

## Abstract Title Page

**Title:**

The Power of Partnerships: Lessons Learned from Research Alliances in the Northwest

**Authors/Panelists and Affiliations:**

Terri Akey, Research alliance lead for REL Northwest, Education Northwest (alliance leader panelist)

Michelle Hodara, Research alliance lead for REL Northwest, Education Northwest (alliance leader panelist)

Les Morse, Deputy Commissioner of Education & Early Development, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (alliance member panelist)

Hilda Rosselli, Deputy Director for College and Career Readiness, Oregon Education Investment Board (alliance member panelist)

Neal Finkelstein, REL West Associate Director and Senior Research Scientist, WestEd (moderator)

## **Purpose of Panel Discussion**

The purpose of this panel is to discuss how researchers and policymakers work together in two Regional Education Laboratory (REL) research alliances to develop research agendas aimed at changing policy and practice and to provide practical lessons for researchers about the challenges and solutions to working in a research alliance context. The panel will consist of four members—two REL Northwest staff who lead research alliances and two alliance members who are core decisionmakers in their states and implementers of alliance work. The panel will include a moderator affiliated with REL West to provide an external perspective. The moderator will introduce the panelists, lead discussion, and draw implications for research alliance work for a broader context and audience.

## **Panel Agenda and Approach**

The main content of the panel discussion will focus on three key issues that have emerged in our research alliance work—stakeholder engagement, capacity for research, and evidence use. These issues emerged from our formative evaluation of our REL Northwest research alliance work, which provides data about how our alliances are meeting their goals and how well we are meeting capacity-building and research goals for REL Northwest. Data sources include interviews with alliance members and teams, survey results, events and activity feedback, review and analysis of products, and documentation of alliance discussions.

The panel will describe how each key issue manifested in both featured alliances, explore variation in the approach to each issue, and discuss lessons that can be drawn from each alliance's experience to improve research alliance work. We will use a variety of approaches to engage audience members including a combination of panelist presentations, moderated large group discussion, and moderator synthesis of key implications. A strong focus will be on hearing the perspectives of alliance policymakers and the advice they have for researchers working in a policy context. In addition, we will use interactive technology to poll audience members about key topics throughout the session.

The panel will follow the outline below; details on sections 2, 3, and 4 follow the outline.

1. Introduction
  - a. Purpose and objectives of the panel discussion
  - b. Introduction of panelists and moderator
2. Background and context
  - a. *The problem:* Building policymakers' capacity to use data and research
  - b. *The solution:* Research alliances collaboratively engage in research and evidence use
    - i. What are research alliances?
    - ii. Introduction to featured research alliances
    - iii. How do we build alliance capacity to engage in and use research and data?
3. Lessons learned from research alliances to help researchers engage policymakers
  - a. Stakeholder engagement
    - i. Ensuring the right people are included at the right time
    - ii. Developing collaborative and sustainable partnerships
  - b. Capacity for research
    - i. Improving data access and quality
    - ii. Building capacity for using data and conducting rigorous research

- c. Evidence use
  - i. Designing questions and studies that respond to policymaker needs
  - ii. Increasing relevance, accessibility, and actionability of results
  - iii. Disseminating findings in ways that inform policy and practice
- 4. Conclusion
  - a. Building better researcher and policymaker partnerships
  - b. Overall goal is to improve policy decision making

*2. a. Background and context: The problem*

Research and experience indicate that policymakers often do not use credible and rigorous evidence to inform decisions. In addition, researchers often find it difficult to disseminate the results of their work to the right people to inform good policy and practice. Studies have identified factors associated with why researchers and policymakers have difficulty communicating around research and decisionmaking. For example, research is often treated as a one-way street, where researchers identify topics, conduct the research and disseminate the findings—limiting opportunities for researchers and decisionmakers to discuss how research can provide more credible and useful evidence. Similarly, policymakers and researchers may differ in their perspectives on what makes evidence credible and useful to inform policy. Other barriers—lack of timeliness, lack of sensitivity to policy context, or irrelevance of research findings—can also keep research from being used by decisionmakers. However, we also know that policymakers are more likely to use research evidence if it emerges from their specific education concerns. Policymakers are more likely to welcome evidence that is timely, is directly relevant to current and ongoing policy concerns, and accounts for the political context. Helping policymakers to rely more on rigorous and credible evidence requires helping researchers and policymakers develop a two-way collaboration to ensure that research questions are actionable, research design and data collection methods are appropriate, and findings are clearly communicated, contextualized, and made relevant to the policy context.

*2. b. Background and context: The solution*

A solution to the above problem that is gaining traction is that of research/policymaker partnerships. The REL system has adopted a form of this approach—the research alliance—where education stakeholders come together to solve critical problems of practice through evidence-based decisions. A key goal of this approach is to build alliance member capacity to engage in credible research and data use. As part of the national REL system, REL Northwest facilitates partnerships between researchers and policymakers by supporting eight alliances across the Northwest. Each alliance is different with respect to local context, participants involved, issues discussed, and the level of the educational system targeted (e.g., state or district). However, at the root of each alliance partnership is a strong, shared desire to collaborate and to use research for improving student outcomes. We will describe the potential for these partnerships to achieve success; how overcome some of the challenges inherent in partnerships; and present learned valuable lessons about how best to support such research collaborations.

For this panel, we will focus on lessons learned from two state-level alliances supporting students for postsecondary success: the Alaska State Policy Research Alliance (ASPRA) and the Oregon College and Career Readiness Research Alliance (OR CCR). ASPRA is a statewide alliance which brings together state-level policymakers, researchers from universities and state

agencies, and education practitioners to identify critical problems of practice and apply evidence-based decisions to the development of state policies that influence postsecondary readiness and success. OR CCR is also working on strengthening efforts to improve college and career readiness statewide. State education agencies and 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions are working to foster improved alignment between the secondary and postsecondary education system and increase Oregon students' college and career readiness through research, policy, and practice.

One of the critical areas of our alliance work is building capacity to identify, access, use, and apply data and research to inform policy decisions, including:

- Creating and improving infrastructure (such as data systems) and organizational skills to support more effective data and research
- Facilitating an inquiry process to ask the right questions, access the appropriate information, analyze and correctly interpret findings, and develop reasonable and credible actions
- Choosing and/or implementing appropriate research designs, data collection techniques, and analytic approaches
- Developing collaborative partnerships and shared research agendas across alliance partners
- Communicating findings to many audiences in clear, accessible, and engaging ways
- Critically evaluating existing research and data for credibility, relevance, and utility for policy and practice decisions

Specifically, with both ASPRA and OR CCR alliances, we collaborate with our alliance partners to design and conduct descriptive studies that increase their insight into local problems of practice and help them develop indicators they can use to track progress and outcomes. We also work with alliances to identify and plan for rigorous evaluations of specific programs and policies that address alliance-identified problems of practice. We engage alliance members at each stage in these studies—from determining and refining questions, to data collection strategies, to reporting and making meaning of the results—and model for them appropriate methods for conducting all of these activities.

### *3. Lessons learned*

The main part of the panel discussion will focus on important lessons for researchers—specifically focused on collaborating with policymakers in a research alliance context. We will highlight three broad issues that have emerged out of ongoing alliance development and partnership partnerships: stakeholder engagement, capacity for research, and evidence use. As part of the session, we will offer lessons learned from our experiences (from both the researcher and policymaker perspective) and elicit feedback from the audience.

*3. a. Stakeholder engagement.* A significant challenge and opportunity in research alliance collaborations is to sustain authentic stakeholder engagement in the process and build commitment to alliance functioning and outcomes. Over time, we have improved methods for involving policymakers in developing and implementing the research agenda. We will discuss several factors that can affect authentic engagement and ways that our alliances have addressed these factors by describing specific situations within both alliances. Some of these factors include:

- Tension between alliance and funder priorities, agenda, and timelines

- Engaging multiple stakeholders who have the same policy priority but different perspectives
- Embedding structures in members' resources and priorities to sustain participation
- Creating shared frameworks, definitions, and metrics to help alliances engage in dialogue

Our presentation and the facilitated discussion with audience will focus on addressing the questions such as: (1) How do you make sure the right people are included to help frame the problem and set the agenda? (2) What are effective ways of continuing to bring researchers, policymakers, and practitioners together? and (3) How do you develop collaborative and sustainable partnerships?

### *3. b. Capacity for research*

There are many capacities needed to support alliances conducting research, ranging from access to high-quality and credible data to developing understanding and skill in designing studies, conducting analyses, and interpreting findings. A key take-away from our collaboration with our alliances is that success in this area does not rely solely on the expertise that the researchers bring to the inquiry process, but rather emerges when alliance members can learn to conduct (or at least understand) the research process themselves. We will describe how this process has emerged for our two featured alliances and illuminate both positive outcomes and lessons learned to improve the likelihood of success. For example, in ASPRA, research studies are conducted in collaboration with state education and workforce agencies, with staff from those agencies actively engaged in the research process. Some positive outcomes to date have been that the alliance members now have an improved data system that they understand, are capable of conducting more complex analyses, and have a deeper understanding of factors that are important in education policy research and analysis. Our presentation and the facilitated discussion with the audience will focus on addressing questions such as: (1) What are strategies for addressing challenges around data access and availability? (2) How do you assess an agency's capacity for rigorous research? and (3) How do you foster cross-agency collaboration?

### *3. c. Evidence use*

Alliance collaboration opens opportunities for researchers and policymakers to work together in new and different ways to interpret and use research evidence and data in making decisions. For both ASPRA and OR CCR, alliance members have been engaged in vetting, interpreting, and disseminating results. This ensures that findings are policy-relevant and contextualized appropriately. In addition, alliance engagement in these activities builds ownership over the research process and the subsequent results from the studies. We will discuss how alliance members are better able to use research findings and data to inform their policy discussions and build the credibility of participating organizations. Our presentation and the facilitated discussion with the audience will focus on addressing questions such as: (1) How do you conduct analyses that respond to stakeholder questions and needs? and (2) How can researchers and policymakers work together to frame and disseminate findings to inform practice and policy?

### *Conclusion*

At the close of the panel, our moderator will provide a short response to the panelists' presentation and will engage the audience in a facilitated question and answer session about the key issues above.