Approaches to Build and Maintain High–Quality, Effective Partnerships

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are pioneering novel approaches and innovations to improve educational practice and policy. These entities are uniquely positioned to develop educational innovations because they oversee the implementation of high-quality education in their geographical service area and thus are responsible for the selection of curricula, providing professional development training in impactful instructional practices, hiring staff, designing effective organizational structures, and other policies that affect how and what students learn. To do this work, LEAs partner with researchers and community members to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of such innovations; these partnerships are often referred to as Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships (RPPs).

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education has made significant investments in RPPs through the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program.[1] The EIR program currently boasts a diverse profile of funded projects that span school districts, non-profits, and research organizations across the country. The department has written this cross-project summary to provide insight into some of the unique challenges LEAs face when engaging in RPPs, and illustrative examples of the approaches EIR-funded LEAs have taken to form and maintain high-quality and effective partnerships. This summary is designed as a resource for LEAs in existing RPPs, those considering engaging in an RPP, or any individual or organization seeking a research-based understanding of the challenges LEAs face when engaging in partnerships, and real-world examples of how high-quality partnerships are formed and maintained.

The information shared in this summary is presented through the lens of the RPP literature, which has established the structure, purpose, and potential promise of RPPs. The description of the experiences of the EIR-funded LEA grantees were gathered via two virtual, one-hour focus groups conducted in January 2022 with eight LEA Project Directors of EIR grants awarded between 2016 and 2020. Participants were asked to define what success meant to them in the context of partnerships and were encouraged to provide both a general view of challenges and successes they faced, as well as those specifically faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven additional Project Directors of EIR grants provided insights into their experience via email and virtual interviews in April and May 2022. Themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and interviews were combined with literature on RPPs to contextualize and expand EIR-funded LEA grantee experiences. Appendix A provides the names of the EIR grantees who participated in data collection efforts, the focus of their grant, and their geolocation. Narratives and abstracts of their EIR application can be viewed on the EIR awards page and are linked below for each featured project.

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[1] The EIR program was established under section 4611 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Through a competitive grant process, the EIR program is designed to generate and validate solutions to persistent education challenges and to support the expansion of those solutions to serve substantially larger numbers of students.

What are RPPs and Why are They Important?

Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships (RPPs) are long-term, intentionally organized collaborations between researchers and practitioners with diverse expertise who seek to address persistent challenges in education, inform practice and policy, and ultimately improve student and teacher outcomes through joint research endeavors. Interest in RPPs in education has grown broadly. They can inform the work of those outside of the partnership, while attending to a local problem of practice at the school and district level. RPPs are increasingly recognized as a promising approach to fostering educational improvement by bridging research on education and educational practice, with the goal of improving student and teacher outcomes. These interdisciplinary collaborations provide an opportunity for communities to identify solutions through a process that develops a more nuanced understanding of what does or does not work, for whom and why, and in what context (Coburn and Penuel, 2016, Farrell et al., 2018; Farrell et. al 2021; Henrick et al. 2017; Scher, McGowan, and Castaldo-Walsh, 2018; Schindler, Fisher, and Shonkoff, 2017; Tseng, Easton, and Supplee, 2017; Wentworth, Mazzeo, and Connolly, 2017).

How are RPPs Organized?

While there is no set way for researchers and practitioners to arrange themselves within an RPP, there are four dimensions along which the organization of RPPs may vary (Farrell et. al 2021).

1. **Critical elements of the partnership's goal:** including either a narrow or broad scope of work and whether members of the RPP envision equity as central to the outcomes the RPP seeks to achieve or as central to the process of establishing and maintaining a partnership.

2. **Composition of the partnership:** including researchers at universities or nonprofit organizations, state agencies, LEAs, schools, and other community organizations and representatives.

3. **Approaches to research**: may include a diversity of methodologies, types of collaborations, and roles and responsibilities of RPP members.

4. **Funding sources:** from federal and private sources to local or national foundations, can greatly impact activities and the flexibility to change and adapt approaches.

Regardless of how they are organized, effective RPPs have five dimensions that support their functioning and productivity (Henrick et al. 2017). Effective RPPs 1) build and cultivate trusting relationships amongst partner organizations; 2) conduct rigorous research to inform improvement and action; 3) support partner organizations in achieving individual and common goals; 4) produce knowledge in the form of tools, resources, or processes that drive education improvement initiatives; and 5) build the capacity of researchers and practitioners engaged in the partnership work.

How are RPPs beneficial?

Though researchers and practitioners engaged in RPPs are often from unaffiliated partner organizations that join together in shared decision-making processes and collaborative work (Farrell et al. 2021; Supplee et al. 2019), RPPs can be mutually beneficial for both. Practitioners desire to learn about and improve their work through research, and researchers hope their work will make a difference for teachers and students (Booker, Conaway, and Schwartz, 2019). Regardless of the organization of the RPP, these partnerships are valuable to the partner organizations as showcased in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sample of Benefits of RPPs

Researcher Benefits	Practitioner Benefits
• Deepens understanding of LEA and local educational contexts • Builds confidence in the value and impact of their work • Expands knowledge of educational outcomes	• Improves access to valid, reliable research and data • Deepens understanding of research methodologies and expand research skills • Systematically improves the work of the agency and support its ability to achieve local improvement goals

Educational System Benefits
• Provide new ideas, frameworks, or designs for local programs and practice, and policy • Create an equitable and ethical shared decision-making space that reconfigures power dynamics while leveraging diverse perspectives and skillsets • Expands professional learning communities and networks • Develops tools, processes, and/or resources for future initiatives or programs

Adapted from McGill et al. 2021

RPPs benefit the education community by providing opportunities to build complementary expertise and skillsets while simultaneously achieving project goals and objectives (Penuel et al. 2015). They are also well-positioned to drive systemic change, create equitable power dynamics and decision-making processes, expand professional learning communities and networks, and develop evergreen tools, processes, and resources for future initiatives or programs within educational contexts (Coburn, Penuel, and Farrell, 2021; McGill et al. 2021).

Challenges to Building Partnerships

Even when researchers and practitioners enter into a partnership with the best intentions, they can experience challenges while building a productive relationship (Booker, Conaway, and Schwartz, 2019). When EIR-funded LEA grantees ("EIR grantees") were asked to reflect on specific barriers or challenges they experienced, responses could be delineated into two categories: challenges

experienced *internally* within an LEA and *externally* with partner organizations. The challenges described below were underlying before the COVID-19 pandemic and may continue to be pervasive and unique challenges LEAs face in the future when forming and maintaining partnerships.[2]

Internal Challenges with an LEA

Additional Roles and Responsibilities of Staff

Through the EIR program, LEAs seek opportunities to explore, develop, implement, replicate, and scale innovative, evidence-based, field-directed interventions to improve educational outcomes. Significant staffing and time are needed to implement projects successfully. The LEA staff who are involved with EIR-funded projects often need to take on roles and responsibilities in addition to those for which they were hired. For example, one EIR grantee reflected that in addition to their day-to-day responsibilities, they now develop and coordinate the logistics for professional development trainings, which includes creating multiple training formats to comply with the LEA's COVID-19 protocols (e.g., virtual, or small, in-person sessions rather than whole group sessions). Additionally, the responsibilities and decision-making structure of each partner within the RPP may not match. For example, one EIR grantee reflected that the hierarchical structure of the district does not match the joint decision-making authority of the RPP, which has made navigating supervisory relationships and providing performance feedback difficult.

Limited Time, Resources, and Capacity

LEA RPP members have limited time, resources, and capacity to dedicate to their increasing number of professional responsibilities. These limitations can often show up in the work as scheduling conflicts or poor engagement/disinterest in the work of the partnership (Scher, McCowan, and Castaldo-Walsh, 2018). However, as one EIR grantee reflected, "I think about our intervention as needing a certain amount of activation energy. You need to put a certain amount of energy into [the intervention]... before you realize that it's making things easier for you. When you're thinking about all the things you're juggling all at once, though, it sometimes just seems daunting," (M. Goodbody, personal communication, January 12, 2022).

Competing Priorities and Programs within the LEA

Within an LEA, there may be competing initiatives that are aimed at improving the same outcomes. This can make it difficult to not only recruit participants for the grant, but also to distinguish the reach and impact of the grant from other District initiatives. For example, one LEA whose EIR-funded program is focused on developing and implementing a new computer science instructional model for Grades 3 - 8, reflected on the competing priorities between ELA and STEM-focused interventions within their LEA: "For this grant specifically, there's a lot of competition in [the K-12] space around early literacy. Tens of millions of dollars were spent and that has been the focus for many schools this year," (M. Goodbody, personal communication, January 12, 2022).

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[2] During focus group discussions, it was near impossible for EIR grantees to separate the challenges they are experiencing related to partnership formation and maintenance from implementation challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not unique to these EIR grantees. As increasingly documented, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many challenges in education (Goldberg, 2021), amplifying pre-existing academic, social-emotional, and physical challenges faced by students, teachers, administrators, and the educational community at large (Gagnier, Okawa, and Jones-Manson, 2022). This has not only disrupted the daily operations of educational systems across the United States and beyond, but also EIR grant implementation and lifecycles.

External Challenges

Communication

Within RPPs there are often differences in organizational cultural norms, and processes when it comes to communication both in terms of frequency and language used (McGill et al. 2021; Penuel et. al, 2015). Researchers and practitioners may use different terminology, jargon, or phrases on a day-to-day basis, such as "propensity score matching," "treatment or control groups," or "survey responses rates", that fall out of the everyday vocabulary of practitioners. Conversely, practitioners may prefer to use quicker communication like messaging in comparison to researchers.

Lack of alignment in organizational cultural norms and motivators

The differences in the cultural norms and processes between LEAs and partner organizations in RPPs can become overtly apparent when a partnership forms. Researchers seek to "build upon broader bodies of knowledge, seek data or subjects to interrogate, and look for opportunities to use rigorous research methods. Practitioners plunge forward with the assumption that the research will either validate or help them fine-tune their approach—and, if it doesn't, they often find reasons to explain away the findings," (Booker, Conaway, and Schwartz, 2019, p.1). Several EIR grantees agreed that it quickly became apparent that partner organizations did not share the same perspectives or see "eye-to-eye" on approaches, and that greater flexibility than anticipated would be needed to navigate the partnership successfully.

Lessons from EIR Projects: Four Approaches to Building High–Quality, Effective Partnerships

These challenges can prevent the development of high-quality, effective RPPs well-situated to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Lessons From the Field

Four common themes emerged when EIR-grantees described approaches they have taken to address these challenges and build impactful, effective, lasting partnerships:

1. Build a solid foundation early;
2. Pause, reflect, and recalibrate;
3. Identify champions and advocates,
4. Align grant activities to District or State responsibilities and/or requirements.

Below, are illustrative examples of how each approach was implemented in EIR-funded projects and how such approaches affect the quality, impact, and effectiveness of the partnership and project.

Approach 1: Build a solid foundation early

An RPP's structural approach is critical to its success (McGill et al. 2021). Therefore, a solid foundation must be built early to make the partnership and project successful. This foundation begins with engaging in activities that help build and cultivate trusting relationships amongst partner organizations and develop an understanding of what both practitioners and researchers bring to the table (Farrell et al., 2018). Building trust requires a feeling of mutual ownership in decision-making and regular and effective communication (Scher, McCowan, and Castaldo-Walsh, 2018). Below are three examples of how EIR grantees have built a solid foundation by prioritizing relationships, establishing partnership agreements like Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) or Intergovernmental Agreements (IGAs), and committing to consistent and transparent communication.

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Project Example 1.1. Supporting Behavior and Improving School Climate through the Elementary to Middle School Transition: Whole School Restorative Practices in Austin Independent School District (AISD)

Austin Independent School District (AISD) partnered with the University of Texas at Austin School of Education (UT-Austin) and American Institutes for Research (AIR) to implement and evaluate the impact of culturally responsive restorative practices (a school-wide approach to strengthening relationships and building a positive climate) during the transition point between elementary and middle school (AISD, grant application, 2016).

Often in RPPs, partner organization are driven by their own goals, cultural boundaries, and processes (Penuel et. al, 2015). At the surface level, partner organizations may not understand or see the commonalities in these goals, boundaries, or processes. Therefore, to build a solid foundation early, it is important to **prioritize relationship-building** within and amongst partners – particularly when partners have not worked with one another previously. Sarah Johnson, EIR Grant Coordinator and Project Director for AISD, shared that her partnership did this by implementing an in-depth relational structure during weekly and monthly project meetings with UT-Austin, and AIR. Specifically, she noted that the "structure of our meetings [mirrored] what our work is... we used restorative practices to connect together [such as] meeting with people in the circle, doing welcoming rituals, and co-developing agendas," (S. Johnson, personal communication, May 2, 2022).

As a result of having strong relationships and maintaining consistent and transparent communication through frequent meetings, AISD staff and its partners were able to provide genuine, high-quality feedback to one another and deepen their understanding of both program and evaluation activities (S. Johnson, personal communication, May 2, 2022).

Project Example 1.2. Partners To Lead: A leadership training program aimed at improving principal effectiveness

The DuPage Regional Office of Education (ROE) partnered with the West Central Illinois Regional Office of Education, Mclean and Dewitt Counties Regional Office of Education, Bureau, Henry and Start Counties Regional Office of Education, and Illinois State University (ISU), as well as 19 LEAs across the state to form a consortium of twenty-six rural and/or high need Local Education Agencies (LEA). The project intervention focuses on three leadership strategies: managing time as a resource; teacher team collaboration; and an instructional improvement process (DuPage ROE, grant application, 2016).

DuPage ROE recognized the importance of building a solid foundation early - during the proposal phase. To facilitate a strong foundation, DuPage ROE **established memoranda of understanding (MOU) and intergovernmental agreements (IGA)** with its partners and participating districts **during proposal writing** to ensure buy-in and the success of its partnerships, given their geographic disbursement. In addition, DuPage ROE provided in-kind contributions and required partner ROEs to come up with matching funds and staff hours dedicated specifically towards the partnership.

PTL Director Dr. Alicia Haller reflected that because of these efforts, partners were able to fully "understand what their role was and what they're committing to." (A. Haller, personal communication, March 21, 2022). Moreover, she emphasized that requiring matching funds and staff hours were "crucial for a couple of reasons. You need to have someone in the region actually working on the project to see how it integrates within that organization or it's just going to die as soon as the funding goes away. The other reason was that we created all of our training materials and coaching protocols in-house. Because we have [many different types of LEAs] we needed good PD designers at the table working together so that we weren't creating for one group of schools and leaving the other group of schools out," (A. Haller, personal communication, March 21, 2022). Establishing MOUs and/or IGAs early on creates accountability benchmarks for partner organizations for successfully completing deliverables on time and emphasizes an equitable power dynamic across the partnership.

Project Example 1.3. Metro Nashville Public Schools Scaling Up Pyramid Model (PM) Implementation in Preschool and Kindergarten Classrooms: A framework to promote healthy social and emotional development

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) partnered with Vanderbilt University, University of South Florida (USF), University of Colorado - Denver (UC), and SRI International to expand and scale up the Pyramid Model (PM) - a framework of evidence-based practices for promoting young children's healthy social and emotional development. Their goal was to expand this model to rural kindergarten classrooms and ensure teachers could implement the program with fidelity by providing training, coaching support, and materials for teachers (MNPS, grant application, 2016).

While MNPS had previously worked with Vanderbilt on other projects, the partnerships with USF and UC were new for this program. Realizing that consistent and transparent communication would ensure a solid foundation, EIR Project Director Inta Sanford met with "liaisons from the universities as a leadership team on a weekly basis to discuss progress, barriers, and considerations related to grant implementation," (I. Sanford, personal communication, May 2, 2022). She reflected that having **established project meetings and consistent communication** "was pivotal to the success of the partnership. Without meeting there would be not as much common language, unity, or cohesiveness," (I. Sanford, personal communication, May 2, 2022).

Setting up and implementing consistent communication routines and procedures is essential to achieving RPP goals and objectives ([Fancscali, Klevan, and Mirakhur, 2021](#)). Moreover, a well-articulated communication plan can ensure seamless transitions in times of staff turnover ([Farrell et al., 2018](#); [Scher, McCowan, and Castaldo-Walsh, 2018](#)). To complement this plan, it may be beneficial for the partnership to co-develop reference documents such as a list of common acronyms or terminology used by each partner organization, as alluded to in this project example.

Approach 2. Pause, reflect, and recalibrate

RPPs evolve across the grant lifecycle as partner organizations "uncover new problems, tackle implementation challenges…pose additional questions that reflect a greater understanding of their shared goals and the problems to be addressed", and experience changes in the composition of the group due to staff turnover on either the researcher or practitioner teams ([Farrell et al. 2021, p.6](#); [Farrell et al. 2018](#)). Sometimes this evolution can result in the partnership not achieving

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critical milestones related to grant program goals or objectives. While it may appear counterintuitive when deliverables and deadlines are involved, EIR grantees recommended that sometimes the best course of action is to *pause, reflect, and recalibrate* as a partnership. Below are two examples of this approach in action. Example 2.1 illustrates this approach in response to a breakdown in partnership dynamics. Example 2.2 illustrates how pausing, reflecting, and recalibrating can be proactively built into an RPP as an iterative process.

Project Example 2.1. [Mathematical Reasoning with Connections (MWRC): Development of a conceptually-based fourth year Math course](#)

Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE) partnered with California State University, San Bernardino, California Baptist University, San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools, and local districts throughout the Inland Empire Region to develop a year-long math course that students would take in their fourth year of high school. This course was designed to reinforce concepts from Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry, as well as develop critical thinking skills needed for college and career success (RCOE, grant application, 2016).

In the beginning phase of the grant, a breakdown in partnership dynamics prevented the team from achieving their goals and objectives. Partner organizations were operating in silos rather than a collective team. Additionally, the team realized that there were critical voices and perspectives not represented within the team (e.g., students, teachers, and families). The partnership recognized that it needed to **reorganize staffing, bring in new team members, and recalibrate their team processes** to look at the work holistically and through a systems lens. In addition to shifts in grant leadership, the MCRW Project Director Teresa Cummings recounted that the partnership "brought in more high school teachers and started interviewing students to bring in different [voices]. We provided more support to the counselors and administrators so that they could articulate the work to the families [to increase buy-in]," (T. Cummings, personal communication, January 13, 2022). She shared that this reconfiguration was challenging. Some individual team members were

overextended in terms of workload, or the grant evolved into something that no longer aligns with the team members' expertise or interest, "You do everything that you can do, but sometimes you're not the right team member…You need to be willing to cut the cord and be honest," (T. Cummings, personal communication, January 12, 2022). As a result of bringing in more diverse perspectives, the partnership noticed that more creative ideas were being presented, team members felt less stressed from the workload, and team members felt validated and heard.

Project Example 2.2. [Using and Leveraging Technology to Reinvent Accessibility: Minecraft Mentor Edition (ULTRA: ME) – Supporting teachers' use of accessible gamification tools to enhance instruction](#)

Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) partnered with the University of North Florida (UNF), Florida State University (FSU), and Microsoft to develop a suite of professional development trainings and supports for teachers in leveraging Microsoft accessibility-supportive and gamification tools to enhance instruction. The project aims to help teachers develop the knowledge and skills to provide inclusive learning opportunities for students with and without disabilities (DCPS, grant application, 2020).

As described by EIR Grant Manager, Kathleen Simpson, "*Pause, Reflect, and Recalibrate* was our mantra. The ULTRA team held **weekly meetings**…during those meetings **we would discuss what was happening, what seemed to be working, and where there needed to be additional attention,**" (K. Simpson, personal communication, April 26, 2022). She further clarified "to keep this process simplistic, an excel workbook was used to document what was happening within the program as it happened. As part of this documentation, we created a 'Lessons Learned' tab that allowed us to collect the "issues" as they arose, store brainstorming ideas, and input solutions that were reached. The 'Lessons Learned' was a HUGE help when writing up the APR," (K. Simpson, personal communication, April 26, 2022).

Frequently pausing, reflecting, and adjusting as needed allowed the ULTRA: ME **team to proactively identify or document challenges "in real-time,"** which allowed DCPS to "reach out to our partners for suggestions/guidance," (K. Simpson, personal communication, April 26, 2022).

Approach 3. Identify champions and advocates

Champions and advocates are incredibly important to the success of the partnership. Sometimes champions serve in a formal capacity, such as a primary representative from one of the partner organizations. Other times, a champion might be someone empowered to advance the work or negotiate the terms of the partnership. Champions have an understanding of how the partnership and different partner organizations function. Advocates should be built from external stakeholders from communities impacted by their work. Engaging the community early on can ensure the partnership is responsive to community needs and that the findings generated by the partnership lead to change. Both champions and advocates are people who support the partnership's work and potential impact. They have the position

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and decision-making authority to shepherd the partnership and provide ongoing leadership. These individuals can see the big picture and understand the ways in which the project can lead to impactful change and are committed to advocating for changes based on the project's findings (Booker, Conaway, and Schwartz, 2019). The following illustrative examples highlight approach and considerations EIR grantees took to identifying champions and advocates amongst their partners and within their communities.

Project Example 3.1. Personalized, Relevant, Engaged for Postsecondary (PREP): An integrative approach to instruction, career-connected learning, and social-emotional support in alternative high schools

The Personalized, Relevant, Engaged for Postsecondary (PREP) program partners with numerous local, state, and national organizations, such as Portland State University, Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center, KBOO, Outside the Frame, CommuniCare, and Education Northwest. PREP works in alternative high schools integrates project-based instruction with career-connected learning and social-emotional support to build college and career readiness for under-served students (Portland Public Schools, 2020).

Ensuring projects have champions and advocates that offer perspectives from critical project stakeholders has been an essential aspect of the PREP program. The program has established a leadership team and a design team that includes school-based staff and teachers. Additionally, **to gain champions and advocates from within the district broadly, they established a District-level steering committee** that includes representatives from multiple district departments including Teaching and Learning, College and Career Readiness, and Student Services Departments, and a District-level Steering Committee.

The impact of having champions and advocates from so many different stakeholder groups has been greater recognition of and interest in the PREP program across the district and community: "PREP teachers were becoming known in the district for doing interesting project-based learning work with community partners. When we did our first Project-Based Learning Design Institute in 2020, we had interest not only from our schools in the project but among other schools in the district; it became a district-wide event. We've had other events that have pulled folks together to share in their subject areas, and their interdisciplinary projects. They have been hugely attended because folks are looking for community and creative ways to engage students," (N. Legters, personal communication, January 12, 2022).

Project Example 3.2. Choice in Cultural Competency (C3): Building K-12 teachers' cultural competency

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is partnering with Cultivating Leadership, Community Design Partners, and The Evaluation Group (TEG) to implement a teacher-directed professional learning program focused on building teachers' cultural competency in ten K-12 Sea Island schools (CCSD, grant application, 2020).

To garner buy-in amongst key stakeholders, CCSD and Community Design Partners hosted a five-day Design camp with lead teachers, students, and community members to discuss what culturally responsive is and what it looks like in practice. Participants in the Design camp took part in circle discussions and empathy interviews to model and experience culturally responsive practices firsthand. EIR Project Director Abigail Woods reflected that participating in the design

camp naturally fostered champions and advocates of the program and "it built some momentum going into the school year. There were people on the ground who knew what was happening and could speak about it. The [students] were excited and the parents were excited," (A. Woods, personal communication, April 29, 2022).

To continue to engage champions and advocates of the program, CCSD has ongoing dialogues with the community to highlight how their input is being incorporated into the project's work. (A. Woods, personal communication, April 29, 2022).

Project Example 3.3. Advanced Placement (AP) STEM Access Program for Rural, High-Poverty Mississippi School Districts

The Mississippi Public School Consortium for Educational Access (a consortium of eleven rural, public-school districts serving low socioeconomic areas), in partnership with the Global Teaching Project, is implementing a program that expands advanced placement in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) course access and offerings to high school students.

The partnership quickly understood that to be successful, it needed buy-in from stakeholders at all levels of the educational system: the superintendent, principal, and teacher in the classroom. "The schools that the program works the best in, have buy-in from all levels," shared Usha-Kiran Ghia, Chief Strategy Officer at The Global Teaching Project. To help increase this buy-in, **members of the partnership traveled to schools and met with teachers, principals, and superintendents in person**. Ghia reflected, "the participating schools are in rural settings [where] face-to-face time is valued," (U.K. Ghia, personal communication, May 3, 2022) doing so allowed the partnership to build relationships and foster champions and advocates for the program in these communities.

Approach 4. Align grant activities to District or State responsibilities and/or requirements

Teachers and administrators are operating at maximum capacity regarding the initiatives and efforts they are a part of. Aligning RPP activities and initiatives to District or state requirements and responsibilities in place for teachers and administrators has a variety of positive impacts on the project such as (1) minimizing the burden associated with additional partnership roles and responsibilities, (2) maximizing the partnership's productivity, (3) garnering support for the partnership's work, and (4) increasing the chances that the project's products and findings will be implemented and used within the District. While this approach is focused on the level of the partnership activities, it serves to support the overall health and functioning of the partnership and thus can lead to better relationships within the RPP and thus more productivity. Below are three examples of EIR grantees who found that it is advantageous to align partnership-related activities and initiatives to District or state responsibilities and/or requirements.

> Aligning RPP activities and initiatives to District or state requirements and responsibilities in place for teachers and administrators has a variety of positive impacts that maximize productivity and increase support for and use of findings within the District.

Project Example 4.1. Coding Our Future: Creating Equitable Computer Science Pathways in Urban Schools

Recognizing the need for a larger, more diversified computer science workforce, San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) in partnership with the California State University of San Marcos, University of San Diego, TechSmart (CA), LEGO Education, and the Classroom of the Future Foundation, developed and implemented a new computer science model for Grades 3 - 8. The model is a multi-year, curriculum pathway where students have opportunities to take differentiated computer science courses and participate in work-based learning experiences. Teachers also participate in these work-based learning experiences, as well as professional development to increase their computer science-content knowledge and skills (e.g., coding).

To garner support within the District and minimize the burden to teachers, SDUSD **aligned the computer science model proposed in the EIR grant to what will eventually be the District's science curriculum**: "What's nice about the grant is that it's tied to what will become our science solution (we're studying [the science+CS model] for this grant. People have incentives to have training around standard-aligned curricula that will become adopted across our system. There are incentives for sites to come on early when there are a plethora of resources," (M. Goodbody, personal communication, January 12, 2022).

Project Example 4.2. Evaluating and Replicating the San Francisco Unified School District's Summer Academy for Integrated Language Learning (SAILL) Program

The Multilingual Pathways Department and the College and Career Readiness Office in San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) partnered with Rockman et al (REA) to implement and evaluate the SAILL program – a five-week summer program designed to support high school English Learners' academic, linguistic, and social-emotional development through project-based learning in STEM subjects (SFUSD, grant application, 2019).

As described by Dr. Jennifer Fong, co-Project Manager for the SAILL program, "Our EIR project aligns with the District's focus on improving the academic outcomes of English Learners. This goal alignment will maximize district effort to support English learners," (J. Fong, personal communication, May 4, 2022). Thus, because **the project goals were aligned with that of the District's**, they minimized the barriers to implementation and were able to smoothly implement the SAILL program.

Project Example 4.3. Self-Directed Professional Learning Project (SDPLP)

Recognizing a need for self-directed professional learning amongst Grade 3 - 8 math teachers across the state, the Texas Center for Educator Excellence housed at Region 18 Education Service Center (ESC 18-TxCEE) partnered with AIR to develop and evaluate a TDPL program where teachers (1) attend an orientation session where they complete a self-assessment of their needs, review student data, and their existing professional learning plan; and (2) complete two professional learning cycles where teachers select, participate, and reflect on the professional learning opportunity (ESC-18 TxCEEE, grant application, 2020).

The SDPLP grant team **considered state professional development requirements during the proposal writing process**. Joann Taylor, SDPLP Project Director reflected, "We considered the state requirements for teachers to attend professional development and used that to help us develop our expectations for the project. By replacing mandated PD with self-selected PD, we can

determine if there are any benefits or improved student outcomes for those teachers. As part of our list of approved PD providers, **we also considered sessions and vendors that are on the state-approved list**," (J. Taylor, personal communication, April 28, 2022). Doing so not only minimized the burden on teachers to complete professional development requirements but expanded the options and opportunity to select professional development activities that aligned with their interests, thereby increasing interest and engagement in the grant.

Looking Forward

LEAs are uniquely positioned to develop innovations to improve educational practice and policy. To develop novel approaches to foster educational opportunity and quality, LEAs partner with researchers and community members to form RPPs. Even when partners come together with the best of intentions, it can be difficult to foster high-quality, effective partnerships. LEAs must navigate internal and external challenges related to role conflict, limited resources, communication, competing priorities, misalignment between organizational cultural norms, and motivators when forming and maintaining partnerships. EIR-grantees have implemented four promising approaches to maximize partnership capacity and impact: (1) building a solid foundation early within the RPP relationship; (2) pausing, reflecting, and recalibrating as needed; (3) identifying champions and advocates within partner organizations and the communities they work with; and (4) tying grant activities to District or state responsibilities and/or requirements. Our aim here is to offer a resource for LEAs in existing RPPs or those who wish to establish an RPP. While forming and maintaining RPPs requires time, resources, buy-in from partner organizations, creativity, and flexibility, these partnerships are beneficial to not only the growth and development of the researchers and practitioners involved but also the educational system at large.

Resources for Starting or Continuing an RPP:

[NNERP: National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships](#)
Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University

[Research+Practice Collaboratory](#)
Research+Practice Collaboratory

[Research-Practice Partnership Microsite](#)
William T. Grant Foundation

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Appendix A.

Table 1. EIR grantees who participated in data collection efforts

Grantee	Project	Absolute Priority	Geo-Location
Austin Independent School District	Supporting Behavior and Improving School Climate through the Elementary to Middle School Transition: Whole School Restorative Practices in Austin Independent School District (AISD)	Improving School Climate	Austin, TX Non-Rural
Charleston County School District	C3: Choice in Cultural Competency	Teacher-Directed Professional Learning	Charleston, SC Non-rural
DuPage Regional Office Of Education #19	Partners To Lead – A Consortium of 26 Rural and/or high need Local Education Agencies (LEA)	Improving the Effectiveness of Principals	Wheaton, IL Rural
Duval County Public Schools (DCPS)	Using and Leveraging Technology to Reinvent Accessibility: Minecraft Mentor Edition (ULTRA: ME)	Field-Initiated Innovations—STEM	Jacksonville, FL Non-rural
Educational Service Unit 2	ESU 2 EIR EMPOWER (E3)	Promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science.	Fremont, NE Rural
Louisiana Department of Education	Improving Pre-Engineering and Computer Science Education through Micro-Credentialing	Promoting STEM Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science	Baton Rouge, LA Rural
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools	Scaling Up Pyramid Model Implementation in Preschool and Kindergarten Classrooms	Social-Behavioral Competencies	Nashville, TN Non-rural
Region 18 Education Service Center	Self-Directed Professional Learning Project (SDPLP)	Teacher-Directed Professional Learning	Midland, TX Non-Rural

Grantee	Project	Absolute Priority	Geo-Location
Riverside County Office of Education	Mathematical Reasoning With Connections (MRWC): Development of a conceptually-based fourth year math course	Implementing Internationally Benchmarked College- and Career-Ready Standards and Assessments	Riverside, CA Non-rural
San Diego Unified School District	Coding Our Future: Creating Equitable Computer Science Pathways in Urban Schools	Promoting STEM Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science	San Diego, CA Non-rural
San Francisco Unified School District	Evaluating and Replicating the San Francisco Unified School District's Summer Academy for Integrated Language Learning (SAILL) Program	Promoting STEM Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science	San Francisco, CA Non-rural
School District 1J Multnomah County	PREP: Personalized, Relevant, Engaged for Postsecondary	Increasing Postsecondary Preparedness	Portland, OR Non-rural
Scott County School District	Mississippi Public School Consortium for Educational Access: Advanced Placement (AP) STEM Access Program for Rural, High-Poverty Mississippi School Districts	Promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science.	Forest, MS Non-Rural
Seminole County Public Schools	Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Curriculum Project	General	Sanford, FL Non-Rural
Winchester School Board	Metrics: Maximizing Engagement Through Regular Immersion in Computer Science	Promoting STEM Education, With a Particular Focus on Computer Science	Winchester, VA Non-rural