

EDUCATION WEEK

Program Lets Urban Districts Call Shots on Research

Fellowships support projects that cater to real-world concerns.

By [Scott J. Cech](#)

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The Council of the Great City Schools' [Senior Urban Education Research Fellowships](#) could be seen as upending the usual order of education research—or as merely reconnecting two ends of the academic spectrum that have grown too far apart.

Either way, the 2-year-old program, which last month sent out its third wave of requests for proposals, appears to be making progress with an unorthodox idea: Let schools, for a change, set the education research agenda.

"Sometimes it seems as if research is something done to or on urban school districts," said Jason C. Snipes, the director of research for the council.

With funding of more than \$2.5 million from the U.S. Department of Education, the fellows work on research projects they have pitched to a panel of district officials from the Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based advocacy group representing 66 of the nation's largest urban districts. If a project is approved, the researcher works directly with district officials to conduct the study.

In all, six research projects are under way—all awarded to prominent education researchers with a history of commitment to urban issues. Three more will be announced next spring or summer.

Each project is expected to last a year and a half to two years, with the researchers each receiving a \$100,000 stipend. No fellowship research results have yet been released; the first three projects are set to be presented at a Great City Schools conference next October.

All of the research is designed to be directly applicable to schools. For example, John H. Tyler, an associate professor of education, public policy, and economics at Brown University, is working with the 34,000-student Cincinnati school district to evaluate how much of students' academic gains can be attributed to their teachers' access to student performance data.

Making Education Research Practical

Urban fellows' study projects are intended to apply high-quality methodology and personal attention to districts' specific needs.

Researcher: **Kenji Hakuta**
Institutional affiliation: **Stanford University**
District: **San Francisco**
Research: **Technology-supported tools to enhance science instruction and learning for English-language learners in middle schools**

Mr. Hakuta's project is attempting to improve instruction in middle school science by providing new technology-based tools that give teachers the capacity to analyze the academic language in the curriculum and to adapt instructional support to match the language proficiency of students. Strategies include identification of key language elements of texts and materials, vocabulary analysis, automated adaptation and translation of text, and automatic feedback to students on their writing. New programs are expected to be made available for teachers of English-language learners in March 2009.

Researcher: **Catherine E. Snow**
Institution affiliation: **Harvard University**
District: **Boston**
Research: **Developing and evaluating Word Generation**

Ms. Snow's project is an efficacy trial of a schoolwide intervention designed to teach academic language through classroom discussion, debate, and persuasive writing. Word Generation is a program that focuses on academic vocabulary—words that students are likely to encounter in textbooks and on tests, but not in spoken language. The model for this instruction involves teachers across the curriculum who coordinate with each other to ensure approximately 15 minutes of Word Generation instruction per day for every student.

Researcher: **Robert Meyer**
Institution affiliation: **University of Wisconsin-Madison**
District: **Milwaukee**
Research: **Accountability and performance in secondary education**

Mr. Meyer is developing an early-warning system, based on estimates of a "value added" model of student outcomes, to identify students at risk of dropping out of school or performing below proficiency on state assessments. The value-added model underlying the early-warning system and variants on this model will not only identify students at risk of negative outcomes, but will also offer advice about policies and interventions that can be adopted by schools to reduce the probability of negative outcomes.

Researcher: **James E. Rosenbaum**
Institution affiliation: **Northwestern University**
District: **Chicago**
Research: **Does postsecondary advising improve student motivation and progress in high school?**

Mr. Rosenbaum is studying whether postsecondary advisory programs influence college-going culture, students' plans, motivation, and outcomes in the same individuals over time. The study particularly examines whether the advising meets its goal of being especially beneficial to low-socioeconomic-level students.

Researcher: **Becky Smerdon**
Institution affiliation: **Academy for Educational Development**
District: **District of Columbia**
Research: **A study of middle school students in the District of Columbia and their transitions to high school**

Ms. Smerdon is focused on understanding the root causes of the high dropout rate in the nation's capital—particularly factors that may lead to leaving school before 9th grade. Using student demographic and school data, the project is establishing “high school readiness” indicators to assist the public school district in identifying at-risk middle-grades students, and will provide a description of those middle school characteristics that help or hinder students’ high school readiness.

Researcher: **John H. Tyler**
Institution affiliation: **Brown University**
District: **Cincinnati**
Research: **Using performance data to inform instructional practice**

Mr. Tyler’s work focuses on “data-driven instruction” by evaluating the extent to which providing teachers with student-performance data leads to improved classroom practice. Cincinnati assesses student learning via a series of benchmark tests that are administered over the school year. Detailed results from each benchmark assessment are provided in a timely manner to each teacher using a Web-based information-delivery system. The project examines the extent to which teachers actually use the data in ways that might inform and improve teaching and learning.

‘In the Driver’s Seat’

Deborah L. Lindsey, the director of assessment and accountability for the 85,000-student Milwaukee school district, said that typically researchers “would come to us and say, ‘We want to research a subject on this or that,’ and we either decided to let them or not. ... They were in the driver’s seat with the direction of the research.”

“What’s fundamentally different about this model is that we’re in the driver’s seat,” she said of the fellowship program. Although her district respects and prizes its assigned researcher’s independence, Ms. Lindsey said, “the ideas and the stimulus for the research come from the district directly.”

Accordingly, University of Wisconsin-Madison education researcher Robert Meyer, whose proposal to study accountability and performance in Milwaukee secondary schools was one of the first fellowship projects to be approved last year, has been working closely with district officials, Ms. Lindsey said. Mr. Meyer is working on a system to identify and intervene on behalf of students who are academically underperforming.

The idea that front-line educators would call the shots on research didn’t start with the fellowship program. Harvard University education professor Richard J. Murnane worked in 2002 with Boston school officials, for example, to explore and address their most pressing research needs.

The fellowship's concept also echoes the efforts of the Strategic Education Research Partnership, or [SERP](#), a national research-and-development program started in 2003 with the aim of helping to solve practical problems. ("[Real-World Problems Inspire R&D Solutions Geared to Classroom](#)," Oct. 10, 2007.).

But SERP, which is based in Washington, has struggled in recent years to raise the money to meet its original "grand vision," which called for a \$700 million, 15-year effort to enlist states in support of a large-scale network of sustained collaborations between practitioners and researchers.

Career Considerations

Catherine E. Snow, a senior education researcher at Harvard University who is working as a Great City Schools fellow with the 57,000-student Boston school district and helps lead SERP's education research partnership committee, said part of the reason the researcher-district dynamic has remained so undynamic for so long has to do with the internal practices and perceptions of universities' education departments.

Studying problems of direct relevance to K-12 educators "is not what the academy rewards, so it's hard for junior faculty members to do," she said. "They have to do what the arts and sciences faculty do, and arts and sciences rules are rules that say, 'You publish in the best journals, and to do that, you mine the research in those journals to find gaps in the research.'"

"I don't mean to demean that work," she added, "but it doesn't tend to find knowledge that's likely to directly help schools."

Nor, Ms. Snow said, does traditionally structured research tend to meet districts' need for relatively fast turnaround times.

It can take up to a year and a half before research gets approved, she said, and "by then, the superintendent who asked you do that research has probably been fired."

Kenji Hakuta, an education researcher at Stanford University who is an Urban Education Research fellow working with the 53,000-student San Francisco district, agreed with Ms. Snow's characterization.

"If you do things that are mere practice—I did this and it worked—that's not going to make it into a social science journal," he said. Publication in those journals, Mr. Hakuta added, tends to be valued by universities' tenure committees.

Start of a Wave?

It remains to be seen how long the fellowships will endure. The Education Department grant covers only three waves of research, and the new presidential administration may well have different spending priorities.

Still, Mr. Snipes of Great City Schools believes additional funding will become available once the studies begin to see publication next fall. No other sources of funding have yet been found.

Katherine A. Blasik, the associate superintendent for research development and assessment for Florida's 258,000-student Broward County schools, who has helped evaluate proposals for the council, thinks the fellowships will lead to more district-centric research. "I think this is the start of that wave—that's why I get so excited about this project," she said. "What it's done for schools across the nation is, it makes urban school districts the customer, changing the weight from the researcher being the customer."

Ms. Blasik said the fellowships have also helped make other districts savvier users of research, and whetted their appetite for good studies. "I don't know that we would have done this individually," she said, "[but] once you see the value, you want more of it."