

The SERP Field Site Structure

The SERP field sites are structured as a set of three closely connected, and partially overlapping, groups: The Core Group, The Design Team, and the Research Team.

Core Group: The Core Group includes both the district and the research leadership, as well as SERP staff. This group plays a guiding role, ensuring both that the research, development and evaluation work is closely tied to district priorities and decision making, and that the work builds knowledge and tools that are useful beyond the site. The assumption at the heart of the SERP structure is that incorporation of research knowledge into practice does not happen simply because a researcher or designer provides clear guidelines about “what to do.” It requires that the work be responsive from the start to the district’s needs, processes, and people. The Core Group is the mechanism to ensure this responsiveness.

The Core Group membership from a district includes the District Superintendent and the Chief Academic Officer (or equivalent position), though it is often the latter who is directed to take primary responsibility. Others from the District who are critical to the work, including instructional leaders in the targeted areas, are invited by the District’s leadership to participate. Participants from outside the district include a senior SERP staff and lead researchers. Others who are critical players in the local context may be added by mutual agreement of the District and SERP leadership.

The core group meets at regularly scheduled intervals (monthly, or bimonthly with less formal meetings in the interim). The group is critical to effective execution of research and development (R&D) in context. From the researchers’ standpoint, the transaction costs of engaging in the R&D are reduced because the district leadership can facilitate the work. For example, the district can solicit parent permissions when needed in the regular course of communication between the schools and parents, and can provide the legal agreement required for data use, as well as the personnel who can explain the history behind critical data -- like how a program was rolled out, and how teachers and/or students were selected for participation in it. Administrators, in turn, have their transaction costs reduced substantially. The SERP team carries the responsibility for identifying, recruiting, and coordinating the research and development talent needed for the work. SERP researchers also provide administrators with independent observations on sources of strength and weakness in the districts’ schools that can be built upon or addressed in the collaborative work.

The core group is a unique feature of the SERP field site model. While there are many partnerships between researchers and school districts, these are often peripheral to school district decision making. The effectiveness of many partnerships is constrained because researchers have status but lack authority, and district professionals have authority but often have little status in the partnership context. The continuous interaction of those involved in the research and development with the district’s leaders creates an opportunity (when the process is well managed) for district leaders to bestow authority on the collaborators by actively engaging with and supporting the work, and for district professionals to be given status through the rules of engagement that give equal voice to the expertise of district participants.

Research Teams: The SERP Research teams work on the ground in the schools, interacting with teachers, coaches, principals and others to explore the nature of a problem as it appears in context, to observe and document existing practices, to help introduce interventions and improvements, and collect data and artifacts of a variety of types (including video tapes) for research, evaluation, and professional development purposes. The research teams are led by highly regarded senior researchers, and include junior researchers, post-docs, and research assistants who, over time, will deepen the bench of researchers prepared to work in highly collaborative, interdisciplinary teams in practice settings. The field site also provide opportunities for participating researchers to hold seminars or a practicum for graduate students related to the targeted area of work, to the benefit of the universities' education programs, the graduate students, and the district's schools.

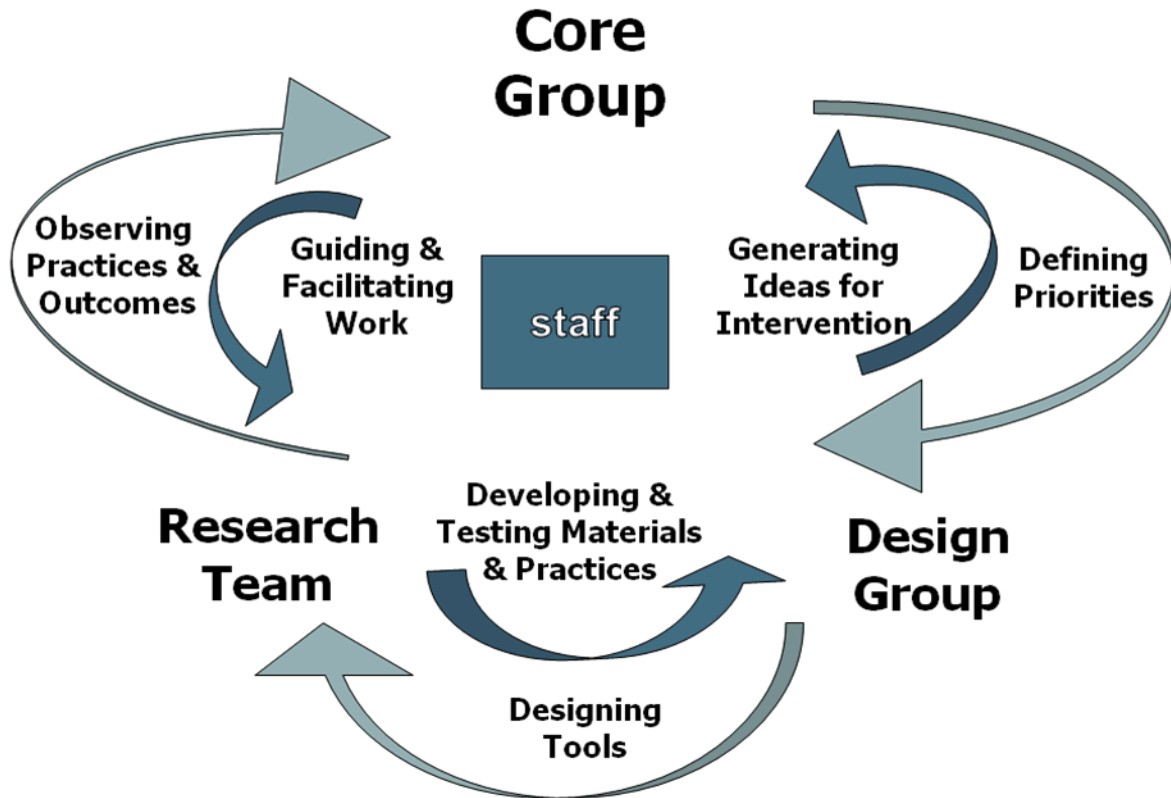
The Design Team: A third SERP field site structure is the design team: a group of interdisciplinary researchers, designers, and practitioners who bring knowledge from a variety of fields related to the task of improving student achievement in the targeted areas. The design team addresses one of the most difficult challenges of effectively linking education research and practice: education problems as they arise in real school settings cross many fields. Improving achievement in any area requires, at a minimum, expertise on the design of instructional materials, on pedagogy, on the design and use of assessments, on data management and use by school staff, and on features of school organization and context. Those with high level expertise in any of these areas tend to be specialized. Doing work that advances the field in any single area, therefore, is in some respects at odds with doing work that can improve student achievement in real school contexts. The Design Team resolves this dilemma by supporting the work of the local research team with a broad range of expertise that contributes to the design of the research, and to the development of instruments and interventions. It provides a venue for bringing the most successful ideas and experiences to the field site district from elsewhere, so that the field site can use them as a jumping off point, or as benchmarks, in designing approaches to improvement.

The Design Team meets much less frequently than the Core Group (1-4 times a year, depending on the stage of the work). Redundancy in expertise is intentionally sought under the assumption that, when confronted with design challenges, people with similar frames of reference are likely to be highly productive in pushing each other's thinking in innovative directions. Subgroups of the design team (for example, on assessment, instruction, or school organization and coherence) often work on specific problems, and some members became more deeply engaged in the work as opportunities arise—eventually joining the Research Team.

Interaction Among the Three Groups

As figure 1 indicates, there is a very dynamic relationship among the three groups. The design group is a generator and incubator of ideas for improvement. Discussions in design group meetings help to reshape the thinking of all participants, including District decision makers, about the nature of the problems to be addressed and the possible solutions. But the final decisions regarding the lines of research, development and evaluation that will be pursued in the field site are made by the Core Team, with veto power resting with the Superintendent. Once the Core Team sets the direction, however, decisions about research design and implementation, and about tool development, rest with the members of the Research and Design Teams charged with carrying out the work.

Figure 1:



The collaborative process creates a set of demands on all participants that are different from business as usual. District participants who are subject to a great many demands daily to solve immediate and pressing problems are asked to set aside time and give priority to solving longer term problems that require sustained attention. The focus on evidence, and on introducing initiatives and reforms in a manner that can generate solid evidence, also requires a commitment to longer term goals.

Research participants generally see problems through the lenses of their disciplines, and strive to establish knowledge with high levels of certainty. The problem solving nature of the SERP work, however, requires that the priority areas are defined by the school district's leadership, and that the most interesting questions from a research perspective at times give way to the most pressing needs of practice. Moreover, the immediate demands of practice require continuous cycles of trial and error, with redesign and revision in response to observations of practice. Using knowledge to make best bets on approaches to improvement rather than to construct defensible arguments, and a willingness to fail, involves a level of risk taking that is not always comfortable for university researchers.

The bet the SERP model makes is that the rewards for all involved in the field site collaborations will sustain commitment to the challenging work SERP partnerships carve out. The opportunity to learn from many others with deep expertise and experience in the many areas of research and practice represented, and the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the children, are powerful incentives. And like the work SERP is engaged in, the SERP model itself is being tested through trial, error, revision, and redesign. We rely on those participating in the field sites to provide the feedback that can lead to continuous improvement in the SERP model.