

Name

Yael Caplan

Email address

ycaplan@uchicago.edu

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Major

Public Policy and Comparative Human Development

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Project description

Supporting the creation and distribution of high quality education research is essential to improving the quality of education in the United States. Although every large school district has a review board devoted to approving proposals to conduct research in districts' schools, studies have not evaluated how these boards make determinations about what research they will approve. Through interviews and policy analysis, I explore how Chicago Public Schools, evaluates proposals to conduct research in its schools through its Research Review Board and the implications of its practices and policies for education research in Chicago and nationally. My research reveals that underlying the district's processes for reviewing research is a desire to enhance the district's ability to educate students. Thus, the RRB serves a dual purpose of not only ensuring that good research happens in schools, but also that this research supports the district's primary function as an educator.

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Sara Adcock Public Policy

Classrooms are Not Laboratories: Research Review in Chicago Public Schools

by

Yael Caplan

Preceptor Sara Adcock

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**Abstract:**

Supporting the creation and distribution of high quality education research is essential to improving the quality of education in the United States. Although every large school district has a review board devoted to approving proposals to conduct research in districts' schools, studies have not evaluated how these boards make determinations about what research they will approve. Through interviews and policy analysis, I explore how one large urban school district, Chicago Public Schools, evaluates proposals to conduct research in its schools through its Research Review Board and the implications of its practices and policies for education research in Chicago and nationally. My research reveals that underlying the district's processes for reviewing research is a desire to enhance the district's ability to educate students. Thus, the RRB serves a dual purpose of not only ensuring that good research happens in schools, but also that this research supports the district's primary function as an educator.

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## Introduction:

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Supporting the creation and distribution of high quality education research is essential to improving the quality of education in the United States. School districts increasingly work with external researchers to test programs, evaluate outcomes, and ultimately improve their schools. Although much research exists on ideal examples of partnerships between school districts and researchers, less is known about how school districts enter into these partnerships in the first place and, more significantly, how districts interact with researchers seeking research opportunities outside of established partnerships. Although every large school district in the nation has a research review board devoted to approving proposals to conduct research in the district's schools, studies have not evaluated how these boards function and make determinations about what research they will approve. My research explores how one large urban school district, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), evaluates proposals to conduct research in its schools through its Research Review Board (RRB) and the implications of its practices and policies for education research in Chicago and nationally.

My findings shed light on how CPS navigates the complex mix of interests and stakeholders that exists concerning research within its schools. Although researchers, teachers, and district officials share the goal of improving educational outcomes for students, concerns about student privacy, educational time, resources, and professional responsibilities create a complicated matrix for sorting out what research may be conducted. My research reveals that underlying all of the district's processes for reviewing research is a desire to enhance the district's ability to educate students. In this way, the RRB serves a dual purpose of not only ensuring that *good* research happens in CPS schools, but also that this research supports the district's primary function as an educator.

In its review process, the emphasis of the RRB is on the central role of the district as an education provider. But this emphasis needs to be contextualized by recognizing both district and school resource constraints, on the one hand, and the desire to approve research that aligns with expressed district priorities, on the other. This case study has implications for education research nationally because it captures both the necessity of robust research review methods in education, and the powerful influence RRBs exercise in the field, despite their omission in the literature.

The first section offers a review of the current literature on education research, school districts, and research review boards. The second examines how the CPS RRB reviews research through a combination of policy analyses and interviews. The final section considers the implications of the CPS process for evaluating research proposals and offers recommendations for improvements and future research.

## Background and Literature Review:

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### **Education Research and Policy**

The American educational system is plagued by inequities. Significant achievement gaps remain across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. The nation's schools and districts face immense pressures for increased accountability and reform that require solid research to reach proactive long-term solutions (Finnigan and Daly 2014). High quality research drives policymaking in education through multiple avenues. It generates big ideas, develops and identifies effective models, evaluates programs, and analyzes policies (Roderick et al. 2009, p. 14). Despite the recognized value of evidence-based decision making, educational policymakers often employ uneven types and qualities of research to the detriment of students and communities (Finnigan and Daly 2014).

The conception of education research as a scientific discipline on par with other forms of social science research is relatively new. Beginning in the 1960s, federal policy began to encourage the use of evidence to inform education policy (Coburn and Stein 2010). By the 1980s, however, as increasing national attention turned to challenges and failures within the American education system, education research became subject to rising scrutiny. As Walters et al. explain in *Education Research on Trial* (2009):

The national crisis of confidence over the quality of American schooling that has unfolded since the 1980s led to increased questioning about what could or should be done to fix the schools and a new critique of education research for failing to provide a firm evidence base for improving educational practice and policy (21).

Walters' claim captures the interdependent relationship between the quality of education and the quality of education research. If education research is to provide valuable insights for policymakers to use to improve outcomes for students, it needs to be held to rigorous standards.

The newfound desire for strong evidence from and on the schoolhouse can be seen in federal policies such as the 1997 Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration. This program allocated \$150 million dollars for schools to adopt research-based reform programs (Pogrow 2017). The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) refers to “scientifically based research” over one hundred times (Coburn and Stein 2010). The Obama Administration’s 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) moved away from the “scientifically based research” terminology of NCLB and endorsed the use of “evidence-based research” (ESSA and Evidence 2016). The shift in rhetoric highlights the continued attempts to use policy to construct idealized notions of what education research should be. ESSA is estimated to shift up to \$2 billion a year into evidenced-based education interventions (Results for America 2015). The increasing number of references to education research in federal policy over the past several decades demonstrates the central role

research plays in education policymaking as well as the ways in which policy makers exercise influence over researchers.

### **“Big Data” in Education**

Education research policy has become a particularly salient topic in recent years because of the increased focus on the potential value of “big data” to yield actionable insights. As the volume of student data proliferates because of improved educational record keeping and data collection, researchers have begun “mining” large amounts of student data in the hope of developing a more robust understanding of student performance and learning styles (West 2012). Concerns about the risks such ubiquitous and frequent use of student data pose to student privacy have been raised alongside these discussions about the value of “big data” (Wang 2017). As Lingenfelter (2016) explains, “Measurement and data have many stakeholders and beneficiaries, whose interests may not be identical or even congruent. Who “owns” information when people are served by an institution or organization, the provider of service or the client?” (83). The notion of information “ownership” captured by Lingenfelter hints at the many ways that the field of education research must navigate different and sometimes conflicting stakeholder interests that often intersect with concerns about individual rights.

The rise of big data in education not only raises concerns about data “ownership” as Lingenfelter suggests, but also worries about potential misuse of data and the ever-present political concern about overconcentration of too much power in the hands of those in possession of data (Lingenfelter 2016). Concerns about safeguarding the privacy of students as increasing amounts of data about them are generated, captured, stored and analyzed apply not only to “big data” based analyses, but also to smaller qualitative studies that involve student-level data. Combined with the prior analysis of the essentiality of high quality education research for school

improvement, it becomes clear that education research must be scrutinized for not only for quality, but also its protection of student information.

### **School Districts and Research-Practice Partnerships**

School districts play a central role in discussions about the intersection of education research and policy. As Coburn and Stein (2010) argue,

School district central offices are increasingly seen as a locus for bringing research and practice together for school improvement. Because district leaders make key decisions about textbooks, intervention programs, assessment, and professional development, they can play an important role in the degree to which instruction improvement efforts in schools are rooted in research evidence (12).

Not only do districts shape research by their allocation of resources and programs, they also directly work with researchers in the design and implementation of studies. Although school districts play an essential role in authorizing and guiding education research, their need for public accountability complicates the ways in which districts can support research. Donovan (2013) argues that administrators and teachers have many constituencies who do not tend to prioritize experimentation above education. Moreover, supporting research requires time, resources, flexibility, and incentives that are not readily available in districts that are invariably resource constrained in their primary function as educators.

Because of the challenges that districts face in supporting research, current explorations into the relationships between school districts and researchers tends to focus on what are labeled as Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs). Coburn et al. (2013) define Research-Practice Partnerships as “long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are intentionally organized to investigate problems of practice and solutions for improving district outcomes” (2). RPPs are a specific form of education research that involves not isolated studies but lengthy collaborative relationships between school districts and research partners that

focus on collectively determined concerns about practice (as opposed to more theoretical endeavors). Although RPPs are only one form of education research, given their prevalence in the literature, understanding the nature of education research within the context of RPPs can elucidate more general trends in how school districts navigate education research. Additionally, there has been growing support from foundations to fund these types of partnerships, which indicates that significant resources in the education sphere are going towards them (Finnigan and Daly 2014, p.171). Lessons from RPPs are therefore relevant for developing best practices as well as evaluating investments.

There are several noted advantages to engaging in RPPs. They allow educators, who do not otherwise possess the resources or expertise to conduct extensive research, to collaborate with researchers so that the findings produced are relevant and useful to the educators themselves, the ultimate implementers of research informed policies. Researchers, in turn, benefit from the opportunity to gain deeper familiarity with the needs of educational actors who directly work in the field they hope to influence (Coburn et al. 2013). RPPs can solve for one of the common challenges in education researcher, a disconnect between educator's and researchers' interests and goals.

Despite their recognized benefits, RPPs are not without their challenges. First, researchers and school districts have different incentive systems. While researchers are hesitant to make recommendations without a strong research basis, districts can experience considerable pressure and urgency for implementing changes. Trust can also be an issue in RPPs, where districts are sometimes wary of the evaluative nature of research or fear that research findings will not be shared as promised. A final challenge is mutualism -- the idea that authority differences privilege certain voices more than others. For example, teachers may lack

opportunities to offer as much input as district administrators. A final challenge is resource constraints; districts may be unable to secure the necessary resources to implement the changes suggested in the partnership (Coburn et al. 2013).

These findings on RPPs have several important implications for the current analysis of research review boards. First, the best practices that are discovered from RPPs are not unique to this type of long-term strategic relationship. Improving the exchange of information between researchers and educators is vital to all types of education research. Second, the challenges that exist within these partnerships are also endemic to education research as field. Incentive structures, trust issues, power dynamics, and resource constraints are challenges that exist regardless of the existence of an RPP or not. Therefore, one would expect research review boards to consistently address these challenges in their day-to-day operations. Third, the focus on RPPs an idealized form of education-focused research relationships, although useful for the reasons discussed above, sheds little light on the more common ways that districts tend to handle research requests and demands that inevitably arise outside of established relationships (if the relationship exists at all). That is to say, there are a number of practical concerns that districts must address when it comes to allowing research in their schools that are not discussed in the literature on RPPs. This omission is because the literature on RPPs discusses cases when the district and researchers are working together on shared goals.

### **Research Review Boards**

Although the existing analyses of effective research-practice partnerships offer meaningful findings for districts with existing partnerships, the research on RPPs does little to evaluate how districts engage with researchers in more routine ways. As previously mentioned, every large school district in the country has an internal review process for determining what

research will be approved to occur in its schools.<sup>1</sup> These review systems operate separately from Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), federally certified bodies that fulfill a similar, albeit distinct, function within universities. Although these review boards vary in size and structure, their ubiquity in education suggests that they play a powerful role in shaping and filtering what education research is occurring in schools nationally.

Despite their ubiquity and essential role, research review boards are rarely discussed in the literature on educational research. An extensive review reveals only three sources that explicitly focus on the role of review boards in approving education research. Notably all are written by current or former school district employees. Bel Hadj Amor (2014) suggests that researchers should frame their proposals according to what districts want, as opposed to whether or not its “good research”. She further argues that researchers should be cognizant of burdens on district time and aware of specific district requirements for timelines and applications. Bel Hadj Amor’s analysis reinforces the earlier suggestion that mutual understanding and trust between the district and researchers is key to successful research relationships.

Muñoz (2017) states that districts are interested in research that is “feasible, ethical, and technically sound” (185). He also stresses that school districts do not exist as research sites and that district officials are often disappointed in researchers who fail to share their findings with the district once the research is complete. Muñoz’s finding, that research findings may not always be shared with the districts, raises an additional challenge that is not present in analysis of RPPs. Outside of established relationships such as RPPs, the incentive for researchers to share their findings with the district from which they gather their data is questionable. A failure to share findings seems to contradict the goal of using research to improve education. When

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<sup>1</sup> Determined by checking the websites of the ten largest school districts in the United States as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics. Terminology used for research review boards varies, with some districts referring to them as IRBs

researchers do not relay their findings back to the schools, educators cannot hope to improve their practices, and may feel that they have been exploited by the researchers-- leading to distrust and less motivation to participate in future research projects.

In *Ethical Researchers in Practitioner Research*, Beck et al. (2001) discuss the role of the research review board in their small six-school district in Missouri. They too stress the importance of research that aligns with district principles as well as the willingness of researchers to share their findings with the district. That a research review board exists in such a small school district highlights the universality of the research review board system and its nuances.

The current albeit sparse literature on research review boards offers a useful starting point for considering how school districts currently evaluate research requests. What it lacks, however, is any connection to broader discussions of how education research can best support policy making. Additionally, because the existing evaluations are all produced by individuals working in specific school districts, the ability for the authors to be reflective and extrapolate their findings to broader policymaking issues is limited. There is a demonstrated need for more research on how to support school district and researcher relationships. As Huber and Williams (2009) explain, “despite a lavish buffet of existing and past educational partnerships, the fact remains that dropout rates are too high and achievement too low, suggesting that whatever we’ve been doing simply isn’t working” (33). Given the dearth of research on the subject and the current need to improve the educational research sphere, the research review board is clear area warranting further inquiry.

### *Legislative History of Research Review Boards*

Although it is difficult to construct a comprehensive history of research review boards, one can better understand the impetus behind their creation by looking to regulatory landscape of education research. There are a host of laws that govern education research. The earliest piece of relevant legislation to education research is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Congress passed FERPA in 1974 and the act applies to all educational institutions that receive federal funds (Elliot et al. 2014). The act states, “The purpose of this part is to set out requirements for the protection of privacy of parents and students” (FERPA 1974). FERPA was passed in response to “evidence showed a rising number of abuses of student education records in the United States” (Futhey 2008, p.278). While schools were readily providing student information to external parties, parents struggled to access their students’ records (Futhey 2008). Consequently, FERPA aims both to protect student privacy by forbidding the disclosure of student records without parent or eligible student consent while also ensuring parents and students fair access to their educational records.

Four years after the passage of FERPA, in 1978, the passage of the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) expanded student privacy protections and more explicitly dealt with external research in schools. PPRA requires that schools obtain written consent from parents before their students are required to complete any survey or evaluation that reveals personal information (Dagget 2008). Whereas FERPA primarily addresses the data schools release about students, PPRA regulates the data schools collect about them (Dagget 2008). Although there are components of FERPA that govern data collection, and components of PPRA that concern data release, the imperfect distinction helps to clarify some of the primary differences between the two laws.

In response to FERPA, states began to pass additional regulations on student data usage. When state laws diverge from federal laws, the law that provides greater privacy protections trumps the more lenient law (Baker 2008). For the purposes of my study, the 1976 Illinois School Student Records Act (ISSRA) plays a significant role. ISSRA expanded on many of the same protections specified by FERPA regarding the disclosure of student records (ISSRA 1976). Like Illinois, most states have remained active in revising data privacy policy to keep pace with changing technology. In 2014, 36 of the 46 states with legislative sessions that year introduced student data privacy bills (Data Quality Campaign 2014). Illinois was no exception; in 2017 Illinois passed the Illinois Student Data Privacy Bill, which supplements the protections of FERPA and ISSRA by regulating technology providers and protecting student data collected through educational technology platforms (Madon 2017).

Since their enactment, many have critiqued the strength of FERPA and PPRA in protecting student information; particularly in response to the current proliferation of “big data” in education. Zeide (2016) argues that FERPA’s reliance on educational actors to approve the release of student data cannot account for the new ease with which unauthorized parties can obtain student information in an era where data is easily tracked and accessed by various stakeholders. Additionally, according to Zeide, “notions of notice and consent are particularly problematic in the education context where student participation is compulsory, or frequently coerced” (344). If consent in educational spaces is inherently tainted, then there is a need for greater scrutiny of collection and release of student information. FERPA also arguably places too much of a burden on educational institutions for oversight of data usage. Public education institutions largely lack the infrastructure and resources to adequately perform this duty.

Although none of the laws described above mandate or even suggest the creation of school district research review boards, considered in aggregate, they strongly imply an expectation of data privacy and data protection of information generated from the schoolhouse. As Zeide's critique emphasizes, however, there are reasons to suspect that the laws in place meant to protect student privacy are insufficient in the current climate of education research. As a result, research review boards simultaneously ensure enforcement with existing laws and fill in for their insufficient protections.

## Methods

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### **Research Setting: Chicago Public Schools**

Studying research review in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a useful undertaking for a number of reasons. Most broadly, studying a local school system's policies, as opposed to state or federal policies, is important because local districts have the most direct influence on teachers and schools and, as a result, student improvement (Penuel and Coburn, 2014). Additionally, CPS is the fourth largest school district in the United States, with 514 schools and 35,869 employees serving 371,382 students, 90% of whom are minorities, 77.7% are economically disadvantaged, and 18.0% are English Language Learners (CPS: Stats 2017). The size and diversity of CPS mean that processes used at the district level have the potential to impact hundreds of thousands of students, some of whom face significant obstacles to achievement.

Since 1988 CPS has undergone three major waves of reform, sparking substantial interest in the impact of the district's policies and decisions on students (Roderick et al. 2009). A search for "Chicago Public Schools" in the University of Chicago's Articles Plus database returns 4,036 peer reviewed journal articles that discuss Chicago Public Schools, published in

just the last decade (2009-2018).<sup>2</sup> Twice as many articles that specifically mentioned “Chicago Public School” were published by the top four education journals than articles that mentioned the New York City Department of Education or the Los Angeles Unified School District, the two other comparably sized urban school districts in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Although an admittedly rough estimate of the quantity of research published about CPS in the last decade, these numbers capture the immense amount of interest the research community has invested in Chicago’s schools.

Not only is CPS the subject of a large quantity of education research, but also the district is frequently held up in the literature as the “gold-standard” for Research-Practice Partnerships due to the district’s relationship with the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Coburn et al. (2013) explain:

Perhaps the best-known research alliance is the Consortium on Chicago School Research, which was formed in 1990 as a partnership between researchers from the University of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools, and other local organizations. In recent years, the perceived success of the Consortium has spawned the development of research alliances in cities across the country. (4)

Given the noted success of the CPS Consortium relationship, CPS has the potential to provide a strong example of how districts can best conceive of and review research.

## **Research Methodology**

From January 2017 until June of 2017 I worked as an intern in the School Quality Measurement Office of Chicago Public Schools. I reported directly to the CPS Research

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<sup>2</sup> Used search term “Chicago Public Schools” and filtered for peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2018

<sup>3</sup> According to Scisearch Journal & Country Rank, the top four ranked education journals are the American Educational Research Journal, Education Researcher, Review of Education Research, and the Journal of Teacher Education. Using the Sage Journal Database I searched for mentions of “Chicago Public Schools,” “New York City Department of Education” and “Los Angeles Unified School District” between 2010 and 2018 in the four journals. 40 articles were published that mentioned Chicago Public Schools, compared to 19 that mentioned the New York City Department of Education and 20 that mentioned the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Manager who oversees the Research Review Board and manages all of the day-to-day responsibilities related to overseeing research in CPS. The Research Manager also manages the data request process for researchers interested in obtaining data from CPS, as opposed to conducting primary research. The six months I spent working in CPS sparked my initial curiosity in the topic of how research review boards shape education research and ultimately helped to structure the research questions at the core of this project. Although my internship did not involve direct data collection for this project, given that it was a significant influence on the types of questions and research inquiries I pursued in my interviews with the district, it is necessary to recognize it as component of my methodology. Absent my direct experience directly working on the issues to be discussed, this research may have been framed differently.

To understand how CPS makes decisions at the district level about what research to approve, I conducted a series of interviews with the CPS Research Manager to learn how the district interacts with researchers on a day-to-day basis as well as how the Research Review Board conducts its ultimate assessments of research. I met multiple times with the Research Manager prior to the formal interview to develop a list of questions that would adequately capture the research review process.

Although interviewing only one district employee may seem to be a limited sample, the reality of research review in CPS is that the entire process is overseen almost exclusively by the Research Manager and a Research Coordinator, who are then supported by the Research Review Board members.<sup>4</sup> The limited number of individuals available to speak about the nuances of the review process may explain the current dearth of literature on the subject of research review boards. Despite the limited sample, my findings nonetheless provide invaluable firsthand insight

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<sup>4</sup> The Research Manager reports to the Director of Research and Analytics who reports to the Chief Education Officer

into the inner workings of the CPS research review process. Additionally, given my months of experience working in the office, I am able to verify the claims made during the interviews.

In addition to interviews, I extensively reviewed the materials the district makes available to researchers and the policies establishing the Research Review Board. These materials include: the CPS Research Guidelines, the RRB Application form, the RRB Modification & Continuing Review Application Form, and the CPS Research Study & Data Policy.<sup>5</sup>

## Findings

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In the following sections I organize my findings in sequence with how the RRB at CPS makes decisions. I begin with an analysis of the formal policies and guidance on which the RRB is founded. Next, I discuss the criteria the RRB uses in practice during its deliberations followed by an analysis what takes place once decisions are made. I conclude by highlighting a current challenge facing the district and discussing proposed plans for the future.

### **Formal Process and Policies**

Researchers hoping to conduct research in Chicago Public Schools must submit their proposals to the RRB. Proposals include an overview of their research question, hypothesis, background literature and their methodology as well as their timeline, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, copies of all surveys and instruments, and copies of IRB approved consent forms. See Appendix I for a complete list of the required materials in an RRB application. The proposal must also include a “description of the direct benefit to the Chicago Board of Education or CPS” (Guidelines, 2016; p. 6). The RRB meets every six weeks to review submitted proposals. The RRB includes members from the central office that have both content knowledge (i.e. someone from the Office of Teaching and Learning with science curriculum knowledge), as

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<sup>5</sup> All materials are available at [www.cps.edu/Research](http://www.cps.edu/Research)

well as individuals considered “generalists” who are well versed in understanding how to think about, read and review research. The board also includes members of the CPS legal team. After the RRB meets, proposals may be approved, denied, or returned with requested revisions. The third response, requested revisions, is the most common. For those receiving requests for changes, the RRB provides feedback about the changes that must be made before approval may be granted. Rarely are proposals approved upon first submission.

The procedures for research review in CPS have their roots in the official CPS Research Study and Data Policy, which was adopted on July 28, 2010 (CPS: Research 2010). It is unclear what the district’s policies for research were prior to this date. In 2002 John Q. Easton, the newly appointed Director of Research and Evaluation for CPS, initiated a study to develop a plan to build the Research and Evaluation Department’s capacity. In the final report, Easton claims the department should better manage relationships with researchers and “encourage outside research and de-emphasize the gatekeeper role” (Stanton and Easton 2002, p.9). The existence of a research review board is not mentioned anywhere in the report and the suggestion that the district should deemphasize its gatekeeper role seems counter to the regulations of a RRB. Regardless of the exact history, today the RRB is well established as the review body for research conducted in CPS. The Research and Data policy states:

The Board recognizes that the District’s educational programs and services can benefit from academic study and study in the field of education. It is in the Board’s best interest to establish a policy in support of research endeavors when the findings and results of these studies will be shared with the Chicago Public Schools (“CPS”) to advance public education.<sup>6</sup> (CPS: Research 2010)

As the policy’s language reveals, the underlying reasoning for the research review process is to encourage the execution of research that can be shared with the district to advance the education of CPS students. In other words, the policy does not aim to support research generally that does

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<sup>6</sup> In this quote, the “Board” refers to the CPS Board of Education, not the RRB

not have any demonstrated benefit to the district. Moreover, the purpose statement assumes that findings will be shared with the district, thereby advancing a conception of research that relies on partnership, not research for exclusively academic purposes.

One of the policy's main provisions is "No Right to Access". It states, "there is no right to access Chicago Public Schools students, staff or data related thereto for research purposes. Access may be granted when determined to be in the best interests of the Board. If access is granted, Researcher may only access schools, students, staff and data relevant to the research as approved by the CPS [Office of Performance]" (CPS: Research 2010). The lack of unfettered access to student data is consistent with the conception of student privacy conveyed in FERPA and PPRA.

The policy further establishes that the Office of Performance<sup>7</sup> will "establish guidelines, standards and procedures for evaluating requests to conduct research in the Chicago Public Schools or to receive data for research purposes and generally for implementing the requirements of this policy." Despite designating guidance power to the Office of Performance, the policy includes many specific requirements for what research proposal submissions must contain. This includes information on "how the study will contribute to the profession of education and be of direct benefit to the Board", as well as detailed information about the study's methodology, IRB approval, timeline, etc. Beyond the content requirements, the policy does not establish how the required information should be evaluated to determine whether it aligns with CPS' interest in research that can advance public education

The first point of guidance for researchers hoping to conduct research in CPS schools is the webpage [www.cps.edu/Research](http://www.cps.edu/Research). Although the Research Study and Data Policy establishes

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<sup>7</sup> Due to reorganization, the Office of Performance no longer exists, but its duties have been transferred to other departments

general principles and requirements for the research review process, it is not through the short five page policy document written for district administrators that researchers receive comprehensive information about the review process. The webpage begins with district's definition of primary research: the collection of original data for analysis aimed at discovering new facts and their correct interpretation to draw conclusions, including for program evaluation purposes (CPS: Conduct 2017). In addition to the definition of research, the site includes a short description of the RRB and the appropriate submission processes. It also lists the following Principles/Criteria for Review:

- The proposed research must directly provide educational value to the Chicago Public Schools or the Board of Education or to the field of education generally.
- The proposed research addresses an identified research priority of the district and does not duplicate research already occurring in the district
- The proposed research should not intrude upon instructional time or disrupt the educational process.
- The proposed research must manifest a sound research methodology using valid and reliable techniques.
- The proposed research must document that the researcher or organization has the capacity and experience to successfully complete the project.
- The proposed research must protect the privacy of students and staff and ensure compliance with state and federal laws and well as CPS board policy. The Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Illinois School Student Records Act are based on the premise that information about an individual student is private and confidential and generally may only be accessed with parent consent. (CPS: Conduct 2017)

There are several key takeaways from the principles. The principle that research must “provide educational value” underscores the extent to which CPS prioritizes its role as an educator above all else. This claim is strengthened by the third principle that research should not intrude upon instructional time or disrupt the educational process. Not only must the research be educationally valuable, but also the act of conducting that research cannot interfere with existing educational practices. The relationship between these two principles captures the major tension at work in

much of the RRBs decision-making (and education research generally): how to conduct research to improve education without interfering with the educational activities already at play. In other words, classrooms are not laboratories.

The primacy that CPS places on the education of its students is obvious. That said, whether any given research project is educationally valuable cannot be answered by the principles enumerated above. Whether something has “value” is a normative question. In *Education Research on Trial* (2009) Walters argues that attempts to improve the quality of education research are “a political struggle over whose claims to scientific legitimacy will prevail...an example of the politics of expertise and expert knowledge” (18). What is considered educationally valuable by experts and policymakers today may not be tomorrow. What is deemed valuable can shift with changing political demands – thereby redefining what research endeavors are the most appropriate.

It is also worth reflecting on the second principle stated in the Principles/Criteria for Review -- that research addresses identified district priorities and is not duplicative. This principle complicates the question of educational value offered in the first principle. Is there a distinction between what is educationally valuable and what the district prioritizes as valuable? If the only relevant research is research that aligns with district priorities, one would assume that district research priorities would be readily accessible. As will be discussed later, however, although a research agenda is currently in the works for CPS, to date there is no explicit publicly available research agenda.

The second plank of the principle, that research not duplicate existing research is not nearly so simple as it sounds. There are two reasons why this is the case. First, is the issue of how researchers are supposed to determine what research has already been conducted, which is

no easy task given the large amount of research published on CPS annually. Second, although one would hope that a good researcher would be aware of the existing studies in their field, the principle highlights a more tacit desire that research be tracked and built upon, a practice that does not necessarily occur consistently in a district pressed for resources.

As the above analysis suggests, the criteria for review of research raise as many questions as they answer with regards to how CPS evaluates proposals on an individual level. On the CPS research site, one can easily locate CPS Research Guidelines, which claim to provide researchers with a clearer understanding of how the district evaluates research proposals. The guidelines open with the disclaimer, “Chicago Public Schools (CPS) reserves the right to modify the Research Review Board (RRB) Guidelines as needed. Therefore, CPS reserves the right to request changes to new RRB submissions and to multi-year approved research proposals at any time” (CPS: Guidelines 2016, p.1). Although my interviews reveal that the guidelines have not changed significantly in recent years, that the district reserves the right to change how they evaluate research strengthens the claim that research is contextualized by how the district decides to evaluate research in that given moment.

The Research Review Board (RRB) Guidelines do not offer any additional principles or procedures used to evaluate research proposals. They do, however, list some important research restrictions. The restrictions include a ban on excessive interference with school instruction and operations and relationships between students, parents and school and district staff; the use of CPS time or resources to solicit study participation, compensation for staff during school hours, and the request of data directly from schools. They also place additional restrictions on CPS employees, such as principals and teachers, hoping to conduct research. Employees must conduct research outside of normal work requirements and may not research individuals known to them

(CPS: Guidelines 2016). The complexities of employee research will be discussed in greater detail later.

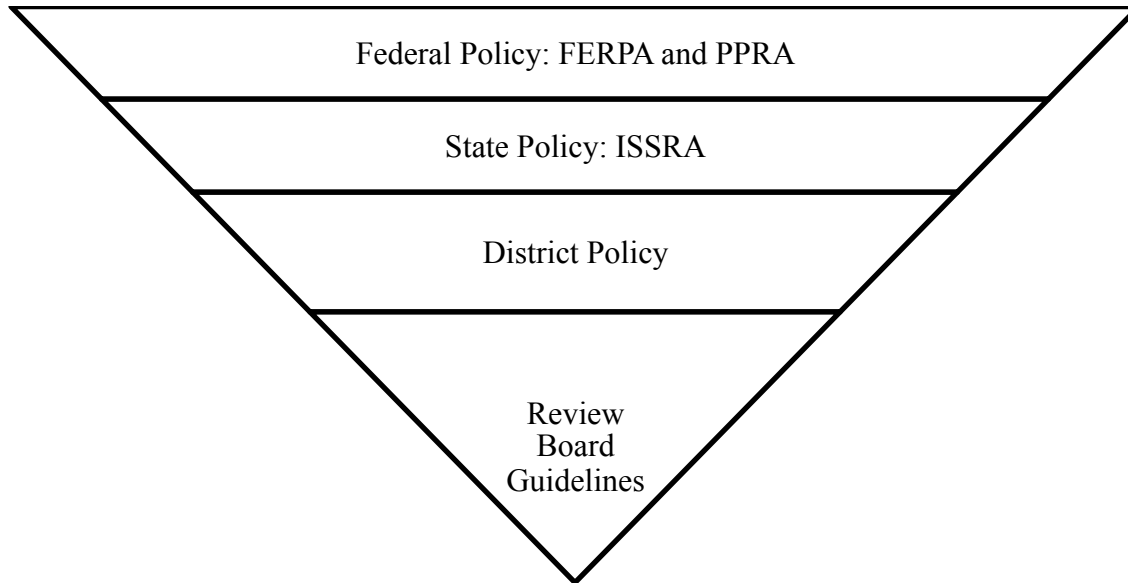
Before analyzing how the review process works in practice, it is useful to reflect on the role that the regulatory framework discussed above plays into the research review practices. The CPS Research and Data Policy cites FERPA, PPRRA, and ISSRA as legal references. One addendum to the policy meant to govern a specific long-term survey project, however, claims:

Various standards and requirements established by the Board in the Research Policy exceed legal mandates due to a need to effectively manage the high volume of research requests received annually by the Chicago Public Schools and to ensure high quality research with informed participants. (CPS: Research 2010)

In other words, while the policies governing the RRB appeal to the federal and state laws about student data usages and disclosure, CPS's review processes include additional protections of student data beyond those mandated by existing federal and state laws. Although one could argue that the laws offer insufficient protections for student data in the face of high demand for education research, the policy acknowledges the high demand placed on CPS specifically as justification for the increased protections and consequently chooses to accept the current limitations of the laws.

Taken together, federal and state law along with district policy and guidance documents contribute to the governance of the RRB process. Anything not listed in the policies analyzed above is left to CPS to determine. Figure 1 demonstrates how these policies function in a hierarchical fashion. In other words, nothing can contradict FERPA, and district policies cannot contradict ISSRA. This figure also reveals the limited scope of the legal environment shaping RRB guidelines.

**Figure 1.** Regulatory Framework



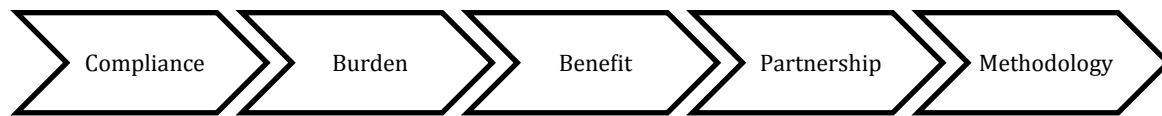
### **Considerations for Approval in Practice**

As can be deduced from the ambiguities highlighted in the above policy analysis, there is much to be learned about how the review process functions in practice. To unpack this process, I examined what transpires in the room during RRB meetings. Proposals are typically submitted about a week and a half prior to the RRB meeting. They are then assigned to be read by a member of the RRB who is deemed to have the most knowledge about the content area. The Research Manager, the Research Coordinator, and the legal team on the board also read every proposal. Additionally, every member of the RRB is provided with a copy of every proposal being reviewed in the upcoming meeting to read if they choose to do so. When the meeting begins, the proposal's designated reader offers a summary for the board and suggestions for what changes they would like to see made to the proposal prior to approval. The board discusses its concerns, and comes to a decision about what revisions to request from the submitter. The researcher is then sent a letter informing them of the board's decision, which most likely includes

a list of requested changes (such as more specific consent forms, a change in procedure, etc.), which they may resubmit to the board for approval.

My interviews with the research manager revealed that the metrics used to evaluate proposals during RRB meetings extend far beyond the brief Criteria for Evaluating Research Proposals provided in Research Guidance Document. Although the metrics discussed in my interviews employ similar rhetoric as the written criteria, their substance expanded on those available to the public and followed a particular order. As shown in Figure 2, the CPS process for research review comprises five categories: Compliance, Burden, Benefit to the District, Partnership with the District, and Methodology. The following sections will explore the meaning and implications of the different metrics for research review.

**Figure 2:** Approval Considerations



*Compliance:*

When reviewing research, the first factor that the RRB considers is compliance with federal, state, and local policies for research. For the district, adhering to these policies is “non-negotiable” and therefore a prerequisite for gaining approval to conduct research in the district. This consideration is also consistent with the written principle: “the proposed research must protect the privacy of students and staff and ensure compliance with state and federal laws and well as CPS board policy” although the content of those laws is left unnamed in the written principles. (CPS: Conduct 2017) Compliance with policy means that proposals must incorporate

all the required content listed in the research guidelines. This required content includes materials such as appropriately formatted consent forms, assent forms, and IRB approval letters.

When discussing compliance, the Research Manager explained, “[the RRB process] is an art and a science and that's the science part.” The compliance component of the research review process is arguably the most “scientific” in that the question of whether or not a proposal is compliant with the requirements set out in the law and district policies tends to elicit clear answers. Other considerations about the research’s benefit, in contrast, are less explicit and require more value judgments by the RRB.

### *Burden*

If the proposal is federal, state, and district policy compliant, the next consideration is the burden the research places on the district, teachers, and students. Time and resources are valuable in classrooms. Increasing instructional time increases student achievement and thus it is essential that instructional time not be sacrificed without justification (Andersen et al. 2016). Concern about burden is alluded to in the written principle “the proposed research should not intrude upon instructional time or disrupt the educational process”, but what it means to disrupt the “educational process” warrants further consideration. The idea of research as a burden is shaped by the notion that the students are in school to receive an education and “not to be research subjects”; that classrooms are not laboratories. Irrespective of their potential value, proposals that place too large of a burden on the district may be rejected – particularly those that ask too much of teachers’ or students’ time. In this sense, the RRB serves as the ultimate guardian of student’s instructional time (as well as lunch and recess time). Time also matters for teachers, who already face countless burdens on their time to plan lessons, meet district requirements, etc.

The idea that research efforts aimed at improving educational outcomes for students may disrupt the educational process presents a complicated paradox for those hoping to make changes in the educational sphere. On the one hand, reform requires research to guide policies. On the other, research efforts risk interfering with existing and beneficial programs. The RRB weighs these two considerations in its deliberations.

*Benefit to the District:*

Once the district has determined that the research does not place an undue burden on students, teachers, or other staff's time and resources, the next key issue is to determine whether the proposed research has a demonstrated benefit to CPS or if it is instead making use of the district exclusively as a source of data. The research relationship should be mutually beneficial to the researcher and CPS. This consideration is partially reflected with the guideline that the research must provide educational value, but it goes beyond to conceive of value as returns to the district. As mentioned, given its size and notable diversity, CPS is an enticing district for researchers interested in "product-testing" new curriculums, assessments, and instruments. Although there is a need to test new programs to innovate in schools, CPS sees no inherent benefit to using its students and classrooms as testing grounds for not yet validated programs or curricula. Not only does research aimed at validating curriculums offer no immediate benefit to the district, but also it risks generating negative outcomes for students. If the intervention is implemented at the expense of a known effective program, students lose out on the benefits of the old program without any guaranteed gains from the new one.

In a case where the intervention has already been validated and is being proposed as a sort of pilot program, the district still must question how the intervention's benefit is being offered to students. As the Research Manager explained, "we draw a distinction between are you

trying to create something and do you just want to data mine our students essentially? Are you trying to see how something works in the real world?” Research proposals should have real world implications beyond testing for efficacy of a new program.

The notion of benefit extends beyond the potential implications of the research to how the research may be employed to the benefit of CPS students. In the words of the Research Manager, “After you pilot it, what's the benefit to students if you figured out that it works?” Can CPS access the new tool or curriculum at a discounted rate? What happens to the control group that did not benefit from the now proven effective curriculum? Benefit is not an abstracted notion but a tangible question about what will be returned to the district. This is not to say that the district mandates certain returns from research (i.e. discounts on programs), but researchers must consider how their research findings may be used to benefit CPS.

Concerns about a lack of research returns to the district are verified in the literature on CPS. In Roderick et al.'s (2009) report on the Consortium on Chicago School Research, they claim that every year independent studies occur in CPS whose results are never returned to administrators. These researchers fail to bring their findings to the district not because of poor intentions but often because there are no formal processes for doing so (Roderick et al. 2009, p.5). The recognition of this problem by the RRB highlights the need for better results sharing processes.

There is another implication to the “benefit” metric that has questionable implications for education research: If every district has a research review board that is making judgments about what research they believe is “beneficial” to their district and students, then districts have considerable power to apply their judgments about what education research is important and to act as gatekeepers in the field. In other words, RRBs have the potential to be powerful albeit

unwitting forces shaping the content of education research nationally. That said, I found no evidence that is the case with CPS, or that those making decisions about which research to approve have any implicit bias with respect to what research should be allowed. Evidence of this absence is bias among CPS RRB members is reflected by the fact that proposals most frequently receive requests for modifications, not rejections. That said, the potential for abuse of power seems significant enough that RRBs should be given greater consideration in the literature than they currently receive.

*Ability and Willingness to Partner with the District:*

The next consideration is whether those proposing a research project are interested in *partnering* with the district. Whereas the guidelines suggest that research should align with district priorities, partnership means something specific for CPS that goes beyond working on topics that the district expresses interest in. Research must not only present a benefit to students in the abstract but also offer a benefit that aligns with something the district cares about so that the district can appropriately work with researchers at the school and central office level to properly execute the research. As the research manager explained:

Is the research question at issue something that we care about? And the answer to that is almost always yes, we care a lot about a lot of things, but in an environment of constrained resources and constrained capacity, we really have to abide by the idea that if everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. If we say everything is important that actually means in practice that nothing is important because we haven't drawn any lines.

Given that CPS, like most school districts, is constrained by resources, it cannot accept every proposal that meets the prior three standards. Additional consideration must be given to the district's ability and capacity to support the research being proposed. Support capacity refers to a range of things. First, it means that the school in which the research is occurring must be supportive of the research. Although the central office has the authority to approve research, in

approval letters it is made clear that final approval rests with school principals. The guidelines state:

The RRB's approval/acknowledgement of an external research study is conditional and subject to further approval by the school principal(s) and research subject(s) that form the basis for the proposed study. A principal may place restrictions on an External Researcher's access to students and staff to minimize disruption to school activities (CPS: Guidelines 2016).

Although the board is composed of central office officials, at the core of the deliberations is the recognition that the research takes place in individual schools and classrooms, which fall under the authority of the principal. The Research Manager aptly stated, "Principals know their schools in their communities best. And so they're the final decision maker."

Assuming the school's principal supports the research, partnership also refers to the condition that the research ought to be supported at the central office level. Researchers are expected to involve the team in the central office whose work best connects with their area of study. If, for example, the research concerns social-emotional learning, then ideally the researcher should connect with the Office of Social and Emotional Learning to engage with the CPS' current work on the topic. The expectation that researchers engage with the district central office teams raises other questions about resource limitations. If the district is already overwhelmed with the responsibilities of meeting the needs of the thousands of students in its schools, then one is left to wonder how well the district teams are able to partner with researchers. It also places an additional burden on the research review team that must then confirm with researchers that they have the support of the relevant office or team.

Regardless of the capacity of the district to partner with researchers, the emphasis placed on partnering with the district aligns with the prior principle of conducting research that is "beneficial". Research conducted without involving with the district risks promoting the use of

theories and practices that are inconsistent with district priorities or preferred educational methods.

Partnership is also essential for building trust between educators and researchers, as an absence of trust is a common barrier to successful education research. Roderick et al. (2009) stress the importance of partnership in their work on the CCSR: “engaging stakeholders in the design of the research, regularly communicating findings to the district and the larger reform community, and asking for input from stakeholders in the interpretation of findings is critical in building this trust” (6). This is not to say that only interventions consistent with how the district already operates are desired, but researchers should be aware of the context that they are operating within. Partnership also relates to the earlier burden consideration because by keeping the district informed and included in the research, district leadership and stakeholders will have more opportunities to adequately process and respond to the and findings (Roderick et al. 2009, p. 8).

It is also important to note that partnership is the fourth consideration after compliance, burden, and benefit. This is particularly surprising given the disproportionate amount of research that exists on the subject of Research-Practice Partnerships. If partnership concerns are only engaged with once research has met other considerations, there is a clear need for better guidance for how research can progress to this stage.

*Methodology:*

If the research meets all the aforementioned needs, the final consideration before approval is whether the research employs sound methodology and is being conducted by capable and experienced researchers. Unlike the other considerations, the need for sound methodology and researcher capacity is made explicit in the written considerations. Assessing if a study has a

sound methodology can be as simple as checking whether the survey uses an appropriate Likert scale or is free of leading questions. But it can also involve more complex and potentially nebulous considerations such as whether there is a demonstrated match between the research questions and the proposed procedure. Perhaps a case-study is being used to answer a question best answered by a randomized control trial or vice versa. Although all these considerations range in complexity, they ultimately come down to structural components of the proposal and not judgments about the value the research has for the district.

The district must not only be mindful of the soundness of the methodology, but also of *who* is conducting the research proposed. CPS receives proposals from a range of researchers, from PhD candidates to large established research institutions such as the Chicago Consortium on School Research. Research of particularly sensitive or controversial nature, regardless of its importance, cannot always be reliably carried out by individual researchers who lack the resources, institutional support, and content expertise offered from larger research organizations. The written consideration that research “not duplicate research already occurring in the district” implies that research resources are limited and so *who* is conducting the research matters.

Analyzing the methodology of the study in these ways also assumes a certain degree of expertise on the part of the members of the board. Although the CPS RRB intentionally includes members who have expertise in research methodology -- making this a feasible pursuit -- one can imagine that smaller school districts hoping to review research with the same level of scrutiny would face challenges acquiring the content knowledge to accurately assess sophisticated research methodologies.

In sum, although the process CPS uses for reviewing research employs many of the criteria that researchers can discover from publicly available sources, not every relevant issue is

addressed in these sources. An acceptable research proposal must follow policies, pose a minimal burden to schools and the district, demonstrate benefits specific to CPS, show active attempts at partnerships with the district, and have appropriate methodology and researcher capacity. The above analysis not only supports and expands on the findings offered by Hadj Amor, Munoz, and Beck about how school districts evaluate research requests, but also has significant implications for education research more broadly. First, the fact that CPS uses such a robust process for analyzing research proposals reinforces the need for greater oversight of education research given its ethical and procedural complexities. Second, CPS is unique in the high number of research requests it receives. Despite resource constraints, CPS has the benefit a strong, supported research review process to manage the research requests it receives. Because this is not likely the case in other districts, the complexities of questions facing CPS will be amplified in districts with less established processes. This indicates that research review boards as a national institution deserve better support and focus than they currently receive.

### **Post Review Feedback Loops**

Despite the linear process suggested in the district's guidelines and the higher level considerations unveiled through my interviews, the research review process rarely ends after a single round of review. In fact, it is rare that the RRB approves a proposal as originally submitted. Instead, the RRB tends to respond to proposals with feedback on what must be changed before it can be approved. Requested changes may be as simple as a fixing a typo in a survey instrument, or weightier requests such as working with the relevant central office team or changing a component of the procedures. I found that researchers tend to be receptive to the feedback and willing to comply with the district's requests, which temper some of the concerns raised in the earlier analysis about excessive district shaping of research proposals. In situations

where researchers repeatedly fail to make required changes, however, the district will limit the number of chances they have to comply. This limitation is justified on the grounds that there is a finite amount of investment that can be devoted into helping an individual research proposal.

Just as it is rare for the district to approve research during the first round of review, it is also rare that the district will reject research initially. In the uncommon cases in which research is rejected upfront, however, the district still provides researchers with feedback on why the proposal was rejected. Additionally, rejected proposals may still be re-submitted after two review cycles. This provision provides time for the researcher to be more thoughtful about the proposal.

The dialogue that occurs between CPS and researchers between the first round of RRB review and the submission of changes inevitably requires significant time and resources from both parties. Although there is no way to ensure that proposals will meet all the district's standards upon first submission, increasing public knowledge about the RRB process can help eliminate some of the initial problems in submitted proposals.

### **Current Challenge: Employee research**

The above analysis explains how the district evaluates most typical research proposals. What it does not address, however, are the challenging cases in which the RRB struggles to make decisions. That said, consideration of these atypical cases can enhance our understanding of the interworking of research review. One area that poses a special challenge for RRB concerns research proposals submitted by CPS employees. The CPS research policy states: "Researchers must use independent research subjects in their studies. Researchers must not have a position of authority over proposed research subjects or have a conflict of interest with proposed research subjects." (CPS: Research 2010). This requirement creates challenges for CPS employees (e.g.

teachers and principals) who wish to conduct research in their classrooms and schools, an increasingly common situation for those pursuing advanced degrees.

Although the district has a vested interest in supporting employees seeking to enhance their education, that interest must be weighed against the CPS' legal and ethical obligation to safeguard student privacy. As a consequence, research proposals submitted by district employees require an additional level of scrutiny to ensure that the research is completely distinct from the researcher's job within the district. As the Research Manager explained:

So the way I like to describe it as, they need to have two hats that they can never wear at the same time. So when they're being a board employee, they need to fully be a board employee and when they're being a researcher, you need to fully be a researcher.

The notion that employee researchers must wear “two hats” means that they cannot use resources, information, or tools that they have at their disposal as a CPS employee to conduct their research. This includes resources such as staff email addresses and student and parent contact information.

The ethical implications of research conducted on an educator's own practices in their classrooms and/or schools, sometimes labeled action research, have generated increasing discussion in the literature. As Zeni (2001) argues in *Ethical Issues in Practitioner Researcher*, “the insider has relationships that are fundamentally different from those of an outsider doing research in schools” and “the institutional review process, originally designed for experimental research in medicine, has an uneasy fit with qualitative research in education, especially research by insiders in the schools” (xii, xvi). Although Zeni's comment refers to university Institutional Review Boards and not RRBs, my analysis reveals the challenges remain the same in RRBs, which increasingly must apply guidelines meant to govern external researcher to internal ones.

Despite the ethical issues presented by practitioner research, the CPS restrictions understandably complicate the research process for district employees who, given their busy schedules and heavy workloads, are likely to prefer conducting their research in their classrooms and schools. Moreover, as Bakersen et al. (2015) explain, some teachers view restrictions on “action research” (i.e., research on teacher’s own practices) as impediments to improvements in K-12 education. Restricting employee research therefore understandably receives pushback from educators.

Unfortunately, research using one’s own school and students is problematic because it prevents the researcher from truly obtaining un-coerced consent from the research subjects given their position of authority over them, be it students, parents, or even other staff members. Research conducted by staff employees in their own classrooms also taints the validity of their study in that it is not truly an independent evaluation because they may have a vested interest in the outcome of their study.

In addition to the ethical concerns inherent in research conducted by educators in their own schools or classrooms, the question also returns to the primary focus of the district as an educator. Teachers should not be focusing on research during times they are expected to be providing instruction and planning curriculum. This parallels the burden considerations. The Research Manager succinctly stated, “we want to support our teachers and employees who are trying to learn but not at the expense of educating students.”

To support staff research, the CPS Research Manager invests additional time in working with both researchers and their institutions to make sure they understand the reasoning behind the district’s policies and to help them design their dissertation projects. Despite the conversations there is no current codified advice for staff hoping to conduct research anywhere

in the district's policies or guidelines. CPS officials acknowledges the need for such preemptive guidance to make the process more painless for staff researchers.

### **Looking Ahead: The Research Agenda**

The RRB processes and structure is dynamic. Frequent discussions take place regarding how to improve the process and to ensure that approved research aligns with district priorities. More specifically, a significant finding that emerged from my interviews with the CPS Research Manager concerns the CPS' plan to create and distribute a research agenda. The Research Agenda is based on the CPS Vision: a 3 year plan for 2016-2019 that lays out CPS's next steps for improving student success. The concept behind the Research Agenda is that it would enumerate the district's research priorities as they relate to concepts outlined in the CPS Vision. For example, although only speculative, the Vision states, "Over the next three years, we will improve instruction for all students, strengthen special education programming for those with disabilities and provide equitable access to rigorous programs that prepare students for 21st Century careers" (CPS: Three-Year 2017) Framed by this goal, the agenda could, for instance, suggest that research focus on special education curriculum. In RRB applications, researchers would be asked to draw connections between their work and the agenda. In practice, there will likely always be an "other" category for research that does not entirely align with the priorities explicitly laid out on the agenda. The need for such a category suggests the implicit recognition that CPS cannot always proactively recognize all of the research endeavors most essential for its schools. Because the agenda is still a work in progress, however, I was unable to obtain information on what the specific content of the agenda would look like.

The Research Agenda connects directly to the priority of partnership within CPS. Providing researcher with a better sense of what kinds of research the district is most eager to

support will doubtlessly enable more effective partnerships. Moreover, greater clarity may also mitigate some of the aforementioned resource constraints. When research partners become more involved in the research process, they can better understand the needs of the district and lessen some of the burden currently placed on the RRB. The creation of a research agenda is also in line with what experts suggest is a productive component of Research-Practice Partnerships (Coburn et al., 2013). In fact, the William T. Grant foundation offers guidance for school districts and researchers specifically on the creation of research agendas to improve research practice partnerships. The foundation argues that agendas should be collaborative from the start and focus on district challenges. (William T. Grant).

The Research Agenda has been well received by the district's major research partners who have been briefed on it. The research partners welcomed the possibility that the district would "tell them what to do". That only large institutional partners have been briefed so far, however, raises questions about how the agenda may be received and used by smaller researchers and institutions that do not have as close of a relationship with the district. Future research should follow how the agenda, once released, is received and utilized by the Chicago education research community.

## Discussion and Recommendations

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Several key takeaways emerge amidst the analysis of the CPS RRB that deserve further discussion. First, the classroom is not a laboratory and there is no right to access student information, no matter how worthy the cause. Thus, the RRB fulfills an essential function in CPS, by ensuring that research projects do not interfere with students' educational experiences and opportunities. Irrespective of the challenges that emerge when attempting to exercise oversight over research proposals, there is a demonstrated need for protecting students and

teachers' time and information, in part because of the limited scope of the laws governing student data usage.

Although the RRB plays a vital role, there are reasons to be concerned about the lack of attention given to RRBs in current discussions about education research. A considerable component of the RRB's evaluations of research proposals involves applying normative judgments about what is "educationally valuable" or what CPS "prioritizes" at any given moment. Although I believe the CPS RRB exercises appropriate judgment in its deliberations, given that RRBs exist across the country, it is difficult if not impossible to discern what metrics other districts use in practice when evaluating research. In other words, this case study of the CPS RRB serves as an example of appropriately executed power by an institution that in its design and purpose has the potential to significantly shape the content of education research nationally. Without more research and attention paid to other RRBs, however, it is impossible to know the extent to which they are influencing the design of research that in turn shapes policy makers decisions.

With respect to CPS, the findings that research proposals are rarely approved on first review and the emergence of new challenges germane to research proposed by district employees pursuing advanced degrees, demonstrate that there is definitive room for improving the way CPS reviews research. One of the key themes that emerges in my analysis is the significant research constraints on district time and resources. As Coburn and Stein (2010) explain, "adequate resources" are needed "to support the quality and complexity of decision making in a given district at a given time" (180). Absent significant policy shifts beyond the scope of this analysis, school districts will continue to be pressed for financial and material resources for the foreseeable future.

In light of this disheartening prospect, there are ways that the research review process can be improved to better support research in the face of resource constraints. The novelty of my analysis of RRBs derives from the fact that little information is publicly available about how the CPS RRB (and any RRB) makes decisions. The demonstrated gap between the information made available in the Research and Data Policy as well as the RRB guidelines, and the frameworks employed during RRB deliberations means that **the guidance available to researchers can be strengthened to include more information on how the RRB evaluates research**. As the example of staff researchers demonstrates, there is an absence of codified guidelines available for researchers whose projects fall outside the normal range of research. By investing time and resources into creating clearer guidance for researchers, the district can ultimately lessen the burden they now face when it comes time to review research. The research agenda is a good first step, by voicing district priorities to researchers *prior* to submission the district can eliminate much of the back and forth that happens post-submission currently.

Another area that can be reformed is the way the district tracks research that is already approved. Although there are records on every past and current approved study, **better systems should be created to organize and track research occurring in CPS**. Tracking allows for more intentional use of research findings. Although one hopes researchers will be proactive in sharing their research, given the disparate incentive structures mentioned earlier, creating better internal systems for following research from start to finish will help the district maximize the utility of the research it approves.

**A final recommendation is simply that more research be conducted on research review boards**. Although these policy changes may improve the research review process, one is still left wondering why there is such a dearth of research on the subject. I cannot help but

suspect that the fact that the research on RRBs would potentially require the approval and review by the research subject (the RRB) deters researchers from engaging in the process or makes it too convoluted from an ethical standpoint to engage with.<sup>8</sup> Despite this potential barrier to access, because this current study is limited, both in its focus on a single school district and limited data sources, there are several areas for future research that ought to be explored. Future studies should be comparative and focus on the differences in how school districts review research nationally. Additionally, future research should apply the principles established here to analyze the journey of specific studies through the RRB process. Because of confidentiality concerns, I was unable to look at specific proposals, but this would be a valuable next undertaking.

## Conclusion

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In a nation where the achievement gap persists, and graduation rates and college enrollment remain too low, there is a pressing need to improve the quality of our educational system. At the root of improvements in education is strong research that explores the limitations and drivers of student learning and achievement. As my research demonstrates, however, conducting research in schools is not a neutral imposition and school districts like CPS must exercise considerable oversight over the types of research they allow to protect the best interests of their students, teachers, and staff. School districts play a central role in guiding the research that occurs in their classrooms, and, at least in the case of CPS, expect researchers to meet a number of important expectations before their work will be approved. This first exploration into the ways that school districts evaluate research proposals establishes a useful framework for understanding the implications of school district research review for education research as a field.

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<sup>8</sup> I did not have to obtain RRB approval to conduct this research, but the same cannot be said for future endeavors

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## **Appendix 1: RRB Application Requirements**

The online RRB application form and RRB continuing review and modification application form can be accessed at [www.cps.edu/research](http://www.cps.edu/research). All research proposals must include the following:

1. Executive Summary or Abstract
2. Researcher status and title
3. Research question, hypothesis and methodology
4. Purpose of the research and Literature Review / Justification of Research
5. Description of the direct benefit to the Chicago Board of Education or CPS and/or profession of education
6. Description of research activities and school/student/staff involvement
7. Timeline of research
8. Institutional Review Board approval
9. Copy of any survey or other instruments
10. IRB approved and stamped copy of the informed parent consent form(s)..
11. IRB approved and stamped copy of the student assent form
12. IRB approved and stamped copy of the staff consent form

# Yael Caplan

5529 S Dorchester Ave. #2 Chicago, IL 60637 | Phone: 301-646-0701 | E-Mail: ycaplan@uchicago.edu

## Education

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**University of Chicago**, Chicago, IL **Expected, June 2018**  
BA Double Major: Public Policy and Comparative Human Development  
3.89 GPA (4.0 Major GPA)  
Dean's List, President's Scholar, Pi Beta Phi

## Experience

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**Debate it Forward** Chicago, IL **September 2017 - Present**  
*Head of Development*

- Conduct and track prospect research on donors and other fundraising initiatives for new 501c3 non-profit
- Write and submit grant applications for program expansion

*Lead Teacher* **April 2017-Present**

- Teach debate classes and coordinate programming for elementary and middle school students in Chicago public, charter, and private schools
- Train incoming teachers in curriculum and instruction

**District of Columbia Public Schools** Washington, D.C. **June 2017 - August 2017**  
*Teacher Recruitment and Selection UELIP Associate*

- Analyzed results of teacher preference survey and revised survey to improve sustainable hiring
- Conducted data analyses on midyear teacher resignations to improve teacher retention
- Assessed differences in performance of local teacher preparation programs in the district and provided recommendations for improved teacher selection

**Chicago Policy Research Team** Chicago, IL **January 2017 - June 2017**  
*Researcher*

- Collaborated with Chicago Fair Housing Alliance to research housing choice voucher discrimination in Cook County and published findings in report *Not Welcome: The Uneven Geographies of Housing Choice*
- Lead focus groups with voucher holders and analyzed existing policies surrounding source of income discrimination

**Chicago Public Schools** Chicago, IL **January 2017 - June 2017**  
*Office of School Quality Management Intern*

- Developed plan to change process for reviewing proposals to conduct primary research in Chicago Public Schools from paper-based to online system
- Drafted Research Agenda for the district to define CPS's research priorities

**The Urban Education Institute** Chicago, IL **June 2016 - August 2016**  
*Research Intern for the Urban Teacher Education Program (UTEP)*

- Analyzed survey data on different urban teacher preparation programs and reported on findings to improve program design
- Onboarded incoming cohort of students by tracking licensure information and preparing materials

## Skills

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Basic SPSS, Proficient in R, and STATA and Microsoft Excel; Basic French