



## Beth Vaade, Kerry Lawton, and Eric Grodsky on Research-Practice Partnerships in Education

September 2018 podcast episode transcript

Featuring Beth Vaade (Madison Metropolitan School District), Kerry Lawton (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction), and Eric Grodsky (Sociology and Educational Policy Studies, UW–Madison).

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

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Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor. This is our September 2018 episode and we're going to be hearing about research practice partnerships. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to sit down with Kerry Lawton of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction or DPI which is Wisconsin's State Education Agency—you'll hear him refer to it as SEA during the podcast, Eric Grodsky, who is an IRP faculty affiliate here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Beth Vaade of the Madison Metropolitan School District. Between the three of them, they're involved in a couple of partnerships that we'll be talking about here—Beth and Eric are two of the co-directors of the Madison Education Partnership or MEP which is a more formal research practice partnership between the Madison Metropolitan School District and researchers at UW-Madison. We'll also be hearing about efforts between the Department of Public Instruction and researchers at UW-Madison that Kerry and Eric are involved in, which largely involve working together on data sharing and cooperative grants. So, when we first started talking, I asked the three of them to introduce themselves and tell us a little about their work.

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Lawton My name is Kerry Lawton and I'm happy to be here. I'm a research analyst here at DPI. I was hired to work on our latest state longitudinal data systems grant. So I work with the researchers and our research partners at UW to work on some of those specific things, specific research projects that were in that grant proposal, but then overall just sort work that has grown into this larger research partnership kind of work, sustainability of what we're doing right now, those kinds of things.

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Grodsky I'm Eric Grodsky, I'm a professor of sociology and educational policy studies. I codirect the Madison Education Partnership with my colleague Beth Vaade who is here and Katie Eklund who is not, who is in educational psychology. And I'm also PI on the university side of the partnership that Kerry was just describing.

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Vaade And I'm Beth Vaade and I am the qualitative research supervisor in the Madison School District in our Research & Program Evaluation Office. And I'm also co-director of the Madison Education Partnership.

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Chancellor So, initially I asked Eric and Beth to tell us about the Madison Education Partnership and how it came to be.

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Grodsky So, the Madison Education Partnership was formed between the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, which is housed in the School of Education, and the Madison Metropolitan School District, three years ago, I guess, but we started talking about it four, four and half years ago. And it was really formed from ideas that Jen Cheatham who is the superintendent of Madison's Public Schools and Bob Matthew, who directs WCER, shared about their objectives for increasing both the utility of research to

Grodsky, continued the district, but also the research opportunities the university enjoyed. And so they came to the table with some objectives related to those. Jen also came to the table having been at the Chicago Consortium for school research, which is one of the oldest research practice partnerships in education. So she kind of organically “got it” and was interested in seeing something like that get off the ground, so it was kind of a perfect time I think to build this partnership.

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Vaade Yeah, I feel like in a lot of the research-practice partnership circles you talk about your origin story and what got you up and going and I think it was this unique moment in time of these two leaders who had the same question about how to bring these two organizations together to better outcomes for kids here in Madison. And then were willing to invest the time and the people and get the right people on both sides to think about structurally, how do we put this thing together so that it can take on problems of practice that matter, not just today or even tomorrow, but over the course of time.

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Chancellor Could you give me some examples of some of the things that you’re working on right now?

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Vaade Yeah, so we’ve done a lot of work in the early childhood sphere, so particularly around our four-year-old kindergarten program. So we’ve done a variety of topics connected to it. We’ve looked at enrollment patterns, we’ve looked at outcomes for kids when they enter kindergarten to think about the impact of participating in that program. We’ve looked at family engagement, social and emotional learning, a whole kind of array of topics off of that. So that’s been one portfolio of work. We’ve also worked on looking at attendance patterns for kids in kindergarten through third grade, and thinking about how does attendance look for those kids and what does that mean for the outcomes they’re getting in school? So those are two pretty concrete examples of work we’ve kind of run the course with at this point.

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Grodsky And we’re currently in the field with an experiment looking at home visiting to see how home visits from kindergarten teachers, five-year-old kindergarten teachers can affect the transition kids and families experience going from four-year-old to five-year-old kindergarten. So that’s, I think, going to be really interesting but we’re only a couple of weeks into doing the home visits and collecting data on those.

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Chancellor I’m wondering if we can talk more about the origin story of how this got started. So it’s been in place for about three years, right. But I’m guessing there was planning leading up to this.

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Vaade It’s probably been four, four and half years. There was probably a solid year of nothing but conversations. And they started pretty global, I would say just thinking about the relationship between our two organizations and what kind of things we felt like would move the needle for kids, what were the best things about both sides we could bring to the table and a lot of trust building, a lot of kind of laying things out there. Guarded conversations that became less guarded over time. And so there was a team of six to eight people that would meet relatively frequently to talk this out. And then, I would say six months into that, there was this moment where Bob and Jen said ‘well, let’s go down this road.’ There was a lot of national research on research on research practice partnerships and their structures. We had gathered some, we had talked with people who worked in other organizations like the one we were thinking about, we had had a lot of conversation at the table and at that point, at least on my side, Jen said to myself and to my boss, Andrew Statz, who’s the head of Research, Accountability & Data Use —she said go and try to make this thing real, like actually sit down, let’s map it out, let’s play this out. So then at that point, both sides kind of brought their people to the table and we started meeting weekly, we started putting together MOUs and data use agreements and talking about how you’d structure this and that has continued. We meet weekly, we talk a lot. It’s a significant investment, but there was sort of this dating period and then you decided, nope, we’re really going to try to make this work, and then there was sitting down to figure out what it would look like if it worked. And now you just have to do the hard work every day to keep it moving.

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Chancellor There’s this sort of long history of varying relationships between the university, the state and local governments. Sometimes the relationships work really well and sometimes not. Were there any preconceptions going into it? You talked about being guarded...

Grodsky Yeah, I can say a little bit more about what led to it which is related to this, on the district side I can kind of make sense of this. Well, I can make sense on both. On the district side, as Beth said, there's a lot of work that's still going on in the district. One of the challenges for the district has been that while lots of work goes on in the district, very little comes back to them. And so, you'll have PIs from the University go in there, they've got grant money, they've got some seed money, they go do their stuff, they go away, and the district's like "hello? What did you find? Hello, hello?" So they're getting nothing back, and that was a problem from the district's side. From the University's side, whether true or not, the sense was that we were having increasing difficulties getting access to the district to do research. And so people were wondering what's going on, why isn't the district letting us in, so there's a lot of outside of our relationship in the partnership, there's a lot of relationship building the two institutions needed to do, and I think that having the partnership has helped that a bit. I think it's probably easier to see on the district side just because Beth's closer to that—where research funnels through is outside her door, whereas organizationally, I'm not close to the IRB or have a sense of all the work that's flowing through WCER. But that was part of what happened. Then, actually with the SEA, we have a long history of working with the Department of Public Instruction and that's also had its rough spots and its better periods. But the architect of the grant that funds this is a guy named Jared Knowles, who's a terrific analyst. He's a guy that came up through the University, got his doctorate in political science, and then came to work at the Department of Public Instruction. So when the call for proposals came out on this last grant cycle -- and it was quite explicit that the state education agency needed to partner with another organization to work with on research. It could have been a university, it could have been a nonprofit. But it had to be something outside of the state agency. Jared called us and the Institute for Research on Poverty because he knew both organizations. And we both of course very interested and that's how it started.

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Lawton And I do think it sort of comes into play even now as we sort of move through these partnerships. I think it's important to have somebody as the PI on the grant, but also high up within DPI who really trusts research and researchers and has a real understanding of the benefit that partnering brings. That sort of makes, as you're deciding which projects to do, how you go about it, how you move forward in the future, I think it just makes it a lot easier to just get these things rolling.

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Grodsky And it evolves to a point where we can suggest things. As Kerry was saying, it's sort of been a fairly flexible funding structure in terms of projects we take on. So, an example is with my colleague Beth Graue at WCER. We suggested that it might be beneficial to create a network of school districts that serve a large share of our African American youth to come together and think about early childhood education and opportunities for increasing equity in early childhood education. We came to the team at DPI with that idea and they said, you know, we think we can secure some funding from that grant to support this work. Why don't you go ahead and do that, right? It's a great project, I think it's going to be great for the state but I also think it takes that collaboration, that trust, for them to say, "ok, yeah, we think you can pull that off. We're willing to invest."

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Vaade And there's some level, and I imagine it's the same for DPI, but I know on the MMSD side, that the trust that you build through that, it allows to sort of believe that the motives are inherently good. Because I think, not only from the district perspective, we have all this research going on, we wouldn't hear about, but when we would hear about it, it would feel like it was more designed to as a public shaming of what was happening. Pointing out gaps, sort of doing the work that researchers do which is to lay these things out in the space so that people can talk about them feels like you're sort of undercutting the efforts of good, smart people who are trying to do right by kids. And I think you have to lay those things out so you can start crafting solutions. But it goes a lot better when you feel like you know the person who's saying it has the right things in mind, believes in the people in this organization, and is truly trying to help this organization, this leadership get better. And you can't do that unless you know each other to some degree. And so I know it's important that, like for Jen, for Andrew, for myself, that when we say something that isn't flattering about the district, it's coming from a place of 'well, we believe these are smart, capable people who will do right by kids when they have what they need. And we want to give them what they need. And it's a very different frame for research

- Vaade, continued than ‘we’re going to come find out things that you aren’t telling us.’ And you can’t get there without some relationship building. And I would think for DPI it would be very similar circumstance.
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- Chancellor Can I ask how, so far, you’ve been able to use this research. We talked about the “hello?” moment. So, if that’s not the case, or not the case as much, how is benefitting the classroom level or the district level, what are we seeing?
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- Vaade There are a lot of ways that it’s being used, and it’s diffuse, right? Like most policy work, it’s not as direct as you would like it to be. It’s not like MEP puts out a study that says this and the district says ok, here we go and off we go and the board says charge on and teachers go on and do it...it doesn’t work that way.
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- Grodsky Which would be awesome...
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- Vaade It would be awesome—on so many levels, but it doesn’t work that way, so you have to think about... We were having this conversation earlier today. You have to think about what does a win look like and what is successful use look like? And I think for us, the fact that MEP is part of conversations that we were never part of before, the fact that people are thinking and talking about the areas we’ve looked at, that they weren’t thinking and talking about before. So, our 4k work is a really good example, where we started to think about, now that we understand the program better, where can we push in to change these results? Maybe we need to think about why we’re getting this particular result. We had for a while we thought—so we had half day 4k. And there had been kind of this ongoing belief that there was a difference between the afternoon and the morning sessions. That, inherently, despite the fact that curriculum was the same, despite the fact that they had the same number of hours, that there was something about going to the afternoon or morning that made outcomes different for kids. And so, we went in and looked at that and basically said, not particularly. It really doesn’t particularly matter, not nearly as much as some other things about these programs do. And, it’s not like there was a moment in time where all the sudden everyone said, we all agree—we’re no longer talking about this. But in the last year and a half, I haven’t heard anybody bring that up to the degree that the previous four years that I heard people constantly saying that was going to be the thing. We’ve changed now what we think might be the change agent programmatically for 4k to be more along the lines of things that seem to be coming from the research, thinking about all day 4k, thinking about the sites that you’re choosing and who’s in those sites, and then thinking about instructional quality. Like, what’s actually going on in the classroom? Not, all of these other programmatic pieces that we thought were leading the charge, which is great. It tells our teachers ‘you matter, you are what’s making the difference for your kids’ and it gives us a place to think about what can we do to support you better to help kids—which has cued up a whole new line of research for MEP, so yeah, it’s been really great that way.
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- Lawton As a member of the SEA, I sort of see that impacting kids thing is something we can really bring to the table. What the researchers give us, expertise, knowledge, capacity—that’s sort of obvious. We can provide data and that’s great, and we can provide funding, grants, and that’s great. But I think that a lot of researchers want to have their research get out there and impact. And it’s not easy for us to have that change, but we can make sure that we get it to the people that can make decisions, or we can make sure we can broadcast it out to the state and do our best to make sure that there’s some uptake on what we learn from research.
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- Grodsky Which is satisfying, because you do want your research used—at least many of us want our research used in more applied fields. But it also makes the research much higher quality, because you gain insights—for example—this new stream of work to which Beth alluded, we have funding from the US Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences to do a line of work around professional development for four year old kindergarten. And we’ll start off doing structured observations of classrooms and then we’re going to work with the early learning lead, who is the co-PI on the grant, Cullen Witthuhn. And with 4k teachers to try to figure out what are the holes in professional

- Grodsky, continued development and what are the right approaches to try to addressing them? That has clear applied potential but it also means that you're on the ground with the people who engage in this work every day. And so the insights you can glean as a researcher are much richer than if you were in your office plugging away at secondary data, which I do all the time and I love, but there are limits to that, right? You're really, if you want to think about it differently, you're getting to the data generation process. You're right there and so you learn stuff that you wouldn't otherwise know.
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- Vaade And you get connections to the people who can use it, at a level that—organizations on paper are one thing, but organizations in real life are a totally different beast. And so you're able to then see how this stuff works in practice and you're able to figure out who are the players that get things done in organizations, who are the right people who need to be looped in to make these decisions to use what we have found.
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- Chancellor In the research part of the process, what does the collaboration look like? Are you reading each other's stuff? Are you writing together? How does that functionally work?
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- Lawton Eric usually emails me and tells me he wants me to do a podcast...
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- Grodsky It depends on the project and the partner. So with the partnership with the department of public instruction, thus far there's really been more of a division between the research side and the SEA where they're awesome about getting us the data, they're awesome about helping us think about things that crop up in the data and acting as liaisons to other parts of the department of public instruction. But the end of the day, it's my team that's writing a report up. We'll send it to them. They'll look at it. But it hasn't been a sort of coauthoring process, right? We're working toward that, we haven't gotten there yet. With the work with the Madison School District, we've taken the lead on writing but Beth has really been at the table from inception of what are we looking at and how are we going to analyze these data and what does this mean, preliminary results. She will edit the paper, she will rewrite stuff. She will frame it, she will give us insights into the organizational side—"I don't think you want to say it that way." Or, "you know what, if you say it this way, this is going to happen." And one time I was like "no it's not" and it turned out, that's what happened. I only had to learn that lesson once. So, much more involved in all steps of the process with the Madison side.
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- Lawton With our relationship, I think a lot of the collaboration and research is around the data involved. We fulfill data requests, but we're also there to say, 'hey, this is what we have, this is how it's collected, this is what inferences you can make from it, this is what you might want to be careful of.' Things like that. I think about coauthoring, and I'm not sure that we're ever going to have people here that are going to have time to sit down and write something. So I really see us being able to inform with the data. I would love to write but...
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- Grodsky You know—I don't think you're right though. I think the way it would work is we would write the first draft. That's the heavier lift. Then coming in and editing it or making suggestions about what's missing or what doesn't need to be there. That's the kind of stuff that, in our writing, that we've done for the most part.
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- Lawton I could edit a paper...
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- Grodsky There you go.
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- Vaade It's the best way to do it. I like to think that my value comes in not only sort of saying how to say something, but actually like, looking at those results and saying 'that doesn't—it might make sense, but it doesn't seem right' or 'explain this to me in a way we're going to understand.' And we've uncovered problems in the data we didn't realize were problems in the data until we started looking at results and going—that doesn't make sense to write up. And I don't know that a researcher independently would catch those things. In fact, from seeing the few reports we do get back, we



- Vaade, continued occasionally will get something as a district back and say ‘you just didn’t understand that data.’ Like, everything you said is correct about it, but you fundamentally missed something about it you would have had to catch really early on. I think a lot of the work of MEP, because there are multiple district voices at the table, those things get caught pretty early in the process. So by the time you get to the end, if we’re quibbling, we’re quibbling about what’s the action that should be taken, we’re not quibbling about does this actually mean what you said it meant...
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- Grodsky Well, sometimes they come up rather late in the process...
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- Vaade Sometimes... It’s iterative... But in these new studies, so in these new iterations of studies we have where we’re collecting new data as opposed to mining existing data, I think the district is also even more actively involved in that because you have to be in some ways, like to get into schools, to get access, to do things that people want to participate in. You need a different level of involvement if you’re truly going to say this is a partnership. It’s not a partnership if all we’re doing is opening the door for you. We have to be part of that the whole way.
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- Grodsky Another instrumental thing, having Beth at the table in the writing of this is that I will write things that I think aren’t academic and I turn out to be wildly incorrect. And she can not only help identify those rather efficiently and mercilessly, but also as we iterate through, how about if we said it this way, how about if we used a graph like this? Tremendously helpful in getting us where we need to be if we’re going to communicate to a broader audience. My capacity to communicate my research has increased markedly through our collaborations.
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- Chancellor Can we talk about reaching these outside audiences or what kind of reactions to these partnerships you’ve had from other people?
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- Grodsky So, in research practice partnership land, where Beth and I have spent a fair bit of time recently, partly because of funding we have from the Spencer Foundation, partly because we’re a member of the National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships, NNERPP...
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- Vaade Sure are...
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- Grodsky And you’re actually on the steering committee?
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- Vaade Yes I am...
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- Grodsky It’s sort of gratifying being recognized in that community for doing some pretty good stuff. It’s also I think we both find it very reassuring when we go to those meetings that like—we’re doing really well. We’re not at the bottom of the list. There are things that we are still working on as a partnership but there are a lot of things that seem to be humming along. And having recognition and appreciation from that group actually means something to us because they’ve been doing this for a little while longer than we have for the most part. It also increases the exposure of the partnership and of, for my purposes or the School of Education’s, for example, we’ve written a few blogs that go into Education Week which is a big trade publication in the education world. And people see that, other districts see that. Other superintendents see that. Other researchers see that. So it’s been good press for us, more broadly speaking. So, I think generally, reactions have been pretty positive. On the SEA side, it’s a little more of a closed community it seems like.
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- Lawton Yeah, and we have actually sort of been put up as a model—I have the phone calls with our federal monitors each month and they love what we’re doing on the research and really the partnership angle. I think that they’re very impressed with just the fact that we get together, you know? That we have meetings regularly.
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- Grodsky So the bar might not be that high...

- Lawton And so I was asked to do a session at one of their conferences and the at StatsDC in Washington DC, Eric and Maria Cancian were nice enough to come to Washington DC for the sole purpose of doing this hour presentation in front of ten people.
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- Grodsky It's a partnership—you do stuff that benefits your partner.
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- Lawton I know that—our federal monitor's name is Charles—I know that Charles is really sort of looking to us and wanting us to be more involved with the other states that are having SLDS. Because research and evaluation are sort of a core focus that a lot of people put into their grants, it was one of the things you could focus on, and a lot of people did.
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- Grodsky It also honestly, and we've talked about this at our other meetings, it helps a lot that we're all here, in Madison, right? I met with Beth this morning at WCER which is a four or six block walk from her office. Happened to bump into her up on the square around lunchtime, which is another eight blocks from my office, and then walked the other three blocks to DPI. Most partnerships don't have that ease of access. And I think that makes a lot of difference.
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- Lawton I agree. There's a certain amount of face to face that goes on. If we talk about trust, it's like being in the same room with each other and not trying to do everything through email where things are easily—you don't get any body language. If something happens, you can't see how dejected you feel about it. I really think it's important to; it's nice that we're all sort of together here
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- Vaade I think the point about face to face is really big, that there is just something about knowing someone as a person that makes you feel very different about their work, right? There's a level of you just sort of build trust, you can read emotion a lot better out of somebody and in the end they become real people. I've been with the district for six years, I've overseen all of our external research connections and conversations we have about researchers sort of as a unit or an amorphous robot human being over here can sound very different than if you say, let's talk about Eric. And if you talk about Eric, sometimes flattering, sometimes perhaps not so.
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- Grodsky Oh come on...
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- Vaade But they're real conversations and you have to think of like when we make these decisions about how we're going to react, I'm talking about a real human being who has kids and a family and lives down the street and I could bump into at Woodman's. There are realities to that are very different than "I'm going to talk to a researcher, I'm going to send them a formal letter and we're going to reply as an organization to them." And I'm sure it works in reverse. I'm sure when you talk about "The District" it's a lot easier to sort of to not think about the implications of what you're doing both relationally and technically, if you don't think of that actual human being. And so the in person, face to face, the time you spend makes the work better because you considering it in a much wider way than you were before.
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- Lawton This is great—all the trust and the face to face, but it also poses, not an issue, but if you're talking about sustainability, how do you sustain these things if somebody leaves for another job? You've got this other person coming in, they don't have the trust relationship, and that's what is hard about these things. You need to sort of get from the interpersonal to something institutionalized, but I don't think... Interpersonal is part of it. How do you get it past this small group of folks? I know that at DPI, how we're sort of looking at things in the future, if we can't separate it and we shouldn't separate it, we want to at least increase the connections. So we would like the faculty members that are teaching policy courses to have their students come in and share out their work and have discussions with us about policy.
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- Grodsky There are different challenges in the two partnerships I think for sustainability. I have my head much more around how I want to pursue it with the Madison Education Partnership than I do with the

Grodsky, continued partnership with the SEA. Partly because the Madison Education Partnership was always designed to be an organization. And so we have spent some time, Beth and I, talking about how we're not going to be in this position forever. What sort of work do we need to do to create an organization with staying power? And I think this is a common challenge, right? It's great while it lasts, but you want to make structures so that, if the next two directors don't get along as well as we do on our two sides, they can still get along well enough and the organization will still continue to yield benefits to the university and to the school district, right? Whereas with the work with the SEA, it really is grant driven at this point. And we're starting to talk now about how do we create a more sustainable relationship. My guess is the next step of that sustainability is writing more grants as opposed to creating an organizational structure. But, just as Kerry said, so I'm teaching a class in the fall where I've already hit up some folks at DPI to come talk to my students, and we'll hit them up to be an audience for their policy discussions and all that, so we'll still work on that. It's just a little more tenuous than having an organizational structure that both partners feed into.

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Vaade I think the beauty of these partnerships in some ways, especially in a community like Madison where everything is right here, you have the state agency, you have the second largest school district in the state, and a world-class research university, we're all kind of working on similar stuff, but we work alone a lot. And don't think it's because we want to, but sometimes you just don't know the people who know the people who know the people to put you all in the same room. The world is not that large of people doing this research work and so through the fact that I work with Eric on Madison Education Partnership and he works with Kerry, all of the sudden now I know something about SLDS that I didn't know before. And you start increasing the scope and my guess, the sort of hope, is that over time, you take on the bigger thornier problems that MEP couldn't take on alone, DPI can't take on alone, that you've built these relationships and networks of research that you can then start tackling bigger and bigger things because you have people at the table who are brokers to each other. I never intended—I was so worried during that MEP's origin, we've gotta get this thing to work right here. And one of these sort of unintended benefits is all the sudden we're tied into all of these different things and people that we weren't part of before. So, no longer can we be like awwwrgh... DPI... Oh, they have names. There are people there with names, talk about those people. There's a project we're working on, I know that through these other people they're also working on it too. Maybe there's a future to work together on that stuff. To me, that's what research practice partnerships at the next level are about. Your own partnership is a part of it but it's this belief in this more collective way of doing the work. That was very touching...

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Chancellor If you're giving advice to somebody that wants to start one of these... You've talked sort of generally about a lot of things like the face to face, the close proximity we have. What would you tell somebody who's looking to get started? I'm sure you've had this discussion with other groups, right?

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Grodsky I will give you my often poorly received first piece of advice to faculty. Not until you have tenure. It takes time, it takes investment up front. The first project we took on under MEP, I took on full well knowing there was no publication potential in that project at all. It was the right project for us to do, I have no regrets about doing it. But I knew, that was an investment in the school district and in the partnership, and ultimately then an investment in me—so I'm not saying I'm totally unaware that it has some benefits for me, but they're long term strategies, right? And if you're an assistant professor looking at tenure, that's not a great use of your time. Now, there are going to be opportunities hopefully that come up for more mature partnerships. So, for example, the work we're doing around home visiting, that's under a randomized control trial, which is something that never would have been able to happen had we not had this relationship and if there were a junior faculty colleague of mine who was interested in home visiting and approached me about getting involved in the project, I would be happy to bring her or him along on the project but would not encourage them to do it all by themselves. So there are ways to do it, but starting a research-practice partnership involves a substantial investment of personal time.



- Vaade So certainly the trust building aspect of it cannot be undersold. The time you have to spend, the amount of being willing to open up and have candid conversations and knowing that you won't be able to do that on day one, it will probably take a long time before you get to a point that you have them and you're probably not doing the right work until you can. I think all of that is important, I think there is a level of—we were talking about this earlier today—about you also have to be in it... Mutual but not simultaneous benefit. Was that your description? This belief that at times you're going to give and get nothing back and that's ok. In fact, it's not only ok, it's necessary. It can't be that every time we go into something that if I put some time in, I'm like come on, what's the district's benefit? Like, give something back to me. Sometimes I do things that fully, as in my job at MMSD and for the district, have no value in return to us, but they matter to my partner because I know that when the time comes, that that should be reciprocated on my end. And I think if you take that longer term view towards these partnerships, I feel like you're more likely to be successful. If you're sitting around every time thinking about, we both have to win, we both have to win, we both have to win, you're probably going to stumble because it just doesn't work that way. And certainly it hasn't worked that way for us, but it's worth it. It's worth it and you've just gotta have that view of, if this is work that's important to do and you believe makes a difference, you have to be willing to put in and kind of give a little a to get a little.
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- Lawton Yeah, I'd piggyback on that and just go back to the important of sort of flexibility and things. Like Eric was talking about, we have specific sort of projects. So once those get done, once you tick off the boxes of the sub tasks of the project plan, right eventually if you want to continue things, you're going to need more funding. It's sort of the difference between a partnership and contracted work. If you do one project and you say, oh, we found this, we're curious on this, and we might be able to tell you this and you say, sure. Yeah, go for it. I think that that's important.
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- Vaade I think the only other one that I think has helped a lot, and we've talked a little bit around it, is this idea of these folks that can cross the boundaries a little bit. There have to be people as part of your partnership that can speak both the research side and can speak the practice side, organizationally, in particular. If you want to do really good work that will also be used, you have to have people that understand at some level both sides of that equation. And if you don't, you have to have people that are at least willing to learn about it. They're very different beasts and you need to be able to come into it knowing that you'll have expertise on both but you have to be able to speak across. And it's a big part.
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- Grodsky The organizational brokering is something I totally underestimated. Among the many things, because, you know, I'm a professor, so I'm sort of an independent contractor, I work for the state, but I'm also kind of self-employed. I don't have a boss. And so my organizational structure is pretty flat. So I don't spend a lot of time thinking about, well, how do I need to work this out so that I can satisfy these people, get access to this thing and make sure these people know about it and these people use it, right? It's a lot of different groups to coordinate and I would have no idea how to do that and come up in both the partnerships in different ways.
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- Vaade Umm Hmm. Yeah, I think it's there's the level of 'you can't say that, someone will get fired'—that someone being me. And there's also the level of you telling me, 'I can't change that. That fundamentally undermines the research.' You have to be able to stand your ground on both those sides. But you do have to be able to talk across them and be like 'I can recognize and I can see how what you're saying is important, so let's figure out how to move from that.' Which is very different than a contract or very different than an independent research that lives on sort of the other two poles there.
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- Grodsky I have not given my customary shout out to my friend Jack Jorgenson who is part of the reason I got into all this stuff. Jack is a wonderful human being, has worked for the Madison Metropolitan School District. Has worked for the Department of Public Instruction. He is incredibly dedicated to kids, but is also great at relationship building and sustaining. When I first came back to Wisconsin after working at a couple other universities, I was already very interested in working on an equity agenda to reduce inequalities in kids' opportunities. And, was doing some stuff with Jack and Jack kept saying

Grodsky, continued relationships are really, that's critically important, and I would say kind of like, yeah, yeah, yeah, but these are technical problems, we should be able to look at experimental evidence, bring some data to the table, we're going to talk to people, oh yeah -- that's that the way to do it, and it's going to be awesome! And that's totally incorrect. And Jack, God bless him, patient soul, brings me around to like, ok, I guess relationships are pretty important and worth building and that's been a game changer for my career. I really enjoy this work at a professional and personal level and I fully appreciate the importance of these relationships. Even when sometimes there's a little overhead to maintaining them. And I don't know that we're different, I think about a buddy of mine who works at Google who used to work at CitiGroup. It's relationships. Like, that's how you get things done. And it took me a while to get that, but I think it's helped me do better research, but also be a more effective policy person.

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Lawton You said 'don't be a jerk' once. I take that to heart.

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Grodsky I did. That's the primary rule. Don't be a jerk.

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Vaade Yeah, there is some level of just like, be someone people would want to be around. I think sometimes in professional settings, particularly when the stakes are higher or the problems feel more meaty, people, in an effort to be more intense about them can just be people no one wants to be around, right? And can hammer that point. You do have to have some amount of sense of humor, ability to laugh a little bit about this, ability to be someone you'd want to hang out with. And you're probably going to get more work done and you're probably get more meaningful work done at that. I think we've been very lucky to have organizational support of these partnerships and, personally, from people that matter to our careers, but also organizations that believe in doing the right thing by kids and want to use evidence. I think there is something to that. You take that away and these are going to be really hard to make happen. I also think my main feeling is also, you can always do this work, if you're willing to put the time in and do it, you can figure out how to do it right. People inherently, particularly in education, want help and they want more voices at the table and they don't have the answers, and it's a very lonely feeling to feel like you're out there and you're not getting what you want for that six year old that's sitting there and you don't know what do next. And so, the more people that can come to the table and not be jerks and do good work the better off we all are. And I think partnerships in particular, for me if there's professors sitting around being like 'I'm not sure...' I'm like just come in and try this work because you're going to find that people want your help. They really do.

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Grodsky And it's kind of funny doing this podcast for IRP because the Institute for Research on Poverty has been doing this with the Department of Children and Families forever, right? From the data sharing agreements that enable a tremendous amount of good research to the cross-pollination of what's an important research topic, what data resources do we have to bring to bear, to the engagement of policymakers which I think Jennifer Noyes and Lonnie Berger and Maria Cancian do incredibly well. So, it's not like we just invented this. IRP has been doing this for years.

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Chancellor I've noticed that a lot of the projects you've all collaborated on do focus on equity, and obviously there are big ramifications for that around our community and the state. Is there anything you want to say about that?

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Lawton I would say that partnerships are extremely important to solving issues of equity. We have education data here, right? And we know that educational outcomes are not just what happens in the schools, but we don't have access to that. We have to partner with other people to get a full understanding. We want to provide the right supports to the right kids at the right time. And you can't do that by yourself. We've got a great longitudinal data system but we can't get that without partnering with practitioners to know their particularly context and what they can and can't do in terms of an intervention or just what their climate's like. And we can't do that without experts in early childhood and IRP. I just think it's incredibly important if you want to actually start decreasing or eliminating the gaps.

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Vaade I feel like the problems of practice that matter to the district, many if not all are really focused around

Vaade, continued issues of equity. We have amazing things in our schools that we have done for kids and we have amazing kids and teachers who have—some of the best things you can see in education happen in Madison schools. And at the same time we have some of the most problematic and disturbing gaps that you can see. We need help with that. So, I don't see a space in which MEP is ever doing work that isn't sort of at its heart focused around these equity issues and trying to really disrupt inequities and figure out ways where we can end up in a space. Certainly lots of our historically underserved groups are doing better as a result of the research work that we're doing. I think it's critical.

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Grodsky It is the fundamental shared agenda. And it's the one that led me to graduate school in the first place, it's my academic work is all about social inequality and educational inequality. So it's natural that when the agendas of the organizations we're partnering with and with our own research agendas align, that's what you go with. And it happens to be equity for both moral and intellectual reasons, but I think that really is our fundamental common ground.

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Chancellor I want to give a big thank you to Beth Vaade, Kerry Lawton, and Eric Grodsky for taking the time to share their work with us. If you want to learn more about the Madison Education Partnership, you can visit their website at [mep.wceruw.org](http://mep.wceruw.org) and to learn more about the research partnership work under the State Longitudinal Data System Grant, you can visit [dpi.wi.gov/slds](http://dpi.wi.gov/slds).

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