

**MEMORANDUM**

**Date:** October 11, 2019

**To:** The Hon. Phil Mendelson, Chairman  
Council of the District of Columbia

**From:** Kathleen Patterson, D.C. Auditor  
Erin Roth, Education Policy Director, ODCA

**CC:** Christina Setlow, Deputy Director, Committee of the Whole

**Re:** Recommendations on Research Practice Partnership NOI Draft

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Mr. Chairman, this responds to your request that the Office of the D.C. Auditor provide recommendations for revisions to the draft Notice of Invitation prepared pursuant to Bill 22-776, *The District of Columbia Education Research Practice Partnership Establishment and Audit Act of 2018* enacted in December 2018.

There are three areas that need addressing before the NOI is issued in order to improve the possibility that the District's Research Practice Partnership can be successful in meeting the ambitious goals you have set out. Those areas: the scope of the RPP, the respective roles and responsibilities of the research *partner* and the *partnership*, and a burdensome and ineffective structure for data sharing.

**Scope of the RPP**

The draft NOI proposes this very narrow scope for the RPP: to "inform[ing] or improve[ing] instruction." This limiting language may be an attempt to closely track the exemption for studies in the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which states that "Studies can be for the purpose of developing, validating, or administering predictive tests; administering student aid programs; or improving instruction". Research on educational improvement seen far more broadly at both the system and school level is necessary to improve instruction in a comprehensive manner. Our research indicates that there is not a single RPP that defines its mission in this kind of narrow language. Your committee report notes that recent studies in Chicago considered the impact of suspension reforms and school closures. The broader scope we recommend would accommodate such topics.

We also suggest that the District request proposals that to speak directly to the breadth of education research that will help improve education outcomes. As drafted, the NOI neglects to ask the potential research partners to suggest topics of study in their proposal. This missing

piece may be due to the unnecessarily narrow scope. The scope needs to be expanded and the edits that follow include that expansion.

### **The Role of the Research Partner vs the Partnership**

The draft NOI conflates the role and definition of the research *partner* and the *partnership* that you envision creating. This conflation results in a misunderstanding of the type of research that RPPs undertake. According to your legislation, the NOI is to solicit a research partner and once designated the partner and the District become parties to the Partnership which also includes the Advisory Committee. In addition, RPP products reflect decision-making from all these partners which means that the research is inherently collaborative and not independent. The research partner, however, is independent and should bring that objective lens to the research that is undertaken in the Partnership by holding themselves to the highest professional standards and conflict of interest policies which should also be reflected in the NOI and are included in our edits.

### **Burdensome and Ineffective Data Sharing Structure**

Most existing RPPs including the Chicago Consortium on School Research have a broad Memorandum of Understanding/ data sharing agreement at the government jurisdiction level. Then, prior to actual data use, the jurisdiction as the practice partner must approve a project plan that outlines the research question, data (already governed by the MOU) that will be used or collected, methods, timelines, and deliverables, among other details decided by the jurisdiction. RPPs do not typically sign an additional MOU for each project nor do they destroy data as such data destruction is antithetical to the long-term goals of an RPP, i.e. gaining an understanding of how to best improve student outcomes based on longitudinal data.

The NOI, as currently written, asks the research partner to negotiate MOUs with each LEA or with OSSE for each individual project. This is unproductive and defeats the purpose of having an RPP to engage in large scale, long term education research across the District. This burdensome approach regrettably reflects language included in the law and we recommend that in practice the individual project MOU be identical to the already-governing MOU. This would comply with federal law in that an overarching MOU covers all data sharing. The edits we provide reflect the necessary goal of the designated partner having a single MOU with the District and describes project plans that must be approved by the District or its designee before data use begins.

What follows are specific edits with comments that provide further explanation. We share as a pdf but please let us know if you would like a Word version for greater flexibility of use. We appreciate the opportunity to share these recommendations and thank you for your consideration.