Tool for Assessing the Health of Research-Practice Partnerships

IES Institute of Education Sciences

Tool for Assessing the Health of Research-Practice Partnerships

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This tool is designed for individuals who want to formatively assess a research-practice partnership (RPP) in collaboration with its members. It provides guidance on how to set and monitor progress on quarterly RPP goals aligned to five critical dimensions that researchers and practitioners must address to build and sustain an effective RPP. This tool and its related processes enable RPP evaluators and members to monitor the health of their RPP by tracking the extent to which it is meeting its goals and demonstrating effectiveness, as articulated by the five dimensions and their indicators. Using a formative lens rather than a summative one, the tool encourages RPP members to purposefully and honestly reflect on their collaborative work and to make necessary adjustments over time. This tool is designed so that even individuals with limited experience evaluating or participating in RPPs can use it effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

This tool is designed for individuals who want to formatively assess a research-practice partnership (RPP) in collaboration with its members. RPPs are "long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving district [and state] outcomes" (Coburn et al., 2013, p. 2). Education RPPs offer structures and processes for bridging research and practice and ultimately driving improvements in K–12 outcomes.

To date, there is limited literature on how to assess the effectiveness of RPPs. A commonly used framework for doing so is *Assessing Research-Practice Partnerships: Five Dimensions of Effectiveness* (Henrick et al., 2017). That framework consists of five dimensions and related indicators "intended to guide the development of more specific protocols and measures that could contribute to a body of evidence related to partnership effectiveness" (Henrick et al., 2017, p. 2). The five dimensions, which researchers and practitioners must address to build and sustain an effective RPP, are:

1. Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships.

2. Conducting rigorous research to inform action.

3. Supporting the partner practice organization in achieving its goals.

4. Producing knowledge that can inform education improvement efforts more broadly.

5. Building the capacity of participating researchers, practitioners, practice organizations, and research organizations to engage in partnership work.

This tool builds on the Henrick et al. (2017) framework by providing guidance on how to set quarterly RPP goals aligned to the five dimensions and related indicators and how to monitor progress toward the goals. The tool enables RPP evaluators and members to monitor the health of their RPP by tracking the extent to which it is meeting its goals and demonstrating effectiveness, as articulated by the five dimensions and related indicators. Monitoring progress toward the dimensions can help prevent or address common RPP challenges, such as frequent turnover, lack of trust and a common language, and problems caused by complex contexts (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Using a formative lens rather than a summative one, the tool encourages RPP members to purposefully and honestly reflect on their collaborative work and to make necessary adjustments over time. It is designed so that even individuals with limited experience evaluating or participating in RPPs can use it effectively.

RPP members who piloted this tool in a district-level RPP shared the following feedback:

I think that the structure that you guys are putting in place here is really essential. It's going to change the way we do business, and I think that's really important.

—RPP district representative

It has been a breath of fresh air to have another partner joining us in this work, and to actually get us to look up...at the larger context of the project. That's been something that has been fun and informative.

—RPP research representative

Overview of the tool

The tool is an Excel workbook that consists of three parts, which are available at https://go.usa.gov/xAV29:

- *Prioritizing dimensions and indicators.* The tool's first worksheet aims to lead researchers and practitioners to a consensus on the dimensions and indicators they want to prioritize during a predetermined time frame (for example, the first quarter of the school year).

- *Establishing short- and medium-term goals and measures.* The tool's second worksheet is designed to support researchers and practitioners in establishing short- and medium-term goals for each of the RPP's prioritized indicators. These goals should be measurable and timebound. The short-term goals for the RPP should be able to be accomplished during the first year of using this tool, and the medium-term goals should be able to be accomplished during the second or third year of using this tool. The long-term goal is the same for each indicator: to provide evidence that there are processes, structures, and practices ingrained in the partnership that support the given indicator. Therefore, the worksheet does not prompt the RPP to develop a long-term goal.

- *Interview protocol.* The interview protocol is designed to help the evaluator conduct interviews with the RPP members to determine the extent to which the short-term goals aligned to the prioritized indicators were achieved, which barriers are preventing progress, and which potential structures and process might need to be established or revisited. The protocol consists of nine worksheets: an overview of the interview protocol for the interviewee, a consent form, a worksheet for each of the five dimensions (Dimension 1 through Dimension 5 tabs), a worksheet for additional reflections (Wrap-Up tab), and a worksheet with the rating categories the evaluator can use (Rating Categories tab). Not all questions in the interview protocol are intended to be completed; only those tied to the indicators prioritized by the RPP each quarter. Each dimension's worksheet includes six key components:

  1. *Dimension.* Specific features essential to effective RPP design and implementation, based on rigorous research. The tool includes the dimensions identified by Henrick et al. (2017), which are listed at the top of each dimension worksheet.

  2. *Indicator.* Discrete characteristics of each dimension that describe where to look for evidence of progress on a particular dimension and that suggest the necessary practices, systems, and structures that an RPP needs in order to be effective.

  3. *Questions.* Questions designed to gather information and evidence to determine how well an RPP is implementing the necessary practices, systems, and structures that it needs in order to demonstrate progress on a particular indicator.

  4. *Goals for the Quarter.* Space to enter the specific goals established for each prioritized indicator in a dimension.

5. *Evidence/Notes.* Space to reference evidence for the rationale of a rating, make comments, and suggest next steps for continuous improvement.

6. *Ratings.* The current level of implementation for each prioritized indicator in each dimension.

Using the tool

This section discusses how to use each part of the tool.

Guidance for prioritizing dimensions and indicators

The evaluator should plan to facilitate a 60 minute discussion to prioritize the RPP's dimensions and indicators. At a minimum, the RPP members from the practice organization who should participate include:

- *Champions.* Decisionmakers who have the power to commit organizational resources to the RPP's research projects (Kochanek et al. 2015).

- *Facilitators or managers.* Individuals who manage the day-to-day work of the RPP's research projects.

- *Primary investigators.* Individuals who lead the RPP's research projects.

Because RPPs vary in composition, this general guidance should be adapted so that individuals who play a major role in the RPP's management and scope of work and who ultimately make decisions informed by the results of its research are included in the goal-setting process.

To begin the prioritization process, the evaluator should provide a copy of the Prioritizing Dimensions worksheet from the Excel workbook to all the RPP members and ask them to read the indicators for Dimension 1. After everyone has read the indicators, the evaluator should ask the members to reflect on whether the dimension should be a priority for the next quarter. If they agree that it should be, the evaluator should invite members to rank the dimension's indicators according to what they deem most important and feasible to address in the next three months. The evaluator should then ask the members to share their rankings aloud.

This process provides an opportunity for areas of agreement and disagreement to surface and for the RPP to build consensus. If there are discrepancies, the evaluator should invite the members to explain their rationale for prioritizing specific indicators. After the members have listened to one another, the evaluator should ask whether any members would like to modify their initial ranking and if so, to share the new ranking.

The evaluator should then determine whether there is a consensus. If the members are unable to come to a consensus, the evaluator should ask those who rated an indicator as most important whether their organization and the RPP have the capacity to make progress on it in the upcoming quarter. If the answer is yes, the evaluator should include the indicator among the RPP's priorities; otherwise, the evaluator should ensure that the indicator is considered for prioritization in future meetings. With a large RPP the evaluator might establish

at the outset that the lead representatives of the research and practice organizations will make the final decisions regarding the prioritized dimensions and indicators.

After this process has been completed for the first dimension, it should be repeated for the remaining dimensions.

The capacity to prioritize dimensions will vary across and even within RPPs based on competing priorities and demands. To increase the likelihood that the RPP makes progress on its priorities, the evaluator should encourage RPP members to prioritize only one or two indicators in a dimension and only three dimensions at a time.

Some RPPs might not prioritize a particular dimension because of their level of maturation. For example, newer RPPs might want to prioritize the dimensions "Building trust and cultivating partnership relationships" and "Conducting rigorous research to inform action," whereas mature RPPs might have already spent substantial time on those dimensions and prefer to focus on other dimensions.

Guidance for establishing short- and medium-term goals and measures

After the indicators in each prioritized dimension have been ranked, the RPP should set measurable, timebound short- and medium-term goals for each prioritized indicator. The evaluator should plan to facilitate at least a 30 minute discussion involving, at a minimum, the individuals who prioritized the RPP's dimensions and indicators (that is, the champions, facilitators or managers, and primary investigators).

The RPP might set a short-term goal during the first year in which it is using this tool and medium-term goals for the second and third years. The long-term goal is the same for each indicator: to provide evidence that there are processes, structures, and practices ingrained in the RPP that support the given indicator. Therefore, the worksheet does not prompt the RPP to enter a long-term goal in the form. RPPs might aim to achieve this long-term goal for each prioritized dimension after the third year of using this tool.

Even after the long-term goal has been accomplished, challenges will arise that require processes, structures, and practices to adjust. Therefore, prioritizing indicators as well as setting and measuring progress toward goals should continue over the RPP's lifespan.

Guidance for the interview protocol

After the RPP has prioritized the dimensions and set goals aligned to the prioritized indicators, the evaluator should record the goals in the interview protocol workbook, hide the worksheets of dimensions that were not prioritized, and hide the rows of indicators that were not prioritized under dimensions that were prioritized. Then the evaluator should schedule interviews with each RPP member. Each interview should last no more than one hour. The evaluator should ask the questions in the order they are listed in the protocol. After all the interviews have been completed, the evaluator should assign a rating to each

prioritized indicator in a dimension. The following category descriptions should inform the evaluator's rating.

Partnership Health Rating Categories	
Red	The partnership shows little to no evidence of implementing activities aligned to this indicator.
Orange	The partnership shows some evidence of implementing activities aligned to this indicator.
Yellow	The partnership shows evidence of implementing activities aligned to this indicator, but processes, structures, and practices are not well ingrained within the partnership.
Green	The partnership shows evidence of implementing activities aligned to this indicator well, and processes, structures, and practices are ingrained within the partnership.

The ratings describe the degree to which RPP members—both researchers and practitioners—believe that RPP processes, structures, and practices are in place. These ratings should be used to organize the formative feedback for the RPP. Evaluators should highlight where the RPP made progress toward its quarterly goals and where there might be room for improvement. If RPP members do not feel satisfied with the progress made for a given indicator, the evaluator should share specific examples of challenges or barriers mentioned during the interviews and invite the RPP to consider how to address them in the next quarter.

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TOOL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The interview questions that map to each of the indicators in Henrick et al. (2017) were informed by interviews with researchers and practitioners who represented eight RPPs at the state and district levels from across the country (Kochanek & Scholz, 2020) and by literature on collaborative research processes (such as Kochanek et al., 2015). This tool was further modified after testing its relevance, feasibility, and utility with an RPP funded by the National Science Foundation. The goal was to ensure that RPPs within and outside the Regional Educational Laboratory system can use the tool.

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