

Building Research-Practice Partnerships with Pennsylvania Superintendents:

A Report for the Penn State College of Education

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About the Pennsylvania School Study Council

Founded in 1947, the Pennsylvania School Study Council (PSSC) is a partnership between Penn State and member school districts, intermediate units, and career and technology centers. PSSC is dedicated to improving public education in Pennsylvania by providing up-to-date research information, professional development activities, and technical assistance that will enable its members to provide top-quality educational services to students.

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Contents

- Executive Summary 4
- Introduction 5
 - Historical Background: School Districts and Land-Grant Universities... 6
 - Strategic Plan for Penn State..... 7
 - Defining Penn State’s Community 8
 - Research-Practice Partnerships: Guidance from Scholarship..... 11
- Methods..... 15
 - Description of the Study 15
 - Phase 1: Broad Survey of Pennsylvania Superintendents 15
 - Phase 2: Follow-up Interviews with Selected Respondents..... 16
- Findings 18
 - What School District Leaders Want 18
 - School District Needs: Advocacy for Financial Reform..... 19
 - School District Needs: COVID and Schools—Achievement, Learning, and Well-being..... 21
 - Student Teachers: A Case Study 22
 - Designing a Partnership for Pennsylvania School Districts 23
- Recommendations..... 27
- Conclusion 29
- References..... 31

Executive Summary

This report examines how Penn State, particularly the College of Education, might best serve Pennsylvania's public school districts and their leadership in a process that systematically bridges the two institutions through effective research-practice partnerships. Building these partnerships would help realize the historical mandate that land-grant universities like Penn State were designed to fulfill and help accomplish three duties that are relevant to working with public educators (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018).

This report is intended to inform the field about the potential opportunities and critical issues related to forming effective research-practice partnerships using our study that was funded by a Research Initiation Grant from the College of Education. Our findings show that there is potential to develop systematic, sustained partnerships with Pennsylvania public school districts and that school district leaders are ready for Penn State to facilitate these relationships. The majority of superintendents in our study perceive that they need help from higher education across a variety of areas, particularly in the realms of policy advocacy, academic interventions, and social and emotional well-being. Our findings also show that opportunities to partner with Penn State are often grounded in spatial equity and along patterns of geographic convenience.

Introduction

Universities that are not engaged with their communities in the twenty-first century will soon find themselves disengaged from any meaningful relevance to the citizenry of the United States. ... [O]ur nation's communities—rural, urban, and in between—urgently need to partner as equals with the land-grant universities so that together they can work on solutions to the problems of their communities.

(Foreword, *Land-Grant Universities for the Future*, Gavazzi & Gee, 2018)

Penn State University was established in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to ensure social progress through a combined philosophy of community development and active involvement with the needs of youth and the infrastructure that supports them. Thus, the University has the potential as well as the responsibility to support the 500 public schools and the 1.7 million K-12 students attending them in the state. This report examines how Penn State, particularly the College of Education, might best serve Pennsylvania's public school districts and their leadership in a process that systematically bridges the two institutions through effective research-practice partnerships (RPPs). Building these partnerships would help realize the historical mandate that land-grant universities like Penn State were designed to fulfill and help accomplish three duties that are relevant to working with public educators (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018):

1. To serve a future generation of American citizens by supporting their communities as they develop.
2. To focus on practical, pragmatic application of research and techniques by bridging theoretical views to real-world problems and conflicts.
3. To survey the needs of the communities in which they reside within close proximity and to act upon those findings.

This report is intended to inform the field about the potential opportunities and critical issues related to forming effective research-practice partnerships using our study that was funded by a Research Initiation Grant from the College of Education. Our findings show that there is potential to develop systematic, sustained partnerships with Pennsylvania public school districts and that school district leaders are ready for Penn State to facilitate these relationships. The majority of superintendents in our study perceive that they need help from higher education across a variety of areas, particularly in the realms of policy

advocacy, academic interventions, and social and emotional well-being. Our findings also show that opportunities to partner with Penn State are often grounded in spatial equity and along patterns of geographic convenience. Additionally, while Penn State is uniquely positioned to be a strong ally to these potential future partnerships, it is still uncertain whether the university has the capacity and willingness to initiate and sustain programs that superintendents would find satisfactory to help address the critical problems public schools now face.

Historical Background: School Districts and Land-Grant Universities

In 1862, the Morrill Act established universities for the purpose of advancing the industrial nation-state and with the goal of interconnecting the fates of communities with higher education institutions (Ostrom, 2022). Soon after Penn State's founding, researchers developed novel innovations in soil management, agricultural mechanization, climate measurement, and thousands of other contributions. While these scientific and technical contributions progressed the entire US economy throughout, they were also investments in Pennsylvania farming communities. These were endeavors geared toward bolstering agricultural locales and their neighborhoods to extend happiness and healthiness to Pennsylvanians. Today, Penn State is similarly called to take actions that positively support the communities around campus, both adjacent and afar.

Historically, institutions of higher learning were perceived as a public good, rather than a private interest for individuals trying to better their social and economic standing (Fischer, 2022). After the establishment of land grants, the federal government issued wide-scale investment in higher education through the use of the GI Bill, which awarded access to colleges and universities to millions of eligible citizens. This propelled the United States into a legacy of technological and economic ascendancy throughout the 20th century (Fischer, 2022). However, since the 1980s, states and the federal government have reduced financial support of higher education, and this change has been driving the personal debt taken on by students and families. Consequently, this has impacted the perceived societal value that colleges and universities provide (pp. 49-52, Quadlin & Powell, 2022). More than half of Americans now perceive post-secondary institutions unfavorably for their potential contributions to society and do not believe that the cost is worth the gain from attending a postsecondary institution (pp. 82-85, Quadlin & Powell, 2022). Additionally, costs to attend college have substantially outpaced the growth of income for young adults, raising questions regarding how the next generation will perceive the value of pursuing post-secondary

degrees (Figure 3, Carnevale et al., 2021). The combined market effects of the 2008 recession and a subsequent housing crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic have left a generation of youth with more financial uncertainties which may exacerbate these trends, placing higher education in a critical position to adopt new roles moving forward.

Strategic Plan for Penn State

Leadership at Penn State has recently emphasized the need to fulfill a responsibility to surrounding communities. In a January 2023 speech to 200 business officials across the Commonwealth, University President Dr. Bendapudi stated, “What is good for Pennsylvania is good for Penn State; what’s good for Penn State is good for Pennsylvania.” In this speech, Bendapudi emphasized Penn State’s desire to build partnerships with the local business community by investing in research that would combine the institution’s resources with the intellectual capital of staff and students to help Pennsylvanians thrive. Businesses, however, are not the only institution in need of Penn State’s time, resources, and human capital.

Pennsylvania’s 500 school districts face critical issues that threaten the welfare of public education. Schools across the Commonwealth are consistently underfunded by the state as evidenced by the recent finding that the state funding formula is unconstitutional (Coffin, 2023). Teachers and administrators are leaving the profession in droves, and public schools lack the necessary support staff, such as guidance counselors and nurses to aid students (Fuller, 2022). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic left a generation of children behind in terms of reading, writing, mathematics, and more importantly, the social and emotional growth attributed to schooling (Skar et al., 2022). Private interests have systematically hijacked school district resources, particularly in Pennsylvania districts with less available taxable revenue to fund their schools (Mann & Baker, 2019). As Pennsylvania students opt out of attending their local schools in favor of charter or cyber charter schools, they attend school settings that have demonstrated substantially lower outcomes in high school graduation and college attendance (Cordes, 2023). Moreover, Pennsylvania schools face problems with chronic absenteeism: Twenty-five Pennsylvania districts reported that over 30%¹ of their student bodies are chronically absent from schools, while about one-third of school districts reported that 15–30% of their student bodies are chronically absent (United States Department of Education, 2023).

At this critical time in public education, the strategic plan for Penn State makes two claims

¹ The Department of Education reports these figures from the 2015-16 school year, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

that empower the university to prioritize more robust partnerships with Pennsylvania public schools:

1. Universities must be agents of social adaptation and transformation, developing critically engaged citizens whose endeavors will support the public good, now and into the future.
2. Our land-grant mission, uniting our teaching, research, and service activities, provides an unrivaled platform for empowering resilient solutions. (Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research, 2022).

If universities, particularly land-grant universities, are to be the community leaders in research, evidence-based practices, and policy, then it is clear that partnerships with local schools should be front and center to their mission and purpose. Scholars have long criticized the ongoing disconnect between community and higher education (Bruning et al., 2006), but in a broader sense for the education community, this extends to the division between universities and their surrounding public schools (Lezotte et al., 2022). Lezotte argues that there is a general sense of a nonexistent relationship between institutions of higher education and K-12. However, the American university was born as an ideological vessel to connect the needs of a community to the intellectual capital of scientists and scholars, and it is through those means that we must forge an interconnectedness.

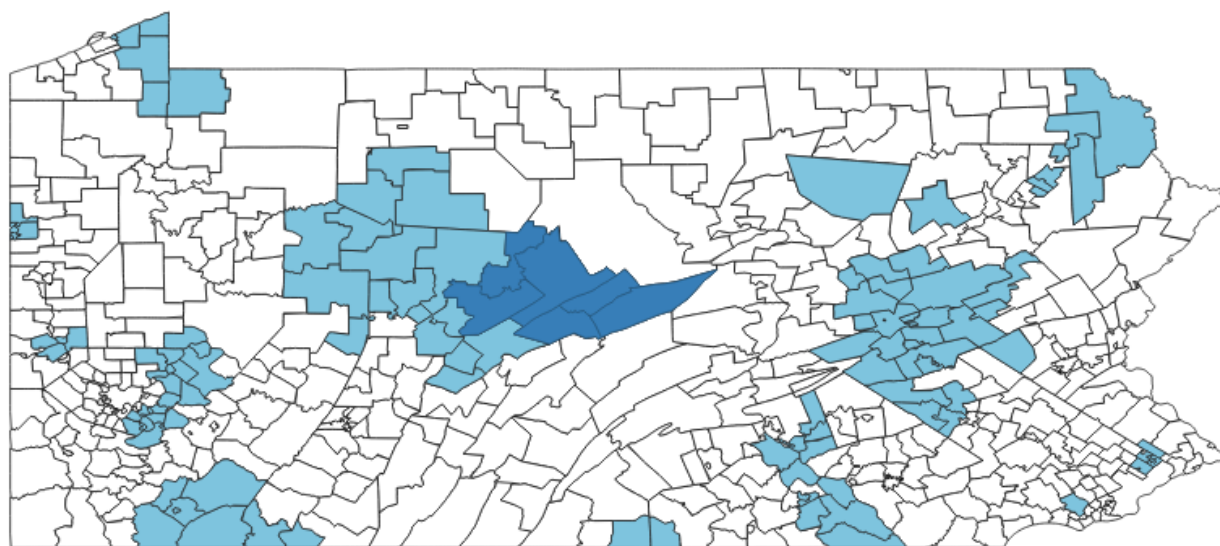
Defining Penn State's Community

Penn State currently partners with local school districts in various capacities throughout multiple departments and colleges. Many individual programs are made visible by the office of Penn State Outreach, while individual colleges have their own ensemble of community engagement programs like Center for Science and the Schools (CSATS) and the College of Arts and Architecture, which oversee the various museums and community events related to performing arts. In the College of Education, outreach comes in the form of the Curriculum and Instruction Field Experience (CIFE) department and the 14 centers and institutes that offer various research programs and initiatives that often involve working with schools. We call to attention these programs because it should be recognized that many individuals at Penn State have made efforts to ensure that the university is reaching out to communities. However, the concern that superintendents across the Commonwealth have expressed is that these partnerships, opportunities, research initiatives, and events have taken place along lines of spatial convenience and have created patterns of inequality.

To illustrate this concern, Figure 1 depicts the 115 school districts in which no other higher education institution is geographically closer (using straight lines from the boundaries of school districts) than a Penn State campus.² These school districts represent approximately 17.5% of all Pennsylvania students (NCES, 2023). The University Park campus is the closest higher education institution to six school districts: Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley, Phillipsburg, State College, and West Branch. For these school districts, students, parents, teachers, and school leaders face, at most, a 40-minute drive to reach University Park to attend campus events. For other school districts, however, Penn State could be the closest institution of higher education but remain a multiple hour drive one-way.

Figure 1.

The 115 Pennsylvania School Districts that are Geographically Closest³ to a Penn State Campus instead of Another Institution of Higher Education.



- Closest college/university is Penn State Main campus
- Closest college/university is any of the Penn State campuses
- Closest college/university not a Penn State campus

2 We include branch campuses in this version of the report to demonstrate the nature of proximity in terms of which districts might be presently unexamined by Penn State programs. In just thinking about University Park, over 96% of Pennsylvania school districts are an hour or more drive from campus, and 72% are two hours or more.

3 To calculate geographic proximity, we used district boundaries to compute distances to Penn State campus coordinates collected from the NCES Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) accessible from the NCES Education and Demographic and Geographic Estimates reports, found at <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/geographic/schoollocations>. Because boundary lines do not necessarily reflect population, our distances should be viewed as underestimates, and the nature of distance and time are, in fact, more severe than reported.

The districts in Figure 1 are, in a sense, Penn State's most local school districts even if they are not the most proximal to the campuses themselves. Some of these places are geographically isolated from essentially all universities in the state, suggesting that these places carry the most potential for Penn State to provide services like Wayne Highlands, which is 44 miles away from any university or college. Physical geography and drive time further intensifies the reality that certain districts, even the ones near Penn State campuses, are unable to capitalize on the university's resources. For example, Moshannon Valley is 25 miles from the University Park campus, but 38 miles by drive distance and it takes approximately 50 minutes to complete a travel route by car. These factors can play a crucial role in the ways those communities might interact with Penn State University Park, because on-campus events may be only serviceable to the districts within the most immediate zone of proximity.

Another potential obstacle for partnerships is the nature of economies of scale for small school districts. Often, a small school district lacks distinct personnel for the constellation of bureaucratic processes necessary to operate a school district, and it is common for a single administrator to carry a heavy burden of tasks and roles. Communication with a university might be delayed or nonexistent for these types of school districts as superintendents might remain focused on other critical tasks, which could ultimately create an imbalance in which only the districts with sufficient personnel and resources would benefit from Penn State's partnerships. For example, of the 115 school districts that are closer to Penn State campuses than any other higher education facility, 19% are designated as rural (NCES, 2023), 24 districts serve less than 1000 students, and five districts serve less than 500 students.

Penn State's school district community might be conceptualized as the districts that are characterized by historic need or that are disadvantaged by various conditions. Researchers who specialize in certain topics might want to rely on demographic or economic characteristics in choosing school districts that would provide sufficient ecosystems to conduct studies or to engage in problems of practice. In Table 1, we present the ten highest ranked school districts by traits that researchers and administrators might find compelling in the future formation of a research-practice partnership, particularly ones related to Penn State's vision of equity. While these districts are not necessarily logistically optimal by distance, the characteristics of these spaces make them compelling areas for future partnerships.

Table 1Pennsylvania School Districts Ranked by Various Characteristics.⁴

Ranking	Geographically Isolated (US Census, TIGERLine)	Most Impacted by Charter Policy (F-33, 2021)	Highest Proportion Hispanic students (NCES, 2023)	Highest Proportion Black students (NCES, 2023)	Highest Proportion Low-Income (SAIPE, 2021)	Highest Pupil: Teacher Ratio (NCES, 2023)
1st	Salisbury-Elk	Wilkinsburg Borough	Reading	Wilkinsburg Borough	Duquesne City	Shikellamy
2nd	Johnsonburg	Duquesne City	Allentown	William Penn	Greater Johnstown	Greater Nanticoke
3rd	Wayne Highland	Chester-Upland	Lebanon	Chester-Upland	Clairton City	Southern Lehigh
4th	Turkeyfoot Valley	Philadelphia City	Hazleton	Southeast Delco	Sto-Rox	Wilkes-Barre
5th	West Branch	Coatesville Area	Lancaster	Farrell	Reading	Pittston Area
6th	Sullivan County	York City	Muhlenberg	Aliquippa	Harrisburg City	Hazleton
7th	Corry Area	Woodland Hills	Shenandoah Valley	Duquesne	Philadelphia City	Kiski
8th	Forest City Regional	Pittsburgh	York City	Clairton	Big Beaver Falls	Waynesboro
9th	Southern Columbia	Sto-Rox	Antietam	Penn Hills	New Castle	Panther Valley
10th	Mount Carmel	Morrisville Borough	Norristown	Woodland Hills	New Kensington-Arnold	Mars

Research-Practice Partnerships: Guidance from Scholarship

While it is easy to state the importance of forming partnerships with tangible outcomes for schools and institutions of higher education, university personnel struggle to uphold these

⁴ Charter impact is calculated by subtracting columns V91, V92, and Q11 from total revenue of the F-33 survey (after dividing by weighted attendance). Teacher ratios were calculated using full-time equivalent status.

relationships because of the nature of publishing and tenure-track policies (Tirrell-Corbin et al., 2023). Problems of practice involve a constant stream of communication from all parties, and the larger the partnership, the more complicated the nature of working across institutions can become. If the outcomes for university faculty are one or two published papers after years of intense collaboration, researchers can be disincentivized from participating in RPPs (Tirrell-Corbin et al., 2023). For educators, other challenges complicate partnerships. Public educators do not have flexibility in their schedule for meetings and are often unable to check emails at regular intervals if they serve as instructors in a school. Opportunity cost tradeoffs emerge in the form of sacrificing time from lesson planning, department meetings, parent meetings, special education planning, and other necessary functions of school faculty (Tirrell-Corbin et al., 2023). School district leaders operate with limited time, especially in places where limited resources and personnel exist.

Fortunately, these issues are solvable and manageable, as evidenced by the host of literature on successful university-public school partnerships that have resulted in measurable gains for both parties. Three gold standard RPPs are worthy of close examination:

1. Denver University (Donovan & Snow, 2018)
2. University of Colorado (Penuel, 2019)
3. Consortium of Chicago School Research and the University of Chicago (Roderick et al., 2009)

Each of these cases share traits that exemplify effectiveness across a variety of standards:

1. Ongoing for a decade or more
2. Multidisciplinary
3. Based in restorative justice
4. Transferable to desired outcomes for university faculty in the forms of creating publishable research efficiently
5. Establishes measurable results that can impact policy and student learning

Moreover, financing and building of infrastructure allowed partnerships to be effective in these cases. Examples of measurable outcomes for school districts include raised test scores, teacher satisfaction, lower behavior referrals, and more effective use of interventions; while

university members benefitted in published works, increased satisfaction with their work and scholarship, and increased awareness of critical issues related to education as a field. Additionally, we call to the reader's attention Idaho's state-spanning RPP described by Wargo et al., (pg. 3, 2021) as a potential way to mitigate inefficiencies caused by geography and limited university capacity. Six geographically isolated school districts worked as combined partners with two universities in one RPP setting, each carrying equal voice in the various interventions, programs, and strategies employed. For this partnership, universities collected data systematically from key stakeholders using convenient communication strategies that gave university members contextual information to the climate and conditions of the public schools (see Table 2, and Figure 3 in Wargo et al., 2021).

In summary, we find that six characteristics define high-quality and effective RPPs between universities and school districts:

1. Mutually beneficial for all parties.
2. Formed and fostered in personal relationships.
3. Based on the needs of communities in addition to school officials and university members.
4. Frequent, transparent, and honest communication between all parties.
5. Sustained relationships following completed projects between universities and public schools.
6. Tangible, measurable, and achievable goals that are grounded in real-world outcomes.

We also note five characteristics that signal failure of RPPs between universities and school districts:

1. Extractive: When schools are used to leverage research opportunities, it can come across as uncaring or even abusive by public educators.
2. Didactic: When universities are in complete control of the dissemination of knowledge, mutual benefits are unlikely.
3. Ambiguous: When a partnership lacks clear goals, it is destined to be ineffective and participation will come with less enthusiasm.

4. Overly bureaucratic: When there is increasing complexity in various stages of development, it dooms the buy-in and lowers potential outcomes.
5. Isolating: When parents, communities, school faculty, or administrators are not kept in the communication cycle, distrust for intentions grows.

For rich descriptions of these characteristics, we recommend a review of Lezotte et al., (2022).

In the sections that follow, we examine the potential for expanding into high-quality partnerships in Pennsylvania by way of measuring and investigating what Pennsylvania superintendents report as the problems of practice in which they seek the most guidance and support.

Methods

Description of the Study

As part of a combined effort of the Pennsylvania School Study Council with support from the Penn State College of Education through a Research Initiation Grant, the authors conducted a two-part investigation that examined the needs of public school superintendents. We sought to answer these research questions:

1. What are the perceived issues, resources, and ideas that school leaders perceive they would benefit from the support of a university in serving their Pennsylvania public schools?
2. What are the opportunities for mutual benefit between Penn State University and Pennsylvania public schools?
3. How do school leaders contextualize and describe those perceptions and opportunities so that universities might develop informed strategies to target those needs with efficacy?

If Penn State could meet the demands of school districts, partnerships are theoretically possible, although mutualism would be necessary for these relationships to flourish (Lezotte et al., 2022). Our study attempted to investigate these possibilities by trying to understand what public school superintendents envisioned in terms of their demands for us as a flagship university. We conducted this study in two phases: a broad survey of superintendents and a follow-up interview with selected respondents to help us clarify the results of our survey. This explanatory mixed-methods research allowed us to first quantify the demands for university partnerships by public school officials and then qualify that data within the context of how those individuals are thinking about potential mutually beneficial partnerships through interviews.

Phase 1: Broad Survey of Pennsylvania Superintendents

Participants were emailed in October 2022 and asked if they would be willing to participate in a survey that would measure their interests in partnering with Penn State University. Superintendents were emailed directly using the Education Names and Addresses database (EdNa) made available via the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Participants were given a link to an 18-item questionnaire that remained open until March 2023. Subsequently,

participants were sent two follow-up emails asking for their participation if they did not match with the list of school districts that had completed the survey. Table 2 shows the representativeness of our survey respondents by school district characteristic. No incentives were provided to participants.

The 18-item questionnaire surveyed participants for their background, school district characteristics, engagement with education research and literature, their current partnerships with their geographically closest higher education institution, and their perception of their individual goals and obstacles as leaders. Fourteen items were presented as selected-response items and four items were open ended. School leaders were asked whether or not they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Phase 2: Follow-up Interviews with Selected Respondents

The Pennsylvania superintendents in our sample represent just over one-fifth of the state's students, and nearly that proportion of the state's full-time teachers. After the survey, researchers conducted nine interviews with participants who elected to describe their responses with more context. A five-question protocol based on each participant's individual survey response was used throughout the hour-long interviews.

We asked interview participants to explain the following:

1. Their background and experience as school district leaders.
2. Their individual goals as leaders as they reported in the survey.
3. Their perceived obstacles as a district as they reported in the survey.
4. Their expectations for a partnership and how they would evaluate a partnership with a university for its effectiveness.
5. If given all of Penn State's resources—financial, human capital, technology, space, etc.—how would you use these resources to improve the school district?

Table 2.

Sample Compared to Pennsylvania School Districts (NCES, 2023).

2022-23 School Year Characteristic		Sample (n=106)	State	Proportion
Districts by Locale				
	Urban	1	19	5.3%
	Suburban	40	237	16.9%
	Town	22	77	28.6%
	Rural	33	167	19.8%
Race of Enrolled Students				
	American Indian	334	2383	14.0%
	Asian	5562	68473	8.1%
	Black	12920	179001	6.5%
	Hispanic	23523	199008	13.1%
	Hawaiian/Pac. Islander	159	1242	12.8%
	White	179031	989557	18.1%

Findings

What School District Leaders Want

Currently, 27% of Pennsylvania school district superintendents report having a partnership with a college or university, and 74% of all districts report wanting to form a new partnership regardless of having one currently or not. Seventy-seven percent of districts stated that their only communication with their local college or university is through the practice of working with student teachers. The three majority-black and one majority-Hispanic school districts in our sample reported no interaction with higher education, even though those districts are each less than ten miles from any Pennsylvania university or college. This leaves a bevy of possibilities for future relationships, even in places around the Commonwealth that are not geographically proximal to Penn State.

To understand the ways in which Penn State could potentially provide support to school districts, we asked participants to report their individual goals and obstacles as school district leaders in short written explanations. Responses were coded using an open coding technique with emergent themes. Researchers examined the text simultaneously and codes were formed in consensus by each individual. Table 3 examines the most frequently reported topics by superintendents in the survey.

Table 3

Key Issues Described by Superintendents

Key Issue	Definitions, Examples	% of Sample
Fiscal Resources/ Revenue	Acquiring revenue to pay for education costs	61%
Academic Achievement	Grades, testing, classroom output, literacy	52%
Human Capital Management	Hiring and retaining staff	44%
Curriculum and Instruction	Learning goals, knowledge/skills of students	42%
Political Climate	Politicization of education issues, particularly curriculum and emergency response	35%
Social and Emotional Learning	Curriculum, practices, interventions, and goals that improve relationships within schools	29%
Leader-Community Relations	Community support of education efforts, particularly in perception of effectiveness	26%
Engaging All Learners	Equity in terms of classroom interactions. Participants used this or similar phrases to talk about classroom inclusiveness in learning.	25%
Mental Health	Characteristics of well-being, for both or either children and adults within schools	24%
Academic Interventions	Classroom practices and routines that improve education outcomes, particularly grades and test scores	23%
Safety	Preserving the safety of children	23%
Time	Any discussion of efficiency, or the lack thereof in providing all necessary resources to educate children	22%
Professional Development	The improvement of leaders or teachers by their own learning	19%

School District Needs: Advocacy for Financial Reform

School district superintendents reported most frequently that they need financial resources to operate facilities and to implement programs. For some superintendents, the dire

underfunding of Pennsylvania schools was front and center in their descriptions of their needs, and some individuals used the survey as a way to express their frustration with the unfairness of educating in communities that lack accessible resources and aid. One participant described, “I, literally, the other night was videotaping the cockroaches and the mice in my office. So that’s the type of building where my kids go to school. Not okay.”

Almost two-thirds of our participants reported the need to improve the capacity to fund their districts and wanted help from universities in channeling more fiscal resources to students and staff. Participants shared with us an alarming level of financial insecurity in their districts in responses such as: “[We face] unprecedented increases in costs—charter school payments, lack of qualified employees and a lack of support from the state funding system.”

Of the 68 participants who reported funding as an obstacle to their school districts, 32 spoke about the challenging nature of charter school payments that draw from school district funds, diminishing the overall level available for each student enrolled in public schools. For impoverished school districts, one superintendent described the interconnected ways in which policy fails to address poverty:

We are \$2.1 million in the red. I have \$8 million available from a \$32 million budget. \$8 million of that goes out the door to charters and cyber schools. Of the 2,000 kids we should be serving, we serve 1,100—the rest are in charter and cyber schools. ... Our neighboring districts have everything they need to serve kids. My kids don’t get to have any of that—I don’t have heat in my office for the administrators, let alone the buildings with classrooms.

For rural educators, population loss and declining enrollments are driving the underfunding of education. One study participant stated,

We have a declining student enrollment—about 1000 kids K-12. We have 49 kids in homeschool and 139 students in outside cyber. Those cyber kids cost us about \$1 million a year, and about half of those kids are in special education. We’re facing a \$1.5 million deficit next school year, and we’ve got less than \$3 million in reserves—in two years, we will be out of money.

When asked about how Penn State could potentially alleviate or solve these issues, superintendents pointed out our position as a powerful policy influence. For example, one participant stated, “I don’t know how much time you guys spend in Harrisburg or get up on the Hill and work with [politicians]. We’re struggling right now for teachers and to

find workers.” This notion of university advocacy was often positioned as a question, and superintendents reported not knowing whether Penn State maintains connections with legislators that might be leveraged to provide fiscal aid to public education.

School District Needs: COVID and Schools—Achievement, Learning, and Well-being

School district leaders were clearly focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and looking for ways to restructure schooling to improve student outcomes. While we did not set out to study the effects of those events, we found time and time again that concern with lost opportunities to learn in schools, attendance, and the overall emotional health of both teachers and students was highlighted in the data. Superintendents spoke about the possibility of implementing professional development and programs co-designed by Penn State in a local context with regard to the issues outlined in Table 3, particularly in ways that teachers and leaders could directly model and facilitate within classrooms. Some superintendents spoke about utilizing professors and researchers from outside of the College of Education to help with interventions that would generate benefit to the districts in these regards, particularly in fields related to mental health, the environment, literacy, and mathematics.

Superintendents discussed the issue of academic achievement in varied contexts. For example, some appeared focused on standardized test outcomes and accountability measures that were negatively affected by the pandemic, while others thought more about their district needs as improving relationships between students and teachers within a school community. Participants with expertise in social and emotional learning shared their frustration about their staff’s lack of understanding of the difference between taking cursory action to improve mental health and social-emotional learning and making systematic changes in school routines that would make real differences in outcomes. Superintendents expressed that they wanted support in these kinds of endeavors, because they believe that their voices alone are not sufficient to help schools transition into the kind of centers of student and teacher well-being promoted by education scholars. They believe that experts in the districts are needed to help carry these kinds of messages.

Some school district leaders are still operating in crisis mode, particularly as it relates to the “catching up” from remote and online learning forced by the pandemic. Superintendents worried that the “new normal” of schooling post-COVID carried troubling unknowns, such

as the lack of political and community support, increased competition from cyber charter programs, increased state mandates without additional fiscal resources, and concerns regarding attendance. Superintendents seemed interested in understanding how other school districts approached some of those problems, and suggested using the university as a forum of public exchange in conjunction with researchers who might facilitate the transfer of knowledge between individuals.

Student Teachers: A Case Study

From our interviews we consistently found that superintendents were interested in expanding partnerships with Penn State by way of adding student teachers. Participants spoke to the mutual benefit these individuals provide both institutions, such as more opportunities to gain professional experience for pre-service teaching students and the transference of knowledge and resources from Penn State to those school districts. Student teachers are an illustrative case study in the ways that spatial barriers arise, and they present three areas of critical concern for the university as a whole:

1. Our student teachers operate in 29 school districts (6% of all school districts in the state), including Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. This number reflects many years of dedicated work to sustain relationships across space and time, particularly as school leaders turnover.
2. Student teachers offer a daily routine interaction between Penn State and public school districts which contrasts with other forms of partnerships and outreach.
3. Student teachers are in high demand as superintendents seek to establish young workforces to replenish from turnover and to secure well-trained, capable professionals.

Despite the vast amount of space covered by Penn State's student-teaching programs, the burden is felt almost entirely by Penn State students who are responsible for their own travel costs and housing arrangements. Penn State personnel have limited flexibility in terms of scheduling placements which forces a number of student teachers, particularly those without access to reliable transportation, into classrooms of convenience rather than spaces where they would most benefit and best serve. Additionally, imposing a financial burden on students for travel costs denies superintendents access to student teachers, preventing access to Penn State faculty and resources, and it also potentially denies them a high-quality future

teacher who is knowledgeable of their culture and community.

Presently, only four states mandate payment for student teachers' time and work in classrooms, with the latest being Maryland after the passage of HB 1219. Per 22 PA code 354.25, student teachers can be paid as substitutes, but this payment does not appear in regular intervals, nor does it position student teachers to be appropriately mentored and trained as it removes them from their cooperating teacher to act as a substitute. Penn State allows student teachers to act in this manner only if supervisors and cooperating teachers agree on the maturity and preparedness of the student teacher. In June 2023, two bills were introduced to create student teacher stipends: Senate Bill 300 and House Bill 1331. They are very similar but neither have passed both chambers. Legislation is required to create and fund the program. Regardless, Penn State currently benefits from student teachers who bear the burden of spanning spatial divisions to extend the university's brand and influence. Allowing the remedy to rest upon the decision of state legislators may be insufficient to the school leaders who want to bring in student teachers but remain geographically isolated. Furthermore, funding students is insufficient if supervisors cannot reasonably span geographic boundaries to provide mentoring and support in those places.

From our study, we know that student teachers play a critical role in the overlap between higher education and public school districts. Sixty eight percent of school districts in our sample currently maintain student teaching programs from their geographically closest college or university, and 30% of the districts in our sample only interact with these institutions through student teachers. In the interview portion of our study, seven of the nine participants indicated an interest in taking student teachers from Penn State, even if they were presently taking student teachers from other universities.

Designing a Partnership for Pennsylvania School Districts

School district leaders demonstrate diverse needs regarding their current capacity and demand for university partnerships. Every school district leader in our sample reported that they are currently hosting student teachers, but very few have present partnerships beyond that practice. This suggests opportunity for innovative approaches as the demand for partnerships is high, with 73% of our study participants reporting a desire to partner with a university. In terms of strategy, school district leaders reported a few key similarities in how they form expectations on how these partnerships could be initiated.

For example, one interviewee serves in a unique position as a member of a university's board

of directors while also working as a district superintendent. He acknowledged the need for both institutions to work together, and participated in our study because he believed he had inside knowledge of the mechanisms that do and do not work for successful university-public school partnerships. In his description of his district's needs, the superintendent indicated that vendors provide a majority of readily available education materials, and that these enterprises carry far too much influence on Pennsylvania school districts. He stated,

One of the struggles we still have is finding topics: best practices and good research that can drive our practices. An institution like Penn State that has a heavy research component to it would be helpful at providing [those]—there aren't a lot of places that are doing that, and the ones that are, are kind of gimmicky.

This superintendent also described a step-by-step process detailing what he considers to be the most effective strategy to the forging of these alliances:

The university sent researchers to us to do an audit of our English Language Learner (ELL) practices. From that, they designed a professional development based on our strengths and weaknesses. In that process, they reached out to families and worked with my leadership team. They will be providing additional instruction to my teachers and [I will be] using one of our professional development days to inform my staff of best practices.

In our interviews, we asked participants to explain what they would do if they had access to all of Penn State's resources, such as financial, technological, staff, etc. Table 4 presents a sample of their responses. These responses reveal the types of issues superintendents face and what kind of help they might seek from potential partnerships.

Table 4

What School Leaders Would Do With Penn State Resources

What Superintendents Would Do	Quote
Expose Communities to Scholarly Role Models	“To provide role models on the value of education would be kind of game changing, community altering”
Advocate for the Needs of Marginalized Groups	“Bring our story to life – I don’t give a shit who you have to piss off – the system is broken.”
Conduct Valuable Action Research	“There’s not enough high quality research on what works and what doesn’t. There’s a lot of junk research: the mortality of subjects is high and the applicability in other environments is low.”
Increase Presence of Universities	“Penn State is 25 miles away. I’m paying a company in Iowa \$18,000 a year to audit curriculum, see what is tested, and to look at student work with observations in our classrooms. The curriculum experts you have – you could probably send us grad students to record data.”
Integrate Courses Between High School and College	“We have kids here growing up on farms, but we don’t have enough to offer an agriculture class. That could be an opportunity for distance learning, because I know Penn State has a great agriculture program.”
Provide Professional Development	“I’d like to have access to speakers... a speakers cadre would be excellent, like a palette of people that could take a look at under a variety of things: mental health, teacher mental health, humor, instructional strategies.”
Enhance Student Voice	“We’re really into student voice here. I think again, the districts that listen to their students are listening to their community and then they’re more likely to attend and graduate and more likely to stay in the area.”

Similarly, other participants indicated that Penn State is positioned to provide materials and programs that leaders would find trustworthy, as they could be designed and implemented with local context bearing a trusted brand of research. This systematic routine matches the various forms of input we received from other superintendents who asked us to consider a variety of ways in which they could potentially partner with school districts. For example, leaders consistently mentioned professional development, continual engagement with teachers and leaders, and close, on-site proximity.

One interviewee cited the School Superintendents Association (AASA; formerly the American Association of School Administrators) as a potential association to follow. He reported that

in this program, he is able to utilize 215 other school districts around the nation for close examination of novel practices in techniques across a variety of fields—such as, instruction, leadership, etc.—though he acknowledged that this kind of system only currently benefits wealthy districts with extra funds for such practices. “It would be great if Pennsylvania districts could form something similar using Penn State as the connector.”

With regard to the idea of private vendors capitalizing on public schools, Penn State University might be able to position their research and materials to the forefront of this marketplace by forming its own clearinghouse. There are relationships to consider, particularly the role of Intermediate Units who often play an integral part in vendor relationships, but there is no questioning the frustration that some superintendents expressed toward the status quo of available programs, particularly math and literacy interventions:

Not all vendors get right back to us. We have a current resource that we’re using in math and the rep hasn’t emailed us back. We’ve been asking questions and he’s not been responsive, so that makes us want to go to a different company. Regardless of whether or not that resource has proven to be effective, which is based on our PSSA scores. I personally don’t think it has been but it just kind of turns us off. Also, if you’re not going to be there to support us—support us and support our teachers—we just can’t get with you.

Additionally, we found evidence that superintendents were interested in the idea of the university becoming a public space in which to engage with research and discussion around educational topics. While this is a common function of the university already, some superintendents indicated frustration with the lack of available transportation, particularly if they were to bring a substantial number of students or staff to the campus. One superintendent recommended that Penn State use some of its resources to offer school districts busing to campus events: “...if they were willing to split the cost of bussing 70 students, [it] would drastically increase the ability for us to participate. There’s no doubt about that.” We find similar strategies recommended by scholars of education partnerships, specifically Coburn et al (2013), Martin & Samels (2019), and Penuel & Gallagher (2017).

Education partnerships are a path of constant negotiation from both parties, and school districts should be thinking clearly about the realistic support a university might provide to their stakeholders. Farrel et al. (2019) provide a clear description for school officials to follow in planning a partnership with universities.

Recommendations

In essence, this report shows that there is potential to develop systematic, sustained partnerships with Pennsylvania public school districts and that school district leaders are willing, able, and ready for Penn State to facilitate these relationships. Using the interview and survey data, the authors of this report recommend the following as a possible path toward building partnerships with Pennsylvania school districts:

1. Internally survey university researchers to determine topics of expertise they would be interested in working with school districts. A systematic consolidation of outreach available to school districts that can be reported and easily accessed by superintendents would facilitate future coordination.
2. Initiate contact with district superintendents, particularly in areas where districts lack financial resources. Superintendents want Penn State University to reach out to them, because these settings lack human capital and superintendents often wear too many hats to prioritize university engagement. Furthermore, superintendents told us that they feel apprehensive in their ability to contact the “correct” official at a university for help. It would be wise, therefore, to review websites and university marketing materials to closely examine the feasibility of how a superintendent would reach a capable researcher or administrator for a potential partnership.
3. Use an audit as the initial phase for partnership. This component should be treated as a close examination but not as a directive or a mandate. Superintendents were wary of academics “telling them what to do” without first getting to know the local context.
4. Communicate openly and often. Superintendents are skeptical of vendors who keep research of a school or practice private, and they explained to us that they expect partnerships to be collaborative, not directive.
5. Construct a custom, tailored intervention that accounts for local issues. This should be performed after the audit, and parent and community engagement is preferred.
6. Accomplish interventions in a manner that goes beyond a “one-shot” training or a single series of professional development. Superintendents seek a true partnership, where individuals are engaged in a relationship that spans the two institutions.
7. Involve superintendents, who want involvement, in the writing and communication of research, even at the level of publication.

8. Build sustainable infrastructures to include space, funding and communication for building and expanding partnerships. Given the spatial isolation of certain school districts, consider meeting with school districts in spaces more convenient to their locations.
9. Consider translating vital research documents into policy briefs or succinct summaries of findings so that they are accessible to school leaders. Practitioners generally consume only a limited amount of research.
10. Refocus university unidirectional outreach to bidirectional partnerships in which mutual benefits are obtained.

Beyond actions that directly involve school districts, we recommend that Penn State finds ways to serve as advocates in the state policy arena, particularly given the nature of how school district superintendents in our sample repeatedly discussed the inadequacy and inequity driven by the state funding formula. More internal research is necessary to determine what actions the university might undertake to directly cause changes in the political advocacy space, and insight from faculty who currently work in this capacity is needed in this endeavor. The university should support and recognize faculty who write comprehensive policy briefs that are easily accessed by school district administrators. Research centers are frequently listed by the names of the organization on department websites, but superintendents seeking specific knowledge or advice may not readily know which one to seek. Alternative ways to present this information to the public—such as by theme or research topic—might better facilitate the ways in which outside agencies can contact university faculty.

Conclusion

Penn State provides a multitude of opportunities for partnerships made available to the public, including work with school districts. This report shows that opportunities to partner with Penn State are often grounded in spatial equity, and along patterns of geographic convenience. The majority of school district superintendents perceive that they need help from higher education across a variety of areas, particularly in the realm of policy advocacy, academic interventions, and social and emotional well-being. Penn State is uniquely positioned as a strong ally to these potential future partnerships, but less is known about higher education's capacity and willingness to initiate and sustain programs that superintendents would find satisfactory.

Additionally, this report demonstrates the need to examine whether partnerships are formed as byproducts of personal relationships, spatial convenience, and/or random circumstance, and to what extent those processes could be systematized in order to promote spatial equity. This study shows that there are a multitude of possibilities to address the problems across a variety of educational categories that would directly benefit Pennsylvania public school districts. Pennsylvania school districts are far too numerous for a university to service students and leaders equally, but the manner in which district leaders are able to access information and contact relevant university faculty needs to be improved. Participants and respondents demonstrated that they view Penn State favorably but lack familiarity with how to initiate a partnership with the university.

A final consideration is the nature of roles within the formation and maintenance of partnerships between university and school district. Researchers have demonstrated that this process can be misinformed and doomed from the onset if mutual expectations are not made clear (Farrel et al., 2019). School district superintendents seek new knowledge and approaches to answer problems of practice in supporting all learners in their schools within a dynamic and complex environment. The information they seek is time sensitive, relevant, evidence-based, and is high-leverage. However, Penn State's role in this space remains unclear. Superintendents seek personal relationships with university experts who can offer timely and impactful support, but as our study participants shared with us, they can feel apprehensive about their ability to find the right experts by looking at research center names, mission statements, and journal contributions. Better ways to facilitate contact with university experts are needed. Additionally, the normal bureaucratic ongoing of universities—such as internal review boards—are not necessarily understood by school

districts, nor are local school district policies easily accessible and available to researchers who are looking to partner. The most transferable form of mutual expectations comes from the faculty and college students moving between institutions, and the university should view these individuals as worthy investments as they are the face of the institution's brand. Partnerships with Penn State are in high demand at the present moment, and given the critical time public schools now face, it is imperative to develop relationships with schools on the grounds of equity, public service, and historic legacy.

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