

Research Practice Partnership Selection Panel Minority Report

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As the director of education research in the D.C. Auditor’s office (ODCA), I was asked by D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson to serve on the selection panel for an independent research organization to partner with the District in an education research practice partnership, or RPP. In my role at ODCA, I have provided prior RPP-related [testimony](#), [correspondence](#) and a background memo on the Chicago Consortium RPP (UChicago Consortium) for Chairman Mendelson. The search panel met six times and vetted three candidates: Bitric, the Urban Institute (Urban), and George Washington University (GWU). Bitric did not meet initial scoring criteria and did not move beyond the second meeting.

On December 28, 2020, the panel voted to select Urban as the research partner for the purpose of starting an RPP in the District. I was the sole panelist voting for GWU. Not reflected in the 5-1 vote is the fact that the rubric scores for each applicant—completed twice by all six panelists—were nearly identical in two rounds of scoring. Both the final overall scores and subsection rubric scores are included below for reference. In the second round, Urban received an average score of 83 points and GWU an average score of 81.5 points. In each round each applicant received both higher and lower totals in subsections of the rubric, i.e., even though one applicant's average score was higher overall, there was no applicant whose average score was highest across all subsections of the rubric. The total scores for Urban and GWU were so close it was almost a tie, and a difference in means of 1.5 points would not typically lead to a 5-1 vote.

Research Practice Partnership Selection Final Rubric Scores

Overall Scores		
	GW	Urban
C1	79	91
C2	95	94
C3	87	56
M1	72	83
M2	92	97
M3	64	77
Mean Score	81.5	83
*Green is max; Orange is min		

Subscores- Urban							
	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	Average
Knowledge and Expertise	28	28	19	28	29	26	26.3
Partnership Personnel & Collaboration	16	18	12	18	18	18	16.7
Data Use, Protection	20	18	12	14	20	12	16.0
Research Methods	12	15	4	14	15	12	12.0
Financial Management	15	15	9	9	15	9	12.0
Total	91	94	56	83	97	77	
Subscores- GW							
	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	Average
Knowledge and Expertise	22	28	24	24	28	20	24.3
Partnership Personnel & Collaboration	18	20	18	16	20	14	17.7
Data Use, Protection	18	20	18	14	20	18	18.0
Research Methods	12	12	12	9	15	9	11.5
Financial Management	9	15	15	9	9	3	10.0
Total	79	95	87	72	92	64	
*Green means the applicant that got the greatest subscore.							

A better way

One perspective shared by all panelists was that we were choosing between two qualified candidates. In recognition of this fact I twice proposed that we recommend to the Council and the Mayor that the District ask the two qualified applicants to join forces and reapply together, at which point their application would be selected. I raised this solution for three primary reasons and still believe it is the best course of action for the District. First and foremost, such a collaboration would unquestionably leverage more RPP resources for the District. Second, having the applicants themselves join forces would mirror the type of work that successful RPPs do. Joining forces would require the applicants to build trust and bridges across lines of difference. An RPP's main objective is to create relevant, meaningful research that is both useful and used. Their effectiveness is almost entirely subject to trust; it is the lifeblood of the enterprise. Instead of deepening current divisions in education via the selection, this path would create a true "messy middle" and a model of communication and collaboration. Finally, the collaboration reflected by joining forces would be attractive to outside funders. The world of RPP funders has been anxiously watching the District process, interested in helping but also wary of the uncertain education landscape in D.C. The possibility of supporting two strong applicants in partnership with the District would be compelling to funders.

The proposal was unfortunately dismissed by most panelists. I also shared this option with Chairman Mendelson prior to the final meeting.

The better proposal

There are three primary reasons why GWU had the better application. First, research practice partnership work is fundamentally different from other types of research and GWU repeatedly demonstrated that they understood and valued that difference. The application and supplementary materials discussed the type of research products that an RPP produces and how those are markedly different from traditional research, particularly in the methods used. Most RPP work is descriptive and

iterative in nature. It is rarely causal and typically does not involve quantitative questions with clear beginnings and ends. Further, their understanding of what it means to be a true collaborative partner, different from a traditional researcher, shone through in both explicit processes and tone. In fact, GWU scored slightly higher in the “Partnership Personnel and Collaboration” section of the rubric, on average. Finally, GWU’s application was the only one to incorporate a racial and social justice and equity lens and explicit commitments in their original proposal, reflecting again an understanding of how the power dynamics inherent in true collaborative research must be different from the status quo.

GWU also showed fluency in best practices in the field of research partnerships. They demonstrated an understanding gained from other RPPs, of best practices around data cleaning and sharing of student and staff level administrative data with research partners. Many useful descriptive studies and collaborative projects with school districts have been produced when researchers themselves are responsible for deeply understanding the data at hand, with all its strengths and flaws. The reason this knowledge matters is that researchers can easily produce misleading and inaccurate work without deep data knowledge and insights. This has happened and continues to happen in education research, and GWU clearly understood how to prevent this kind of misstep, a sophistication absent in the Urban proposal.

Finally, as a research university, GWU represents the most independent, democratized position possible for a research practice partner, especially when compared with a think tank that can be more vulnerable to political positioning and funder goals than a deeply endowed university. Significant work in the field of [political science](#), [sociology](#), and [education](#) has articulated the potential undemocratic nature and role of foundations and other non-governmental actors in education [research](#) and policy. GWU’s application specifically addressed independence from funders using a strategy of diversity in funding across both public and private sources and committed to having all research partners complete conflict of interest statements unique to the partnership. Perceived and actual independence are fundamental to establishing and growing trust, which is the single most important attribute when it comes to an RPP’s success.

Specific concerns

The rubric illustrates areas where panelists had concerns when comparing the two applicants. But while significant critiques of the selected candidate were mentioned they went largely undiscussed. In fact, the panel voted against discussing these issues at our final meeting. These are the areas of quality control, conflict of interest, and independence, and I explain each concern in order to recommend that they be carefully addressed by Urban and the District as part of moving forward.

Conflict and independence

While neither application was free of all potential conflict, the conflict of interest issues with Urban's application were concerning and again the panel chose not to robustly discuss them. One of Urban's partner's education work is funded in large part by the Walton Foundation, well-known for its ideological stance on school choice. Another Urban partner's work is funded primarily by select charter local education agencies (LEAs) in the District. Financial interest can be an important driver of serious conflict, and it is unclear how that conflict will be abated for an organization whose sole work and revenue is derived from select LEAs in the District. It may be difficult to do rigorous and transparent work beneficial to the entire District without putting at risk already-existing client and funder relationships.

While declining to fully discuss these issues the panelists did express concern about GWU's proposal that the District provide financial support for the partnership. Panel members viewed potential government funding, more than foundation funding or client-based funding, as a threat to independence. Despite evidence that other RPP's do receive government funds, and the District's RPP would presumably use in-kind government staff hours, this diversity in funding was perceived as a flaw in GWU's application.

Quality control

In its formal application and virtual interview, Urban and its partners presented examples of research that do not meet the accepted academic standards of high-quality RPP research although to be sure, Urban's application states that it will conduct quality control with rigor. I hope that stronger quality control measures will be put in place for the RPP going forward.

To illustrate this concern, Urban and two of its partners cited work from [Urban](#) and [EmpowerK12](#) claiming to show that gentrification is not a significant contributing factor in the District's test score rise but the data and methods used did not answer this question. The two studies cited used aggregate proficiency rates and aggregate test score levels across 3rd grade through 12th grade, over time, in the District. Using aggregate data in this way assumes that the District has a steady distribution of test takers and student composition across grade levels and tests. The assumption is not correct. Checking the reported number of test takers by grade and test shows that the number of high school test takers decreased in the District from 2016 to 2018, while elementary and middle school test takers has been increasing. As high school scores were lower, on average, this decrease creates a false sense of increasing scores across the continuum. There are similar important racial and ethnic changes in the distribution of test takers, by grade, over time. These assumptions are not trivial nor are they typical of high-quality education research. To be clear, I do not know the answer to the question about gentrification and test scores. Nor do I know if it is one that District stakeholders want to pursue. I am certain that the cited research does not answer that question.

Second, in the virtual interview, EmpowerK12 presented research on [learning loss](#) during the pandemic that also did not adhere to accepted standards of transparency and quality control in education research. As a result, the conclusions about learning loss are not fully supported by the data. The cited study claims that findings represent all D.C. students, yet the study does not analyze data from all DC LEAs, and it excludes significant amounts of data from the analysis due to presumed testing irregularities. While it is common to exclude data, studies that employ exclusions typically go to great lengths to describe the new analytic sample and any differences from the larger sample, and then run all inferential models with both the full sample and the analytic (smaller) sample and note the differences. Instead, in this instance detailed sample comparisons and full sample analyses are left to the appendix and not discussed in the report. Further, there was variation in changes in learning, including gains and losses for various subgroups and this variation was given less emphasis in favor of a conclusion focused on significant learning losses. Finally, the study does not discuss any of its limitations which is expected in education research and RPP research.

Third, in Urban's [recent report](#) on the relationship between student commuting times and student achievement, an important standard variable was left out of the analysis: prior student achievement. This means that the study examined relationships between commuting times and end-of-the-year achievement for various groups but did not estimate the impact of commuting times on how much

students learned in the school year. It is difficult to find education research with access to prior student achievement that does not control for it in inferential modeling. Additionally, the study concludes that there is no harmful impact of commuting on student achievement, so traveling some distance to schools should not worry education stakeholders in the District. However, the study shows that affluent students have longer commute times than students with lower socioeconomic status. This means that the overall impact of commuting is influenced by affluent students. Unfortunately, the study leaves us with a quality control problem and fails to sufficiently answer the question that is most compelling: does commuting impact the achievement of students who considered at-risk?

The path forward

While the panel's statutory responsibility is complete, the work of the RPP has yet to begin. Important next steps include creation of the RPP Advisory Committee required in the law. I urge the Advisory Committee and the District's new research partner to commit to high standards of research, transparency, equity, and independence in their work together through their forthcoming documented mission statements, goals, protocols and practices around all the topic areas identified below.

Work together to establish internal and external processes around quality and transparency. The Advisory Committee and the research partner should gather best practices around quality control and transparency from other RPPs to use in crafting such policies collaboratively for the District's RPP. Some examples include detailed, post hoc, transparent analytic decision-making for every choice made in a study, requirements regarding how sample sizes are reported and described, requirements for sharing code or detailed, interim descriptive data output with practitioner partners and the Advisory Committee throughout the course of a project, and requirements around what independent peer review means in this context and how that should be implemented and reported.

ODCA will shortly be publishing a report detailing data flaws in public education data in the District. The Advisory Committee and research partner should have a clear-eyed understanding of these limitations and the type of work needed to responsibly use such data. Data cleaning and sharing processes need to be documented and, ideally, a data working group would be established within the Advisory Committee, or in conjunction with OSSE's data governance committee.

Address threats to independence and possible conflict. The Advisory Committee and research partner should engage in robust, honest dialogue about independence and conflict as they relate to all research partners in the RPP. Every partner presents different potential conflicts, and these should be both documented and addressed collaboratively with specific steps to head off potential bias. The research partner should make very clear that any researcher or organization interested in working with the RPP must be open to such discussion and abide by clear rules and explicit steps to preclude bias. Some RPPs use contracts to specifically spell out and assure adherence to these commitments; this strategy could be useful in the District.

Build collaborative capacity in the research partner to establish and grow trust. As mentioned above, RPP work is unlike other research. There is a wealth of evidence showing that researchers have difficulty transitioning to these new roles and responsibilities. Because others have struggled through this process there is good evidence about how to clearly define these new roles up front and how to support researchers in this process. I recommend that the research partner devote consistent time and resources toward supporting this shift in perspective and responsibilities with the partnership. Some practices can be low-cost, such as forming professional learning communities to support this change,

but all take time and commitment. This critical understanding of how collaborative research is different should be codified in mission statements and any agreements among research partners so that any researcher wishing to engage with the partnership has the role, expectations, and support needed clearly articulated up front.

Commit to the democratization of research in the RPP. The most impactful work in RPPs today upsets the [traditional balance of power](#), access to data, and who is seated at the education policy table. Urban committed in its application to doing research that directly addresses inequality. This is only possible with a critical understanding of the power dynamics and structural inequality embedded in the traditional research process. In a recent article entitled, [No Small Matters: Reimagining the Use of Research Evidence From A Racial Justice Perspective](#), David Kirkland describes the power structures in research that must be recognized and dismantled in order to truly address inequality. He writes, “It would be naïve to consider the use of research evidence a neutral act. That is, attempting to conceptualize the use of research evidence without critical attention to why, who, and for whom that evidence is used misses a vital truth: The use of research evidence is not only embedded in systems of power, it is a system of power.”

Along the same lines, Fabienne Doucet [shares a list of seven inequities](#), “rooted in power dynamics, that stand in the way of the potential impact research can have” from Chicago Beyond, a philanthropy that specifically invests in community-led, equity-centered research. These seven inequities provide a roadmap for the District’s RPP to commit to and follow, signaling a commitment to improving inequality in public education. I urge the Advisory Committee and research partner to recognize these inequities and power imbalances in both education and the research process and codify the clear and definitive mission and processes needed to serve the needs of the District’s students, schools, and communities. Only then will the research process at all times center around those most impacted.

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