

Research Use and Its Impact in Secondary Schools

Executive Summary

There has been growing interest in how to strengthen relationships between research, policy and practice in education. We define these efforts, and processes surrounding research use, as knowledge mobilization (KM). This executive summary outlines results from the first phase of an empirical study examining research use and its impact on educational leaders in Canadian Secondary Schools. This report focuses on survey results from 188 educational leaders pertaining to district research culture and knowledge claims relevant to practice as well as what we have learned through implementing interventions in nine school districts across Canada to increase research use. We seek and propose strategies that can be done quickly and easily to improve KM in school districts.

CEA/ OISE Collaborative Research Project
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Current Status of the Project

- First survey was administered in May 2008.
- Three interventions were implemented throughout the 2008/ 2009 school year in 9 school districts across Canada:
 - System to share research articles
 - Study groups around research issues
 - Districts conducting research
- Survey will be re-administered in fall 2009 to determine changes following the interventions.

Key Messages

- Districts report many practices to support research use, but other evidence suggests that survey respondents overestimate the extent to which they use evidence in their work.
- Educators' beliefs are shaped more by experience and colleagues than by empirical evidence.
- There are some simple things districts could do to foster increased knowledge and use of evidence.

Purpose and Scope

- The purpose of this collaborative research is to learn about the ways research is encountered and used to shape policy and practice in Canadian secondary schools.
- 188 secondary school educational leaders responded to the pre-intervention survey on district research culture and knowledge claims relevant to practice.
- This research is connected to a larger project in which CEA is working with a network of 10 school districts that are interested in substantial change in secondary education. 10 of the 11 participating school districts are affiliated with this CEA network and are also involved with CEA's *What did you do in school today?* research initiative.

District Research Culture

Extent of Research Use

Overall, the respondents were positive about the extent to which research is used in their districts. There is more similarity than difference across districts – generally the responses were positive and mean scores on items did not differ very much across districts.

While 85 % of educational leaders surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that “the important role of research was evident in the ways their districts related research to practice”, survey results and conference calls with participants showed some *discrepancy* between the reported importance of research and actual research use. Districts report many practices to support research use, but other evidence suggests that survey respondents overestimate the extent to which they use evidence in their work.

Educational leaders spend more time engaging with research related readings than research related events and networks:

Research Related Readings

- 63 % of educational leaders spend between 0-5 hours per month on research related reading.
- 37 % of educational leaders spend 6 or more hours a month on research related reading.

Research Related Events

- 47 % of respondents spend 2 hours or less per month in research related events.
- 25% are not engaged at all in research related events.

Research Related Networking

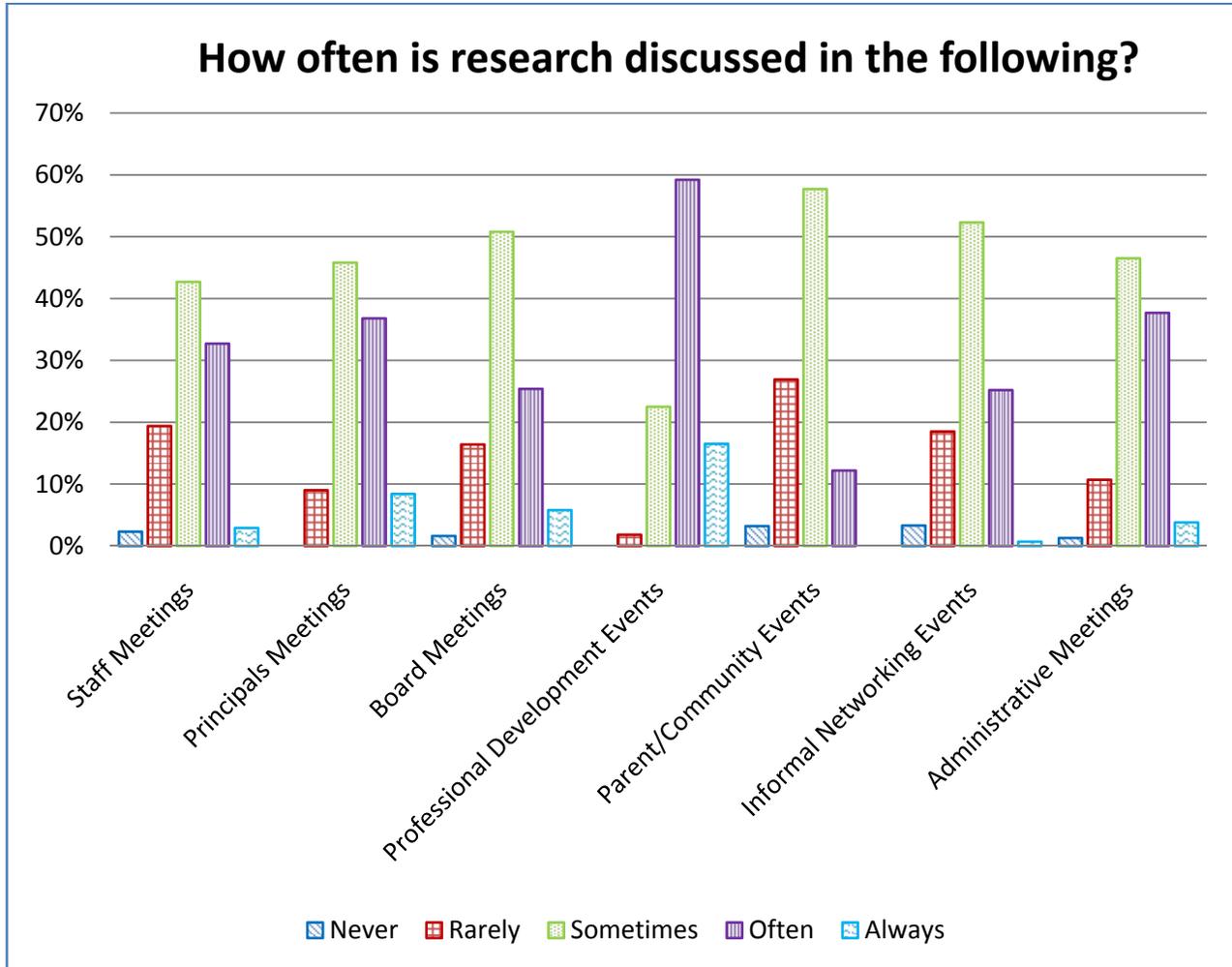
- 52% of educational leaders spend between 0-2 hours per month, with 23% doing none.
- 27% of educational leaders spend more than 6 hours per month.

Most educational leaders attend 1-2 research related events a year including government sponsored events, professional conferences, university sponsored events and academic research conferences.

Districts offer research related resources and formal and informal networking opportunities more frequently than research focused events. Most respondents reported that research focused events were offered yearly. Nearly half of the respondents reported that all three categories, research focused events (59%), research related resources (48%) and other formal and informal networking opportunities (47%) were offered infrequently in their districts.

Where, and How Often, is Research Discussed?

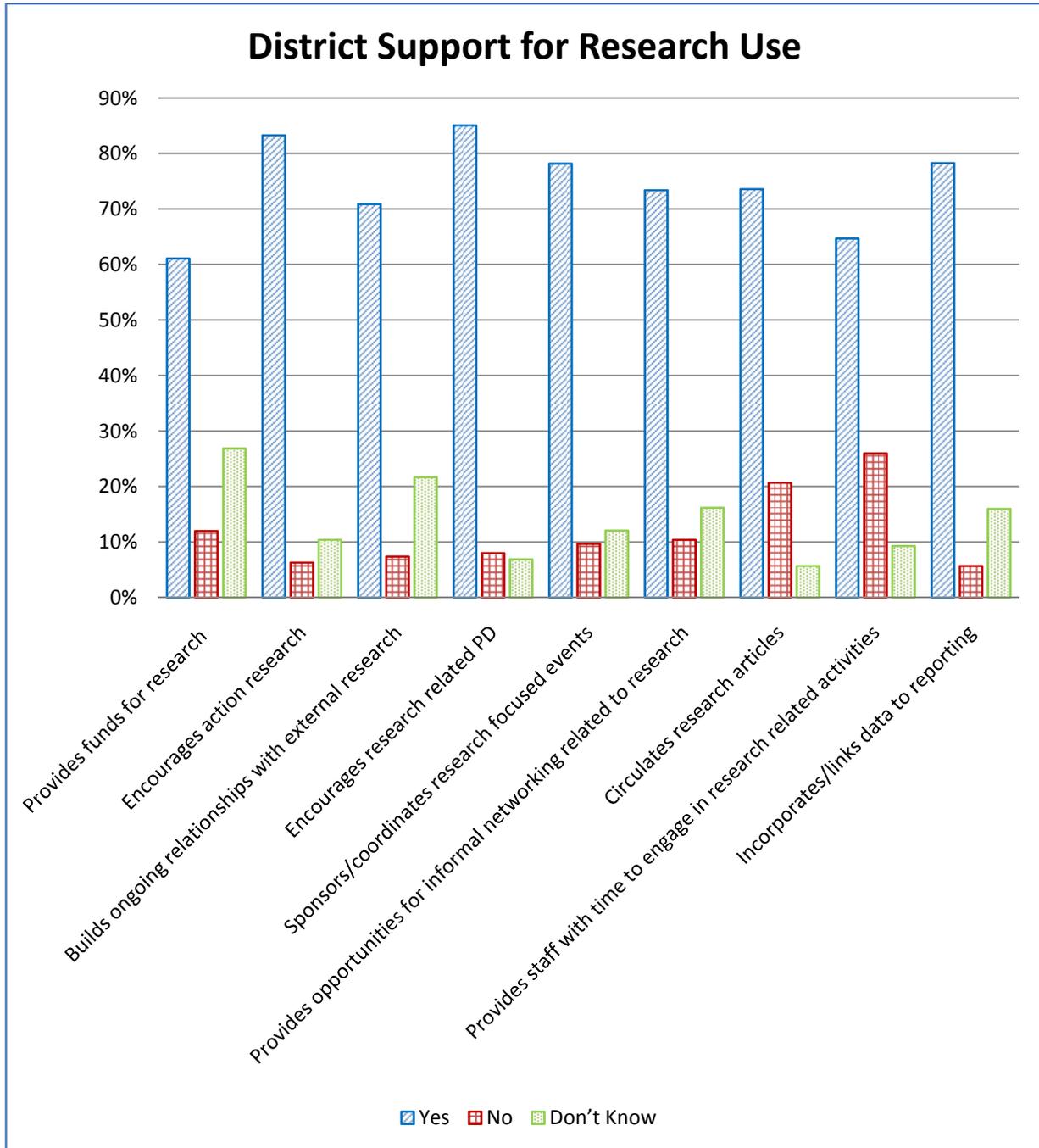
Research is discussed sporadically across different types of meetings and events.



Participants reported that research was discussed the most frequently and consistently in professional development events, although later data in the second half of the survey showed that educators consider PD to be the least important source of information influencing their practice (personal experience and interaction with colleagues were the most important).

District Support for Research Related Practices

Overwhelmingly, educational leaders reported district support for a variety of research related practices; however, self-reported amounts of time educational leaders actually spend engaging with research focused readings, research related events and research related networking are much lower.



District Research Capacity

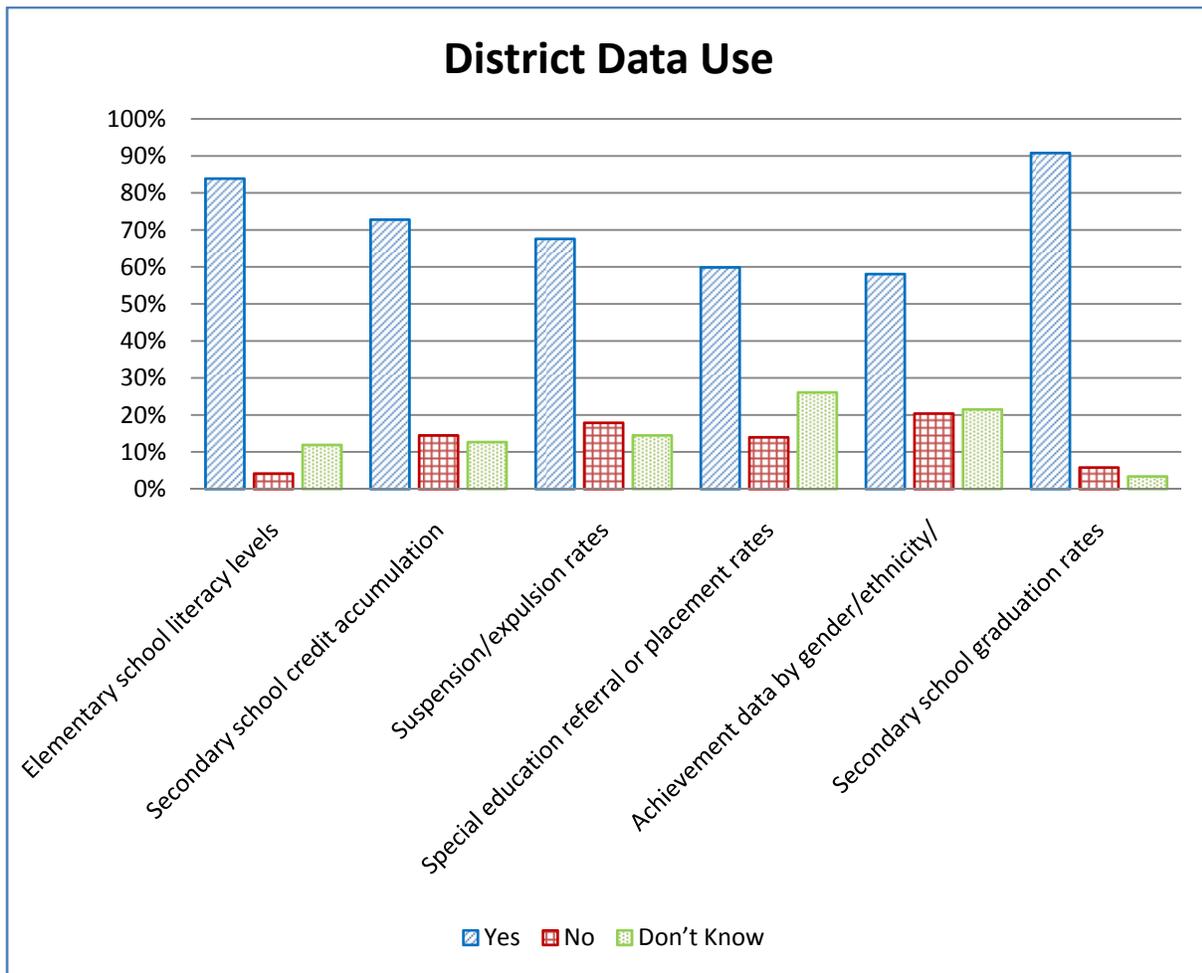
Less than half of educational leaders surveyed reported that formalized roles and research departments existed within their districts. 16 % of respondents were unsure of whether or not their district had formalized research capacity. One exception was a school district that has made a consistent effort in knowledge mobilization: 94% of respondents from this district knew

that the infrastructure exists, suggesting that efforts to give more profile to research do have an impact. Where district research capacity does exist, it is small (usually less than 5 people).

Most districts (70 %) did have joint research projects occurring with universities and community organizations.

District Data Use

Districts regularly report on and analyze a number of data sources.



There is considerable data use in districts for a variety of reports; predominantly, this data use is linked to reports and school plans that go directly to government, suggesting that data use increases with formal requirements and policies.

Conclusion

Most districts appear to have relatively weak processes and systems for finding, sharing and using relevant research.

Knowledge Claims Relevant To Practice

The survey asked respondents their views on six knowledge claims related to success factors for students and student pathways and trajectories. Each statement was based on significant empirical evidence, though some statements were worded consistently with the evidence while others were worded in opposition to the evidence to avoid response bias.

Level of Agreement with Knowledge Claims

For 3 of the knowledge claims, most respondents “agreed” with the weight of empirical evidence around that claim:

- Disconnection and disengagement with the school culture and school community are major contributors to students leaving school. [Knowledge Claim worded consistently with evidence] (94% of educational leaders agree or strongly agree)
- Schools with similar student demographics can and do have very different student achievement outcomes; suggesting that some schools are more successful than others at supporting student success (e.g. timely graduation). [Knowledge Claim worded consistently with evidence] (79% of educational leaders agree or strongly agree)
- The quality of teaching and learning in the secondary school is one key factor that influences student pursuit of post-secondary education. [Knowledge Claim worded consistently with evidence] (87% of educational leaders agree or strongly agree)

On 3 other claims, there was no agreement among our respondents on what is ‘true’

- Students who fail a single course in the first year of secondary school are at a much greater risk of dropping out of school. [Knowledge Claim worded consistently with evidence] (63% of educational leaders agree or strongly agree but 24% disagree or strongly disagree). Notably, the two Ontario districts, where this issue has been the subject of much attention, reported substantially higher levels of agreement with this claim.
- Secondary school performance and grades predict post-secondary school success with a high degree of accuracy. False. (39% of educational leaders agree or strongly agree but 36% disagree or strongly disagree) [Note: this is a reverse phrased claim; the evidence actually indicates that high school grades are only a moderate predictor of post-secondary success.]
- The majority of students believe that secondary school prepares them well for post-secondary school life. False. (37% of educational leaders agree or strongly agree but

36% disagree or strongly disagree) [Also a reverse indicator; the evidence indicates that most students do not feel they have been well prepared.]

Sources of Knowledge

In relation to the factors influencing respondents' views:

- For all the knowledge claims, respondents report multiple sources of influence on their views, suggesting that many different information sources can matter.
- Respondents reported that personal experience is the most powerful influence on their views, followed by colleagues or professional networks.
- Direct contact with formal research sources and professional development appeared to play a weaker role in shaping opinions across all the districts.

Respondents reported more use of evidence-based sources, such as research reports and data collected in the school, in relation to the three claims that had the most agreement.

Implementing Interventions to Increase Research Use

The second phase of the study involved collaborating with nine school districts to implement three interventions to increase research use throughout the 2008/ 2009 school year:

System to share research articles

- The first activity involved providing districts with some readily-available sources of good research on secondary schools and student success (newsletters, websites, readings) that was distributed and used as each district choose.

Study groups around research issues

- The second activity involved creating study groups of district leaders (6 to 10 people in a group) who met three times during the school year to discuss important research on secondary school improvement. Districts were provided with the relevant material (including executive summaries and guided questions).

Districts Conducting Research

- The third activity implemented an intervention to track former students' post-high school destinations and use these data to inform district planning for secondary schools. Districts were provided with a methodology and survey instrument for this activity, which was carried out by secondary students as part of a course.

The three interventions varied in intensity, with the first being the most passive and the third being the most active. We were interested in knowing if more intensive interventions would produce a greater impact than more passive ones. To this end, the survey will be re-administered in the early fall of 2009 to see if the participating district's knowledge of the claims or their reported research culture has changed following the interventions.

Important Themes Arising Across Interventions and Districts

Growing Momentum Surrounding the Importance of Research Use

- Research use is generally not a high priority in secondary schools, but there is a growing recognition among educational leaders of the importance of research in school districts.

Research Use is Likely to be Stronger Where It is Supported Simultaneously by Organizational Structures and Processes as Well as Culture

- Use of research is likely to increase if it is organized and embedded within districts, such as being distributed on a regular basis or being a part of regular meetings or discussions. We need to build structures and processes that support research use, while also fostering a culture that supports and encourages research use.

The Nature and Format of Research Material Affects Use

- Research products are likely to have greater impact if adapted to the needs of practitioners.

The Importance of Facilitation

- Facilitators can help bring different groups together and cultivate relationships.

The Importance of Linking Research Use to Action

- Engagement with research needs to go beyond a conversation and be linked explicitly to action plans.

For more details about this study, a longer interim report is available at

CEA Website: www.cea-ace.ca

OISE RSPE Website: www.oise.utoronto.ca/rspe



For any additional questions, please contact Dr. Ben Levin: ben.levin@utoronto.ca