

## How to Launch a Research-Practice Partnership

With Michèle Foster, Matt Linick, Michael Strambler, Joanna Meyer, Clare Irwin, and George Coleman

Launching a research-practice partnership can look different for each partnership: between the local context, resources available, and which problems are most pressing, an RPP's goals, priorities, and structure can vary greatly. While each one's path is unique, resources on creating RPPs (see [here](#) and [here](#), for example) do shed light on and provide guidance around some general [key tasks](#) to consider.

Conversations within our network have also highlighted the value of learning from each other and sharing experiences around the launching process, with partnerships in NNERPP being able to help each other in navigating this sometimes daunting and seldomly straightforward task. For this “How To” article, we asked three of our members -- all at different stages in their journey -- to share some of their experiences and insights around launching a partnership.

Joining us for this conversation are Michèle Foster from the [University of Louisville-Jefferson County Public Schools \(UL-JCPS\)](#) partnership, Matt Linick representing the [Cleveland Alliance for Education Research \(CAER\)](#), and Michael Strambler, Joanna Meyer, Irwin Clare, and George Coleman from the [Partnership for Early Education Research \(PEER\)](#).

The UL-JCPS partnership was founded in 2016. It is currently working most directly with one school in Jefferson County Public Schools in particular: Michèle describes the partnership as almost like a mom and pop business with a very small staff.

CAER, also founded in 2016, has three partners that form the RPP: the Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, and the American Institutes for Research.

PEER is a state-level partnership among early childhood education stakeholders in Connecticut and was founded in 2014. Partners include the Connecticut State Department of Education and the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, the Yale School of Medicine, Cooperative Educational Services, Education Development Center, and the communities of Bridgeport, Norwalk, and Stamford.

Join us as we hear about these partnerships' experiences in getting the RPP off the ground!

### What are 1 or 2 things that need to be negotiated before you actually start working together in the partnership?

All three partnerships name [securing organizational support](#) as an absolutely necessary step before working together. More importantly, it's not just general support for the RPP that's needed -- Michèle, Matt, and the PEER team all point out the need for the [“right kind” of organizational support](#). For Michèle's partnership, that meant first ensuring that everyone at the university and school district understood exactly what they were agreeing to participate in, from defining the key features that make up an RPP to how they differ from the many short-term partnerships districts often form with universities for specific purposes. Michèle adds that buy-in must come from [multiple levels](#) of the participating organizations.

Matt says that [understanding the goals of the people involved in partnership work](#) is the very first step. The partnership should be aligned to these goals, and organizational support should be directly related to them and must come from [everyone's](#) organization.

The PEER team adds that organizational support should come from top-level [leaders](#) at the organizations involved in the partnership -- starting out, PEER secured letters of support from the superintendent of the school district and the chief executive of the largest community-based provider in each community -- but it is then also critical to identify others who can “speak for each organization in negotiating shared priorities among partners,” because it is not necessarily these top-level executives who will engage in partnership activities, such as negotiating the research agenda. These [representatives](#) should have adequate knowledge of their organizations' strategic plans and research needs and should also have the authority to commit to partnership projects. “Ensuring that [the right people](#) are at the table helps reduce the risk of basing the work of a partnership on goals that may not be meaningful to the organization as a whole,” according to PEER.

### What has been your greatest challenge in getting a partnership off the ground?

Interestingly, all three partnerships experienced a different top challenge in getting their partnership off the ground. For CAER, Matt says [time](#) was the greatest challenge: “Doing this work well

## How to Launch a Research-Practice Partnership, continued

means that you need to dedicate time and effort” to activities such as drafting by-laws, discussing publication guidelines, and scheduling meetings, but finding that time in everyone’s already busy schedule can be “difficult and cumbersome.” Putting in the time, though, “is ultimately worth the investment and necessary to the work,” Matt adds.

Michèle names **human and monetary resources** as the top challenge for UL-JCPS. “Neither partner committed any funding to the project,” Michèle says, and the university does not have the human resources -- such as full-time graduate research assistants or postdoctoral fellows -- or the financial resources to hire people to grow the partnership. Therefore, her “mom and pop” RPP has “a minimum number of employees that can only handle limited research activity.” She also identifies an **instability in leadership** in the partner organizations as an additional and remaining challenge, one that endangers the **organizational support** identified as so critical by all three partnerships (see question 1).

For PEER, the main challenge in getting the partnership off the ground was developing everyone’s **capacity to partner productively**. Because the member organizations had varying degrees of experience with collaborative research, things like data sharing, an appreciation for the value of conducting research together, and the ability to envision how the partnership could support their work all required extra time and attention.

### At what point did you feel like you actually became a “partnership”?

The PEER team and Michèle both point out that this is **not a linear process** and that there are **ups and downs** in becoming a partnership. PEER has seen the engagement of different partner organizations “wax and wane” over time; similarly, for Michèle’s partnership, “high points have been offset when things didn’t work out.” She identifies several moments of **official support** and gestures of **approval/recognition** by key stakeholders where she felt the RPP was becoming an actual partnership, including the Interim Superintendent giving the RPP his imprimatur and the Director of Research inviting the partnership to observe presentations by schools seeking small grant funding under a new Deeper Learning Initiative.

Likewise, the PEER team says that moments of approval and recognition of the partnership’s work have helped them feel like a real partnership, specifically, when **partners started approaching the RPP rather than the other way around**.

Matt and Michèle both name **attending the NNERPP Annual Forum** as an experience that created a feeling of true partnership. As Matt explains, attending a conference as a team and finding time to sit and work through partnership planning “was critical to developing the necessary first steps.” They continued to build on that experience and feeling of partnership, eventually developing “a cadence and regularity” to the work.

Michèle adds that other **key activities and milestones**, such as launching a website and writing a blogpost on the work of the partnership for EdWeek, also created the feeling of becoming an actual partnership.

### What does “success” look like or mean to your team at this early stage of a partnership?

Success looks quite different for our three partnerships, reflecting the stage they are at and the challenges they have experienced (or continue to experience).

For Matt and the CAER team, **building the RPP’s infrastructure** is a good measure of success. This involves things like writing by-laws, signing memorandums of understanding (MOUs), and hosting the first CAER Steering Committee Meeting. Getting this infrastructure right, Matt points out, enables the development of a “sustainable, meaningful, and long-term” partnership.

Success for the UL-JCPS partnership is at this point “tied more to individual actions than to those of the RPP” and revolves around **building relationships**, Michèle observes. For example, one person’s excellent relationship with key people at certain schools can make a big difference; and one researcher working closely with one principal is a sign of success.

For PEER, “success means that you have begun to **produce work** that partners find **interesting** and **useful**, and that motivates them to engage further.” Such **engagement with and appreciation for the collaborative work** signals that partners recognize an RPP’s ability to “produce meaningful results that they can act upon.”

- *Michèle Foster is Director of the University of Louisville-Jefferson County Public Schools partnership; Matt Linick was Executive Director of Research and Evaluation at Cleveland Metropolitan School District before joining American Institutes for Research; and Michael Strambler is Director of the Partnership for Early Education Research, with Joanna Meyer and Clare Irwin serving as Co-Directors, and George Coleman as Practitioner Lead.*