

Written Testimony of

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prepared for the

Council Committee on Education and  
Council Committee of the Whole

Joint Public Oversight Roundtable  
on the  
Education Research Practice Partnership Proposed Notice of Invitation

October 31, 2019

Room 412  
The John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004

This testimony is provided on behalf of the Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA) which has been engaged in comprehensive education research based on mandates from the Council of the District of Columbia. A year ago, we published [A Study of Enrollment Projections for D.C.'s Public Schools: Assuring Accuracy and Transparency](#), which was requested and funded by the D.C. Council at the initiation of D.C. Councilmember Mary Cheh. Today we are coordinating with another consultant on a comprehensive audit of public education data as required by the District of Columbia Education Research Practice Partnership and Audit Establishment Act of 2018, which also set out the parameters for the Notice of Invitation (NOI) which was the subject of the October 31, 2019, joint roundtable. We will soon publish a research report developed from the enrollment research, Study of D.C. Public School Enrollment: Controls Needed to Ensure Funding Equity.

I mention these research projects as background for ODCA's subject matter expertise with regard to education research generally, and the operations of education research-practice partnerships specifically. We provide this written testimony to add to the body of information available to the D.C. Council as you consider next steps with the NOI and the Research Practice Partnership (RPP).

The October 31, 2019, hearing on the proposed NOI for the District's forthcoming raised multiple questions and concerns that remained unanswered at the end of the hearing. We offer this testimony to address these remaining issues and to provide evidence from other RPPs around the country and also specific recommendations given D.C.'s unique education governance structure.

More specifically, the issues raised at the hearing that were insufficiently resolved concern: 1) the feasibility that the District's RPP can hit the ground running with data that is currently available from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE); 2) how many Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) or Memoranda of Agreement (MOAs) are required and what kinds of agreements are typical in RPP work; and 3) what are the expectations for a data archive and for data destruction for the District's RPP.

### **Can the RPP hit the ground running?**

First and foremost, the D.C. Council and other interested public education stakeholders should know, with confidence, that OSSE, as a state education agency, holds an abundance of public education data, at the student level and over time. The data audit included in the RPP legislation and now underway has gathered a large amount of information on the state of public education data, data systems, and data governance. The District, via the D.C. Council, would be well-served to coordinate a discussion of our findings with the independent research partner once the partner is selected to discuss these results in more detail. While there are important findings regarding the accuracy, structure, and longitudinal capacity of the data, an independent research partner working in conjunction with the established Advisory Committee can begin preparing the data OSSE collects and maintains for research purposes and can do so immediately. This preparation work oftentimes takes the full first year of work for a new RPP.

In the course of the hearing, Councilmembers and witnesses put on the public record the fact that detailed coursework, credits, and grades, are not currently available at the state level, which is quite different from information collected by many other state education agencies. At the same time, data IS available for all LEAs across a variety of topics including public preschool enrollment, test scores, discipline, attendance, AP and IB course enrollment, student mobility, and college enrollment, to name a few. These student-level data contain important demographic and special program participation information so that equity-focused analyses can be accomplished. And it is our hope that the new RPP can begin using some of these data for early research projects and jump-start the process of evidence-based continuous improvement for our schools.

Importantly, as is the case with other state-level RPPs across the country, any work using the data that OSSE currently collects and maintains, can and should be started under the legal authority of a single MOU or MOA. This is standard practice for RPPs and should not be up for debate. Unfortunately, the law approved by the Council appears to require an individual MOU per research project, and if that is deemed to be an accurate description, the D.C. Council should consider amending the law as soon as possible to not unduly burden OSSE or the RPP with unnecessary paperwork and to ensure that the RPP is appropriately supported by law to effectively proceed with research. A recent paper<sup>1</sup> from the RPP in San Francisco explains that it took about one year to fully negotiate their MOA with the school district. It would be untenable to require such a process for every research project under the RPP umbrella.

### **How many MOUs do we need?**

As mentioned above state-level RPPs typically have a single MOU with the state education agency. See, for example, the Wisconsin RPP (Madison Education Partnership), the Michigan RPP (Education Policy Innovation Collaborative), the Tennessee RPP (Tennessee Education Research Alliance) and the early iteration of the New Orleans RPP (Education Research Alliance for New Orleans). Each partnership has an MOU with the state and, in large part, can use the data the state collects and maintains under that single MOU. Of course, the MOU may be adjusted and extended as needed. However, there are not individual MOUs for every project. This is precisely the type of siloed research work that state-level RPPs are designed to overcome. One overarching MOU is foundational to this model of research that is intentionally connected across projects, time, and focus areas by virtue of the comprehensive research agenda envisioned in the legislation. Again, to the extent the current law requires one MOU per project, we urge the D.C. Council to amend the law or, at minimum, request that the Executive interpret the law more broadly to ensure an effective start for the RPP.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim, M.; Shen, J., Wentworth, L. (2019). "Technical Paper: Data Infrastructure for Partnership Research: Structures and Processes Used in the Stanford-SFUSD Partnership" retrieved from [https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/20190516\\_technical\\_paper\\_for\\_publication.pdf](https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/20190516_technical_paper_for_publication.pdf)

However, if data are needed from LEAs or schools that is not collected by OSSE, the RPP would need to negotiate additional MOUs for those data. It may be the case that the RPP decides not to engage in additional data collection at the school or LEA level because this negotiation process can be burdensome and unproductive. Or it may be the case that the RPP decides to do only limited additional collections with LEAs and schools willing to collaborate. Many RPPs start with a “coalition of the willing,” and this could be an effective model in D.C. to layer over the state-level RPP.

### **What does an RPP do with the data?**

RPPs represent a long game by their very design. The foundational idea is that the partnership will connect practitioners and researchers in a long-term, committed relationship to conduct needs-aligned research projects that build on and inform one another over time. While researchers must abide by the data destruction requirements in the MOU, in practice data are not destroyed because new or extended MOUs continue to cover the legal authority to continue to use the data. This prolonged authority means that, typically, RPPs do not destroy most data. We are assured of this practice based on having received multiple recommendations from practitioners and researchers in RPPs currently operating to include the provision that data will be destroyed “at the dissolution of the RPP,” which meets requirements of the federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regarding destroying data no longer in use and also aligns with the longitudinal goal of continuously using data to improve education. However, provided the MOU between OSSE and the independent research partner is extended and adjusted as needed (based on the collectively established research agenda), a specific destruction date can, of course, be included in the MOU.

To be clear, the RPPs eventual data archive would not replace or substitute for the state’s education data warehouse or other data maintenance structure. OSSE already is operating under the authority to collect whatever education data it deems necessary as part of the District’s education data warehouse (D.C. Code § 38–2609). Specifically, the law states that, “Upon the request of the State Superintendent, necessary data pertaining to students, teachers, and school levels shall be submitted to the OSSE for the purpose of constructing, updating, or maintaining the EDW system by: (i) The University of the District of Columbia; (ii) A public school; (iii) A public charter school; or (iv) An entity administering a publicly funded education program.” The RPP requires no additional authority beyond the MOU it will hold with OSSE to create its own, separate data archive for use across one or many of the RPP research projects. A data archive or multiple data archives are standard practice for all effective RPPs. These data would no longer be used at the dissolution of the RPP.

Unfortunately, there was no discussion during the hearing of the potential benefit that these data archives can have for other current or new independent research projects or partnerships that would like to collaborate with the RPP. RPPs typically invest large amounts of time and resources in preparing data for research use and it is critical that these research-ready datasets be available for request by those engaged in independent educational improvement work—provided the right data sharing agreements are put in place. In short, the data preparation and

archiving work is not an end in itself. Research-ready data created by the RPP should be in service of educational improvement in the District very broadly defined. It may be that we need additional legislation to facilitate maintaining these archives and their appropriate access and use for the public good.