

School-Level Learnings From The Field:

INSIGHTS IN ESTABLISHING A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP

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ABOUT CASEL'S LEARNING SERIES ON RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS (RPPS)

CASEL has produced a series of briefs documenting insights from our efforts to understand how educators and researchers can build relationships that support a shared action research agenda around social and emotional learning (SEL).

This five-part series shares the perspectives of researchers and practitioners on developing and sustaining collaborative inquiry in classrooms, schools, districts, and states. The goal of the series is two-fold: (1) to articulate an overview of CASEL's research-practice agenda and, (2) to explore our learnings at the school, district, and state level about developing research-practice partnerships (RPPs), action research, continuous improvement, and adult SEL capacity.

This inquiry seeks to demonstrate the emerging coherence of CASEL's theories of action across the tiers of our education system and provide insights into where additional action and support are needed to foster equitable learning and development for children from diverse backgrounds. The cases in this series have been shared with all CASEL stakeholders, including state, district, and school leadership and SEL team members; educators; youth and families; community and research partners; and funders.

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RPP Background: Lowell Community School

The Lowell Community School research-practice partnership aims to better understand how to support teachers in integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) in academic instruction, particularly during early elementary math classes. This partnership also explores how teachers can leverage SEL in their classrooms to build equitable learning spaces and conditions for their students.

This collaboration began at a professional development session on SEL and mathematics instruction conducted by a CASEL instructional specialist. The session was attended by Lowell's assistant principal (AP), who saw an opportunity to explore how integrating SEL in mathematics could be a strategy for achieving more equitable outcomes. Equity is a priority at Lowell, which serves 490 students from prekindergarten through 5th grade, with 65% of students of color and 57% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

CASEL, which has long been interested in investigating how SEL can support equitable learning opportunities, was eager to undertake this research. This work aligns with CASEL's investment in collaborative, action-oriented inquiries that employ design-based research-practice partnerships (RPPs). This approach is practice-focused and geared toward a long-term, mutually beneficial collaboration that promotes the production and use of rigorous research about problems of practice (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013).

The resulting partnership, in which a CASEL research associate engaged with a team of six general education teachers at Lowell, uncovered two sets of key learnings, which will be shared across two briefs. This brief focuses on what we learned about establishing an ongoing RPP engagement. The next brief will describe the insights around adult SEL, SEL-academic integration, and strategies for educational equity the partnership with Lowell uncovered.

As referenced in the first brief of this series, the RPP model elevates the need for interdisciplinary engagement, asking, "Who deserves and needs to be at the proverbial 'table' of education research?" The RPP model brings together the rigorous analytical training of researchers and the pedagogical expertise of practitioners, who are united by a shared passion for innovating new strategies and practices K-12 teaching and learning. While RPPs appeal to researchers and practitioners alike, they are ambitious undertakings that require careful planning and execution.

This brief highlights three key insights related to establishing a successful RPP:

- Insight 1:** Researchers must be flexible and communicate regularly when establishing an RPP project with school staff.
- Insight 2:** Trust between the researcher and school staff is foundational in building a research-practice partnership.
- Insight 3:** For a successful school-level research-practice partnership, school leaders must be prioritized as key levers.

Insight 1: Researchers must be flexible and communicate regularly when establishing an RPP project with school staff.

As Tseng et al. (2017) have noted, launching a research-practice partnership requires a two-way street of engagement. At the start of the CASEL-Lowell partnership, two of the most critical elements were developing our partnership structure and establishing how we would communicate. Partnerships must create processes, routines, and “ground rules” for producing and using research evidence (Tseng et al., 2017). CASEL has learned that in our RPP with elementary teachers, it is the research organization’s task to bridge any gaps since these organizations enjoy more day-to-day flexibility in work schedules than those in the school setting.

We did encounter challenges in our partnership, but they were not due to lack of effort or investment on the part of the school or the participating teachers. Instead, they reflected the different ways various organizations operate. Teachers’ have agency over what and how they are teaching, but not when they are teaching it. Student arrival, prep/planning, instruction, lunch, recess, and dismissal all occur at the same time each day. The RPP added a new variable into the teachers’ often rigid day-to-day schedules, requiring flexibility from CASEL. Teachers also have little control over schoolwide, leadership-initiated events that may disrupt their other obligations.

For example, when a CASEL researcher flew in to facilitate one of the initial professional learning community (PLC), it was discovered that a week prior to the PLC, the school’s administration scheduled a conflicting all-staff session, despite the researcher’s efforts to coordinate and confirm the date for the PLC in advance. Upon arrival, researcher found that holding the PLC was no longer possible.

It would be inaccurate and unhelpful to label this miscommunication (or lack of communication) as someone’s ‘fault.’ Instead of showing frustration or disappointment, a researcher is better served by gleaning insights about how to approach future scheduling and communication. In this case, the CASEL researcher learned that solely checking in with the teacher team to confirm the date/time of a PLC session was insufficient because teachers hold little power to push back on school leadership when a conflicting session is scheduled.

To avoid a recurrence, the researcher scheduled a meeting with school leadership to pick dates/times for PLCs for the rest of the school year. The school leader then put the dates on the official school calendar. Additionally, school leaders agreed to take on the task of contacting the CASEL researcher should last-minute scheduling conflicts arise.

The takeaway: By navigating logistical complications with tact and patience, RPPs can grow and flourish in the long run. Short-term logistical mishaps should be viewed as no one’s fault and approached in a way that works toward a solution that strengthens the partnership.

Insight 2: Relational trust between the researcher and school staff is foundational in building a research-practice partnership.

At Lowell, CASEL learned the extent to which purposefully building relational trust is an imperative for an RPP. When an outside researcher enters a school or a teacher's classroom, the researcher must build relational trust purposefully and with the utmost tact and care. Teachers are the foremost experts of their students, classrooms, and school culture. If a researcher implements a plan for the RPP without taking the time to build trust with the teachers, it damages the sustainability of the partnership. As Lopez, Turley & Stevens (2015) note, building trust requires substantial time and effort, but the returns are worth the effort. At Lowell Community School, CASEL learned that building the relationship on the teacher's terms and having regular, predictable contact and a high level of flexibility are sound strategies for building relational trust.

For example, in this RPP, the CASEL researcher initially wanted to visit the school for two days and observe math instruction. Luckily, the teacher PLC team's leader bluntly told the researcher, "[The team] doesn't really know you yet, so I think it would be inappropriate for you to just show up in their classroom." The researcher then shifted to a more measured approach, trying to build trust on the teachers' terms. Strategies included waiting to meet all participating teachers before creating any plan, organizing the first PLC as a broad overview of the aims of the project with plenty of time for questions, and waiting to be invited to observe instruction.

Additionally, the researcher offered tools for initial data collection (student surveys and weekly diaries) and asked for the teachers' feedback. Weekly email contact was also an effective, non-intrusive way for teachers to get to know the researcher. This strategy also established email as the primary form of communication for the project, which allowed individual teachers to contact the researcher to ask questions or provide comments.

In addition to logistics, researchers in RPPs must also extend this flexibility to the work itself. This is a way to demonstrate mutualism. As Coburn, Penuel, & Geil have noted, a core pillar to the RPP model defined is the "sustained interaction that benefits both researchers and practitioners" (2013). All parties share ownership and can learn from one another.

Researchers must be willing to share the research priorities and ownership and adjust ideas to ensure they provide the right kind of support, while sustaining a rigorous research agenda. While these efforts may create more work for the researcher, the CASEL research suggests that this flexibility and openness has built trust with partner teachers.

For example, after creating both online and paper-based versions of the initial student survey ([Appendix A](#)) at the request of the teacher team leader, it seemed like the survey would be ready for administration. However, when given an opportunity to review the survey, the kindergarten teacher provided feedback about her students' ability to understand and take the survey. The teacher requested the researcher create an 'early learner' adaptation of the survey. The researcher created a pared-down version of the survey, including fewer items, simplified language, and pictures to correspond with each response ([Appendix B](#)). Though this took additional time, it was worth it as it allowed the kindergarten and first grade teachers to give the survey. Not only was this iterative development and feedback process an example of true joint ownership in the RPP, the dialogues and requests for input fostered trust.

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Below is a short narrative written by 2nd grade teacher at Lowell Community School reflecting on their experience with CASEL during this partnership:

“Building trust with CASEL was pretty easy for our team. We had a group of like-minded individuals, and when groups of people who have like goals and are like-minded, the trust is easily built. We all had an agreed-upon vision where CASEL supported and brought surveys as well as resources to help us. CASEL was visible within our school community and our classrooms for multiple classroom observations. These observations focused on the assets and what was already being done within my class. This really helped me know that this wasn't a 'got you' or just a time to point out what you were doing wrong. It really was to build upon what you were already doing. It wasn't until the second observation that suggestions were given. These suggestions again weren't 'you need to do this,' but stated in questions that made you think about ways to innovate your practice—having feedback posed as questions allowed you to adjust and to evaluate what was working and reflect upon your practice. This trusting atmosphere that was built throughout the year caused our team to be more positive and be willing to work with colleagues who you may not have worked with in the past. Even going to them with issues or concerns within the classroom, which in turn made stronger relationships within the building. Many times, our team would rely on each other to discuss issues within the classroom and even go to CASEL to problem solve and question different strategies when needed. CASEL was there and always willing to problem solve with us during the time we meet and outside of that. Through this experience, we have created a team that is willing to take our learning through this year and continue our vision for years to come.”

As this teacher noted, small actions like posing feedback from observations as opportunities to leverage assets not only built trust but also stimulated a willingness “to work with colleagues who [the teacher] may not have worked with in the past.” By fostering the willingness and desire to collaborate, the overall project provided an opportunity to elevate practitioner voices. By fostering equity of voice between researchers and practitioners, the RPP with Lowell Community School offered an opportunity to expand our view beyond our discrete perspectives to produce a dialectical knowledge rooted in multiple points-of-view.

Insight 3: For a successful school-level research-practice partnership, school leaders must be prioritized as key levers.

Through these partnerships, CASEL has learned that school leaders (i.e., principals/assistant principals) are crucial facilitators between ideation and actual action. This may seem like common knowledge—of course school leaders are critical levers for action in schools. CASEL’s learning is not about whether or not ‘principals are important,’ but rather HOW school leaders are prioritized.

School leaders are ideally positioned to understand the lived experience of their teachers, the professional structure of the district/state, and the alignment/misalignment between them. This unique perspective makes schools leaders an indispensable resource and key collaborator, rather than a person with decision-making power that the researcher only has to convince to ‘buy-in’ to the initiative. This approach to school leadership also allowed the researcher to learn about Lowell’s collective identity from a perspective outside the teachers, adding to the researcher’s sense of belonging.

Sudden turnover in school leadership at K-12 schools is something a researcher must anticipate when establishing an RPP. According to Levin & Bradley (2019), the national average for the tenure of principals is four years, with 35% of principals being at their school for less than two years. Only 11% are at their school for over 10 years. The summer before the Lowell partnership formally began, the AP who initiated the project accepted a position at the district’s central office.

To mitigate lost momentum due to this transition, CASEL has cultivated relationships with the school’s principal and new assistant principal through 30-minute check-ins with one or both school leaders during every school visit. These check-ins present an opportunity to update leadership on the learnings from the project. Additionally, this regular, face-to-face communication gave school leaders a chance to catch any overlaps between the partnership and larger school or district initiatives. For example, during one of these leadership check-ins at Lowell, the principal pitched the idea of having the CASEL researcher and teachers present to the whole staff a meeting in June. This decision by the principal gave the project a benchmark toward which to plan. Additionally, it presented an opportunity for elevating the voice of the participating teachers in influencing instructional practice across the entire school.

Learning about SEL through RPPs

Since the RPP is a newer approach for CASEL, it is important to reflect on the logistics of establishing sustainability of these partnerships. CASEL will engage in the continuous improvement of our RPP efforts. The purpose, however, of any educational research is to come to new understandings about teaching and learning. The final three briefs of this series outline learnings about SEL emerging through our RPP engagements and how these learnings align to CASEL's theories of action. The next brief will continue the story of Lowell Community School, discussing learnings regarding strategies for educational equity, adult SEL, and integrating SEL into academics. Brief 4 describes CASEL's district level-engagement with Minneapolis Public Schools, specifically spotlighting the engagement in their continuous improvement processes in service of educational equity. And finally, Brief 5 discusses CASEL's RPP engagement with a state education agency with the aim of exploring how states can provide technical assistance for region, district, and school-level systemic SEL implementation.

» RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Researchers should make every effort to be flexible with scheduling and communication and prioritize and support consistent two-way SEL communication with the school team.
2. Make the time to build trust at the commencement of an RPP by meeting all stakeholders before creating any research project plan.
3. Equally prioritize research and practice supports by providing teachers with the resources they need for their own professional learning in fostering students' social-emotional development.
4. When launching an RPP at the school level, engage school leaders in an introduction to the RPP model and initial project launch dialogues to support project planning and communication structures and foster a sense of trust.

References

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Appendix A – Lowell Student Math Survey

Who are you?

1. I am a ...

- Boy
- Girl

3. I am...

- Asian
 - Black/African-American
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - White
 - Prefer not to say
 - None of these terms fit me, I identify as
-

2. What grade are you in?

- Kindergarten
- 1st Grade
- 2nd Grade
- 3rd Grade
- 4th Grade
- 5th Grade

4. When I am at home, I speak...

- Only English
- Sometimes English and sometimes another language
- Only a language other than English

Feelings About Math

Circle the number that best describes how you feel about each of the following statements:

5. I like being in school.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

6. I enjoy learning new things in school.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

7. I enjoy learning math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

8. I learn many interesting things in Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

9. Math is one of my favorite subjects.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

10. Math is harder for me than any other subject.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

11. I usually do well in Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

12. I am just not good at Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

13. I learn quickly in Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

14. My teacher gives me interesting things to do in Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

15. My teacher helps me when I make a mistake in Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

16. Thinking about Math work makes me nervous.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

17. If I mess up on a Math test, I know that I can do better next time.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

18. I can make mistakes in Math class and no one will make fun of me.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

19. I feel comfortable asking a friend in my class if I have a question in Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

20. Other students in my class are better at Math than I am.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

21. Other students in my class are better at Math than I am.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

22. I get very frustrated when doing Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

23. I get more bored in Math than in other subjects.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

24. I have a family member who loves Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

25. My teacher loves Math.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

26. I feel more confident now in Math when I did at the beginning of the year.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

Appendix B – Lowell Student Math Survey

Circle one response for each number

Native English Speaker Non-Native English Speaker

1. I am a ... BOY GIRL

2. How do you feel about being at school?



I REALLY don't like it

I don't like it

I'm not sure

I like it!

I love it!

3. How do you feel about learning math?



I REALLY don't like it

I don't like it

I'm not sure

I like it!

I love it!

4. How do you feel if you get a math problem wrong?



I REALLY don't like it

I don't like it

I'm not sure

I like it!

I love it!

5. How does people in your family feel about math?



REALLY don't like it

Don't like it

I'm not sure

Like it!

Love it!

6. How does your teacher feel about math?



Really doesn't like it

Doesn't like it

I'm not sure

Likes it!

Loves it!