

Harnessing Research-Practice Partnerships in the North Carolina Summer Learning Programs: Insights and perspectives from North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and UNC-System Researchers.

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There is meaning in establishing a partnership. For researchers and educators, this is significant. In traditional circles, the notion of conducting research is viewed as an academic exercise where a problem is identified, a methodology is proposed to address the problem, and evidence is presented considering specific outcomes. These siloed spaces existing between researchers and practitioners have presented challenges in education. As a state agency, our task was to examine how we could undo these patterns and transform how we work with university partnerships. Through these partnerships, our focus was to leverage actionable findings that were more meaningful for districts and constituencies in the educational field. Through this year-long journey, four UNC-system research institutions partnered with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to evaluate the impact and implementation of summer learning programs across various regions in the state.

The focus of these research studies encompassed understanding the context, voices, and experiences of these programs. Furthermore, as the practitioner and the state agency/client involved in these research studies, the evolution of each university partnership translated into each regional study. This exemplified the key principles of research practice partnerships which include mutualism, commitment to long-term collaboration, and abiding efforts to build and maintain trusting relationships (Farrell et al., 2021; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Coburn et al., 2013). Bridging the gap between the researchers and the practitioner was an intentional focus of these qualitative studies. The Office of Learning Recovery and Acceleration's work with the UNC system partners exemplified shared decision-making and collaboration where the outcomes of these studies translated into actionable findings and meaning for districts. This has insurmountable implications for educational outcomes and policy.

Review of Literature

Research practice partnerships (RPPs) are long-term collaborations aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research (Arce-Trigatti, 2021). These partnerships are intentionally organized to connect diverse forms of expertise and shift power relations in the research endeavor to ensure that all partners have a say in the joint work (Farrell et al., 2022). Partnership expectations established across several RPP studies

provide researchers, educators, and community leaders with a greater capacity to address problems of the practice and identify solutions that improve educational outcomes (Vetter et al., 2022; Data Quality Campaign, 2017; Welsh, 2021). Furthermore, the common characteristics found across RPPs in education encourage innovation in problem-solving, introduce diverse perspectives, and build shared communities (Arce-Trigatti, 2021; Arce-Trigatti & Farrell, 2021; Coburn et al., 2021). Research Practice Partnerships can also address current dilemmas faced by practitioners in education and allow for flexibility as the priorities of communities continue to evolve (Coburn et al., 2021).

Through research partnerships school leadership teams become active members of their change processes and establish new ownership of learning outcomes (Andreoli & Klar, 2021). With the active involvement of leaders already working in local school spaces, research is more grounded in established culture, policies, and standards (Vetter et al., 2022). These partnerships have also been shown to create policy solutions and school-centered strategies that directly address the unique challenges faced by educational agencies.

The structure of research practice partnerships is built on shared authority and trust between involved groups (Arce-Trigatti, 2021). Research has shown that successful partnerships create pathways for community members to be involved in the outcomes of research they helped create (Coburn et al., 2021; Data Quality Campaign, 2017). For instance, in an educational setting, identifying the ways to make data accessible, equips parents, educators, and students with the resources needed to make informed decisions about their learning experience and encourages ongoing engagement in research (Data Quality Campaign, 2017). Literature supports that using these types of collective efforts within the scope of RPPs helps develop tools and identify best practices that introduce actionable ways for schools to implement change that strengthens student outcomes (Andreoli & Klar, 2021; Data Quality Campaign, 2017; Welsh, 2021).

Out of the four research institutions involved in this work the two cases highlighted in this *Research and Recovery Whitepaper* share their insights into the qualitative research studies conducted in North Carolina on the summer learning programs. These partnerships created another platform to exchange ideas regarding the lessons learned about summer learning opportunities and examine the implementation challenges that contributed to the knowledge of practitioners and researchers within their respective fields. The focus of this Research and Recovery White Paper leverages the context of the research-practice partnership(s) and the overall impact of these types of programs across our state. Each research team has shared its unique perspective of its partnerships (non-profit organizations and community learning exchanges).

As the practitioners, within the scope of our research partnership, the inception of our work began with Superintendent Catherine Truitt's vision of Operation Polaris and the Office of Learning Recovery (OLR) at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). The purpose of this division at NCDPI was to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning loss, associated lost instructional time and the overall interruption of services within North Carolina. In response to mitigating the impacts of COVID on at-risk students, Senate Bills

HB 82, and HB 196 were introduced and passed during the 2020-21 school year. Summer Extension Bridge (PRC 176) and Career Accelerator (PRC 177) programs were implemented across public school units as directed by these bills.

Education Policy Initiative at Chapel Hill (EPIC) and **East Carolina University Rural Education Institute (REI)** share their reflections on their work towards developing their regional research-practice partnerships. Their research presented a unique opportunity for North Carolina. The collective stories that emerged through research partnerships are not only supported by a qualitative mechanism but exemplify an intentional focus on how districts facilitated their summer learning experiences. Additionally, the programmatic aspects of these summer opportunities were intended to maximize learning outcomes for students. The work in North Carolina for summer learning and its programming is continuously evolving through key principles that define research-practice partnerships.

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