

## District-Based R&D Partnerships: A Cross-Consortium Meeting

**Meeting Purpose:** The Obama Administration is allocating unprecedented resources to education with an immediate goal of preventing a major disinvestment as a consequence of the recession, but with a long-term goal of improving the competitive performance of the United States globally. As was true in other times when our nation's leaders targeted improvements in education as a means to achieving a high priority goal (e.g., a focus on math and science to confront the Sputnik challenge, the focus on educational equity in pursuit of civil rights), the role of the federal government in supporting education research and development (R&D) merits rethinking today.

Those involved in the SERP enterprise believe that our experience to date, and that of others working with a similar R&D model, could be valuable to the rethinking process. We do not assume that our model is the same as others participating in the meeting, but hope to explore similarities and differences, and the extent to which they reflect different ultimate goals versus different starting points and opportunities.

The SERP partnership model pairs interdisciplinary teams of researchers and developers with school district practitioners to work on critical problems of practice identified by district leaders. Experience with the SERP model in the past five years has demonstrated that: a) researchers who are among the best in the field can be recruited to this work, b) districts are willing to engage in experimental work when they have a voice in identifying the problem and shaping the agenda, c) the partnerships can produce knowledge and tools in real time, and d) the process changes the products in important and highly valuable ways, finding approaches that are both digestible for teachers and viral in their spread. For these reasons, SERP has suggested to the Department that this model of R&D would be a highly productive component of an overall research and development strategy.

We have also learned difficult lessons. Most importantly, available funding mechanisms for education R&D are not well matched to this kind of work. First, foundations provide critical support for getting an R&D partnership under way, but they rarely see their role as sustaining an enterprise over time. Since R&D for public education is a public good, the long-term funding role rightly belongs with government. But the competitive grant mechanism available for winning funding from IES and NSF—even in the fortunate event that the RFAs align well with field site work—generally requires a year from the time of an announcement until funding is in hand. If the first round proposal fails the time lag is considerably longer. When a program of work is responsive to district needs, such a long lag time can undo commitments that have been carefully negotiated, strain relationships that have been carefully built, or allow a window of opportunity for decision making to

close. The mechanisms in place ensure impartiality, but they undermine the maintenance of a productive R&D partnership.

Second, not only does the R&D require funding, but the collaboration itself needs to be supported. Working with a school district requires a high up-front investment in the form of relationship building. Every researcher and district interested in working together must pay that cost. Establishing an infrastructure of long-term sites can be highly efficient in reducing these costs because the relationships are ongoing and collaborative practices become routine. But the partnership itself needs to be supported in order to sustain that collaborative infrastructure-- including financial support to the district to play a role that places additional demands on an already taxed leadership structure. There is precedent for such support in the teaching hospital model, where additional federal funds flow to teaching hospitals because they play a role beyond direct service delivery.

In the months ahead, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) are up for reauthorization (though the precise timing is unknown). This creates a window of opportunity for the Department of Education to redefine the components of its approach to R&D. With an interest in supporting their efforts, SERP has opened its work to members of the Department for careful scrutiny. SERP's interest, however, is not simply to win support for its work; as this group will appreciate, the work is difficult and the adage "be careful what you ask for..." is never far from consciousness. Rather, we are committed to doing what we can to contribute to a larger effort in field building, with the most immediate definition of the "field" being the other district-based R&D partnerships that are engaging high-powered R&D teams to work on problems of practice. That is why we have invited you to join us for this meeting.

The purpose of the meeting is to explore the interest of other established district-based partnerships in forming an alliance through which we might strengthen our separate efforts, build the field, and collaborate on common goals. While SERP has been engaged in building sustainable partnerships for the past five years, CCSR has successfully maintained its partnership with the Chicago Public Schools for 20 years. The Baltimore and New York collaborations are, as we understand them, newer travelers on the same road. The knowledge base on forming effective district-based partnerships is still in its infancy. Forming an alliance for purposes of knowledge sharing and field building is certainly worthy of exploration in its own right. But the impending reauthorization, and the potential opportunity to contribute to the rethinking under way and to make a case for financial support for the field-building work we might do collaboratively, adds a sense of urgency to that exploration.

We hope that the meeting will accomplish four goals: 1) to provide an opportunity to understand the commonalities and differences across our partnership models, 2) to

determine whether there is interest in forming an alliance, and, if so, what important /unique purposes an alliance might serve in the US education arena, 3) to explore possible mechanisms through which the federal government might support such an alliance, and – assuming the above seems promising -- 4) to develop a strategy for moving forward, possibly by forming a working group that will carry the discussion further in the weeks and months ahead.

## **Background for the Discussion**

### ***How do we differentiate the R&D partnership model from what already exists?***

We view the district-based R&D model as different in important respects from other models the federal government has supported to date. The Regional Education Laboratory (REL) model, for example, assumes that the required expertise for R&D resides in a staff that can be employed by a freestanding organization. The model assumes that the problems to be solved can be identified by the staff (who are charged with serving districts), and that solutions can be developed externally and disseminated to school districts in the region through technical assistance.

While the Labs are expected to address a broad range of district needs, the IES supported Centers target specific areas of knowledge and work deeply in the designated area. The Centers may be based in universities or non-profit think-tanks, and they often attract highly accomplished researchers. While they can produce work that is of high relevance to education practice, the model under which they operate is not partnership based. The Centers, like the Labs, assume that problems can be solved outside school districts, and that the work can be disseminated to districts across the nation.

The National Science Foundation, through its math-science partnerships, has placed its R&D bets differently. That model relies on expertise inside the university—particularly in disciplinary departments—as the source of innovation and improvement. It attempts to move the work closer to practice by funding partnerships between those university researchers and school districts. However by virtue of an application process that requires a well-articulated and carefully defended view of a problem and a plan of work, the agenda is highly likely to be shaped by university researchers whose trade is precisely in taking and defending positions. And unlike the RELs, the math-science partnerships are time-limited at the outset; they are intended as sites for the generation of new ideas and for stimulating different, more scientifically informed teaching of STEM subjects. They are not intended to provide as a national infrastructure for continuous improvement of the education system.

The SERP partnership model differs from all three approaches, though it embodies elements of each. Unlike the REL model, SERP staff are few in number. SERP relies, as do the NSF and Centers models, on the rich pool of research expertise housed in the

nation's best universities to feed the R&D. But unlike the Center model, the team of researchers defines its work in the context of, and in partnership with, school districts. While the problem at hand might require deep expertise in one area (such as literacy or math), the SERP model—in contrast to the Center model-- assumes that interdisciplinary talent will be needed to address the challenges of working in context.

The NSF model, like the SERP model, is partnership based. But the NSF model assumes that effective partnerships will emerge with the incentive of an RFA that requires them, while the SERP approach assumes that the creation of productive partnerships is a highly skilled enterprise that requires a considerable up-front investment of time and expertise. Few university researchers and district professionals are able and willing to make the up-front investment in relationship building, particularly when the widely different incentive systems of the two make partnership success highly uncertain. Second, the complex nature of problems as they appear in practice contexts requires that interdisciplinary talent be recruited. Few researchers or practitioners are in a position to recognize and recruit the full array of expertise required. And finally, a partnership that places the needs and interests of education practice on a par with the needs and interests of researchers is unlikely to be accomplished without the involvement of professionals whose identity and success is tied neither to the university nor to the district, but to the productivity of the interaction between them.

We would argue that the partnership model is *necessary* in order for other efforts at innovation and improvement to be successful because efforts located outside practice settings cannot solve what Phil Daro calls the “final mile” problem: the challenges that emerge when a promising idea, program, or practice is taken inside a district, and enters the pathways from the central office all the way down to a set of interactions between a teacher and her or his students. It is in this final mile that, in Richard Elmore's words, “the wheels fall off.” An effective R&D strategy must include an understanding of what goes on in the final mile, and attend to design and development to address the challenges found therein. Very often these are the most difficult problems both to understand and to address, and they require a presence inside the district.

Finally, we believe that the partnership model – because it engages teams of researchers deeply in a district's structures and practices over a prolonged period of time – is also uniquely positioned to carry out research that generates the new management systems required for school districts to become continuously improving organizations that learn from experience – organizations that are much less hierarchical because they effectively make use of the wisdom of their best teachers, principals, and other employees -- as will be needed to generate a first-class education system in the United States.

***If district-based R&D partnerships are included in the federal strategy, how would the existing partnerships support and enhance the success of the strategy?***

While the answer to this question is precisely what we hope will emerge from the meeting, a few questions may stimulate thinking prior to the discussion:

1. Could an alliance (or federation) of sites serve the purpose of knowledge building and accumulation as well as information and instrument sharing? Might sites in an alliance have a focus on replicating and further developing each other's work?
2. Would an alliance/federation of sites engage in collaborative efforts to do important aspects of the work? Might instruments be developed and tested collaboratively? Might theories be batted about in cross-site meetings on particular elements of school organization or teaching practice, and new designs thereby arise to be tested more powerfully than they could by any single entity?
3. Should a federation of sites be weak—as would be the case if information and instrument sharing as well as collaborative conferences were the extent of the agenda? Or should it be strong—stimulating and steering collaborative work, requesting and distributing funds for the collaborative work?
4. How should membership in the alliance/federation be determined? Should the bar be high so that the organization creates and protects a reputation that will allow it to be field building? Or should it be lower so as to support maximum engagement in this type of work?
5. How should a federation/alliance be governed? Can it be given the attention of those most senior in each of the sites, or will it be delegated to junior members or to others not involved in the site's work?
6. What government funding mechanisms would work best to ensure the integrity of the enterprise? What balance between public and private funding would best accomplish the goals of innovation and quality control?
7. If the sites are supported through the Department of Education, would they be supported independently and each contribute financially to an alliance that supports field building, or would the federation be the governance structure that comes between individual sites and funding for the enterprise? The former minimizes the governance challenge for the alliance, but the latter has the potential (if structured well) to reduce political influence, and maximize quality control and productivity of the overall program of work.

We welcome each of you to add your questions to the list, and look forward to the discussion.