Abstract Title Page

Title: The Launch of the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium: Lessons Learned from the First Year of Implementation

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Abstract Body

Background / Context:

The Philadelphia Education Research Consortium (PERC) was launched in July 2014 as an innovative place-based consortium of educational research partners from multiple sectors. Its primary objective is to provide research and analyses on some of the city's most pressing education issues. As such, PERC's research agenda is driven by both traditional public and charter schools within the City of Philadelphia, and is executed through research partners at Research for Action, an independent educational research organization, and the city's three major research universities (Temple University, Drexel University, and the University of Pennsylvania).

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

In this paper, we detail the process by which PERC selected and executed its first research project: an in-depth analysis of how best to apply the emerging concept of *Blended Learning* to Philadelphia school contexts. The guiding research question for this paper is the following:
- How does an urban educational research consortium fill existing gaps in district/charter capacity for conducting applied research by establishing working relationships with practitioners and drawing on the deep pool of research talent that already exists in the area?

To address this question, the paper details the structure of PERC, as well as the specific process by which researchers approached the blended learning research project. It also identifies a set of indicators that can be used to gauge the degree to which PERC has established strong, trusting relationships leading to a high level of utility and relevance. Our hope is that an exploration of PERC's innovative research consortium model in the first year of its implementation can be instructive for similar endeavors in urban settings.

The purpose of PERC is to contribute in a meaningful way to this culture of collaboration, mutual trust, and free flow of ideas, bringing evidence-based strategies that are applicable to the Philadelphia context. In contributing to a culture of strong evidence use, PERC aims to reduce in part some of the capacity constraints that might otherwise limit the search process for innovative and/or evidence-based ideas. When the School District of Philadelphia and the city's charter partners identified blended learning as a strategy of interest for Philadelphia schools, they were aware that external literature reviews, a search for external best practices, and an internal inventory of existing blended learning practices would greatly inform their own blended learning approaches.

Setting:

This study took place across various school contexts in the city of Philadelphia, including District and charter schools.

Population / Participants / Subjects:

This study included district administrators, principals, and/or technology leaders (e.g., blended learning coordinators, technology coaches or facilitators); and teachers who were involved in carrying out the blended learning model(s). The number of participants varied by site and depended in part on the size of the district/school and related blended learning staffing structures.

Intervention / Program / Practice:

The process of selecting blended learning as a research topic and disseminating the results of the research was designed to ensure maximum buy-in across a range of stakeholders, as well as a high level of immediate utility.

The Governance Committee (including cabinet-level representatives of the School District, as well as representatives of the charter school sector and senior staff from the independent research organization in which PERC is housed) agreed that both district and charter school educators lacked research-based information about blended learning models and practices at a time when both sectors were making classroom- and school-based investments in technology utilized for blended learning instruction. In this context, Committee members identified research questions that would enhance their capacity to make evidence-based decisions about blended learning products, programs, and instructional practices.

Research Design:

PERC published its first Research Brief on blended learning implementation in September 2014 (Beaver, Hallar, and Westmass, 2014). This Brief examined the research base, identified a definition of this emerging concept, and presented a set of literature-based conditions for implementation that can be used to successfully integrate blended learning approaches into instructional improvement strategies (Christensen, Horn, and Staker, 2013).

Robust conversations about the brief among a broad range of stakeholders occurred for 2 months after the brief was published. Concurrently, the District decided to accelerate its plans to roll out an RFP designed to identify blended learning vendors for the District to contract with in the 2015-2016 school year. Based on this accelerated timeline and the information needs associated with it, the Governance Committee charged PERC with conducting a second phase of research to a.) identify best practices in exemplary schools and districts; and b.) determine the capacity of the city's schools to implement blended learning.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Best practice sites were selected based on two criteria: 1) documented success implementing blended learning strategies (i.e. external reports, media attention, and education experts' perceptions of the success of blended learning implementation) and 2) student population similar to Philadelphia with geographic proximity. Sites were chosen in close collaboration with the School District of Philadelphia and the city's charter sector to ensure that the focus of data collection was both relevant and representative of the needs of Philadelphia public school leaders. Qualitative data collection from the site visits included the following:

- Review of relevant documents and background materials about each school/district and its approach to blended learning;
- Interviews with key district administrators, principals, and/or technology leaders (e.g., blended learning coordinators, technology coaches or facilitators); and
- Focus groups at study sites with teachers who were involved in carrying out the blended learning model(s).

PERC also conducted a survey of district and charter schools in spring of 2015. The survey was designed to assess the capacity of public schools to implement and support blended learning. It was written by PERC staff, and questions were finalized through conversations with staff at the District. It was distributed by District staff to all technology coordinators at district and charter schools, and left open for four weeks. Of the 304 district and charter schools in the city, 108 completed the survey in whole or in part, an overall response rate of 36%.

Findings / Results:

The first full year of PERC's work served as a platform for a wide range of stakeholders—district and charter leaders, practitioners, education advocates, and PERC researchers—to build mutual trust and develop formal and informal mechanisms to communicate on a regular basis. The volume and variety of contact between PERC researchers and key stakeholders contributed to both the strength of the PERC partnership and the rigor and utility of the blended learning research design.

Over the course of the year, evidence of growing trust among PERC partners and stakeholders emerged; relatedly, evidence of PERC's utility grew as well. For example:
- PERC leaders engaged in regular conversations with district and charter representatives to discuss feedback on the Blended Learning research design, drafts, and final products.
- PERC accelerated its original research timeline to align with the shifting information needs of the school district.
- PERC had increasingly frequent interaction with the school district's Education Technology staff.
- The District's technology staff solicited guidance from PERC on the development of a District RFP to solicit Blended Learning funders.
- At the request of the District, PERC staff created a scoring rubric to ensure robust review of vendor proposals.
- PERC's results were broad disseminated via extensive and lively conversations among a range of stakeholders.
- Both District and Charter School representatives agreed on the need for an additional phase of research that tracks the implementation of blended learning across participating Philadelphia schools.

When taken together, this evidence of the robust and increasingly substantive interaction between PERC and Philadelphia public school leaders suggests that PERC is serving to increase the capacity of public educators to engage in evidence-based decision-making. In subsequent years, PERC will continue to build upon these early successes, as well as problem-solve two poignant challenges which emerged during year one.

In Philadelphia, there are 98 charter school sites operated by 50 diverse organizations. As such, gaining entrée into these systems requires significant resources allocated toward

networking and trust-building. The absence of a full-time director limited the resources available for such activities. It is anticipated that the direct utility of the inaugural project will also benefit these efforts.

Research Advisory Committee engagement across the three partner universities was also an area where PERC experienced some delays. Given the novelty of PERC, time and attention to relationship-building and collaboratively designing an infrastructure for engagement of faculty and graduate students across institutions is critical. The paper will expand upon these challenges and the implications for PERC's strategic plan in Years 2 and 3.

Conclusions:

The PERC partnership development process and the research and dissemination that occurred in its first year of implementation help illustrate how urban research consortia can enhance the capacity of districts and charter schools to search out research-based information that can then contribute to instructional decisions. Throughout this first year of PERC operations, the increasingly strong working relationship between district and charter leaders, practitioners, and researchers helped shape a research design that addressed these stakeholders' most pressing questions about blended learning implementation. PERC's "high engagement" research process and the relevance and utility of the resulting products contributes to both the literature and the field of research-practice partnerships in urban settings, particularly how these practices can enhance educators' access to and use of high quality, rigorous research.

Appendices

Appendix A. References

Beaver, J.K., Hallar, B., & Westmass, L. (2014). Blended Learning: Defining models and examining conditions to support implementation. PERC Research Brief. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Christensen, C.M., Horn, M.B., Staker, H. (2013). Is K-12 Blended Learning Disruptive? An introduction to the theory of hybrids. Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation.