

Developing Collaborative Partnerships with State Agencies to Strengthen Research Using Early Care and Education Administrative Data



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Collaborative partnerships between researchers and agency staff are mutually beneficial, and they respect and build upon the specific expertise of each partner. While collaborative partnerships may take time to develop, they not only improve the feasibility and quality of research using administrative data but also support the applicability of research to inform policy and practice. Working together, researchers and agency staff can co-construct research questions that address issues related to program operations, policies, or pressing issues in the field that can be adequately answered with administrative data. The purpose of this resource is to offer ideas to researchers about how to build relationships with state partners to facilitate the effective use of administrative data for research and to inform policy. Different contexts, histories, and institutional capacities require distinct approaches to collaboration, so we offer researchers a range of possible strategies for establishing a partnership with state agency staff.

This is the first in a series of three resources designed to help researchers interested in using administrative data. The other briefs in this series are entitled *Determining the Feasibility of Using State Administrative Data* and *Considerations in Preparing to Analyze Administrative Data to Address Early Care and Education Related Research Questions*. This first resource on building relationships with state partners is intended primarily for

In this resource, we use the term **agency staff** to include administrators, program staff, data managers, and other data stewards.

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researchers who are new to the analysis of administrative data, although seasoned researchers may find it useful as well. State agency staff may also find the resource helpful in learning about the possible benefits of partnering with researchers. The resource was informed by conversations with Child Care Policy Research Partnership grantees, state agency staff, and researchers with experience analyzing state administrative data.

The Perspective of a State Child Care Administrator

Leigh Bolick

South Carolina State Child Care Administrator

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State Child Care Administrators throughout the country often need help from data analysts and researchers to organize and understand our data and to engage in one time or ongoing projects that may inform our day-to-day policies. With the implementation of CCDBG reauthorization requirements, we need your help more than ever before to make the sweeping changes mandated in the law; it is critical that we base our current and future decisions on evidence from rigorous research and not on anecdote, and refine our policies based on what the research tells us. State Administrators may be very knowledgeable in this area, but some may be uncomfortable with research, having had few opportunities to work on research projects or look at data with an objective eye. We may be reluctant to spend our valuable time and resources on these activities with so many priorities competing for our attention. So how does a researcher approach their State Administrator to form a collaborative relationship? Some strategies to consider:

- Find out who your State Administrator is and try to connect with them. If possible, find a mutual colleague who can arrange an introduction.
- Don't wait to approach them with a fully formed research project and an "ask." Work on finding that connection and common ground. Make sure you approach him or her as the subject matter expert with information that is critical to understanding how to interpret their data.
- Be up front about who owns the data, and address the issue of confidentiality and the need for good data-sharing agreements that will govern your work.
- Stress your commitment to always request permission before sharing their data, and to get their input before making any presentations or releasing findings. Failure to do so will likely damage the relationship irretrievably.
- Be up front about what you can and cannot provide in your research. Don't over-promise regarding the utility of your project. State Administrators are searching for answers and may want to draw conclusions when the research simply establishes relationships between variables for further study.
- Emphasize the partnership and give examples of how your joint work could benefit them and help make their jobs easier. One researcher took our child care data and constructed a monthly dashboard for me and my staff to use. It began a wonderful partnership that continues to this day.
- If possible, meet with the State Administrator on an ongoing basis, or ask them to assign a staff person as your "point person." Make sure staff knows you are willing to offer input on special projects or periodic strategic plans, as your schedule allows. Consider committing your time after-hours, if necessary, to brainstorm ideas, review documents, or even help with presentations.
- Invite them to be co-presenters when you review the project and/or your findings. Joint presentations with program staff offer opportunities for other researchers to ask questions and engage in a rich discussion, and provide yet another dimension to your work.
- Always offer help and solutions when you can. Be someone the State Administrator or her staff wants to regularly contact to bounce ideas off of. Make connections to those who can help if you can't, and offer to provide personal introductions.

In short, be the kind of partner you want them to be, and nurture the relationship at every opportunity. Good research results when both researchers and program staff have input into the process and take ownership of the project, regardless of the story the data tells.

Benefits of collaborative researcher-state agency staff partnerships

Collaborative researcher-state agency partnerships can have many benefits for the research process, four of which are described below.

1. *Collaborative researcher-state agency partnerships support the development of useful and compelling research questions.* By incorporating the perspectives of agency staff when developing research questions, researchers can enhance the usefulness of the questions for the purpose of informing policy and practice and addressing issues of mutual interest to the state and the research community. For instance, researchers may want to investigate the varying levels of child care quality across setting types and ages served. Researchers could divide the child care population into different settings (e.g., centers vs. homes; small vs. large centers) and ages served (e.g., programs serving infants and toddlers as well as preschoolers vs. those serving only preschoolers). They could also define quality in multiple ways (e.g., accreditation vs. no accreditation; quality rating and improvement rating levels). Researchers can consult with agency staff about their priorities to help narrow the research questions. In talking with agency staff, for example, researchers may learn that state leaders are particularly interested in the quality of family child care homes in rural settings that serve infants—and are less interested in the small vs. large center distinction because they have so few large centers in the state. For researchers interested in analyzing administrative data, working collaboratively with agency staff in reviewing and refining research questions also increases the likelihood that the posed research questions can be answered with available data. A strong collaborative partnership also benefits agency staff, as researchers can lend their expertise in helping to translate topics of interest to the state into specific and testable research questions.
2. *Collaborative researcher-state agency partnerships facilitate a deeper understanding of administrative data.* As with all state datasets, the appropriate use of administrative records for research purposes requires a sufficiently informed user. It is very important for researchers to understand what the administrative data mean (and do not mean), which includes understanding the broader policy context that frames the administrative data. Although the research team can review reports and data documentation (e.g., data dictionaries), they will most likely need to talk with agency staff who often have critical knowledge about the policies and data that are not documented elsewhere. Through collaborative relationships, program staff can help researchers understand the available variables and also advise the selection of particular variables for analysis (e.g., variables for which staff are at least moderately confident in the quality of the data). For example, a state may collect both licensed capacity (e.g., the total number of children permitted to be enrolled) and desired capacity (e.g., the total number of children the program would like to enroll, which is often less than the licensed capacity) in child care programs. A research team may be more interested in analyzing the desired capacity to learn more about the current availability of child care in a state; however, state agency staff may lack confidence in how child care programs report desired capacity across the state. The research team and agency staff will need to work together to determine the best variable to use to answer the research question.
3. *Collaborative researcher-state agency partnerships facilitate appropriate interpretation of the data and findings.* Agency staff help researchers interpret and assign meaning to findings (typical and atypical) and to think more broadly about factors that influence those findings. They can provide researchers with more information about the policy context, as well as the potential impact of the study findings on policies and practices, to include in reports and presentations. In turn, researchers can help agency staff consider limitations and cautions of interpretation related to the study design and analysis. For example, researchers can support agency staff in understanding problems of attrition for program evaluation or the limits of a correlational analysis of data for assessing a program's causal impact. A report about whether the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) meaningfully differentiates higher-quality

programs from lower-quality programs might include a statement such as, “QRIS ratings are *associated* with lower teacher turnover rates” but could not include a statement such as, “Higher-rated programs *cause* lower teacher turnover rates.”

4. *Collaborative researcher-state agency partnerships strengthen state capacity to use administrative data.* By using agency administrative data, researchers may be able to suggest ways to strengthen the use and quality of the data. For instance, a researcher could recommend minimizing errors by developing a computer program to automatically assign points in the QRIS rating for teacher education rather than having staff calculate the points themselves. Researchers may also be able to work with agency staff to improve their skills related to using or analyzing the administrative data. For example, a researcher could help staff understand how to appropriately show (e.g., in a chart or graph) changes over time in licensing compliance among programs serving children who receive child care subsidies.

Recommended strategies for researchers to meet state agency staff

To develop a collaborative working relationship, it is ideal to have initial interactions prior to seeking funding or administrative data for a specific project. This allows more time to talk about shared interests and capacity to support the goals of the agency or staff before being faced with tight funding application deadlines. Developing a relationship prior to applying for funding or finalizing research questions/design allows for more co-construction of policy-relevant research questions by researchers and agency staff, in addition to making it easier to work together when funding opportunities arise.

There are many opportunities for researchers to lay the groundwork for developing a collaborative working relationship with state agency staff.

- *State conferences.* State early care and education meetings, such as the state Association for the Education of Young Children, are useful venues for researchers to meet state agency staff. Researchers can attend state agency presentations, and they could also present on topics that would be of interest to state agency leaders.
- *Presentations at national or regional meetings.* Similarly, researchers who present their work at regional or national early care and education meetings may meet state agency staff with similar interests. Inviting state agency staff to join a panel as a presenter or discussant provides one opportunity for researchers and state agency staff to meet around a common interest. Many meetings also include networking opportunities, during which researchers could introduce themselves to agency staff from their own state.
- *State or agency workgroups.* States sometimes convene workgroups to address special topics, such as defining school readiness or revising early learning and development standards. Volunteering to serve on these workgroups or their subcommittees can help researchers get to know staff from multiple state agencies and help state agency staff learn more about the researcher’s skills and interests. An agency might also convene a workgroup for a particular purpose and welcome researcher participation. For example, the agency responsible for a QRIS may convene a time-limited workgroup to recommend revisions to it. They may also convene an ongoing advisory group to oversee its state pre-Kindergarten program. Researchers may be able to find out about workgroups through announcements on agency website or by talking with the agency leaders or other colleagues familiar with the work. He or she could also share any relevant research reports with workgroup members.
- *Early childhood advisory council.* Although membership on the state early childhood advisory council may be determined by the Governor’s office or legislature, there may still be opportunities for researchers to participate or share resources with this group or committees of the council. Researchers may want to attend council meetings, volunteer for committees, and talk with council members about shared areas of interest.

- *Early childhood integrated data system efforts.* Many states are developing an early childhood integrated data system and working to link their early childhood data with the K-12 education data. As part of these efforts, the state may have a researcher stakeholder group to provide advice about the kinds of research questions that could be addressed and procedures for requesting the data. Researchers may be able to get to know state agency staff by attending these stakeholder meetings.
- *Early childhood advocacy or interest groups.* Both researchers and state leaders have opportunities to be involved in community groups that focus on a particular early childhood topic or interest. Researchers may be able to network or meet state leaders by participating in these groups.

Building a strong, collaborative partnership with state agency staff

Building a strong, collaborative partnership with state agency staff has long-term benefits, and a successful partnership may last beyond a particular research project. We recommend several strategies that can help researchers foster a collaborative relationship with state agency staff.

- *Acknowledge and respect agency staff expertise.* As noted above, the agency staff are essential partners in conducting research with administrative data. They may not be as comfortable, though, with research jargon or technical skills, so talk in plain language. Agency staff may have their own jargon, so patiently ask for clarification to ensure a shared understanding. Understand their perspective and respect the knowledge and expertise that staff bring to the partnership; they are the experts in the program and data. The most important strategy for demonstrating respect and building strong relationships is listening. Be a good listener and try to listen more than you talk.
- *Be curious.* When learning about the state agency data, policies, and procedures, be curious and open-minded. Researchers who are external to the organization will have limited knowledge of the agency's administrative data and the broader context and rationales for current policies and practice. Ask questions to understand the data and research context and check assumptions.
- *Discuss expectations.* Each partner may have different expectations of the collaborative project. Talking early about everyone's expectations—and minimizing surprises during the project—helps build a strong, trusting partnership. Important topics to discuss include timelines, frequency of communication, roles and responsibilities of agency staff and researchers, protocols for sharing results, review of draft reports, and dissemination methods. It may be useful to document the shared expectations in writing and revisit them periodically during the project.
- *Be transparent about needs, limitations, and expertise.* Although researchers want to be helpful and work together with state agency staff, there are limitations to the partnership. Be clear about the research team's needs (e.g., need to complete this project by the end of the year) and limitations (e.g., can review data codebook but can't commit to training staff across the state). State staff may also ask for advice in an area for which researchers do not have expertise. Be clear about the scope of expertise that can be provided to staff and, if possible, connect them with someone who can provide the necessary expertise. Staff may also request something (e.g., analysis of the data to address a sub-question of interest) that is more time-consuming or challenging to complete. In these instances, explain the challenges, suggest alternatives, and talk with staff to determine a solution that is feasible for everyone.
- *Be strategic about requests.* Don't overburden staff with multiple or large requests (e.g., don't ask for all of their data). Staff are likely helping with research while simultaneously attending to their regular job duties. This means it is important for researchers to think carefully before asking staff to do something. It may also be useful to ask staff if a request can be done relatively easily or is more time-intensive: a researcher may think something is easy when, in fact, it is complicated or time-consuming.

- *Make it as easy as possible for staff to participate in the research.* Researchers should support staff in the completion of requested tasks whenever possible. For example, if a letter of support is needed, send them a draft letter that they can review and revise rather than expecting them to develop one on their own. If the agency does not have a data sharing agreement template, share one or two examples. Whenever someone from the research team can do part of the task, do so to minimize staff work.
- *Volunteer to help.* Throughout the research partnership or project, there will likely be opportunities to help. Researchers can volunteer in small or large ways, and some efforts will be more directly related to the research project than others. For instance, research staff may volunteer to come to the agency to extract data or manually enter some information into a spreadsheet for analysis needed on the project. Researchers could also review data codebooks; provide an overview of the literature on a topic of interest at a staff meeting; help staff re-design a data entry form to reduce staff error; or help staff develop a basic report using their administrative data. Researchers could also share reports or briefs about issues of interest or concern with state agency staff. Ask staff for ideas and listen for opportunities to help.

Summary

Research using administrative data is best conducted in the context of a strong, collaborative relationship between researchers and state agency staff. This relationship should be mutually beneficial; researchers can provide technical expertise, while state agency staff can offer program and contextual knowledge. State agency partners should benefit from the relationship, rather than just helping researchers accomplish their work. The ideas described in this resource are suggestions for how to develop a strong research partnership. Although a strong researcher-state agency partnership is important for any research project, a strong collaborative partnership can also lead to a range of mutually beneficial research over a long period of time. We realize that developing such a strong relationship takes forethought and time, but the benefits to everyone are worth the investments.