Michigan College Access Network, creating a three-way collaboration that benefited all involved. We

now know not only the impact of mandatory college entrance exams, but we were also able to develop and offer to districts a suite of research-based, postsecondary supports designed to improve student outcomes.

Benefits and Challenges of Research Partnerships

Benefits:

- Achieving flexible capacity based on need for methodological or topical expertise
- Tapping in-demand talent that would otherwise be out of reach
- Providing fruitful connections between policy, research, and practice

Challenges:

- Finding research partners with the right expertise, interest, availability, and skill sets
- Finding resources to fund the research
- Ensuring results are visible to internal and external stakeholders

GETTING BEYOND THE CHALLENGES OF PARTNERSHIPS

SEAs seeking to build productive research partnerships must overcome several challenges: 1) finding research partners with the right expertise, interest, availability, and skillsets; 2) finding resources to fund the research project, and 3) ensuring results are visible to internal and external stakeholders.

Finding and Developing a Research Partner Relationship

An SEA's first challenge is identifying a partner with an active research agenda in the agency's area of interest. Sometimes this is as simple as looking for a researcher with a specific expertise; for example, if the SEA wants to identify best practices in literacy instruction, it can tap leading literacy experts working in local universities or other research organizations.

But often the SEA is interested in broader questions than specific specialty areas cover. For example, a question like, “What are the characteristics of high-performing schools?” could be addressed by research on whole-school reform, reading and literacy, culture and climate, or myriad other topics. But the SEA needs a partner capable of synthesizing all the relevant research literature, not just individual pieces. When the SEA requires broader expertise, the agency can form “umbrella” partnerships with an institution so the state can tap both a range of expertise, from broad to narrow.

Another challenge is balancing the reward structures of external researchers, which differ from those of SEA staff. SEAs focus on (and are judged on) addressing policy problems and ensuring implementation fidelity. Researchers typically focus on (and are judged on) publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals, where journalistic standards and specialization can limit the research findings’ applicability to real-world policy problems.

In Michigan, we have worked to build a bench of external researchers with the right interests and skill sets. While an SEA can mine existing connections to build such a bench, continually building new connections with the research field through conferences, like the Association for Education Finance and Policy, is key. In the Michigan Department of Education, our research staff makes time to attend research conferences twice a year. We prepare for these conferences ahead of time in order to maximize their utility, identifying researchers to connect with and relevant panels to attend.

We also cultivate ties with graduate students, who will eventually move on to full-time research roles. Together with the University of Michigan, we sponsor the Education Data Fellows program, connecting graduate students interested in working with SEAs to expand their technical and policy skills. This program not only boosts our internal research capacity, it also deepens our connections to future researchers.

In Michigan, we have faced a partnership constraint around aligning timelines. Unless an SEA has ongoing research partnerships, or a stable of “on call” researchers, it can be challenging to get a research partner on board, get them up to speed, provide the data, and get results in a policy-relevant timeframe—which is definitely shorter than a typical research-relevant time frame. External partners need to be willing to produce on firm deadlines and produce exactly what the SEA needs.

To better manage these challenges, in Michigan we now try to start all partnerships with a scoping meeting that includes all impacted program and research staff. We use this meeting to establish key milestones and products. We give each of our priority partners firm internal deadlines and a single agency point of contact, rather than trying to manage the relationship in a more informal and ad hoc way.

Research partners who want to work with state administrative data need to have strong quantitative skills and reasonably good detective abilities. The SEA administrative data sets are a departure from what many researchers are used to working with, such as those from the National Center for Education Statistics or small survey data sets. Our SEA has millions of records amassed over decades, and the way things were collected, stored, and documented has changed over time. Schools and districts do not always enter data cleanly and we do not catch all their mistakes. Bottom line: An external partner must be an expert data manager, strong data cleaner, and have the patience to work with data sets that were collected for one purpose—basic reporting—but now are being used for another, namely, program evaluation.

External partners must also be able to translate research into digestible formats for a non-technical policy audience. Overwhelming the superintendent or commissioner with information simply because the research partner is not willing or able to express findings in an easily understandable brief winds up harming—not helping—the SEA research cause.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act: Implications for Research Partnerships

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) guides both SEAs and external researchers in using educational data and is only growing in importance with concerns over “big data” and how student information is used and shared. An SEA can only re-disclose student data in certain circumstances; they include partners studying outcomes of educational importance and interest to the state. This helps explain why research partnerships and studies need to align with an SEA’s priority policy areas. It also underscores how important it is for an SEA to have thorough documentation on how data are being used. SEAs should refer to the National Forum on Education Statistics [Guide to Supporting Data Access for Researchers](#).

Research partners must also understand the SEA's bureaucratic constraints and be willing to work with the SEA to address emerging challenges. When this understanding and willingness is weak or absent, SEA staff become frustrated and the partnership is less likely to be productive. SEAs need research partners who can serve as partners not only in research, but also in learning. They must be willing to help SEAs develop their processes for this potentially fruitful work.

Funding the Partnership

Building productive partnerships takes resources for both SEA staff and the external researchers. States can seek out partners to compete for funding through the **Institute of Education Sciences (IES)**, foundations, or other grant sources. A growing number of grants are available to research partnerships, such as the **Partnerships and Collaborations Focused on Problems of Practice or Policy** research program initiated by the Institute of Education Sciences. These grants focus on SEAs and local districts finding research partnerships on mutual topics of interest and are an encouraging development for research-driven SEAs. The grants are designed to support a range of partnerships and large-scale evaluation of state and local programs.

Regional Educational Laboratories as Research Partners

The **Regional Educational Laboratories (REL)** work in partnerships with state education departments. In Michigan, we have partnered with REL Midwest on several research projects including understanding:

- **Which measures predict whether a student is on track for college**
- **Key issues related to early-childhood education quality**
- **Which methods are most reliable for evaluating educators**
- **Which strategies and practices differentiate schools that are beating the odds from demographically similar schools that are persistently low performing**

These projects leverage the federally funded REL program resources to inform the state's ongoing policy and program work.

To date, IES grants include:

- Evaluation of State and Local Education Programs and Policies, first awarded in 2009 and totaling 17, including the Michigan Consortium for Educational Research (see p.51). Evaluates major state or local policy initiatives using rigorous methods to estimate program impacts.
- Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships in Education Research, first awarded in 2013 and totaling 20. Targets researcher-practitioner partnerships and frequently serves as a precursor to successful bids for the larger evaluation grants above.
- Continuous Improvement Research in Education, first awarded in 2014 and totaling six. Helps states and districts with short-cycle implementation science grants to regularly evaluate a program or intervention in shorter time frames to enable more rapid course corrections and continuous improvement.

In summer 2016, IES will award more grants in each category and run a special competition for evaluation of federal ESEA flexibility waivers.

Timing is a challenge in leveraging grant funds; the grant cycle is often too long to help a state answer a timely policy question. For instance, if an SEA and its research partner apply for a grant in August 2014, they will not hear if their bid was successful until July 2015, with a start date between July and September 2015. That means a nearly year-long lag before work can begin. Meantime, potential partner schools and districts have moved on, policy has shifted, and the imperative for an answer to the policy question may have disappeared. SEAs and researchers are challenged to pick questions and topics that will remain relevant in a year, plus figure out what work to do and how to fund it while they wait for an answer on a grant proposal.

Developing state block grants to fund SEA research questions would enable more flexibility in individual research projects and would greatly benefit SEA and local district research partnerships. The SEA would be the grant recipient and therefore be responsible for both meeting quality research and partnership standards and reporting on progress made with the grant funds. The SEA would have discretion to develop requests for proposals to use grant funds and to select research partners. Ideally, the funds would be used for a mix of short and descriptive “rapid response” studies to respond to immediate policy questions as well as for long-term ongoing partnerships on broad policy areas. This would also support states in developing ongoing partnerships that can be quickly leveraged to respond to new policy research needs without the conventional lag time involved.

Even without grants, partnerships are still possible. The key challenge is identifying researchers positioned to conduct the research without securing new funds. In Michigan, we have successfully partnered with senior university researchers who have built-in access to the needed resources (e.g., research assistants, software) and are relatively free from political interference to pursue relevant policy questions.

Ensuring Visibility and Use of Findings

Ensuring that findings and research products are well disseminated is a critical piece of building productive partnerships. Elsewhere in this volume, we discuss the importance of building internal capacity to produce, interpret, and act on useable research. But SEAs also need research partnership-generated findings to have visibility; it helps state agencies demonstrate that they are using research to make decisions and are invested in having solid information or the “right answer” to a policy question. Many state agencies suffer from a public relations problem of sorts—as the regulatory agency, they are often seen as overly compliance-driven and mired in bureaucracy. When SEAs contribute research, data, and information to the policy conversation, or can support their initiatives and policy decisions with relevant and timely research, it helps create a common conversation around difficult policy topics and, ultimately, can help the agency successfully carry out policies. Researchers, for their part, need their work to be visible because their professional worth is often judged by their success in publishing research and having their results referenced in the public policy domain. Partnerships between SEAs and external research can help researchers achieve public interest in their work.

It can be challenging for states to ensure this visibility. Researchers generally do not write for a policy audience; SEAs generally lack a communications or public relations arm aimed at disseminating research findings. Suggestions for SEAs include:

- **Focus on developing defined deliverables and timelines for each partner.** Michigan requires partners to produce four types of deliverables: a policymaker-focused document (1 to 2 pages, key takeaways); an executive summary; a full report; and a technical working document. Massachusetts requires a four-page summary for all research findings.
- **Highlight with research partners the importance of descriptive statistics and graphical representations.** Many researchers produce these as an afterthought of sorts on their way to the “real question,” but this is valuable information for SEAs. Ask research partners to produce short descriptive reports every three to six months as they work on the larger question.

- **Set regular times for researchers to present ongoing findings within the SEA.** Options include department-wide leadership team meetings, executive team meetings, office-specific meetings, or brown bag lunches. Do this several times a year to help break the information into manageable pieces.
- **Ask research partners for six-month updates outlining their ongoing work and deliverables.** This allows the SEA to take an active role in dissemination, through public releases of information and internal and external presentations.
- **Request that research partners submit to major research conferences and include an SEA staffer as a co-presenter in sessions.** This highlights both the partnership and the work. Discuss the possibility of co-authorship with SEA staff, particularly on policy briefs or white papers geared to more of a policy than academic audience.
- **Preserve researchers' independence and their ability to publish.** In Michigan, we request a time to review all external researchers' results for appropriate use of data and FERPA compliance, as well as to arrange our internal messaging if the findings are going to be highly visible or potentially contentious. But we protect the researcher's academic freedom and do not interfere with the publication of results.

Case Study: Michigan Consortium for Educational Research

In 2010, the Michigan Department of Education entered into a 6-year, \$6 million partnership with the University of Michigan and Michigan State University to form the **Michigan Consortium for Educational Research**. The consortium focused on two key questions: what is the impact of the **Michigan Merit Curriculum** and what is the impact of the **Michigan Promise Scholarship**. The partnership also had another aim—to build an ongoing, collaborative research partnership with Michigan’s leading research institutions and use this to beef up the state’s infrastructure and capacity to do research with external partners. A few lessons learned include:

- **How to handle related studies and researchers.** Since the partnership focused on two research questions, initial data approvals were related to those questions, as FERPA requires. But, over time, both universities added new graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and other interested faculty. While interested in the original questions, these parties were even more interested in the state administrative data and the chance to do relevant policy research. This led to adding research questions and related hypotheses—a new concept for us. From the state’s perspective, a partner got data to do a certain study and when that study was done, the partnership was over. But related questions arise all the time as research unfolds. As the consortium studied the Michigan Merit Curriculum and its impact on achievement, new questions surfaced. What about teacher mobility? What about teacher supply and demand? What about schools that open and close over the study’s life? We had to strike a balance that afforded the consortium enough flexibility to grow while also maintaining strict documentation to ensure we followed the rules around researchers needing to study the educational question for which they are approved, not any question of interest.
- **How to provide appropriate longitudinal files.** The consortium was approved for certain data sets and received those data. But where previous partners had gotten a data dump and then done their analyses, this time we created a standard process for researchers to request a regularly updated longitudinal data.
- **How to deal with special requests.** In the consortium’s desire to address the research questions with the most rigorous data available, researchers often wanted data outside our ‘normal’ data set. This was initially a source of confusion or even worry on the part of the SEA: Why did the researchers want address data? How can we ensure compliance with FERPA’s requirement that we release only the most-needed data? To address this, we assigned an SEA “case manager” to each of our key research partners and, conversely, asked the external researchers to assign a point person on their side. This helps us solve problems and facilitate unusual data requests.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF A RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

Building and sustaining mutually beneficial, ongoing research partnerships is not simple. It requires both the SEA and the researcher to build trust and invest in the relationship. The benefits that accrue from these partnerships include high-quality, relevant research using the state's longitudinal data; regular reports and feedback; data "products" like researcher-ready data files; and being able to deploy the data to drive policy, versus leaving it to sit in data warehouses for reporting use only. To reap these benefits, however, states must overcome some challenges: facilitating work between multiple bureaucracies across different timelines and senses of urgency about the work, as well as communicating results to the public, particularly when negative attitudes prevail toward key policy initiatives.

To maximize partnerships, SEAs should:

- **Leverage institutional and personal relationships within the state.** Spend time developing a professional relationship with researchers. Find individuals who are committed to the state and the use of state data to drive policy; this will help you work through challenges in SEA-research institution collaboration.
- **Think about the strengths of different research universities in your state.** Some might be best at research techniques that use advanced quantitative methods and longitudinal data; others better at studying certain interventions and how they work; others stronger in behavioral research. Research institutions are known for different things. Build the partnerships around strengths. Don't be afraid to "cherry pick," taking the best each has to offer.
- **Establish multi-university partnerships cautiously.** These have great potential, but also can compound difficulties in navigating relationships. If you want to partner with multiple universities, make sure you have fully committed individuals from each university, ideally with some demonstrated track record of working together.
- **Get buy-in from SEA people at all levels, from the executive to program offices.** Articulate a clear vision and need for this work, then show some 'quick wins' or early value that these partnerships generate. Make sure someone is in place to translate between researchers and program staff—someone who knows the language of each and can help make sure they do not talk past each other.

- **Make sure the questions tackled are answerable.** It would be great to know conclusively what instructional practices are being used in our lowest-performing schools and how those relate to student engagement and motivation—but that is very tough to measure and requires much additional data collection. Many worthwhile questions and studies are much harder to accomplish than others. Prioritize so you can show the partnerships' value.
- **Be honest with researchers about SEA internal dynamics and politics and the limits of what the agency can do.** Researchers will be better partners if they understand the lay of the land from the outset.
- **Encourage research partners to develop policy briefs in a “question driven” format and address key questions in a non-technical way.** Keep the writing simple, clear, and to the point. [Tennessee’s exploration of course enrollment patterns for high school students](#) provides a nice example of a research summary designed for a general audience.
- **Set clear expectations, guidelines, and rules, particularly around partners presenting results and giving the SEA sufficient notice.** Make sure external researchers state that their findings reflect the researchers’ work and not necessarily the views of the state education department. Involve the SEA communications office early on to determine concurrent or related messaging and ensure agency staff know when a release is coming. Ensure researchers understand this is not about control or censorship, but about the SEA being able to have a policy-relevant response.
- **Have SEA staff attend key research conferences,** such as those held by the Association of Education Finance and Policy and the American Educational Research Association.

Identifying, recruiting, training, and supporting external research partners provides many excellent opportunities for SEAs, although agencies must invest time and internal resources to develop and maintain an infrastructure to support these partnerships. But the benefits of having high-quality, independent research on major policy areas of interest outweigh the costs. As states have developed comprehensive longitudinal data systems, developing the concurrent infrastructure to use those data is of utmost importance and supports the SEA’s ability to make smart, data-based policy decisions.