Building Strong Collaborations between Researchers and School Districts: Lessons Learned from the USC Project to Learn about Youth

Overview

Optimizing Education Quality and Student Outcomes: The Role of K-12 Educators

Educators have a vested interest in ensuring delivery of high quality education for student success and are often perceived as having a primary role in achieving this goal. However, creating an optimal learning environment is challenging and resources necessary to achieve desired outcomes are often lacking, including:

- Time/competing demands
- Financial support
- Means to collect, store, manage, and utilize relevant data for implementing evidence-based practices
- Support to implement interventions with high fidelity
- Specialized training/expertise (e.g., emotions/behavioral health)
Optimizing Education Quality and Student Outcomes: The Role of University Researchers

University researchers in a variety of disciplines have a direct interest in promoting student success or conducting studies with educational relevance, including:

- Physical activity and nutrition
- Emotional/behavioral health
- School readiness

Despite the relevance of this research for education, educators and researchers often operate in silos, resulting in a persistent research-to-practice gap.

Although research does occur in community settings (e.g., schools), academics often initiate and drive the process with little input from stakeholders (e.g., K-12 educators, parents).

Advancing a Shared Agenda: School-University Partnerships

Increasingly recognized as a promising means to improve education and student outcomes:

- E.g., Institute for Education Sciences (IES) grant established to support partnerships between educators and researchers that aim to address persistent problems in education

Collaborative partnerships between K-12 educators and university researchers can be mutually beneficial (e.g., resource and knowledge sharing), enhance work quality, and support dissemination and implementation of interventions.

Fostering School-University Partnerships

Community-academic partnership model:

- Guide the initiation and maintenance of effective collaborations
- E.g., community-based participatory research (CBPR)
- Goal is to reduce the research-to-practice gap by facilitating mutually beneficial partnerships that address needs of the community

Key facilitators include:

- Trust between partners
- Respect among partners
- Shared goals, vision, and/or mission
- Good relationship between partners
- Effective and/or frequent communication
USC Project to Learn about Youth

**Primary objectives:**
- To estimate the proportion of children and adolescents (grades K-12) in a specified population with emotional and/or behavioral health concerns, including tic disorders
- To describe rates of current and past mental health treatment in this population
- To quantify the measure of medications prescribed to treat emotional or behavioral health concerns in this population
- To examine change in prevalence rates of emotional and/or behavioral health concerns over time (project occurred twice, beginning in Fall 2014 and Fall 2015)

**Objectives addressed in 2-stage process:**
- Stage 1: Universal behavioral/emotional health screening (completed by teachers)
- Stage 2: In-depth evaluations with select subset of students and a parent/caregiver

**Stage 1: Population Characteristics**

**Students in grades K-12 attending schools in a SC school district**

**District**
- 20 schools in catchment areas across rural, urban, and suburban areas
- 11 elementary schools (grades preK-5)
- 4 middle schools (grades 6-8)
- 3 high schools (grades 9-12)
- 1 vocational school (high school students) and 1 alternative learning center (middle/high school students)

**District Enrollment**
- 10,443 students enrolled (Fall 2014); 10,454 students enrolled (Fall 2015)
- District is 67% White, 30% Black, 3% other
- 58% of students in the district were in poverty in 2016, according to SC Dept of Education "School Report Card"

**Stage 1: Eligibility and Study Sample**

**Eligibility**
- All students were eligible to participate in universal screening, unless parents opted out of the study (passive consent)
- Parents opted out for 10% of students in Fall 2014 and 7% in Fall 2015

**Study sample**
- Fall 2014, teachers completed online screener for 7,819 students, representing 76.7% of all eligible students
- Fall 2015, teachers completed online screener for 7,811 students, representing 75.9% of all eligible students
Stage 1: Procedures

Online screener
- Measures commonly used to assess teacher-reported behavioral/emotional concerns in youth
  - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)-2 items
  - BASC-2 Behavioral and Emotional Screening System (BESS): 27 items
  - Assessment of past or present tic behaviors: 2 items

Confidentiality and incentives
- Teachers completed online screener using students’ ID numbers—not names.
- Teachers received $4-$5 per completed survey.

Items of interest in present study
- Students categorized as at-risk based on standard, published cutoffs on SDQ indicating high risk and/or presence of past or present tic.

Stage 2

Study sample
- Students who completed Stage 1 were categorized as at-risk or not at-risk for emotional/behavioral health concerns.
- Students randomly selected for Stage 2 participation based on risk status, gender, and school level (elementary vs. middle/high school).

Recruitment/consent
- Packet mailed to parents/guardians of selected students containing information about Stage 2 participation as well as a opt-out postcard for those who were not interested in participating.
- Phone calls made to relay Stage 2 information and to schedule appointments.
- Parents/guardians and students completed consent/assent forms prior to data collection.

Stage 2 Procedure
- Parent/guardian and student (Grades 4-12) completed a 2- to 3-hour evaluation with research staff at a centrally located school in the district.
  - Questionnaires completed by parents and students.
  - Structured clinical interview completed by parents.

Progress thus far
- Stage 2 evaluations completed with 277 students/parents for fall 2015 project.
  - Stage 2 evaluations have been completed with 377 families to date for Fall 2015 project and ongoing.
  - Final goal is to complete evaluations with a total of 650 families by Fall 2017.
Establishing Collaborations in the USC Project to Learn about Youth: Processes and Strategies

**Building relationships with district personnel**
- Advocate/champion of project in district—Dr. Owen
- Public relations coordinator
- Principals of all 20 schools—letters and meetings
- Teachers—letters, meetings, and website
- Data coordination for district
- School board and superintendent—presentation

**Communications emphasized**
- Discussion of goals
- Relevant benefits to families and district; addressed concerns and questions
- Collaborative work
- Included district feedback and suggestions throughout (for example, parent and teacher letters)

**Providing information to parents**
- Website
- 2 letters countersigned by principals
- Press release
- Information in school newsletters
- Automated call from district
- Stage 2 letters and phone calls
- Stage 2 free evaluation reports
Thank you!

Learning Objectives
1. Learn strategies for building strong collaborations between researchers and school districts.
2. Understand the basics of the USC Project to Learn about Youth (PLAY).

REFERENCES