# Research that Leaders Really Use, Researchers They Want Close By

By understanding the unique needs of school district leaders, researchers can provide evidence-based support for professional development and decision making.

"We need more researchers on speed dial," announced Jim Ryan, a curriculum director from San Francisco Unified School District. Jim had come to a meeting the Research+Practice Collaboratory held in Boulder, Colorado, in the summer of 2014, to bring together leaders of 11 different research-practice partnerships from across the United States. Jim already had on speed dial his research partners from the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP), and he greatly valued their contributions to district improvement efforts. He often consulted with them on district policies and programs. To him, the value of these partners was in his ongoing relationship with them and the fact that they were willing to help him to tackle some of the most pressing problems he faced in his district.

There are many district leaders like Jim who are eager to draw on the perspectives of research to inform their practice. But Jim is not only interested in the results of evaluation studies that show whether this program or that works to improve student learning. For many of the problems he faces, purchasing an evidence-based program isn't an option. He either doesn't have the budget, or no program exists that meets the goals that he and his colleagues have for improving teaching and learning in his district. He needs people like his partners at SERP who can help him find and adapt programs or design new ones and then develop the evidence that they can work in his district.

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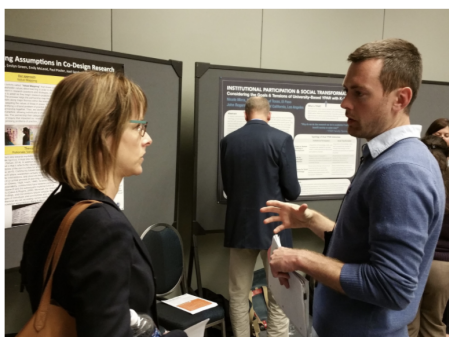
Many of the decisions Jim makes on a regular basis have little to do with selecting or adapting programs. The most frequent activities leaders in Jim's position do every day are designing professional development for teachers and for administrators in their districts. According to a recent study by the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (NCRPP), between 75 and 80 percent of US central office leaders and principals engage in those two activities. By contrast, just 63 percent are involved in decisions as to whether to purchase a program or not. These are important facts for policy makers and researchers to consider when promoting the use of evidence in schools and districts. They suggest that just having more interventions with evidence behind them will not be enough to inform the day-to-day work of district leaders.

But what kind of research is useful for these kinds of decisions? The NCRPP study identified research that helps people get a conceptual handle on problems, that is provides a language for describing their challenges and a framework to use in searching for solutions can help. Carol Weiss years ago called this the "conceptual use" of research, and it's most commonly presented in books that synthesize large bodies of evidence rather than journal articles. A good example is Tony Bryk and colleagues' book, Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago, which several leaders in one district cited as an important resource for thinking about their collective reform efforts.

Research-practice partnerships can help leaders like Jim access, use, and even develop that research. Partnerships like the UW-Seattle-Renton Partnership provide access to "big ideas" and opportunities for district leaders to make sense of them in the context of their ongoing work to design professional development related to new standards (e.g., the Next Generation Science Standards). Partnerships can also partner directly with leaders to provide professional development focused on big ideas, as the Interactive STEM partnership in Maine is doing by helping teachers integrate understanding of learning trajectories in mathematics into their technology-supported assessment practice. They can also provide feedback on how well district initiatives are meeting their goals for improving the quality of instruction, something that the MIST partnership led by Vanderbilt University researchers has done with its partner districts. They can develop evidence for the efficacy of programs they design together, as a number of partnerships like SERP have done. To be of help, though, researchers need to take a broad view of the role of research in district leaders' decision making, and some of them may even need to volunteer to be on speed dial.

For more on the kinds of research that district leaders use in partnerships with strong research-practice partnerships, see:
http://epx.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/10/17/0895904816673580.abstract

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