

Strategic Education Research Partnership

Summary

The Strategic Education Research Partnership is intended to mobilize political will and financial resources, the power of scientific research, and the expertise of teachers and school administrators in a collaborative effort to improve student learning. Its mission is expressed in four key objectives:

- Building deep and reciprocal connections between practice and research;
- Producing a research program noted for its coherence, quality, and the accumulation of useful and usable knowledge;
- Building talent for this collaborative work in the research and practice communities; and
- Having impact on what teachers do, how schools operate, and foremost, on student learning.

The SERP enterprise needs to be understood in several distinct dimensions. First, *SERP is a program of “use-inspired” research and development*. This means that problems of practice will be at center stage in determining the research and development agenda; the program will place as much emphasis on follow-through to link knowledge and products as on theoretical grounding. For example, work on general principles of human learning will be extended to learning in specific content areas, to learning in varied contexts (e.g., high-poverty urban classrooms), to scalability from individual sites to the larger system. Much of the work will be carried out in classrooms, where innovative materials, methods, and organizational supports are tested and honed.

SERP is also an organization, designed to provide the infrastructure to make a coherent, sustained research, development, and implementation program possible. The structure envisioned for SERP has three basic components: a central organization or headquarters responsible for program design and coherence, quality control, communications, financial oversight, and long-term planning, where an internal research program is also located; distributed research and development teams that muster the nation’s expertise to the enterprise; and a set of field sites—school districts or groups of districts where practitioners and researchers work together to define and pursue key lines of development and implementation research. All of these—headquarters, research teams and field sites—will make common cause in a series of collaborative research and development networks.

And finally, SERP is a partnership. To promote change of the magnitude we propose here will require building a broad coalition of powerful partners both in the early stages and as the organization matures. The prospects for success of the SERP enterprise will be greatly enhanced if it, in a sense, “belongs” to those most involved in the delivery of education. Since education is in the first instance a state priority, commanding about a third of total state general expenditures, launch of the SERP enterprise will be organized

around creation of a compact of states ratified by the U.S. Congress. In addition, the vitality of the SERP program and the reach of the SERP infrastructure will be enhanced by the participation of private foundations and federal agencies.

Below, we answer questions raised frequently about the ambitious SERP proposal.

1. How does SERP differ from other efforts to link education research and practice?

There are many novel features of the SERP proposal, but a few are particularly distinguishing. First, the SERP enterprise would bring a level of coherence to education research and development that is now lacking, building connections among the many fruitful, independent efforts that currently exist. A key element of that coherence will be the linking of work on learning and instruction with work on schools as organizations, and education policy. Good work in each of these areas has limited impact when it is isolated from the others.

Second, the SERP enterprise would provide an institutional infrastructure for building and supporting long term relationships between researchers and practitioners, transferring some of the most onerous requirements of conducting research on practice from the researchers and schools to the SERP organization.

Third, SERP will focus at every point on the follow-through needed for practice. This means that research and development would be closely linked. And issues of dissemination and scaling up will not be assumed to follow from good R&D. They will themselves be later stages in the program of R&D that seeks to learn how to support teacher learning and school improvement.

Finally, SERP will bring a new set of funding partners to the table. It will be designed as a public-private partnership. This unique aspect of SERP gives those responsible for delivering education services—state and local governments-- a considerable share of the “ownership” of the R&D. But it also creates the opportunity for private businesses, foundations, and federal agencies to productively join in the R&D efforts that support their own long run goals.

2. Is it realistic to think that the states will support education R&D?

The question, of course, is what incentives would states have to do this?

First, states policy makers have been frustrated by the results of their efforts to improve achievement in their schools. They are increasingly aware that accountability measures can change the incentives for teachers and students to perform to higher standards, but incentives alone are not enough. Teachers and schools need to know how to improve student outcomes. We believe states are open to concrete examples of the potential for

using R&D to that end—a potential that is not now fully exploited. If we are successful at demonstrating concretely what a SERP would do to improve teaching and learning, to make the connections between R&D and practice that are not now being made – we believe we will build state support.

Second, through the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, the federal government has created more powerful incentives for states to engage in research-based practice. Once again, however, there is a gap between incentives and capacity. We believe that states will be receptive to supporting an institution that creates capacity for research-based practice at the state level. Indeed, the perceived push at the federal level has created a sense of passion in many state and local governments that can be harnessed for the creation of a research and development enterprise for which the states can claim ownership.

Third, early indications suggest receptivity on the part of state policy makers. Former Governors Geringer (Wyoming), and Barnes (Georgia) have expressed strong interest in working to create the compact of states. Former Gov. Hunt (North Carolina) spoke supportively of the SERP idea at the AERA convention in Chicago on April 23. The SERP idea was also well received at a steering committee meeting of the Education Commission of the states, with ECS chair Gov. Mark Warner (Virginia) responding favorably to the proposal.

3. *What would prevent states from simply opting out of the compact in tough times?*

We believe that to sustain long term state commitment, SERP will need to develop a program early on that genuinely supports teachers, administrators, and policy makers. The SERP portfolio must include a substantial number of projects that carry forward well- developed ideas that currently have limited impact in schools. Early successes, we believe, will strengthen the broad-based support that will sustain the enterprise in the long run.

4. *In what ways would the compact of states to support SERP differ from the compact that created the Education Commission of the States (ECS)?*

The history of ECS serves as a model for SERP in several respects. The proposal for a state compact emerged at a time when the federal government was playing an increasing role in education. The creation of a state compact was proposed in order to counterbalance the federal influence by creating a context in which states could come together to advance their common interests. We also draw lessons from the mechanism used for creating the compact: early support from foundations for an effort to create the compact, with the effort led by a state leader with high credibility.

What is different, however, is the role of the enterprise being created. ECS allows the states to share information on education policy and practice. While SERP would certainly promote information sharing, it would allow states to collectively fund research

and development efforts – an agenda that would *create* new knowledge, programs, and educational tools.

5. *How does the SERP effort relate to the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) at the U.S. Department of Education?*

SERP and the IES share several important goals: improving the quality of education research and development, making education research more responsive to the needs of practitioners, and insulating the education research enterprise from excessive political influence.

On several dimensions, the SERP proposal is quite different from – and we believe complimentary to – the IES effort. To be useful to classroom practice, much of the needed research and development must go on in the classroom context. The distinct roles of the federal and state governments requires that the former be some distance from the classroom. Federal agencies can certainly make funds available for classroom-based research. However the transactions costs for researchers and schools to work together is high on both sides. Schools that would like researchers to help them address specific problems of practice have few pathways that will lead to the relatively small community of researchers who want to work in schools and who are interested in the problem at hand. Similarly, researchers who are interested in working in schools confront a daunting array of challenges—from finding schools that would be open to researchers, to negotiating access to individual classes and permissions for all students involved in the research.

The SERP R&D infrastructure would create long-term relationships with schools and school districts that would serve as “field sites.” By taking on the arrangements for this type of work at an institutional level, individual researchers and school personnel will not be taxed so highly for participation. With these field sites in place, conditions improve for agencies like IES to effectively carry their mission forward. Researchers might well apply for an IES grant to conduct research in a SERP field site.

The SERP proposal argues for a substantial expansion in the funds made available for education research and development. States now spend over \$300 billion per annum on K-12 education delivery. In other sectors-- medicine, agriculture, transportation, communication—it is assumed that an investment of several percent of the “production” budget should go to R&D. As in other sectors, we would expect the R&D investment to yield a return in education—in the form of fewer repeat grades, fewer special education placements, higher graduation rates, reduction in teacher time required (eg. with more efficient assessment techniques). We believe the mismatch in the size of the K-12 budget and the investment in R&D is rooted in part in the separation of the R&D enterprise entirely from the production enterprise. Bringing the states into the equation will, we believe, allow for an expansion in total resources that will be required if the goals that

SERP and IES share – linking high quality research with educational practice—are to be achieved.

As a public-private partnership SERP is different from a government agency. While anchored by state funding, SERP would draw new resources from the private sector as well. The interest of the private sector in contributing to improvements in K-12 education is demonstrated in efforts like that currently being led by Louis Gerstner, former chairman of IBM, who has joined ranks with the chief executives of American Express and Boeing to form a task force on the quality of teaching. Since the SERP agenda would focus on teaching, learning, schools as organizations, and education policy, it would provide a well-organized vehicle to facilitate private sector participation in any of these areas that corporations wish to pursue.

Finally, it is widely acknowledged that the capacity in the field for high quality education research and development is now quite limited. That capacity must be created as a research and development program builds. Because the SERP enterprise would conduct an in-house program of research that would draw in post-doctoral fellows and would provide the infrastructure for researchers in a variety of disciplines to focus their efforts on problems of education practice, we believe SERP can expand the capacity for the type of work that IES and other agencies wish to fund.

6. *Who will set the agenda for the research and development program?*

The proposed design of the organization puts specific program decisions in the hands of the SERP director, who would serve at the discretion of the governing board. The director would be best positioned to evaluate the existing research program, and steer it in productive directions. Two advisory committees would inform the process: an agenda setting advisory committee, and a scientific advisory committee. The former would consist of outstanding school superintendents, principals, and teachers, other policy makers, and researchers. This group would bring to the process direct knowledge of, and experience with, the needs of schools and the work of conducting classroom based research. The scientific advisory committee would play an oversight role, assuring that questions that are being asked can be adequately answered through the proposed research design.

To effectively conduct an R&D program in school settings, the needs of the schools in which the program is being conducted must be taken into account. The overlap between the SERP agenda and the interests of the schools will, we expect, be continuously negotiated.

7. *Where will a SERP headquarters be located?*

SERP field sites would be located throughout the country. Where the SERP headquarters will be located will be determined by the founding partners. Considerations include the proximity of the headquarters to multiple research universities as well as to a large school district that is interested in serving as a field site.

8. *What about all the existing efforts to link research and practice in education?*

The SERP proposal is about creating coherence in education research and development; creating common research protocols and data collection efforts, linking work going on in many different locations so that it can be more cumulative, and carrying promising research and development efforts through all of the stages of work necessary to have an impact on practice. The obvious place to begin that work is to sustain and build on existing successful efforts to link research and practice. Planning efforts in the launch phase will draw extensively on those most active currently in the kinds of work SERP would advance.

9. *In what way would the business community be involved in SERP?*

We envision three different roles for the business community. First, businesses have been most generous in supporting efforts to improve education in the communities in which they are located. Because SERP would consist of field sites around the country whose mission it is to advance our understanding of how to improve learning outcomes, businesses in those communities would be obvious targets for support. Their interests would clearly overlap directly with those of SERP.

Second, members of the business community who have been involved in the SERP effort have made the case that private businesses would contribute to education R&D more broadly if it were clear how to do so effectively. No structure currently exists to give businesses confidence that if they support effective R&D, it will actually change education practice. If SERP is successful in its mission, it would create a place for businesses to invest in improving education outcomes.

Finally, the SERP work would support the development of new programs and tools that might be effectively marketed by business enterprises. Attention will be devoted in the SERP launch phase to the legal and practical arrangements that can be made to harness the resources of entrepreneurs to fund R&D that could lead to marketable products.