

Lessons From a School District–University Research Partnership: The Houston Education Research Consortium

Ruth N. López Turley

Rice University

Carla Stevens

Houston Independent School District

Research partnerships between school districts and universities can be extremely beneficial to both institutions, but these partnerships require many skills that academics and district leaders generally do not have, making these collaborations challenging to set up and difficult to maintain. Co-authored by a university professor and a school district leader, this article examines from both perspectives why more of these research partnerships are needed, why they are not more common, and how these barriers can be overcome, using an example of a recently formed partnership with one of the nation's largest school districts.

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“GETTING the right information is less than half the battle. Acting on it, once it's in hand, is harder still” (Bridgeland & Orszag, 2013, para. 7). Although many advances have developed in education research over the last several decades, a particular development needed in the field does not have to do with methodology or analytical tools but rather the need for altering the way research is produced and used. The unfortunate reality is that most education research does not influence policy because it takes too long to produce, is too expensive, is not applicable to a specific context of interest, and is not disseminated in a clear and direct manner to decision makers. Overcoming these obstacles requires extensive coordinated efforts by both the producers and the potential users of education research.

Using the example of a recently formed partnership between Rice University and the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest school district in Texas and one of the largest in the nation, this article describes a mechanism for improving the way education research is

produced and used for decision making. The value of research–practice partnerships such as the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is clear. More than in previous decades, school districts need research universities, and research universities need school districts, yet numerous barriers prevent the formation and maintenance of these direct lines of communication between education researchers and policy-makers and practitioners. This article aims to inform university and school district leaders for the purpose of promoting the formation of future partnerships and encouraging the development of existing partnerships.

On one hand, districts need to partner with research universities. First, districts across the nation are facing significant budget cuts that have led to large reductions in staff and programming. In Texas, the 82nd Legislature cut public education spending by US\$5.4 billion in 2010–2011, and a study by Children at Risk, which gathered data from 1,020 out of 1,031 Texas school districts, revealed that many districts

subsequently increased average class sizes and reduced their teaching staff, overhead, expenditures, full-day pre-K programs, teacher professional development, and student support and intervention programs (Goff, 2013). Significant budget cuts and staff reductions often mean that funding for research is pushed toward the bottom of the many urgent concerns, leaving many districts without adequate research support.

Second, with limited resources, school district research departments—if they even exist—have difficulty filling research staff positions. Even in large urban areas that can tap into larger applicant pools, it is often challenging to find qualified researchers willing to accept salaries that are often lower than their counterparts in research institutions. Turnover rates are higher than at research institutions that offer tenure and other benefits that are important for researchers, and when districts successfully attract researchers willing to sacrifice these perks to serve K–12 education, these researchers are inundated with state and federal reporting requirements and numerous research requests from a variety of entities within and beyond the school district—often combined with very short timelines. This makes it very difficult for districts to produce large-scale research studies that can be used for decision making.

Third, districts amass large amounts of data about their students, schools, and educators. There is no shortage of data, but often there is not enough time and resources for in-depth analyses on issues such as student development and persistence, changes in achievement gaps over time and across grade levels, and the short- and long-term effects of curricula, programs, and interventions. Yet, they know that they need the answers to these important questions. There is also not enough time and resources to build, maintain, and update a data infrastructure that seamlessly consolidates data from various sources and that is set up efficiently for data extractions and research analyses.

Finally, districts need access to independently produced research. When districts produce their own research, such as program or curriculum evaluations, they face skepticism from the public. Favorable results or claims of improvement sometimes are dismissed or viewed as counterfeit. Given the public nature of their work,

districts need to assure the public that the research they are using for decision making is rigorous and valid, and independently produced research can be more convincing to the public. Vendors often produce their own research and use it to sell education products to school districts, but this type of research has to be used with caution given the vendors' interests. Districts need more access to independently produced research, such as that produced by research institutions, which can be used for more informed decision making.

On the other hand, universities also need to partner with school districts. First, research universities tend to have access to a variety of resources, the latest research tools, and an endless stream of student laborers who need research experience, but university researchers need access to data. School district data are particularly difficult to access, given the sensitive nature of the data and the potential to identify individual students and educators. As a result, university researchers often turn to national education data sets, such as those produced by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Although these data sets are extremely useful, they have several important limitations. For example, national data sets tend to select just a few representatives from each school in the sample, and some types of analyses require more than a handful of students per school. In addition, national data sets cannot be used to inform local decisions regarding specific programs and curricula that may have varying effects by region or context.

Second, although research universities tend to produce high-quality research, its impact on educational decision making is usually minimal. The research produced by universities is typically published only in academic outlets, such as academic journals, which are primarily read only by other academics. District leaders do their best to stay current on the research literature, but it is unrealistic to expect them to read the latest research articles and books when they have extremely demanding jobs as administrators.

Third, research grant funding is increasingly competitive, especially with the significantly reduced budgets of major funding organizations such as the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Institutes of Educational Sciences (IES), and the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Strong research

partnerships between school districts and universities offer an innovative element that increases researchers' odds of securing research funding, and funders have the benefit of knowing that they are not just supporting research per se but also helping to improve the lives of children more directly and more immediately than what is possible through the typical research grant.

Finally, universities need more community outreach. Universities are notorious for creating Ivory Tower communities of elites, often from very privileged backgrounds, who isolate themselves from the urgent needs of the larger community. Many universities make valiant efforts to reach out to the surrounding community, but these are often sporadic, volunteer-based programs with an imbalance of power. Universities need to form deeper relationships with the community through systematic and formalized partnerships, with long-term commitments not only to invest its most valuable product in the community but also to make serious efforts to listen to the needs of community partners. This type of community outreach has tremendous potential to benefit both the university and its partners.

Why These Partnerships Are Not More Common

There are at least three important explanations for why formal school district–university partnerships are not more common. First, there is a need for more funding of such efforts. Although participating in these partnerships may increase the odds of obtaining research grants, as described earlier, more funding is needed to create these partnerships in the first place. Many funding sources explicitly exclude funding for infrastructure costs. Yet many resources are needed to bring together researchers from different institutions, build compatible research structures, and conduct rigorous research projects. In particular, if the research is to be independent, the school district should not be the funding source. Therefore, there is a great need for funding the start-up of such partnerships.

Second, there is a need for information on how to create these partnerships. Researchers and administrators usually are not trained to do this type of partnership work. Although researchers often collaborate with other researchers at

similar institutions, it is unusual for them to collaborate with researchers from other types of institutions such as school districts. Furthermore, there are substantial organizational differences between universities and school districts, and members of these different institutions often are not fully aware of the dissimilarities. There are recent efforts to provide such information to researchers and practitioners/policymakers, such as the William T. Grant Foundation's Research–Practice Partnerships Microsite, but these efforts are very new and need further development.

Third, university researchers have little or no incentives to take steps to ensure that their work is applied. Instead, they are rewarded primarily for publishing their work with the most prestigious publishers or in the most cited academic journals, which are read primarily by other academics and not decision makers. In some institutions, applied work is even frowned upon because it is deemed beneath the academic endeavor of pursuing intellectually interesting questions. Basic research is certainly important and should continue. Publishing in academic journals is also important and should continue, especially because the blind review process pushes authors to improve and polish their work in ways that they would not do otherwise. However, research universities should recognize and reward efforts to apply research in settings that could really benefit from it, such as schools and school districts, and academics should not make publishing in academic journals their end goal but instead take additional steps to ensure that their research actually informs decision makers.

The Partnership

Housed within the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University, HERC is a formal research partnership between Rice University and HISD. It was launched in 2011, after a year of studying existing partnerships in other parts of the country, talking to their leaders and former leaders, defining the nature of the local partnership, developing relationships between key university and school district leaders, and writing a grant proposal to secure funding for the partnership. University administrators, including the President and Vice Provost, helped to set up initial meetings with district leaders, including the

Superintendent, Chief of Staff, and Chief Academic Officer, and both university and district leaders were eager to move forward with the partnership. A vital component of the partnership was that one representative from each institution took a leading role. At the school district, it was the assistant superintendent for research and accountability, and at the university, it was a professor of sociology and director of the partnership. This collaboration was key to the development of the larger partnership, as it ensured that both university and district perspectives were guiding the joint venture. Most academics are not trained to understand how school districts produce and use research, and even if they are, there is a lot of variation among districts. It was important for us to inform each other about the research process differences at our respective institutions. What began as occasional meetings and emails evolved into regular meetings and phone calls, at least every other week. This investment of time proved to be crucial for developing a strong working relationship across two very different institutions.

During its first year, the partnership focused on setting up an organizational infrastructure and hired staff, generated a Memorandum of Understanding with a Data Sharing Agreement, and selected an Advisory Board responsible for approving the research agenda, which focused on closing the socioeconomic gaps in achievement and attainment.¹ The goal of closing these gaps served as a guiding principle for selecting research projects, the first of which was to monitor and analyze these gaps longitudinally. This involved making very large data requests from the district, which were incredibly time-consuming for the district's research staff.²

While the first data requests were being processed, and researchers were without data to analyze, we produced two reports that evaluated existing research. The district requested assistance with the evaluation and interpretation of existing research on two programs of interest, both of which had a series of studies reporting mixed results. These reports aimed to provide guidance regarding which research studies provided stronger evidence, based on U.S. Department of Education evidence standards.

The first program of interest to HISD was Project GRAD, a non-profit education reform

model with the goal of increasing high school graduation and college attendance rates for low-income students. We reviewed six existing evaluations of Project GRAD and found that only one MDRC study met evidence standards with reservations, and that study reported no discernible effects on high school graduation or college readiness measures (Snipes, Holton, Doolittle, & Szejnberg, 2006). The second program of interest to HISD was Reasoning Mind (RM), a technology-based program designed to teach elementary and middle school students mathematics and logical reasoning skills. We reviewed five existing evaluations of RM and again found only one study that met evidence standards, and that study reported that RM increases math achievement when measured by RM's own math test but not when measured by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the state standardized achievement test in use at that time (Waxman & Houston, 2008).

These two early reports indicated that almost all of the existing studies failed to meet evidence standards, signaling a need for more rigorous research, and they pointed to the need for an external review of research reports more broadly. As a result, we worked to produce an external review process for the district, which would provide, at the request of the district, an independent, third-party review of research to be used for decision making—research that evaluates HISD programs, curricula, interventions, or policies that affect a large portion of the student body and that addresses a forthcoming school board meeting agenda item.

At the district's request for a review, researchers either provide the reviews directly or assist the district in identifying and contacting external reviewers with expertise in the area of interest. To assist with this process, we produced a database of potential external reviewers using as a starting point an existing list of researchers who have conducted research at HISD. We also produced guidelines to aid reviewers in evaluating reports in a manner that is useful for the district. Whereas a typical manuscript review for an academic journal determines whether a manuscript is good enough for publication in that journal, this type of review determines whether the evidence in a report is good enough for district decision making. Reviewers are asked to disclose potential conflicts of interest, to assess whether

the study can be used to answer a causal question (not only whether a program works but also when, where, and why), whether it attempts to rule out competing explanations for the reported results, and whether the evidence is strong enough to be used for decision making.

When we began to receive district data, we worked to create a database that would permit longitudinal analyses, tracking individuals over time, as opposed to the annual snapshots typically used for district reporting and accountability purposes. We standardized and merged hundreds of data files, first within years, then across years, so as to produce a longitudinal database that could provide valuable insights regarding student development and persistence, as well as the short- and long-term effects of curricula, programs, and other interventions. We also produced accompanying codebooks designed to make the new database user-friendly for university researchers as well as district research staff. This process took almost a year to complete.

After the longitudinal database became functional, conversations began with the district about the possibility of making the database available to external researchers outside of the partnership. This benefits the district in several ways. First, granting access to external researchers speeds up the research process, as it effectively multiplies the research capacity of the partnership. Second, it enables the district to take advantage of a much broader base of expertise on topics that are of interest to the district's decision makers. Third, it gives the district yet another opportunity to make use of independently produced research. Making the longitudinal database available to external researchers not only benefits the district but also the external researchers, who get access to a large district database that is set up for longitudinal and multilevel analyses and that provides not just a handful of students per school, as national data sets do, but rather a complete census of the entire student body. As a result, the advisory board approved a set of topics aligned with the district's strategic direction, and we disseminated a national Request for Proposals inviting education researchers to submit proposals for research projects on the selected topics, which included early learning, English Language Learners, school choice, and over-age/retained students. University researchers and district leaders reviewed and approved

selected proposals, submitted by researchers throughout the nation who were seeking an opportunity to gain access to the new longitudinal database and to inform one of the nation's largest school districts. We plan to disseminate subsequent requests for proposals on a regular basis.

Lessons Learned: Developing Relationships of Trust

In the course of developing this research collaboration, we have learned several valuable lessons that are presented here for the purpose of promoting the formation of similar partnerships and encouraging the development of existing partnerships. These lessons are arranged in three main areas: developing relationships of trust, communicating with different stakeholders, and building a joint research infrastructure.

Perhaps the most significant lesson we have learned through this partnership is the importance of developing relationships of trust, in which leaders from both institutions mutually agree with and are invested in the larger mission of the partnership, can communicate effectively across institutions, and are open and willing to learn from each other. Relationships characterized by these attributes do not occur naturally or immediately but require a significant investment of time and effort, which means that the initial phase of the partnership can be somewhat precarious because these types of relationships have not yet developed. As a starting point, it is important that both institutions mutually agree with and are invested in the partnership's stated mission. They both need to be involved in the creation of the mission statement, and both perspectives need to be represented in it, as this will create the buy-in that is crucial during the early stages. After crafting a joint mission statement, research priorities, and projected timelines, the partners can focus on developing relationships of trust. Although these relationships develop through a significant investment of time on the part of individuals, they can play a critical role in helping to institutionalize the partnership beyond individuals by setting up routine processes for the partnership. Institutionalization of the partnership enables it to endure the many leadership changes that are to be expected in both institutions.

Effective communication can be especially challenging during the early stages while leaders from both institutions are getting familiar with each other's organizational cultures, norms, and expectations. During this phase, it is imperative that both partners are open and willing to learn from each other, as this will not only speed up the process of developing relationships of trust but also allow room for mistakes, which are inevitable. The key, of course, is to learn from those mistakes, which involves discussing them critically—not for the purpose of tearing down but rather building up and improving. This can be especially tricky when the norms of criticism are different across institutions. For example, academics, who are accustomed to criticizing students and colleagues in private and public settings, are notorious for delivering harsh criticism—an activity that is not only acceptable but often expected in an academic setting. However, this style can clash with other organizations such as school districts, where jobs can be at stake. This does not mean that criticism should be avoided, but it should be delivered in a manner that is conducive to the norms of the organization receiving it, as this will ensure its effectiveness.

Lessons Learned: Communicating With Different Stakeholders

In school district research, there are six primary stakeholder categories: (a) school district leaders, (b) school district research staff, (c) external researchers, (d) school board members, (e) vendors and organizations that design or implement educational products, and (f) students and parents. It is important for education researchers to understand the interests represented by each of these groups, which are similar to some extent but also different and even conflicting at times.

School district leaders, such as superintendents and chief officers, aim to improve district performance, with particular emphasis on measures tied to accountability, rankings, funding, and job contracts and bonuses. District performance measures have real and significant consequences for the leaders who are responsible for district oversight. In particular, district leaders face tremendous pressures to identify programs that not only improve district performance but also have an

immediate impact that can be seen during their terms in office. These pressures generally are not conducive to long-term research studies, lengthy external reviews, or in-depth analyses of struggling schools or programs. Perhaps most importantly, district leaders' decision-making timelines are much shorter than the typical academic's timeline for producing research.

School district research staff aim to produce high-quality research reports to be used by district leaders and other stakeholders, but they have two significant constraints. The first is that they must produce these reports within the short timelines required by district leaders, and the second is that they receive numerous research requests, which leaves little or no time for conducting analyses that go beyond descriptive statistics or correlations. As a result, district research staff also face tremendous time pressure that is not conducive to in-depth program evaluations or other explanatory research, which is precisely the type of research that is most needed by district decision makers.

Unlike district leaders and research staff, external researchers from universities or think tanks do not face the same level of time pressure. In fact, long-term and in-depth analyses are encouraged and even expected at these institutions. Although external researchers do not face the same level of time pressure, they do face pressure to produce publishable research. For research to be publishable, external researchers must focus on research questions and methodologies that are of interest to an academic audience, which do not necessarily overlap with the research questions that are of interest to school districts or the methodologies that are possible with school district timelines or with existing school district data.

School board members, who are publicly elected officials, oversee school district leaders and make up the official policymaking body of the district.³ They aim to represent the constituents in the voting districts that elected them and to make sound policy decisions that are informed by evidence. However, their decisions are also influenced by many other factors such as available resources, time constraints, limited information, existing policy, and the district's strategic direction. Because of the pressing nature of these other decision-making factors, they often take precedence over research evidence.

Vendors and organizations that design or implement educational instruments, programs, curricula, or other interventions aim to show evidence that their product is effective. Sometimes they also aim to make a profit from their products, but even if they are non-profit organizations, often their main interest is to prove that their product leads to better outcomes. Sometimes these vendors and organizations are open to learning from studies that show mixed, limited, or no improvements. Sometimes, however, they prefer to generate their own studies, put pressure on researchers to report favorable results or not report unfavorable results, or attack the validity of studies that question their product. Effect sizes produced by developers' own evaluations are typically much larger than those produced by independent researchers. For example, in the case of comprehensive school reform, developers' own evaluations systematically produced effect sizes 3.4 NCEs (Normal Curve Equivalent) greater than those produced by external evaluators (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). For these reasons, research ideally should not be produced by vendors or organizations that create educational products but rather by independent researchers who are not funded by these organizations.

Finally, students and parents aim to draw various benefits from their schools, including learning, securing credentials, socializing, and care giving. Although their interests can be described as the "purest" in terms of looking out for the students' well-being, there are two limitations. First, students and parents are ultimately interested in maximizing their own benefits and not necessarily the benefits of others in their school or the district as a whole. They are typically interested in others insofar as it affects their children but not in the interests of others per se. Second, students and parents tend to make school-related decisions based not on research or school academic or disciplinary profiles but rather on word of mouth and especially the racial and ethnic composition of schools, which is seen as a proxy for school quality (Holme, 2002). As a result, their use of education research is quite limited even though they are the stakeholders most likely to have the students' interests at the top of their priorities.

It is important to understand the various interests of these different stakeholders when

attempting to work with them to link research and policy. The short timelines of district leaders and research staff means that researchers must take steps to produce research faster than the norm for academics, without compromising research quality. In our case, by inviting external researchers to use the longitudinal database (through a national Request for Proposals), the partnership's research capacity increased, aiming to produce more reports (because there are additional researchers) in a shorter period of time (because they are sharing a database that has already been set up for longitudinal analyses). The school board members' power to make policy decisions means that researchers, both inside and outside the district, should aim to directly inform and guide them about the use of research. This could include activities such as attending school board meeting and retreats and providing a primer on how to interpret and use research for decision making. Vendors' interest in selling their products (whether for profit or not) means that district leaders and board members should be cautious when using research reports produced by vendors. Ideally, independently produced reports should be used for decision making, but sometimes vendor reports are the only ones available. In this case, an external review process can provide an independent second opinion. Finally, parents' and students' limited use of research means that researchers should aim to inform them as well, in a manner that is easy for a non-specialized audience to understand.

Lessons Learned: Building a Joint Research Infrastructure

Setting up research tools—databases, qualified staff, computer hardware and software, data sharing agreements, secure data exchange protocols, and so on—that are compatible across institutions is no small feat. It can be challenging and takes time, often requiring review by numerous technical experts and legal counsel, yet it is an indispensable part of building a research partnership. In our case, three elements were crucial components of the research infrastructure: (a) producing a longitudinal database, (b) sharing that database, and (c) developing researchers.

Taking the time (almost a year) to create a longitudinal database at times seemed like a questionable activity. It is an extremely tedious task with an intangible research product and no immediate rewards. It was also risky to have no empirical research to report to the district or the funding agency during that time. However, the quality of all future research depends on the quality of the database from which the analyses are conducted, so it is worthwhile to invest a lot of time and effort to create a clean, useful, and researcher-friendly database.

Following the remarkable effort to set up the longitudinal database, it became clear that it should be exploited fully and shared with other researchers, so we purchased two secure servers in which to house the data and statistical software in a manner that could be accessible to outside researchers without compromising data security. The proposal to give access to external researchers was considered unusual, given the tremendous amount of work that went into building the database, but that is precisely why it needed to be shared. There were also some concerns about giving access to researchers that may not aim to help the district but simply aspire to add another publication to their CVs. District leaders understandably want to have a say in who has access to their data and what will be done with it—not for the purpose of telling researchers what to do or what to report but rather for the purpose of ensuring that the district’s data are used to inform the district. To this end, we strategically designed the Request for Proposals to be aligned with the district’s topics of interest, included both partners in the review of proposals, and required the selected researchers to report their findings to the district first before submitting them for publication.

The third essential element for building a joint research infrastructure is developing researchers at both institutions. We developed two series of research workshops, one is a course for students at the university and the other is a joint research workshop for university and district research staff. The course for university students is offered for credit each semester and is an opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students to attend weekly research team meetings, which includes university faculty and research staff, students, and postdocs. Through videoconferencing, these weekly research team meetings are also attended

by district leaders and external researchers. Each weekly meeting includes a presentation about research in progress and is an opportunity for researchers to receive feedback from the entire research team about how to improve their work—theoretically, methodologically, and substantively—as well as the potential users of that work, with an emphasis on making it useful for a district audience. The joint research workshops for university and district research staff occur about once per semester, an intensive 3- to 4-hour workshop on a topic of mutual interest. Past joint research workshops have covered topics such as multiple imputation, multilevel modeling, and propensity score matching.

There are other activities that could help to build a research infrastructure, but these three—producing a longitudinal database, sharing that database, and developing researchers—have proved to be particularly useful at the start of our partnership. Now that relationships have developed, the partnership is institutionalized, and a joint research infrastructure is in place, future research capacity building could include activities such as building the database by adding data from other sectors such as criminal justice, workforce, pre-school and post-secondary data, expanding relationships with more district and community leaders, tightening the timing of research production to align with the timing of decision making, and collaborating with similar research-practice partnerships nationwide.

Conclusion

From the perspectives of both a university professor and a school district leader, we examined why school districts and universities cannot afford to simply collaborate for occasional research projects but instead need to form long-term research partnerships centered on a mutual commitment to produce high-quality research that aims to be useful for district decision making. On one hand, university researchers should provide much-needed research support to districts facing budget cuts, having difficulty filling research staff positions, and needing independently produced data analyses and in-depth studies. On the other hand, school districts should provide university researchers with access to district data, which is an opportunity for their

research to have an impact beyond the typical academic journal, a better chance of securing research funding, and an opportunity for more systematic and strategic community outreach. However, these partnerships are not more common because more funding is needed to initiate and support these partnerships, more information is needed to inform universities and school districts on how to develop and maintain these partnerships, and universities need to recognize the value of this work and reward and support these efforts.

In our case, university and school district partners learned several valuable lessons regarding the formation and development of this type of collaboration. In particular, developing relationships of trust, communicating with different stakeholders, and building a joint research infrastructure were all important elements. We described each of these lessons here for the purpose of promoting the formation of future partnerships and encouraging the development of existing partnerships.

As more school district–university partnerships develop, it is important to consider the formation of a national network of such partnerships for them to communicate with and support one another effectively. As a preliminary step in this direction, we hosted a conference for existing and emerging partnerships for the purpose of exchanging strategies for creating and maintaining these types of partnerships, sharing research findings, and developing ideas for collaboration across partnerships. Each partnership sent both a university and a school district representative to the conference. Working toward establishing a national network is important because it could facilitate the sharing of information about the most effective programs and interventions, ensure that the most promising interventions are tested and replicated in different regions of the country, exchange innovative ideas about how to improve the connection between research and policy and practice, and develop strategies for altering the research cultures of universities and school districts in a manner that increases their compatibility. Coordinating these efforts nationally has the potential to improve significantly the way that research is produced and used for decision-making, to reduce dramatically the research-to-policy timeline, and ultimately to improve the

education outcomes of all children, especially the most disadvantaged.

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Notes

1. The Advisory Board consists of representatives from Rice University, Houston Independent School District (HISD), Houston's non-profit and for-profit sectors, and the funding agency.
2. The district is in the process of creating a data warehouse that will automate and improve significantly the efficiency of data requests.
3. School board structures vary across school districts.

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Authors

RUTH N. LÓPEZ TURLEY is a professor of sociology at Rice University, the director of the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC), and the associate director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

CARLA STEVENS is the assistant superintendent for Research and Accountability of the Houston

Independent School District and was appointed by the Texas Commissioner of Education to the Joint Advisory Board of the Texas Education Research Centers.

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