

## Building Productive Relationships: District Leaders' Advice to Researchers

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**Abstract** Expectations for the role of research in educational improvement are high. Meeting these expectations requires productive relationships between researchers and practitioners. Few studies, however, have systematically explored the ways researchers can build stronger, more productive relationships with practitioners. This study seeks to identify such strategies by examining district leaders' views of how researchers might work with practitioners in more effective, beneficial, and collaborative ways. Through an analysis of 147 interviews with 80 district leaders in three urban school districts in the United States, we identify several key pieces of advice highlighted by district leaders for researchers. For researchers, these findings reveal potential strategies for shaping the design, conduct, and communication of their research in order to ensure its usefulness for practitioners.

**Keywords** Research use; Research–practice relationships; School leadership; District leadership; Research–practice partnership

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## **Building productive relationships: District leaders' advice to researchers**

Recent changes in the education policy landscape of the United States suggest that the delicate balance between federal, state, and local authority over the nation's system of public schools is shifting. The authorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—signed into law in 2015—reverses the trend toward greater federal influence over education that characterized policy under the Bush and Obama administrations. The law substantially expands the authority of state and local agencies over domains like assessment and accountability, allowing for greater flexibility and experimentation (Black, in press). In doing so, ESSA also requires educational leaders to leverage research-based evidence as they engage in decision making. The law defines such evidence to include the findings of experimental, quasi-experimental, or correlational research studies, in addition to other “high-quality research findings or positive evaluations” (ESSA, 2016, p. 391) capable of supporting the promise of programs, policies, and interventions.

One likely consequence of these policies may be a concomitant shift in the locus of demand for education research—from federal policymakers to state and local actors. Evidence from a recent national survey, in fact, indicates that school and district leaders are hungry for timely, relevant research to fuel their ongoing work (Penuel et al., 2016). Researchers who aim to meet this demand and ensure the relevance of their work will likely need to alter their practices in ways that bring them into tighter alignment with leaders and practitioners closer to the ground (Coburn & Stein, 2010).

Education leaders and practitioners have long claimed that research is out of step with practice, and that studies are often poorly aligned to their daily needs and priorities (Bickel & Hatrup, 1995; Rojek, Alpert, & Smith, 2012; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Moreover, district and school leaders indicate that research is often not timely enough to be useful and that it is published outside of the venues that they are most likely to access (Penuel, et al., 2016; West & Rhoton, 1994). Some educators question the validity of research findings and express doubt regarding the usefulness of interventions tested in contexts with student populations different from their own (Boardman, Argüelles, Vaughn, Hughes, & Klingner, 2005; Penuel et al., 2016). Finally, educators may question the sustainability and feasibility of research-based initiatives that are under-resourced, under-supported, and likely to fall out of favor in tumultuous policy environments (Bickel & Hatrup, 1995; Boardman et al., 2005).

How, then, can researchers bridge these gaps and support state and local improvement efforts? One way forward involves better understanding the interaction of research and practice in education. Contrary to a “transactional” view that assumes research should directly inform practice, recent scholarship suggests that research production and use are inherently social, interactive, and bidirectional processes (Baumfield & Butterworth, 2007; Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Honig et al., 2014; Stein & D'Amico, 2002). In other words, research and practice can inform each other as researchers and practitioners identify problems to study, investigate questions of interest, interpret results, and act upon findings. Under this paradigm, the quality

of relationships between researchers and practitioners becomes a critical factor in producing relevant research that contributes to school and system improvement.

Building relationships between researchers and practitioners is neither easy nor straightforward, however. District leaders, facing a variety of resource constraints and accountability pressures, may be wary of participating in research studies—particularly considering a history of one-sided experiences with researchers in which they receive limited feedback, support, or resources in return for supporting researchers' work (Bransford et al., 2009; DeBord, 1974; Muñoz & Rodosky, 2015; Ornstein, 1978). Developing productive relationships can require both researchers and practitioners to learn a “new way of interacting” (Coburn & Stein, 2010, p. 203; Edwards & Stamou, 2016). Under such a paradigm, both parties must be willing to “meet in the middle” and work in ways that are mutually beneficial—a task that requires building trust, mutual respect, and common purpose, all of which can take time to develop and can be easily breached (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003; Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Hedges, 2010; Krathwohl, 1972; McIntyre, 2005).

If researchers wish to meaningfully impact policy and practice, they must embrace new ways of interacting with educators. To this end, this study offers an insider perspective of district leaders' views related to the practical work of building bridges between research and practice (Korthagen, 2007, p. 309). Drawing from a 30-month study of research use among researchers and practitioners in multiple district contexts, we highlight the perspectives of district leaders working with researchers on a variety of projects. The perspectives these leaders share regarding their interactions with researchers point to six key pieces of advice for scholars seeking to build bridges with educators: scholars should provide a clear benefit to the district's work, understand the district context, build trust and relationships, be transparent, plan for ongoing engagement, and be flexible and responsive.

## **Methods**

To identify district leaders' advice for researchers, we draw on data gathered as part of a study of research–practice partnership in school districts. In that initial work, district leaders shared their experiences with a broad array of research partners and discussed the ways that they used research in their practice. Participants were also asked directly to offer their advice to researchers who might want to work with them in the future. This study synthesizes the perspectives that district leaders shared as they reflected on their varied experiences working with researchers.

### ***Site and participant selection***

For this study, we purposefully sought a set of information-rich cases in which we were likely to observe our phenomenon of interest—in this case, partnership between researchers and practitioners (Patton, 2002). We selected three large, urban school districts from across different regions in the United States—Cypress School District (CSD), Evergreen School District (ESD), and Laurel School District (LSD)<sup>1</sup>. Each district was racially and linguistically diverse, ranging in size from 55,000 to 100,000 students. Demographic data for each study district are presented below, in Table 1.

**Table 1. Characteristics of study districts**

	Cypress	Evergreen	Laurel
Total number of students	55,000	100,000	80,000
% Asian or Asian American	44	0.5	2
% Black or African American	11	44	23
% Hispanic or Latino	25	5	60
% Native American or American Indian	0.5	0	0.5
% White	12	50	14
% ELL	30	6	26
% FRPL	55	53	77

*Note:* Enrollment numbers are rounded to the nearest 5,000 to preserve anonymity of districts.

Each district was selected because of its involvement in research–practice partnerships (RPPs) focused on improving instruction in mathematics. These long-term partnerships involve joint work between practitioners and researchers where both groups create, implement, and study strategies for improvement (Penuel et al., 2015). We found that leaders in each district, in addition to their work with RPPs, interacted with a variety of researchers from universities and other research organizations on a diverse range of projects. As such, each district case held significant promise for understanding research use and researcher-practitioner interactions.

### Participant selection

In each study district, we recruited central office leaders who were involved in decision making related to mathematics. We focused on this group because we were interested in how research played a role in district policies and programs related to mathematics education. Our sample included leaders in different departments who had decision-making authority for mathematics (e.g., curriculum and instruction; leadership; research, assessment, evaluation; special education), and it included actors across roles (e.g., teachers on special assignment, directors/supervisors, cabinet-level leadership). The districts varied in both the size of their central office staff as a whole and in the number of staff responsible for mathematics teaching and learning. We concentrated on leaders involved in middle school mathematics in two of the districts (Laurel and Evergreen) because this domain was the focus of the efforts of the research–practice partnerships in each district. In the third district, Cypress, there are more interviews because our sample included leaders at all levels of mathematics, PreK–12.

We identified prospective district leaders to participate by collaborating with each district's most senior mathematics curriculum leader. We developed a roster of potential participants with them, in addition to consulting each district's organizational chart. All of the district leaders we approached agreed to participate in an in-

interview; not all, however, were available to participate on the twice-yearly schedule we proposed. All leaders were asked the relevant set of questions that formed the basis of the inquiry, regardless of whether they completed one or two interviews per year. A summary of the district leaders we recruited in each study district, by central office role, is provided in Table 2, below.

**Table 2. Participants by central office role**

Role	Cypress	Evergreen	Laurel
Specialists (e.g., coaches, teachers on special assignment)	20	4	7
Area supervisor/Unit director	13	8	9
Cabinet-level leader	11	5	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>19</b>

### **Data collection**

As noted above, this investigation is one strand of a broader study of research–practice partnerships. For this analysis, we reviewed all data related to district leaders’ perspectives about researchers in 147 semi-structured interviews conducted with 80 participants across the three districts. Interview participants included cabinet-level administrators, supervisors, directors, and teachers on special assignment, each of whom were interviewed once or twice in each year of the two-and-a-half-year study, from June 2012 through December 2014. Participants discussed their work with researchers, describing their past experiences working with a variety of research partners, comparing their work with researchers to their work with other external partners (e.g., vendors or community organizations), and discussing their perspectives on why past work with researchers had been successful or unsuccessful. Table 3 summarizes the number of interviews conducted with participants in each district.

**Table 3. Summary of interview data**

School district	# of participants	# of interviews
All districts	80	147
Cypress	44	87
Evergreen	17	23
Laurel	19	37

### **Analytic strategy**

These data were analyzed in an iterative, inductive fashion (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We began by examining a subset of interviews in order to identify a set of broad themes to anchor our further analysis. Coders independently identified a list of themes that they observed in this initial round of coding related to participants’ perspectives on building relationships with researchers. As they did so, the coding team met multiple times to discuss similarities and differences in what

they observed. From these meetings, a set of six common analytic codes emerged, along with a set of relevant code definitions supported by examples drawn from the initial pool of data. These codes, along with a summary definition of each, are provided in Appendix A. Using this set of codes, individual team members proceeded to analyze subsets of transcripts, meeting frequently to compare coding and to discuss questions, disagreements, and potential revisions to the framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002).

After reaching agreement on this analytic framework, the coding team worked independently to analyze the remaining interview data. The team met regularly during this stage to discuss questions or disconfirming evidence and to identify any additional codes rising from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Upon completion of coding, the team worked collaboratively to identify the broad themes emerging from our analysis. The iterative and systematic nature of this coding process, coupled with the team's explicit attention to identifying points of contradictory evidence, helped to ensure that the findings reported by this study accurately reflect participants' views (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Findings

District leaders had many suggestions for researchers seeking to work more productively with districts. Six key pieces of advice emerged from our conversations with leaders in our study districts: provide a clear benefit to the district's work, understand the district context, build trust and relationships, be transparent, plan for ongoing engagement, and be flexible and responsive. Table 4 summarizes the prevalence with which each theme was raised. We describe each of these themes below in greater detail, offering examples from our interviews with leaders and discussing the implications for researchers' work.

**Table 4. Number of participants mentioning each theme**

Theme	<i>n</i>	Benefit the district	Understand district context	Be transparent	Developing trust	Plan for ongoing engagement	Be flexible and responsive
All Districts	80	57	21	38	31	31	28
Cypress	44	31	13	22	15	17	20
Evergreen County	17	9	0	5	5	5	2
Laurel	19	17	8	11	11	9	6

### ***Provide a clear benefit to the district leaders' work***

The most widely emphasized piece of advice that leaders offered was that researchers should ensure that their work presents a clear benefit to the district and its stakeholders. As they discussed ways that researchers might meaningfully contribute to a district's work, leaders highlighted a few examples. First, leaders argued that their most effective research partners helped them to push outward on the boundaries of their perspectives about teaching and learning. One leader, Sana (CSD), noted that

“as [a] practitioner, I only know how to do the practice every day, but I don’t have the ability, capacity, resources, or time or knowledge to make sense [of it]. [The researchers] help me make more sense of my practice by connecting it to research theory.” Moreover, leaders advised researchers to not simply share their findings but also to work with district leaders to make sense of and act upon them.

District leaders shared that, in addition to broadening their perspectives, one of the most important benefits that researchers could bring to the table was taking on the role of “critical friend.” In that role, they argued, researchers offered important feedback on what was or was not working in their organizations. Becky (ESD) explained that researchers helped leaders in her district to “take a completely non-biased look at what’s going on.” She further emphasized that effective research partners are able to shine a light on a district’s practices because, unlike vendor partners, they have “no dog in the fight. They’re not trying to sell a program . . . . They’re able to hold up a mirror and let us see.”

Several district leaders shared that working with researchers was beneficial when it helped to expand district leaders’ own capacity to engage in their work. Nilda (LSD), for instance, explained that a key benefit of partnerships lay in the potential for researchers to study programs and practices in ways that district leaders could not. She shared that it was “extremely beneficial [when] the researchers have already done all the fieldwork of collecting the data, analyzing the data, and reporting on it, and then we can benefit from the findings.” Another leader, Tess (CSD), further argued that the most productive partnerships help leaders grow the district’s capacity in sustainable ways. “The kind of partnerships I want,” she said, “are those that develop our capacity, not that come in and train our teachers for us or solve a problem for us.”

Finally, leaders raised an important corollary as they discussed the ways that work with researchers benefited their districts. They advised that, as researchers engage in their work, they should respect the importance of practitioners’ day-to-day mission and abide by a foundational principle while in the field: do no harm. One leader from ESD, Talya, captured this succinctly, stating that partners should work “in the most non-invasive way, so the least amount of instruction is being interrupted.” Leaders further advised researchers to minimize the “asks” for districts, to the extent possible—particularly those that impact instructional time or staff time and resources.

### ***Understand the district context***

Leaders also advised researchers to make a concentrated effort to understand the district contexts in which they hope to conduct their work. In other words, leaders in our study districts urged researchers to do their homework before engaging with potential district partners. As they did so, they emphasized two particularly important tasks for researchers to attend to: developing a clear understanding of the districts’ needs and priorities and learning the unique ins-and-outs of working in the district.

District leaders expressed that they appreciate it when researchers demonstrate a clear understanding of the district’s needs and priorities as they frame their research projects. Kristin (CSD), for example, shared that more effective partners make an effort to understand “where we’re having our challenges with students’ learning and what it is that teachers need.” She contrasted this with negative, one-sided experi-

ences with researchers who are “not really having a conversation with us.” Others advised researchers to understand the needs of each district’s particular student population. Yaron (LSD) explained that an important criterion by which his district judged research opportunities “comes down to being able to show that the things that [researchers] are working on are not only research-driven, but are easily applicable to our population.” As these leaders indicate, communicating with district leaders about the needs of their district is an important step in benefiting their work.

In addition to understanding a district’s needs and priorities, leaders underscored the importance of understanding the realities of educators’ daily work. Chandra (CSD), for example, asserted that a key challenge in working with some researchers was that “when researchers come out, they’re researchers; they’re not practitioners. They don’t understand the systems or understand . . . the implementation of doing this work. And that’s very frustrating.” Calvin (CSD) also touched on this theme, reflecting positively on an experience in which he felt that a researcher clearly understood the district’s systems and practices; he explained that the researcher “walked in our shoes. She’s led a school. She’s been on a school board and so really understands pretty intimately what it’s like to work in a district and some of the problems that you face.” Although not all researchers will have “walked in leaders’ shoes,” leaders advised that they should make an effort to understand how particular districts and schools work, in order to more ably navigate their structures and systems.

### ***Build trust and relationships***

Trust is essential to effective working relationships in educational settings (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In line with this, leaders in our study advised that effective collaborations require the careful development of trust and positive working relationships. They explained that doing so begins with making a commitment to valuing the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of all stakeholders. As Bettina (CSD) put it, “If you’re going to put everyone at the same table, everyone should have equal say. . . . You should respect [practitioners’] thoughts as much as anybody else at the table.” Talya echoed the idea that researchers should value practitioners’ expertise and practice humility:

In some of the conversations I’ve had with our leadership, it feels like researchers often tell them what to do because they “know more.” That can seem condescending or arrogant. Even in the medical school realm, medical students are required to take these etiquette classes on how to talk to patients in layman’s terms. I think researchers need to be able to do that. There should be some humbleness there.

These leaders, and others, explained that partners must value each other’s knowledge and perspectives to develop trust over time. This was key, they argued, to forging a relationship in which both educators and researchers can feel comfortable in honestly sharing challenges they face and working together to find solutions.

Leaders also advised that researchers should be patient, and willing to put forth the time and effort required to maintain trusting relationships over time—even when



doing so might be challenging. Carter, for instance, argued that a willingness to work through tough times was the mark of a solid relationship: “A great relationship does not mean that there are not growing pains and bumps. A great relationship does not mean it’s always roses. [It] means that there are bumps and that we both can come to the table and talk about them.” For Carter, this ability to remain invested in joint work, despite “bumps” in the road, was key to building and maintaining productive relationships between districts and researchers.

### ***Be transparent about the work***

As they discussed the importance of building relationships, participants also advised researchers to be transparent and specific in their communications with the district about the nature of their work and what would be expected of district partners over time. Building clear expectations, Carter explained, involved developing “common understandings” between research and practice partners regarding their roles and responsibilities within the work. He noted that clarity on both sides provided an anchor for the relationship, sharing that “when we have common understandings . . . of what we would do, what they would do . . . if all else fails, we [can] come back to those common understandings.”

Just as district leaders discussed the need for transparency in defining each partner’s responsibilities, they also explained the importance of clarity regarding each partner’s respective roles in their ongoing relationship. Kerry (CSD), for instance, honed in on the importance of establishing clear lines of authority when negotiating relationships between districts and their partners. She noted that, in her district, “the question is always: who is the driver of this work?” Ultimately, many district leaders agreed that establishing clarity, transparency, and common understandings regarding the nature of partners’ work helped to form a foundation for effective relationships. Moreover, they advised that such transparency is essential not only in the beginning of the work, but also as partnerships—and the roles of partners within them—evolve along the way.

### ***Plan for ongoing engagement***

As leaders reflected on the nature of effective researcher-practitioner relationships, they suggested the need for what one participant called a “paradigm shift” from more traditional, short-term, project-centered relationships toward longer-term partnerships characterized by ongoing engagement. District leaders explained that this type of sustained relationship involves regular communication throughout the project, collaborative work, and efforts to build capacity in order to effect sustainable improvement.

District leaders reflected positively on relationships with research teams that involved regular communication through meetings and other check-ins. Henry (CSD) described one such relationship, sharing, “[The researcher] has a lot of communication with all of us, all the time. She knows a lot of things about this, and how to communicate to each one of us in a way that works for each one of us. We have lots of meetings.” While individualized communication and group meetings were valuable, leaders noted that they should not be so extensive as to be burdensome for the district. They agreed, however, that regular communication over time is essential to the continual development of effective relationships and advancement of the work.

Further, leaders argued that such ongoing engagement should be characterized by “open dialogue” and opportunities to work “side-by-side” with researchers as “thought partners.” Kristin (CSD) advised that this would likely require a marked change in traditional patterns of interaction between district leaders and researchers, sharing: “What I’m thinking of as the paradigm shift for the researchers, [is] that they’re actually in a dialogue with us about their research.” She went on to say that this dialogue should offer the opportunity, over time, for district leaders to have a voice in the work, allowing them to help shape the trajectory of the ongoing research. Moreover, Kristin shared her belief that such mutualistic relationships held the potential for motivating greater learning among district leaders, emphasizing that “it’s not just us telling them, but we can ask questions of them and learn from them ourselves.”

Beyond the horizon of their immediate work, leaders advised researchers to think carefully about how they might make lasting investments in districts. They expressed, for example, that researchers should help districts to develop the internal capacity to continue their implementation of new innovations or practices beyond the end of the research project or the termination of a grant. Tess (CSD), for instance, stated, “What happens the year [the researchers] are not funded, when they go away? It’s a release of responsibility and the handover is trickier if they haven’t been explicitly focused on developing the capacity of an in-house team to do it.” Leaders’ comments suggested that building such capacity likely would require investment in several district stakeholders, across multiple units. By working to build a network of capacity, expertise, and working relationships around initiatives, researchers can help to ensure the sustainability of their work in the district over time.

### ***Be flexible and responsive***

Finally, district leaders advised researchers that, because districts’ needs and priorities can shift over the course of a research project, researchers should be flexible and open to change rather than being rigid in the face of evolving conditions. Moreover, while they recognized that changes in the research design can be more challenging for some research projects than others, district leaders urged researchers to be open to others’ thinking and suggestions throughout their work together.

Leaders noted that districts and schools were dynamic and complex by nature. In response to changing conditions, researchers need to be willing to “go with the flow” and to “tweak” their practices and methods, to the extent that adaptation is possible. One leader from CSD, Eun Mi, gave an example of last-minute changes that occur:

If someone has not experienced working in a school system, it might be hard for them to understand why dates or venues change. It happens all the time—we need to make last-minute changes and have less than ideal circumstances than when we first sat down to map it out. It happens.

Eun Mi’s comments indicate that, in addition to understanding how districts and schools work, researchers need to be ready to work within a dynamic context and to communicate with district partners as conditions within the district change.

Hector (CSD) added that the relationship between researchers and district leaders should be an evolving, “learning” one. Successful research partners, he said, “are willing to understand that we ourselves are learning, are adapting, making changes along the way . . . . What makes them good partners is that they understand that, and they themselves are learning.” Accounting for the continual learning process that Hector points to likely requires researchers to design their studies with the dynamic nature of work in districts in mind, in addition to practicing flexibility as the work continues.

No matter the research design, however, district leaders urged researchers to keep an open mind and to fully consider district and school leaders’ thinking and suggestions. As Tess (CSD) explained:

Open-mindedness. You’ve got to have it. You can’t say, “No, unh-unh, it’s not gonna work . . . . It’s just not gonna happen.” Let’s figure out why. Let’s have that conversation. It doesn’t have to be a drawn-out, lengthy, beat-this-to-death type of a conversation, but let’s just bring it out on the table and give it a chance.

When potential changes to a research project are not prudent, it is important for researchers to be open to leaders’ perspectives and to communicate openly about the best next steps for the work going forward. Carter (CSD) concurred with this idea, sharing that “it’s the role of partners to know that they are now becoming part of a bigger group, and that there are certain . . . common understandings of this family, this group of professionals. You need to understand that.” Researchers may need to shift their work to accommodate district cultures and practices, balancing these concerns with constraints of research designs.

## Discussion

In the days ahead, local policymakers in the United States will have a greater responsibility for knowing about and using research evidence. A recent national study of research use suggests demand for research to help with some education’s most intractable problems (Penuel et al., 2016). Bridging the gap between research and practice, though, will require improving the relationship between educators and researchers. The insider perspective offered by the district leaders in this study provides insights on how researchers can work to accomplish this goal.

Looking across the advice offered by leaders in our study, we see a clear picture of the kind of relationships they would like to build with researchers. Rather than focus on projects that primarily serve their own research agendas, researchers need to make explicit efforts to align with and advance districts’ needs and priorities. For instance, researchers might consider how their proposed work connects to goals set out in district strategic plans and work on those projects where there is a named need. Second, they should build trust-based relationships with their practitioner partners as equals. In such relationships, practice informs the questions researchers ask, making research more relevant (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). Or, researchers and educators can closely work together to blend ideas and evidence from research with the wisdom of practice (Penuel et al., 2011; Snow, 2015). Finally, instead of one-off studies, researchers might plan for longer-term engagements with educators. Within

a project that upholds traditional roles for researchers, this could look like a series of analyses and policy briefs, digging more deeply into issues over a sustained period of time. Longer-term engagements could also involve more collaborative types of engagement around design work (Penuel et al., 2011) or continuous improvement efforts (Bryk, 2015). Regardless of the form of engagement or particular roles for researchers and educators, the end goal remains the same: trusting relationships between researchers and practitioners collaborating around work that meaningfully benefits educational stakeholders in sustainable ways.

Heeding this advice promises to benefit researchers and educators alike. For the research community, the ability to speak to the points raised by district leaders here may well mean the difference between successfully achieving access or being rebuffed by districts laboring under the shadow of limited resources, time, and capacity. Researchers are likely to find that building more productive relationships with practitioners helps to create opportunities for future research endeavors. Perhaps most importantly, responding to this advice is likely the only way the research community will be able to help tackle meaningful, practice-based questions facing schools and districts. For educational leaders, productive relationships with researchers can offer support and the benefits of an outside perspective as they face expectations to use research-based evidence to make key decisions about policy and practice.

## Note

1. To maintain the confidentiality of participants, the names of both districts and individuals presented herein are pseudonyms chosen by the research team.

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## Appendix A

Code	Definition	Example
Understand the district context	This code captures participant responses regarding the degree to which researchers attempt to develop a deep understanding of the district's context, including the district's strategic priorities, goals, and existing lines of work.	"We've created a vetting process that now we filter our potential partners through, vendors, so they can go on that website and look at the district and where it is and be thinking about the work, where they are in their role as a vendor, and how they see themselves aligning to that work. So they have to demonstrate to us that they understand who we are and what we do, and if they actually have the capacity to align in the way that we need them to align themselves if we were to purchase anything from them. Because many times they call cold, thinking that we want their service, and they tell us how wonderful it is to buy their product, but we don't actually need it."
Build trust and relationships	This code captures participant responses regarding the degree to which researchers work to build trust and productive relationships with district partners.	"The team brought in people who were easy to talk to. I know you can't necessarily pick your fellow faculty, but that helps, that you have people who—we respect what y'all know and we know y'all know what you're doing, but to not make us feel like, 'Until you know what I know, you will never be equal to Dr. ____.' We all felt we could all talk to any of them about anything. We valued what they said to us, and I think they truly valued what we gave to them. When they asked us, 'What can we do to help y'all?' they digested that and brought back, 'OK, I think we can do that. Let us move forward and look at launch,' or whatever. Making sure that you have people who can be talked to and who are willing to listen and learn from that experience and [are] not just ... moving it to be published somewhere."
Clarify roles and responsibilities	This code captures participant responses indicating the extent to which roles and responsibilities held by each member of the partnership are clear and understood.	"Back in those days, it was a struggle. 'Who's the driver here, [partner] or the district?' We finally landed on, it was really the district. They have to be the driver. And then [partner], within their organization and with their funders and all of that, would work with the district on a particular priority or initiative. But that was the hard conversation in terms of deciding who the driver was going to be. That's the tension. The work is the work. But who's driving the work? It took some years to get to that point."

## Appendix A (continued)

Code	Definition	Example
Benefit the district	This code captures participant responses indicating the degree to which the work of the partnership provides clear benefit to the district, is well-aligned to district priorities and aims, and is perceived to be generating information that is actionable and useful for district administrators.	“If a research partnership were going to come into [District], they’ll have to offer an opportunity that will benefit [District] in a way where obviously both parties will have to benefit, but it would have to be in the most non-invasive way, so the least amount of instruction is being interrupted and it’s real-time feedback, real-time data, and it’s benefiting us in the sense that it aligns with, again, our strategic plan, which guides our work. At this point, anything that aligns with that strategic plan will be the way to go. That’s the core of our district. If schools don’t know it, they should know it. Everybody should be knowing that that’s the core of our work, and as a partnership comes in, that should be the very first thing they look at, to see, ‘How can we help this district by looking at this strategic plan?’ And then providing an unbiased approach of third-party expertise that will be the most non-invasive way to get them the help they need, but also help out the partnership.”
Be flexible and responsive	This code captures the extent to which participants report that they perceive their partners to be willing to adjust their approaches and practices to district needs and priorities, and their ability to engage with the district in non-invasive ways that respect the work of educators.	“I’m still trying to understand their project, and to suggest that we should somehow integrate them, like the 5x8 card. It’s still in draft form. To me, their agenda was by wanting us to use what they do as a way of beginning to define STEM. That was too narrow, too limiting. It didn’t necessarily reflect what the initial thoughts around STEM had been. That was one. Another one was in the initial conversations around STEM and how they thought it was just—so did, I reckon, the other folks. They were all speaking from their own experience, but they weren’t trying to sell me on, ‘Do it this way,’ where Tania pretty quickly went to, ‘Why don’t we write a National Science Foundation grant that looks at Boom?’ But Boom was something that she had an interest in and that [Partner] had been thinking about. ... While they were sort of trying to hear me, it was very clear that they were still trying to figure out how they fit themselves—or using—the tail wagging the dog kind of thing, is what I felt at times.”

## Appendix A (continued)

Code	Definition	Example
Plan for ongoing engagement	This code captures the extent to which district leaders' responses indicate a perception that their research partners are invested in the work of the district and its longer-term success.	"We don't necessarily want people to come in and do their studies here and disappear, or do their studies and then give us a report six months later that's not necessarily actionable. We want people to be thinking alongside us ... . I also know that [University] is thinking about—again there's a research partnership—they're thinking about how we prepare pre-service teachers, in particular with master teachers in mathematics and science, and two of their faculty, Noreen and Kristina, are supporting one of our middle schools in their transition to do heterogeneous classrooms. So they're working at the school. So I think that's part of what we—those are other examples of wanting to partner versus be studied."