

Foreword

Who better to write a book about research-practice partnerships than two people—one a highly regarded education scholar and the other an accomplished educator and district administrator—who have been working together to build these mutualistic ventures? I have known and admired Bill Penuel for many years and have been encouraged and inspired by his commitment to partnership work. Dan Gallagher has made impressive contributions to the field through the work of his own partnership and his advocacy for partnerships in general. Of course, strong research-practice partnerships (RPPs) must go far beyond two key players, as this book makes very clear. Yet leaders like Bill and Dan can serve as models for readers involved with aspiring, developing, and extant RPPs in other places. I hope that this book—which draws on their expertise, as well as the experiences of a wide range of RPPs—will provide a valuable resource to encourage these leaders in their own work and will reach the broad audience it deserves.

Creating Research-Practice Partnerships in Education takes as its starting point Bill's seminal work with Cynthia Coburn, coauthor of chapter 2. They identify three defining characteristics of partnerships: careful, joint choice of the problem to work on; a commitment to ensuring that the work meets the needs of all involved; and the presence of intentional strategies to decide upon joint work. They also describe three major types of partnerships: research alliances, design-based research-practice partnerships, and networked improvement communities (while noting that there are many hybrid partnerships that exhibit various combinations of these types).

My experience with RPPs began through my long-time relationship with the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research. There I learned of the value of conducting rigorous but useful and relevant research and I saw firsthand how Chicago Public Schools engaged with and acted upon our findings. In Chicago, I learned that partnerships are not only about getting more "research into practice." As this book makes abundantly clear, partnerships are also about bringing "practice into research." This is a two-way street with a reciprocal and recursive relationship between research and practice. Each is informed and improved by the other.

I brought my experiences from our Chicago partnership to the federal government, where the Institute of Education Sciences initiated an RPP grant program. At the Spencer Foundation, we also support RPPs. My colleagues Vivian Tseng and Lauren Supplee and I have written about partnerships, and in our writings we stress the importance of trusting relationships and good communication.¹ Trust enables partners to make it through the inevitable misunderstandings and miscommunications. That theme is prominent in this book as well, along with specific advice on how to build trust among diverse partners.

Because I had been most familiar with research alliances, I found this book especially helpful in expanding my horizons and teaching me about design-based partnerships and networked improvement communities. There are numerous examples of partnerships throughout the book so that all readers are sure to be able to identify with one or more. In addition to these many examples, the book contains many very specific suggestions, tools, and tips for developing and sustaining a partnership. There is also a nice emphasis on developing routines in partnerships that help partners navigate the many unexpected aspects of their work together. The word *agility* appears many times throughout this book, and *agile* is perhaps a good adjective for describing successful partners. As conditions change and partnerships evolve, it takes real agility on all parts to keep the work going and maturing.

The final chapter of this book discusses many important topics around the future of RPPs. What will it take to maintain this focus and develop it further? Who will fund the work? How do we build the infrastructure that's needed to make partnerships ubiquitous and commonplace, rather than unique and special? It is heartening to hear how some universities are

changing not only to accommodate this kind of work, but also to encourage it. As education systems are further incentivized to become more analytic in their decision making, they too are more interested in partnering to help themselves improve. As both supply of and demand for partnerships increase, and as we learn more about what makes partnerships most effective, we can hope for a new generation of partnerships exhibiting even greater results.

That final chapter also contains a key insight about partnerships and about the improvement process. Many researchers and educators are still in search of the “magic bullet.” What intervention, program, or tool can I create or adopt to solve big problems? This magic-bullet approach to improvement is sometimes exacerbated by calls for “evidence-based” policy making or practice improvement. These calls sometimes imply that a system can solve all its problems by faithfully implementing proven practices. My experience—along with the experiences of many others, including Bill and Dan—suggests that the approach to improvement described in this book is more likely to succeed. It takes many—researchers, educators, intermediaries, community members—working collaboratively and deliberately together to make significant, lasting improvements. Partnership work is characterized by careful analysis and constant iteration, improvement, and documentation. This book describes very well how partners can best work together and succeed in solving some of their most vexing problems. I hope that readers will take these ideas and suggestions to heart, try them out, and stick to it until they’ve achieved success.

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