How to Build and Strengthen Partnerships between CCDF Lead Agencies and Early Care and Education Researchers

Supporting Evidence to Inform Policy

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As Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agencies, you need evidence to help inform the policy and program choices you make. These choices will help you support the child care needs of the children and families in your state, territory, or Tribe. Your agency may need evidence that you do not have. Or existing evidence may not be applicable to the policies, programs, and families in your state, territory, or Tribe. *One way you can build evidence to inform the choices you make is to partner with researchers.*

Researchers can provide the capacity and knowledge to help your agency collect high-quality evidence to answer your key questions. Your agency can use that evidence to make more informed choices and better meet the needs of the children and families you serve. This brief covers the following questions.

How Can You Partner with Researchers?

One way to partner with researchers is to establish a researcher-agency partnership. Researcher-agency partnerships are a type of research practice policy partnership.[1] They are long-term, collaborative relationships between researchers and government agencies, such as CCDF Lead Agencies.

What Did Agency Staff and Researchers Express Are the Benefits of Starting and Continuing a Researcher-Agency Partnership?

A researcher-agency partnership may

- expand the amount and complexity of evidence your agency staff can gather and use in a given period;
- enhance your agency staff's capacity to use administrative data;
- increase the value to and likelihood that the public, policymakers, and funders will use evidence from your agency;
- help your agency efficiently keep working through staff turnover and changes; and
- strengthen your agency's relationships with other state, territory, and Tribal agencies serving young children and their families.

What Are the Problems Agency Staff Face When Starting and Continuing a Researcher-Agency Partnership?

Problems may include

- changes in your agency's priorities can slow, delay, or alter the partnership's work;
- it may take a lot of time to help your research partners get access to your agency or another agency's administrative data;
- it can take time that you and your agency staff don't feel like you have; and
- research findings may not match what your agency staff sees in their day-to-day work.

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[1] Lauren Supplee, Ivelisse Martinez Beck, Alysia Blandon, Sarah Blankenship, and Kathleen Dwyer, "The Role of R3P: Research Practice Policy Partnerships and Evidence Use," *OPRE Insights Blog*, April 6, 2023, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/blog/2023/04/role-r3p-research-practice-policy-partnerships-and-evidence-use.

What Approaches and Tools May Help Agency Staff Successfully Start and Continue Researcher-Agency Partnerships?

When your agency starts a partnership,

- pick a partnership structure and draft an agency engagement plan;
- build trust;
- set partnership goals;
- create a learning agenda; and
- write an agreement for how the partners will achieve the shared goals.

To continue a partnership, your agency will want to

- communicate regularly with your partners and
- update the shared-goals agreement and learning agenda.

What Are Researcher-Agency Partnerships?

Research practice policy partnerships are long-term, collaborative relationships between researchers and government agencies. These partnerships provide high-quality evidence to support policymaking, program implementation, continuous quality improvement, and operational choices (Coburn and Penuel 2016). **Researcher-agency partnerships** are a type of research practice policy partnership between researchers and government agencies, such as CCDF Lead Agencies. The researchers in these types of partnerships may include people working in government research units, colleges or universities, and for-profit or nonprofit research organizations.

The Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) has funded child care research and evaluations carried out by researcher-agency partnerships since 1995. OPRE also sponsors supports to build capacity for these partnerships. The insights we share in this brief are drawn from researchers and agency staff from 23 of those partnerships.

BOX 1

How We Wrote This Brief

We gathered information for this brief from three sources: (1) discussions from community of practice meetings with OPRE-funded Child Care Policy Research Partnership (CCPRP) 2019[a] *and* Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Implementation Research and Evaluation Grant[b] team members;

(2) interview responses by researchers, CCDF Lead Agency staff, and community-based organizations involved in researcher-agency partnerships, and (3) existing literature.

Community of practice meetings. In these meetings, a facilitator asked researchers and agency staff to reflect on the most rewarding or worthwhile reasons and the most challenging parts of participating in a partnership. Researchers analyzed these reflections for common themes.

Interviews. We interviewed one researcher, one community-based partner, and four CCDF Lead Agency staff about any successes or challenges they had while starting and sustaining their partnership. We also asked what approaches they felt helped make their partnership a success. Researchers analyzed the interviews for common themes and pulled out illustrative quotes.

Literature. We reviewed the literature on research practice partnerships. We searched for evaluations of research practice partnerships and evidence tying certain partnership strategies to success of the partnership.

In this brief, we share the voices and experiences of researchers and agency staff by summing up their stories and providing direct quotes.

[a] "Child Care Research Partnerships: 2019 Grantees," US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), updated March 31, 2020, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/child-care-research-partnerships-2019-grantees.

[b] "Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Implementation Research and Evaluation Grants," HHS, ACF, OPRE, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/child-care-development-block-grant-ccdbg-implementation-research-and-evaluation-grants.

What Are the Benefits of Starting and Continuing a Researcher-Agency Partnership?

Researchers and agency staff expressed that there are many benefits for agencies involved in researcher-agency partnerships. By taking part, the agency can

1. build more complex evidence on policies and practices;
2. use administrative data;
3. improve how the public, policymakers, and funders value and use their evidence;
4. continue work even with high turnover; and
5. build and strengthen relationships with other government agencies.

Researchers Help Your Agency Staff Expand the Amount and Complexity of Evidence They Can Gather and Use in a Given Period

Often your agency needs to build new evidence or sum up current evidence for leaders and policymakers. You share this evidence to show how your program's policies or processes were carried out and the impact they had on families, providers, and communities. Your staff works hard to learn how policies and programs are working for families and providers by talking to administrators and others who work more closely with families and providers. But your staff may not have the time or resources to collect data in an efficient way.

Researchers can take the time to learn about the evidence your agency needs. Then they can create and carry out a plan to collect data that will allow your agency to evaluate your programs or policies.

“Agency staff might know certain things about their programs that they do not necessarily have the evidence to back up.”
—agency staff member

“The boots-on-the-ground work that is being completed has a ton of heart put into it, and we are interested in knowing how to tie the research part to our everyday work.”
—agency staff member

Also, your agency staff may not have easy access to current research or the time to seek it out and sum it up. Research partners who know your agency’s needs can review current evidence from many fields, sum up the research that relates to your agency’s priorities, and highlight the limits of the evidence based on your agency’s context.

“…it can be about the level of rigor too. [Our agency] might just see an increase or decrease in a trend and want to keep doing a certain thing that might be related, but researchers dig deeper into how much you can attribute an increase or decrease to specific things. Program staff might have a ‘can-do’ attitude where they try to make things work, while a researcher might raise that what’s happening has nothing to do with the work that Lead Agencies do (might be related to broader economic trends, for instance).”
—agency staff member

Your agency staff sees the many factors that affect the success of the policy or program they carry out. Researchers can help your agency gather evidence on those factors. Then they can carry out and simply describe the results of complex analyses for your agency. Researchers can talk through their findings with staff. They can contextualize their findings and discuss the implications with agency staff.

With this information, your agency can get to know *how* those factors relate to the outcomes of the policy or practice and collaborate with researchers to think through what to do with that information.

Engaging in a Partnership Can Enhance Your Agency Staff's Capacity to Use Administrative Data

Your agency staff may also learn how to use current administrative data to continue to improve how a policy or program is carried out. Researchers may share with your agency staff the ways they processed the data to gain more insights into your agency's policy or program. In some cases, researchers can support your agency by building tools, such as dashboards, into your agency's current data system to help your staff use those data on a regular basis.

"It was really important for researchers to be around when [the Agency] had huge transitions in the administrative data systems, because the researchers helped to keep track of the transitions and give insight into some of the changes that are needed…[Researchers] have done skill transference, in a way. Now the agency has a whole data team that can do a lot. The subsidy data [are] hard to work with, so that's been a big added value."
—agency staff member

Multiple agency staff in our community of practice said that one of the benefits of continuing a partnership with one research organization is that the research partner gains expertise in the agency's administrative data (variables) and data-sharing processes. They shared that while it can still take time to get access to the data, once the research partners had the data, they could quickly analyze it to answer their agency's questions from then on.

The Public, Policymakers, and Funders Are More Likely to Value and Use Evidence When Objective, External Researchers Collaborate on the Studies

Your agency may have the capacity to build your own evidence. But you may find that the public, policymakers, and funders are more likely to use the evidence if an external person or organization gathered it. A researcher shared during a community of practice that the public, policymakers, and funders may trust findings from an external researcher because they believe the researcher is not involved in the implementation of the policy or practice, or affected by the results of the study. They may also be more likely to use the findings because they believe the researchers used the best methods when conducting the study.

"…But when the researchers can come in, analyze an issue, and provide that evidence, once that's shared publicly, it's read differently than if the agency were to say it. This can be effective for information shared with legislators or other entities. The information can have two audiences when it comes from objective researchers—the agency and the nonagency (legislators, the general public, etc.)."
—agency staff member

Something that researchers bring to the partnership is their training on how to collect and make sense of data. For instance, researchers may create an outreach plan that ensures the data reflect the groups of families your agency most wants to hear from. Once they collect the data, researchers will work with your agency staff to link new or existing evidence to proposed actions that you can share with your agency's leaders and policymakers to inform the choices they make.

If Your Agency Has a Lot of Staff Turnover, Partnerships Can Help You Efficiently Keep Work Going through Staff Changes

Staff turnover can be common in government agencies. Turnover can make it hard to move the work forward and meet goals. Researchers often document how agencies conduct their work. This could include changes in administrative data, policies, and practices as a routine part of the research process. The agency staff we spoke with said they found it useful to share what researchers found when training new staff. With that information, new staff were able to start their roles more quickly and easily.

"[Our agency] had…been involved with the grant for quite a few years. At [our] agency, [we've] had a lot of leadership changes…the partnership is something that [I] can use to introduce people to the work when they join the agency. It has provided continuity which has been really important to keep the work moving, given turnover."
—agency staff member

"…having this type of documentation [from the research team] was very helpful when [we] were onboarding. There were many things that the research team had documented that were helpful for knowledge transfer with people leaving and joining the agency."
—agency staff member

Partnerships Can Also Help Your Agency Strengthen Relationships with Other State, Territory, and Tribal Agencies Serving Young Children and Their Families

Early childhood services can be spread across many agencies. As such, families tend to connect with multiple agencies to get the services they need. Your agency may have few chances or little time to work with data from other agencies. When researchers need to access data from many agencies, that can create a chance for your agency to build stronger relationships with those agencies. Agency staff shared they learned more about other agencies' policies and practices and how those policies interacted with their own agency's policies and practices.

"… [our agency] identified a need for more and better collaboration with [other] agencies, especially when [we] had to work across departments. [We] focused on the shared subsidy program and had a great opportunity to work with policy staff to pull information. [Our research partners provided] a great opportunity for[our] team to come together [with policy staff], who haven't previously worked together, [to pull together the information needed for the study]."
—agency staff member

What Are the Problems Agency Staff Face When Starting and Continuing a Researcher-Agency Partnership?

Our talks with partners revealed that they felt the benefits outweigh the issues in researcher-agency partnerships. But they also expressed that it is crucial for your agency staff to know what problems they may face when starting or continuing a partnership. Knowing what challenges may arise in advance can help your staff think about approaches they could use to prevent or resolve them. We discuss these approaches in the next section. In this section, we describe four common issues:

1. Changes in your agency's priorities can slow, delay, or alter the partnership's work.
2. Your agency staff may need to use a lot of their time to help your research partners get access to your agency or another agency's administrative data.
3. Taking part in a partnership can take time that you and your staff don't feel like you have.
4. Research findings may not match what your agency observes.

Changes in Your Agency's Priorities Can Slow, Delay, or Alter the Partnership's Work

Your agency deals with changes they can foresee on a routine basis. This might include new political appointments and long-term policymaking. But your agency also often deals with changes they can't foresee. This might include executive orders, natural disasters, and community discussion. These changes are a normal part of your agency's work. However, they could alter the policies and/or practices that the partnership is evaluating. Thus, the partnership may need to pause the project midway and reshape the study to align with your agency's new priorities.

"Policy and political changes happen for Lead Agencies, or there might just be policy or political constraints that are out of your control. It is important to take note of these and to be adaptable to changes and have patience, in order to have partnerships with long trajectories."
—agency staff member

Your Agency Staff May Need to Use a Lot of Their Time to Help Your Research Partners Get Access to Your Agency or Another Agency's Administrative Data

Your agency's staff will need to work with your agency's or other agencies' data system administrators to make sure your research partner can access the administrative data they need. How long it can take to complete data-sharing agreements and get access to administrative data depends on how sensitive the data are and the agency's abilities, as well as where the data are housed. Recent evidence shows this process can take 7 to 18 months (Lee, Warren, and Gill 2015). Even in cases where researchers already have data-sharing agreements, making changes to those agreements may prompt further review from an agency's legal and information technology teams.

"[The researcher] initiated a conversation with [us] around March 2019, but it was March 2021 before they had an executed data-sharing agreement. There was lots of back and forth, concerns about 'who initiated the request and why?' This was because they were a private entity. Even after [the researchers] had the data-sharing agreement, it's still difficult to get the data. They have been trying to get some particular data coming from two different state agencies. Having a private group that's taking data from two agencies and matching it is a concern. They don't have that worked out yet. That has been a challenge and is a challenge for other agencies across the state."
—agency staff member

BOX 2
Resources on Sharing Administrative Data

Tips for sharing administrative data can be found here:

- Van-Kim Lin, Kelly Maxwell, Carlise King, Kassandra Martinchek, and Julia Isaacs, *Working with Administrative Data in Early Childhood and Related Fields: A List of Resources* (Washington, DC: HHS, ACF, OPRE, 2021), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/working-administrative-data-early-childhood-and-related-fields.
- "Developing Data-Sharing Agreements," Research-Practice Partnerships, William T. Grant Foundation, accessed September 11, 2024, https://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org/topic/developing-data-sharing-agreements/.

Taking Part in a Partnership Can Take Time That You and Your Agency Staff Don't Feel Like You Have

Researchers will try to minimize the amount of time your staff need to work on the project. However, your staff will still need to set aside time to engage in the project for the partnership to be successful. For the research to answer your agency's biggest questions, your staff will need to engage with researchers in early planning and design. Then, at key points in the project, agency staff will need to make choices, review draft reports or documents, and provide crucial updates to the researchers. Successful partnerships are built on trust, which takes time to build.

"Depending on how your team/office is organized, it is a significant time commitment for CCDF Lead Administrators…[meaning] the time burden to complete reports, attend monthly team and [community of practice] meetings, read over materials that their research team asks them to review, and helping with grant writing."
—agency staff member

For the research to be rigorous and useful, your staff will have to share information about the agency's past and current policies and practices. Your staff can provide valuable insight to researchers about the communities you serve. Also, your staff may need to help researchers gain access to other information like provider contact lists or internal policy manuals. Your staff may also have to engage in or assist with data collection efforts. This is especially important when researchers are having trouble reaching participants or when researchers want to collect information from those who know and trust your staff.

Research Findings May Not Match What Your Agency Observes

Your agency staff hears about how well policies and programs are working through chats with and reports from program staff in your agency or contracted agencies. Sometimes, these discussions give your staff a sense of how well a policy or program is meeting the needs of children and families in their communities. However, reports about some families' and/or providers' experiences may not reflect all families and/or providers. Research findings that do not match with what your agency expects can help your agency narrow in on what parts of the program or policy to improve or look at next. Still, these mismatched findings can be hard for your agency to hear. Because partnerships may have to have difficult discussions, having a partnership built on trust is critical. We describe trust-building approaches in the next section.

"Be open to the possibility that the outcome from the research findings may not be what [your agency] expects, for better or worse, it can be scary to find out from the research that some things in your [agency] are not doing as well as you thought they were."
—agency staff member

What Approaches and Tools May Help Agency Staff Successfully Start and Continue Researcher-Agency Partnerships?

Helpful Approaches for Starting a Partnership

Your agency could enter a partnership in many ways. In some cases, researchers may ask your agency if you would like to work together on a proposal to fund one of your agency's research needs. In other cases, your agency may have contracted with researchers in the past and then ask those same researchers to partner on getting funding for a future project. These early talks between your agency and the researchers can set the partnership up for success. Even if you start the basic working relationship through a contract, it is useful to have a living document that you use to more fully detail and explain relationship expectations, roles, and the people who are involved and responsible.

PICK A PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURE AND DRAFT AN AGENCY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Deciding on a working structure and agency engagement plan early in your partnership will better equip you and your partners to make choices and keep the work moving forward. By answering the question "Who should be at the table?" you and your partners can come up with the structure and engagement plan that works best for you.

Partnership structures often includes a core set of agency staff and researchers who bring other team members into talks when the partnership needs their skills and knowledge. We have learned about common partnership structures that have worked well for other agencies. Here are structures that might work for your agency:

- Your agency's research staff serves as the main partner with the external research partners. Your research staff act as the main point of contact between the external researchers and your agency's program team.
- Your agency division leader overseeing the program or policy may serve as the main partner with the external research partners, pulling in agency research or data teams as needed.
- Your agency's program staff may partner with your agency's research staff, forming an internal research partnership.
- Your partnership may include a third, community-based organization. This may be an organization that is well-known to your agency and has some research capacity. The third organization can serve as the main point of contact between your agency and the external research partners.

Your agency will also want to create a plan that describes the other staff you will need to support the partnership and when to involve them. These could be staff who

- develop and maintain data collection systems (e.g., information technology, analysts);

- work with those who carry out the policy (e.g., program specialists);
- inform policymakers of how a program will be carried out (e.g., directors); and
- can enact change and allot funding (e.g., agency leadership, government officials).

Your plan should include how these staff will

- inform the learning agenda (we cover learning agendas below);
- be involved in data collection and sharing;
- share regular policy and practice changes that can impact the research; and
- learn about findings from the research.

Your research partners can help you draft the plan. They can provide guidance on the types of input and skills staff might need to provide the partnership with key insights at different points in the project.

"Nothing happens without multiple points of opportunity for feedback….I think it's just a really smart use of people at different points in the processes and has been helpful with everybody's confidence that nothing's ever going to go out that is misunderstood or misinterpreted. Everybody has an opportunity to shape [the work]."
—agency staff member

It is very important that your agency keep staff and decisionmakers who are not engaged at every time point up to date on your partnership's choices and activities. One way you can do this is by taking notes at partnership meetings and then sharing those notes, and key choices made, via email to all of the partnership's key members.

BUILD TRUST

Building trust between the researchers and agency staff is a crucial step to make sure the new partnership is successful. The process of building trust does not just require an initial investment. Building trust is ongoing and takes time. Often the process of making a formal partnership provides chances to deepen trust among partners (Connolly 2019). Here we describe approaches that can help your agency build trust within your partnership:

- **Discuss strengths each partner brings to the shared work.** Share the unique training and experiences your staff and the researchers bring to the work. This can foster mutual respect and shared power in making choices. It allows partners to embrace each other's viewpoints and expand their knowledge and expertise (Penuel et al. 2015).

- **Show your agency is invested in the partnership.** Your agency can show they are invested by coming to meetings prepared to discuss and move the work forward. They can give staff time to engage in the partnership. You can also ask researchers when and what kind of feedback they will need from certain members of your team (i.e., leadership). Finally, tell researchers how you plan to use the new information (i.e., research findings) to inform program and policy changes (Farrell et al. 2022).
- **Agree on an approach to the work.** Discuss how your staff and researchers approached your work in the past. Then think about how you each may need to change those methods for the partnership. For example, your staff may need to regularly share changes to your programs and policies—how they are carried out and their main priorities. Meanwhile, researchers may need to build more flexibility into the research plan.

SET PARTNERSHIP GOALS

Another way to build trust between your agency and your research partners is to make sure you agree on your goals for the partnership. Successful partnerships often balance each partner's needs. They address an issue related to policy and practice that matters to their agency. They also meet researchers' interest in building evidence for their field.

"Once a proposal is released, we do a brainstorming call. So, we'll start out by talking about what's the purpose or what's the opportunity that exists with the proposal? And then we brainstorm together. What's happening in child care in [state name]? What questions might we have that would fall under the parameter of the project? So [the researchers] might come with some ideas, I might come with some ideas. But it's really just a big brainstorming session."
—agency staff member

If your agency does not know what programs or policies you want to evaluate, you can ask your research partners to attend some of your staff meetings. Research partners can listen to and record what agency staff say they currently see (e.g., policies or programs underway) and what they plan to do in the future (e.g., expected policy or program changes). Then the researchers can draft possible goals for your agency to think over.

"… [the researchers] have certainly done a very good job of eliciting from us what would be helpful to us. So, in the first grant, the particular area of focus is on this expulsion prevention lane, and I'm part of the state team that works on that. And so, they did a really good job…[by] having some listening sessions and explaining to us what what's in the world of possibilities and getting from us what would be most helpful."
—agency staff member

The agency staff and community-based partners we spoke with said they appreciate that researchers took the time to identify high-priority goals for them to focus on.

CREATE A LEARNING AGENDA

A shared learning or research agenda includes the topics and questions the partnership will address. It is a tool that keeps the partnership focused on their shared goals. Useful learning agendas include detailed timelines, procurement requirements, data-use agreements, key research milestones, deliverables, and dissemination activities (Meyer et al. 2023). When you create your partnership's timeline, you will want to align it with your agency's policymaking timeline.

BOX 3

Resources on Creating a Learning or Research Agenda

These resources go into more detail about best practices in creating a learning or research agenda, including these examples:

- Joanna L. Meyer, Clare Waterman, George A. Coleman, and Michael J. Strambler, "Whose Agenda is It? Navigating the Politics of Setting the Research Agenda in Education Research-Practice Partnerships," *Educational Policy* 37 (1): 122–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048221131567.
- "Developing a Joint Research Agenda," Research-Practice Partnerships, William T. Grant Foundation, accessed September 11, 2024, https://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org/topic/developing-a-joint-research-agenda/.

WRITE AN AGREEMENT FOR HOW THE PARTNERS WILL ACHIEVE THE SHARED GOALS

The start of a researcher-agency partnership is a good time to agree upon and document how each partner will work toward their shared goals and how they will work with each other (Farrell et al. 2022). In some cases, this document may be the proposal and resulting contract with the funder that the partners work on together before the project starts. This document could also be something the partners create after they secure funding, such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU), subcontract, or subgrant.

All researchers, agency staff, and community-based partners we interviewed said this kind of document was a helpful way to make sure partners agree on how to meet their shared goals. They said these documents usually include items such as working norms (e.g., amount of time your agency expects to take when providing feedback), financial investments, time commitments, and each partner's role and responsibilities. Another crucial point for you to agree on with your partners is the process for how each partner will address turnover within their team and changes to the scope of work. Deciding on the process to handle these changes early in your partnership can also help you solve problems if your agency's priorities change.

"I make sure that we are really intentional about introducing new leadership to this work. Sharing findings that are top of mind for a new leader helps them see the benefits of the partnership. Without that level of support, it's harder to continue the work. And if you're doing really good work that is thoughtfully organized around the agency's priorities, it's relatively easy to help somebody new coming in see the value. It supports the work too, because you need that perspective to really identify how best to use the information. And when I'm planning something new, help focus where you're thinking of going."
—agency staff member

BOX 4

Resources on How to Build Researcher-Agency Partnerships and Contract Out Research

These resources include tips and tools for how to build researcher-agency partnerships and contract out research:

- "Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)" samples, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/sites/cch/docs/arcc-resources-directory/42-memorandum-of-understandingmou-samples.pdf.
- Research-Practice Partnerships, William T. Grant Foundation, accessed September 11, 2024, https://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org/.
- Teresa Derrick-Mills, Travis Reginal, Julia B. Isaacs, *Procuring Research and Evaluation Services: A Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies and Researchers* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020), https://www.urban.org/research/publication/procuring-research-and-evaluation-services.

Helpful Approaches for Continuing a Partnership

Your partnership's project timeline may span many years. Your agency staff and research partners will want to think about how you will maintain shared enthusiasm for the work and keep making progress along your timeline. Many of the approaches described above for starting your partnership are also helpful for continuing your partnership. There are a few other approaches that you may find useful for continuing your partnership throughout your project and beyond.

REGULAR COMMUNICATION

The agency, research, and community-based partners we spoke with agreed that it was crucial for their partnership to have regular meetings. Your agency may find it useful to schedule these meetings for a routine day and time well in advance so that the time is reserved in all partners' schedules. Also, the agency staff we interviewed said they found it very useful that their research partners followed the same agenda each time they met. They said research partners

1. shared their team's progress and worked through issues that came up;
2. shared next steps and made sure agency staff knew their role in taking those steps;
3. asked agency staff to share policy and program updates; and
4. shared early findings and asked the agency staff what they thought about the findings.

"…we currently have a monthly meeting. We always have an update from [the researchers] in terms of what they're working on or what the status of something is. We might [talk about] a survey tool or focus group questions…timelines…if we need to recruit parents or providers or other stakeholders...data. And then I think the last thing that we typically do at the meetings is state updates…so that we can continually connect them to the work. [For example] during the pandemic, [the researchers] had some flexibility to change our research questions and what we were looking at.…we were making some last-minute modifications and changes based on what was happening."
—agency staff member

By having your staff share updates on policies and programs regularly with researchers, the researchers can prepare for changes that may affect the study. Having researchers share early findings with your staff reduces the chance that your staff will be surprised by findings that they may be unhappy to hear. It also gives your staff time to think over how to use the results to improve their program, policies, and processes.

REGULARLY UPDATE THE SHARED-GOALS AGREEMENT AND LEARNING AGENDA

Your partnership can stay on the same page by regularly reviewing the agreement and learning agenda you created at the start of your partnership. You should consider both as living documents that reflect the changing nature and timeline of current policy and program priorities and timelines for making choices. For this reason, it can be helpful for your partnership to choose how often and when you plan to review, evaluate, and revise these documents.

In the first few months or even years of your partnership, you may find it useful to review the documents more often. This exercise can help your staff surface things that are not working for them so they can discuss those things with your partners. For example, if in the agreement your agency said they could supply feedback within two weeks, but your staff are finding that hard because of other internal commitments, the partners may agree to extend your review time from two weeks to four weeks. How often you review these documents may change over time. The partners we interviewed had been in their partnerships for several years and said that they usually reviewed these kinds of documents on an annual basis during a routine meeting. When a change is needed, it is crucial for partners to agree on this change as a group and also update the document.

Conclusion

In this brief, we

- sum up what agencies said about how starting and continuing researcher-agency partnerships improves their work;
- share problems agencies faced when starting and continuing partnerships; and
- provide approaches and tools agencies can use to prevent, prepare for, and address these issues.

References

Coburn, Cynthia E., and William R. Penuel. 2016. "Research–Practice Partnerships in Education: Outcomes, Dynamics, and Open Questions." *Educational Researcher* 45 (1): 48–54. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16631750.

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