



Establishing a Research Collaborative in Support of District Schools and Students

Testimony Before Council Hearing on Bill 22-776: District of Columbia Education Research Advisory Board and Collaborative Establishment Amendment Act of 2018

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July 13, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony at this important hearing.

I am offering testimony today on behalf of the Center for American Progress, an independent nonpartisan policy institute dedicated to bold, progressive ideas, leadership, and action. CAP supports the goals of this legislation establishing a research collaborative to benefit the district's schools and students. I have worked in schools, research, and policy settings, including one position in a research collaborative and another position in a very similar role. Research collaboratives offer a critical bridge between practice and research and a real pathway toward the urgent school improvement that is so desperately needed across our city's schools.

While research collaboratives can be a positive force in the work of school improvement, they will only be productive and useful for all students and schools when guided by best practices in the field. Most importantly, these best practices show that a successful research collaborative is not motivated by being a watch dog, but rather improvement for those most impacted by educational reform. This legislation—establishing a research collaborative in the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor—includes the important local capacity building needed to make the work and structure of the collaborative unique to Washington, D.C. It also makes the collaborative responsive to the urgency stakeholders feel around truly improving schools for our most underserved students.

In my experience and research, the following characteristics are the fundamental must-haves of any successful research collaborative.

First, a true research collaborative must intentionally set out to build capacity. Like creating strong professional development, building capacity requires being responsive to the needs of stakeholders and learning together to gain new skills and knowledge. For example, after substantive collaboration, practitioners should be able to interact with, use, and question evidence to better apply it to their own local context. Similarly, researchers should be able to understand the relevance and limitations of research not rooted in collaborative practice and improve their translation of research into clear, concise terminology.

Second, the work of capacity building is fundamentally linked to the one of the most important goals of a true research collaborative: to be integrally involved in the demanding work of real improvement. Research embedded with practice means meeting practitioners where they are and iteratively, continuously creating evidence feedback loops responsive to changes in instruction, particularly for practitioners working with our most underserved students, all the while engaging, adjusting, sharing, and re-evaluating throughout the life of every research project. It should be no shock to any of us here that the research supporting real school improvement does not, in sum, usually look like an impact study. It is insufficient to know the impact of one program on one or two key outcomes without knowing how to improve further and it is insufficient to not know and study what is gained and lost along the way.

In addition, it is critical to understand the power inherent in setting a research agenda to study and improve public education. In fact, it is often the questions that we don't ask whose answers hold the most potential to motivate real change for those most impacted by education reform. A true research partnership will recognize and involve all voices, particularly those usually left out of the agenda setting process. These stakeholders are a collaborative's most critical partners.

Importantly, there are no partnerships that start with inherent trust and respect for everyone at the first board meeting. Like any relationship, that trust must be built slowly over time, and there will be bumps in the road. These expected bumps are why it is crucial that any partner be invested in long-term, hyperlocal engagement with teachers, school leaders, parents, students, instructional superintendents, data analysts, and more. A true partner must be motivated by being in constant conversation with these real people. In turn, a collaborative researcher's products will be vastly improved—more useful and more accurate.

Finally, and most importantly, all of us here also know that while D.C.'s reform efforts over the years have led to more confidence in our public schools and some key areas of progress for students, the education system remains rife with vast inequities in funding, resources, teachers, leaders, facilities, and more. The primary goal of all work in D.C. education must be to tackle these inequities head on. It should be the driving fire behind improvement every day.

To that end, we in D.C. have a responsibility to own that work and support it. This legislation gives additional urgency to owning those inequities and solving them; to incubating and supporting this work; and to sustaining it by building the institutional knowledge needed to prevent these inequities from recurring or worsening. This ownership is important not simply because it involves shared accountability, but because it has the power to build and institutionalize a culture of evidence and improvement. No stakeholder truly invested in our public education system wants only a “gotcha” moment—a diagnosis without a remedy. We want better schools—first and foremost—for communities most in need. This collaborative is only one piece of the puzzle, to be sure, but if implemented with integrity and ownership, it has the potential to build a pathway toward real improvement for students, schools, and families.