Guidance from the District’s public schools to the future research-practice partnership:
How should it work with schools?

An upcoming research-practice partnership (RPP) in D.C. will create the opportunity for external researchers to work with student-level data to conduct studies that have the potential to improve practice. As envisioned, at least at the beginning, the RPP will receive data from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), but researchers are also expected to work with schools as they develop their research and publish their findings.

Experience from other jurisdictions with similar RPPs shows that these initiatives work best when they start with establishing means of receiving feedback from school leaders. In preparation for the establishment of the RPP, the D.C. Policy Center convened groups of school leaders and facilitated discussions on (a) research topics that are of interest to schools; and (b) guidelines for engagement that describe how school leaders would like this partnership to function.

The recommendations and feedback presented in this report are a result of these conveenings. School leaders who participated in the meetings developed, vetted, and prioritized what is presented here with the D.C. Policy Center largely coordinating the meetings and serving as a scribe.

Our goal in these conveenings has been to reflect the voices of school leaders in the District and provide researchers, members of the RPP’s Advisory Committee, and funders of the RPP research with guidance that enables them to set an informed research agenda and initiate a successful partnership with D.C.’s schools.

Funding for this project has been provided through generous support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Background on D.C.’s RPP

The D.C. Council passed legislation in 2018 to create a RPP in the District, and formally selected the research partner in January 2021. The city will now move toward setting up the Advisory Committee to guide the research as well as a data sharing agreement with OSSE and the research partner to allow access to student-level data. The Advisory Committee will comprise representatives from elected office, education agencies, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), parents, education nonprofits, teachers, principals, and other education stakeholders to ensure that its research is focused on improving practice at D.C.’s schools.

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1 The D.C. Policy Center does not work for the RPP or the D.C. Government, but it joined the Urban Institute and other organizations in the bid that eventually was selected as the District’s research partner. For more information on the bid process, please visit https://osse.dc.gov/page/research-practice-partnership
What is a research-practice partnership?

An education research-practice partnership is a collaborative engagement between researchers and education agencies. Its primary mission is to generate objective research that identifies paths for continued improvements in education.

The research partner is typically a research institution or a university with a deep bench of academic researchers and expertise in cleaning, managing, and storing large datasets. The research partner conducts long-term research to inform policy and practice and may take on analyses requested by the education partner.

The practice partner usually includes schools, school boards, or the state education agency. Practice partners inform the research agenda, provide data on an ongoing basis to the research partner, and may determine the rules for data access. Each education agency determines the level and complexity of data they provide, but it is customary to share student- and school-level data.

D.C.’s LEAs and education agencies have already collaborated with education researchers in the past with arrangements that have some characteristics in common with the upcoming RPP:

- For example, since 2011, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has worked with researchers at the University of Virginia and Stanford University to examine the effects of IMPACT, a system for assessing the performance of school staff, and to conduct a multi-year study of LEAP, DCPS’s district-wide approach to teacher professional development.
- The DC Staffing Data Collaborative allows DCPS and charter LEAs to opt into sharing human capital data with TNTP (a national non-profit research organization) in exchange for regular reports on how their schools compare to others across the city.
- Education agencies (including DCPS, the DC Public Charter School Board or DC PCSB, and My School DC) have shared data with the Urban Institute for a study of student commutes as well as with Mathematica Policy Research for a study of preferences when choosing schools.
- In 2012, D.C. established a formal research-practice partnership, the D.C. Education Consortium for Research and Evaluation (EdCORE). However, EdCORE’s work did not continue after producing its five initially commissioned reports.

The RPP that the District is now initiating builds on lessons learned from the research described above. The underlying legislation that authorized the creating of the RPP had three such concerns: First, the RPP is envisioned as an independent entity with a long-term commitment to education research in D.C. This ensures that research topics are determined independent from political considerations, research is conducted with utmost academic integrity, and findings are released in a transparent and neutral manner. Second, the research will be explicitly designed to inform practice at schools. This ensures that researchers serve schools and school leaders with the sole goal of improving education outcomes. Third, the city will select one research partner, which will streamline the process for citywide research. This does not prohibit the currently available paths for LEAs to work independently with researchers, but it does ensure that researchers have the opportunity to use citywide data to create shared knowledge and allow schools to benefit from each other’s experiences.

Given that this is a new undertaking for the District, it will be important to learn from the best practices of other successful RPPs. One such best practice is allowing school leaders to have a meaningful voice in the process. This document aims to act as the first step in that endeavor.

How did we solicit school input?

The D.C. Policy Center convened school leaders and data staff to ask what topic areas are of greatest interest to them and to learn how they want researchers to work with them. The goal was to brainstorm priority research topics and guidelines for engagement as outlined in this document. To maximize participation in the workshops, the D.C. Policy Center informed schools about the workshops through emails to existing listservs of DCPS and public charter school
leaders, presentations at meetings of school leaders in both sectors, and by targeted outreach to individuals.

Over 50 participants attended three workshops that engaged representatives from several DCPS schools, 20 public charter LEAs including adult and alternative schools, DCPS’s central office, the DC PCSB, and the State Board of Education (SBOE). The workshops were held on December 3rd, 2019; December 12th, 2019; and January 16th, 2020. At each workshop, the D.C. Policy Center provided background on D.C.’s upcoming RPP before participants brainstormed research topics of interest and guidelines for engagement during the research process. Then, the D.C. Policy Center compiled feedback, carefully noting each suggestion and comment.

On February 6th, 2020, the D.C. Policy Center met with a smaller group of representatives from each workshop. This working group consisted of workshop participants who had volunteered to become more involved. They examined ideas that emerged across the workshops and selected priority themes for research topics and guidelines for engagement. Finally, all workshop participants were invited to provide feedback on these priority themes.

What is a priority research topic or guideline for engagement?

| **A priority research topic** | is one that has been selected by many school leaders and singled out by members of the working group as an area of high and immediate interest. |
| **A priority guideline for engagement** | is one that has been agreed upon by the greatest number of school leaders. It has also been identified by the working group as an essential component of the partnership. |

This document presents the priority themes as selected and described by school leaders and data staff. It is intended to elevate schools’ voices around research topics and process from the start for D.C.’s RPP. It is not an exhaustive list, nor is it representative of each and every school. It is our hope that what is presented here will provide a strong base for an ongoing conversation on how researchers and schools can deliberately work together in D.C.’s RPP, and how the Advisory Committee sets the research agenda.

**Priority research topic themes**

Priority themes for research topics emerged across workshops and in the working group as research that is of high interest to schools that may help them investigate areas where they are doing well or could do better. Among other aspects, RPPs are more likely to be successful if they support practice partners in achieving their goals, including through relevant research. As an example, the Consortium on Chicago School Research learned that research findings are more likely to be accepted, even if they are unfavorable, when schools believe the research is intended to be constructive rather than ideological. The Consortium ensures this by regularly seeking stakeholder consultation through a steering committee.

Representatives from D.C.’s schools indicated that they are interested in research concerning long-term outcomes, equity and achievement, mental health and support services, school models, and student movement. These themes are described below and are accompanied by areas of interest as formulated by the school leaders – these areas are broad by design and can eventually evolve into more specific research questions. Other research themes and areas of interest that were not chosen by the working group are included in the appendix.

**Priority research topic themes for D.C.’s RPP**

1. **Long term outcomes**: research will examine how successful students are after they graduate or disengage from high school. This will look at college, vocational, and workforce outcomes. Potential research topics include:

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2. **Equity and achievement**: research will produce evidence and knowledge that can make D.C. schools more equitable for all students, particularly those who have been historically under-served. Potential research topics include:
   - What are the best practices for serving specific populations such as English learners, students with disabilities, at-risk students, and immigrants?
   - What additional supports are needed to help underperforming students succeed?
   - What are the trajectories of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)? What factors determine their success?
   - What are the practices of diverse schools that have strong outcomes for all students?
   - What disrupts inequality in education?
   - How can we measure how well schools serve special populations beyond growth and achievement scores? What would an ‘access to opportunities’ metric on the School Report Card evaluate?

3. **Mental health and support services**: research will provide a better understanding of how social and emotional factors affect students’ academic and overall outcomes, including the effectiveness of models that currently address mental health needs. Potential research topics include:
   - How many students are experiencing trauma in schools and what supports are in place to address this? How effective are these models?
   - What are the highest needs for support among students (housing, food access, safety, for example) and what are schools doing to address them?

4. **Program offerings**: research will describe the different educational models (Montessori, bilingual, IB, STEM, personalized learning, no excuses, arts-infused, year-round, extended day, expeditionary learning, etc.) and measure how effective different models are for students of different backgrounds. Potential research topics include:
   - How does performance compare for different demographic groups in different educational models?
   - To what extent are students from different backgrounds accessing each educational model?
   - How do models impact student success in postsecondary education?

5. **Student movement from school to school**: research will examine how student movement between schools impacts outcomes. Potential research topics include:
   - What is the impact of school closure on students, staff, and a community?
   - Which students change schools, and how often, when, and why?
   - Which students stay at a school, and why?
   - How does changing schools impact a student’s outcomes?
   - What influences families’ school choices?
Priority guidelines for engagement themes

Priority guidelines for engagement themes provide ideas as described by schools for how researchers can establish trust with the practice partners. Like the research topics, this list represents the brainstorming sessions from the workshops, and does not include feedback from all schools or LEAs. A best practice from other successful RPPs is allowing practitioners to play a meaningful role in shaping the research process. Providing research guidelines gives stakeholders a clear understanding of what they can expect from the RPP and a sense of what their responsibilities will be. Findings from a multi-year case study of one RPP highlighted how important it is for researchers and practice partners to understand their individual roles in the process. As researchers are asked to take a more active role and practice partners are tasked with adopting new ways of thinking about data use and measurement, the lines can easily become blurred, stalling collaboration and momentum. Adding clarity to the process can only improve the outcome.

Representatives from D.C.’s schools indicated that guidelines around voice, data use, transparency, data collection, and communication would be helpful to them in the research process. These themes are described below and are accompanied by example guidelines. Other guidelines that were not chosen by the working group are included in the appendix.

Priority guidelines for engagement for D.C.’s RPP

1. **Create voice and agency:** Ensure that representative and racially/ethnically/socioeconomically diverse stakeholders are meaningfully included, valued, promoted, and heard at all key conversations and decision points throughout the process. Example guidelines include:
   - Ensure that schools have equal power and autonomy in the agenda, decisions, and communication of findings and guidelines for engagement.
   - Ensure that practitioners and D.C. education stakeholders have a meaningful voice in the agenda, decisions, and communication of findings and guidelines for engagement.
   - Ensure that families and community members have a meaningful voice in the agenda, decisions, and communication of findings and guidelines for engagement.
   - Ensure that decisionmakers are representative and diverse; decisions aren’t just made by those with time and access.
   - Ensure that system leaders are invested in the work and partnership, and advocate for best use of the work.
   - Provide an understanding of how other RPPs function and how D.C.’s is similar/different.

2. **Set clear guidelines for data use:** Ensure that data are protected, and findings are sensitively, appropriately, and meaningfully determined. Example guidelines include:
   - Share data with schools first, particularly those providing data to receive feedback.
   - Provide clarity on policies that regulate access to data by the RPP or organizations outside the RPP if relevant.
   - Ensure data confidentiality.
   - Ensure that findings are reported at the aggregate level. All participating schools can be noted in the research, but no specific school will be mentioned.
   - Use both qualitative and quantitative data as relevant and when appropriate.

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• Ensure high cultural competence standards, demonstrating an appreciation of both the practice partners’ and the researchers’ cultural identities, and how they interact.

3. **Focus on transparency:** Ensure all processes, milestones, and decisions are readily available for all stakeholders and the public to understand drivers and outcomes of the RPP. Example guidelines include:
• Ensure clear and transparent processes for sharing findings with schools, agencies, and others.
• Provide transparency around how the data and findings will be used as well as about the timeline.
• Clarify the relationship between all stakeholders (including education agencies).
• Provide transparency into political influences and how researchers are influenced.
• Provide transparency into who the funders are and what their interests are.
• Provide transparency into the voices at the table – who is and isn’t represented? Where are the gaps in representation?
• Have an open conversation about how all major parties will work together and what the RPP is working towards. Acknowledge that individual agendas may be different and think about how the RPP will move forward with that understanding.

4. **Be thoughtful about data collection:** Ensure that data collection is a shared burden that is agreed upon at regular intervals among and between collectors, stakeholders, and those requiring collected data. Example guidelines include:
• Try to minimize the burden on schools and provide an incentive for participation.
• Clearly communicate which data will be collected.
• Provide assurance of data quality and integrity.
• Conduct rapid cycle research when possible.
• Outline clear rules for sharing data beyond schools.
• Adhere to cultural competence standards in collecting and classifying data.

5. **Create strong communications:** Ensure clear, regular, and forthright updates among all stakeholders. Example guidelines include:
• Organize frequent and consistent meetings among school leaders and researchers to interpret findings and discuss how to turn research into action
• Provide periodic updates to inform schools about what is being done with the data and when.
• Ensure that the findings are accessible, and the reporting is digestible.
• Appoint a central person within the RPP group to answer quick turnaround questions.
• Allow a group of representative LEAs to review the findings during an embargo period.
• Ensure public accountability beyond LEAs.

**How can this document be used?**
This document provides a sense of what questions schools would like to investigate and insight into how they would like this research-practice partnership to function. It can help researchers, members of the Advisory Committee, and funders set an agenda that incorporates guidance from schools. It can also help them learn how to navigate a productive and mutually beneficial relationship with practitioners. For schools, it can act as a tool that elevates their voices and fosters trust in this partnership.
About the D.C. Policy Center

The D.C. Policy Center is a local non-partisan think tank that informs policymaking in education, among other issues. It offers data and analyses, publishes reports on relevant areas of study, and fosters relationships with parents and school leaders.

The D.C. Policy Center does not work for the RPP or the D.C. Government, but it has joined the Urban Institute and other organizations in a bid that was eventually selected as the District’s research partner. The D.C. Policy Center cares deeply about the RPP’s success and believes that a successful RPP should function as a partnership that is rooted in trust and has a research agenda that is guided by schools.
Appendix: Additional themes
Additional themes that were considered during the workshops but not prioritized by the working group are listed below.

Additional research topics

1. Best metrics
   - What is the impact of attendance and graduation rates on outcomes?
   - Can we develop early warning systems to help students?
   - Standardized tests – are we going to continue using PARCC as a metric? If no, what will we use?
   - What are new ways to measure student progress and success? In other words, not just growth and achievement through standardized testing, but also relationship-building, working within a diverse community, etc.

2. Holistic approaches
   - Analysis on school calendar, extended hours, extended school year, etc.
   - What is the impact of wrap-around services for improving outcomes?
   - Is there non-academic data we can investigate to learn more (i.e. homicide data)?
   - Is a credit based high school diploma the best for DC? Are 24 credits and 100 community services hours the 'right fit' for the DC diploma?

3. Enrollment growth
   - How do we ensure successful growth of our programs?

4. Educators
   - How should we adjust staffing to meet needs?
   - What is the pipeline to create effective teachers for D.C.?
   - What are best practices in teacher prep programs? What motivates universities to shift towards those practices? How might they align differently to different schools/systems?

5. Facilities
   - What is the impact of renovated buildings?
   - How do factors like access to natural light, green space, working HVAC, etc. effect learning and progress?

6. Adult learners
   - Do adult students have the technical skills they need to succeed in the workforce, including digital literacy and skills for using technology? This is also relevant for students at large.
   - When and where do adult learners drop out? Is there a pattern?

Additional guidelines for engagement

1. Funding
   - Provide transparency around how priorities interact with funder interests.

2. Objectivity
   - Ensure that there is no political agenda.
   - Ensure neutrality of the researcher.

3. Relevancy
   - Make sure the research is not redundant.