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RECEIVED 01 July 2025

ACCEPTED 19 September 2025

PUBLISHED 21 October 2025

CITATION

Weddle H, Hopkins M, Shanahan K and
Stern S (2025) People, politics, and pivots:
sustaining research-practice partnership
collaboration.
Front. Educ. 10:1657547.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1657547

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People, politics, and pivots: sustaining research-practice partnership collaboration

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A growing body of scholarship outlines the value of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) for disrupting inequities across education systems. While promising, RPP work is also complex as partners navigate politics, turnover, and distinct organizational cultures and goals. To support the field with navigating such complexities, we examine approaches for sustaining RPP collaboration over time. Our work is situated in a national RPP that brings together researchers and 30 leaders across 28 state education agencies to improve multilingual learner policy and practice. Analysis of extensive interview and observation data collected over five years revealed practices supporting joint work amidst significant shifts in membership and national politics. We conclude with actionable recommendations for researchers and practitioners to sustain RPP collaboration over time.

KEYWORDS

research-practice partnerships, RPPs, collaboration, state education agencies,
multilingual learner policy

Introduction

A growing body of scholarship outlines the value of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) for disrupting inequities across education systems (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2024; Farrell et al., 2021; Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Tseng et al., 2017). While promising, the benefits of RPPs can also be complex to realize as partners navigate challenges such as distinct goals, changes in personnel, and limited time for joint work (Farrell et al., 2019; Denner et al., 2019; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2018). RPPs are also shaped by shifting sociopolitical contexts (Weddle and Oliveira, 2024; Villavicencio et al., 2023; Yamashiro et al., 2023), with many researchers and practitioners recently facing heightened political pushback against equity (Hodge et al., 2023; Pollock et al., 2022; PEN America, 2022; Schwartz, 2023). To shed light on strategies for navigating such complexities, we examine efforts to sustain collaboration over time in a large national RPP.

Our work is situated in an RPP that brings together researchers and 30 leaders across 28 state education agencies to improve policy and practice for students federally classified as English Learners (referred to as 'multilingual learners' [MLs] in our partnership to foreground students' linguistic assets). State education agency leaders¹ who serve in ML-focused roles are key intermediaries connecting federal and state policy with local practice to uphold students' civil rights (Weddle et al., 2024b; Brown et al., 2011; Smarick and Squire, 2014; Weiss and McGuinn, 2017). Yet, these leaders rarely occupy formal leadership positions within their

¹ Referred to as "state education leaders" or "state leaders" through the remainder of this paper.

agencies. As a result, their influence often depends on their own capacity to break down silos and foster shared responsibility for ML students (Weddle, 2023; Weddle et al., 2024). These dynamics make it essential that such leaders have dedicated spaces for professional learning and collective problem solving, enabling them to strengthen equity-oriented leadership.

Aligning with the core principles of RPPs, our partnership with state leaders is characterized by mutualistic collaboration, a focus on equity, and engagement with research (Farrell et al., 2021). Within the RPP, members use research to address leaders' current problems of practice, such as developing statewide strategic plans for ML education and improving support for ML students with disabilities. Since its inception in 2020, the RPP has navigated significant political shifts, as federal-level politics related to racial equity, linguistic diversity, and immigration have placed new constraints on many ML leaders' work. At the same time, the RPP itself has grown substantially—tripling in size since it launch—reflecting leaders' increasing desire to connect with like-minded colleagues who are working to defend ML equity. To examine how this partnership has been sustained over time, we analyze extensive interview and observation data collected between 2020 and 2025. We ask: *How does a research-practice partnership respond to shifts over time? What practices and tools helped sustain engagement?*

Literature review: the promise and complexity of RPPs

Research-practice partnerships disrupt longstanding hierarchies and gaps across research and practice by foregrounding collaboration between researchers and practitioners to support equity-focused change in education (Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2018; Penuel et al., 2015). Within RPPs, researchers and practitioners share authority and jointly determine the focus of their collective work (Coburn and Penuel, 2016). To support our inquiry, we draw on Farrell and colleagues' definition of RPPs as “a long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research” (2021, p. IV). This definition also highlights how RPPs are organized to ensure the expertise of all members is elevated and built upon through joint work. Actualizing this equitable approach to collaboration requires attending to power relations across identities, organizational hierarchies, and members' sociopolitical contexts (Henrick et al., 2023).

Much prior scholarship has outlined how RPPs can support improvements to policy and practice across levels of the education system (e.g., Conaway, 2020; Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Arce-Trigatti et al., 2024; Farrell et al., 2021; Weddle et al., 2024a). Summarizing the transformative potential of RPPs, Arce-Trigatti et al. (2024), “The kinds of knowledge generated in an RPP are really meant to be actionable to partners in the practice, policy, or community spaces, in contrast to research that may improve our theoretical understanding of various phenomena but may have limited application to real-world challenges” (p. 252). Indeed, the research on RPPs demonstrates a range of promising practical benefits such as improving student engagement during and beyond school closures amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Potter et al., 2021), supporting families as fellow leaders in transforming schools (Ishimaru and Bang, 2016), promoting the use

of evidence in district decision making (Penuel et al., 2020), and advancing equity for ML students (Wentworth et al., 2024; Weddle et al., 2024b).

While the potential benefits are clear, prior scholarship also highlights the complexity of RPP work. First, RPPs require collaboration between researchers and practitioners who typically come from organizations with different cultures and priorities (Denner et al., 2019), as well as distinct goals (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2018). Further, partners may not be well-supported by their home organizations to engage in RPPs. Illustrating this challenge, previous scholarship highlights how partnership work is often undervalued in university incentive structures despite the substantial effort required to sustain these collaborations and the many benefits of RPPs (Welsh, 2021; Gamoran, 2023). Further reflecting the complexity of RPPs, members often navigate organizational turnover and difficulty coordinating timelines and schedules for joint work (Farrell et al., 2019). Finally, the equity-focused work of many RPPs is inherently political. Villavicencio et al. (2023) note that equity-focused RPP work is especially complex in the current US educational context “marked by deep political divides and material consequences for actions that appear to be motivated by social justice” (p. 254). Navigating such complexities requires careful attention to how partnerships are organized, facilitated, and sustained.

Attending to the ‘how’ of partnerships is essential for supporting the equitable outcomes they aim to produce (Supplee et al., 2023). Through multi-year research across dozens of RPPs, Henrick et al. (2023) developed a framework outlining five dimensions of RPP effectiveness: (1) cultivate trust and relationships; (2) engage in inclusive research or inquiry to address local needs; (3) support the practice or community organization in making progress on its goals; (4) engage with the broader field to improve educational practices, systems, and inquiry; and (5) foster ongoing learning and develop infrastructure for partnering. While each dimension is critical, trust is often positioned as the foundation for sustainable partnership work. Importantly, trusting relationships do not occur spontaneously and must be thoughtfully cultivated over time (López Turley and Stevens, 2015). Riedy and Penuel (2024) note that such strong relationships require consistent efforts to “affirm the dignity of participants through caring interactions” (p. 259), further reflecting the importance of attending to how RPPs are facilitated. In this study, we build upon existing RPP scholarship to shed new light on how collaboration can be sustained over multiple years amidst shifts in size and the sociopolitical context.

Conceptual framework

To examine how RPP engagement is sustained over time, we draw on the conceptualization of RPPs as “joint work at boundaries” (Penuel et al., 2015). Joint work occurs as researchers and practitioners “define, create, implement, and study strategies for improvement” (p. 183). Within the conceptualization, the process and outcomes of collaboration unfold over time through interactions. Further, joint work is supported by *boundary practices* and *boundary objects*² that facilitate ongoing collaboration among researchers and practitioners.

² Also referred to as boundary tools in this paper.

As reflected below, these boundary practices and tools help participants to collaborate across differing norms and expectations that shape their roles in their home organizations.

Boundary practices are defined as “stabilized routines, established and sustained over time, that bring together participants from different domains for ongoing engagement” (Penuel et al., 2015, p. 190) and reflect both research and practice members. Boundary practices help to create a new shared space for collaboration, often requiring members to step outside of their typical ways of working. Boundary practices also help to anchor RPP work by allowing members to share their unique contributions and collectively make sense of shared problems of practice (Rigby et al., 2018; Farrell et al., 2022). In this sense, boundary practices are essential for “making expertise visible” and supporting collaborative decision-making within RPPs (Farrell et al., 2022, p. 199).

Alongside boundary practices, joint work is also supported by boundary objects (e.g., shared ideas or resources). Farrell et al. (2022) describe such objects as carrying “the meanings of partners’ distinct settings into the partnership space” (p. 199). These objects may have different uses across an RPP and may also be developed or refined over time. Pointing to the value of boundary objects in helping to coordinate partnership activities, our prior work demonstrated how tools such as meeting agendas, note-catchers, and jointly developed leadership resources supported members’ early RPP collaboration (Weddle, 2023; Weddle et al., 2024b). In this study, we extend prior scholarship by systematically examining boundary practices and tools that sustained RPP collaboration over five years. During this period, the RPP experienced significant membership growth as well as shifts in the federal political context that increasingly threatened the partnership’s vision of advancing ML equity.

In this paper and the broader RPP, we define ML equity as students’ access to—and positive experiences within—rigorous learning environments that support their sense of belonging and build upon their cultural, linguistic, and experiential assets (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Weddle et al., 2024a). State education agency leaders are well-positioned to advance this vision, as they bridge federal and state policy with local practice in their work supporting districts and schools (Brown et al., 2011; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016; Lhamon and Gupta, 2015; Weddle, 2023). Over the past several decades, federal policy and case law have increased states’ responsibilities for ML education. Between the 1990s to the 2010s, a series of court decisions established case law that emphasizes states’ obligations to uphold the Civil Rights Act and Equal Educational Opportunity Act by setting guidelines for states’ ML programs and monitoring their implementation at the local level (Hopkins et al., 2022), helping to ensure all MLs have meaningful access to education.

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act deepened states’ roles in promoting ML equity by requiring states to attend to resource equity across schools, employ evidence-based approaches to promote school improvement for all learners, and develop statewide accountability plans that include measures of ML students’ linguistic progress and academic performance (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Most recently, the second Trump administration has emphasized states’ roles in education decision-making, which has unfortunately coincided with drastic decreases in federal staffing, guidance, and support (Najarro, 2025). In addition, recent Executive Orders threaten to weaken enforcement of

the Civil Rights Act for non-English-speaking individuals. Against this backdrop, our RPP is committed to supporting state leaders’ critical roles in advancing ML equity by strengthening their capacity to lead in an increasingly challenging political context.

Methods

We employ qualitative case study methods to examine how RPP collaboration was sustained amidst shifts in personnel and politics over time. Aligning with key features of case study research, we draw on a range of interview and observational data, as well as relevant documents, to support triangulation across our inquiry (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The RPP currently includes 30 state education agency leaders across 28 states whose work focuses on ML education. This national partnership is innovative in the field, as most RPPs focus on the district and school levels (Farrell et al., 2021). The partnership focuses on state-level systems change in ML education, and meets every three weeks on Zoom to improve ML policies and programs amid highly politicized issues, such as racial equity, language policy, and immigration. Prior research within the RPP illustrates how the group supported improvements in leaders’ work, such as using research to create asset-focused guidance and professional learning, developing statewide frameworks for ML education, and supporting district leaders with using resources in equity- and evidence-based ways (Weddle et al., 2024b). Given these promising outcomes and high engagement over time, the RPP represents a rich case (Yin, 2018) to examine how such collaboration is sustained.

We write from the vantage point of researchers committed to ML equity, who have engaged in long-term partnerships with leaders and educators in various roles. The first author is a junior scholar with experience supporting several long-term education partnerships using qualitative methods. She previously worked in higher education leadership promoting access and equity for historically marginalized students, informing her collaborative approach to systems-change. The second author is a senior scholar and mixed-methods researcher whose expertise lies at the intersection of ML leadership and policy across various levels of the education system. She previously worked as an EL teacher in a state implementing restrictive English-only education policies, shaping her views on the importance of celebrating students’ multilingualism and building upon their assets.

Across our (the first and second authors) current and previous work, we examine a range of issues impacting ML students’ educational experiences and have increasingly elevated racial equity within our consideration of ML equity (Weddle et al., 2024a). As two white women, understanding ML education as racialized and interrogating our own roles in systems of inequity has been integral to deepening our scholarship and collaboration. Within the RPP, we serve as co-facilitators as well as researchers learning from members’ experiences engaging in the partnership. Facilitation includes coordinating agendas, leading discussions, gathering feedback, and developing draft leadership resources stemming from the group’s work. Each of these tasks are directed by state leaders, as partnership activities are designed to ensure all members have a voice and share power in decision-making (Weddle, 2023).

Aligning with the foundational principles of RPPs (e.g., Farrell et al., 2021; Henrick et al., 2023), our approach to facilitation centers on relationship building and recognizing the expertise of all members. We are fortunate to have talented graduate students supporting the

RPP's work, including the third and fourth authors of this paper. They are both current doctoral students with backgrounds in K-12 teaching, including providing culturally and linguistically responsive instruction for ML students. Together, we share a commitment to fostering joy in partnership work, even amidst the many threats to democratic education our partnership (and others) face.

Partnership context

The cross-state RPP in which this study is situated was initiated in June 2020 by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) English Learner Collaborative, the only national, sustained organization for state education agency leaders, researchers, and advocates whose work focuses on ML education. The RPP is open to any state education agency leader whose work focuses on ML education, and membership has grown significantly over time. At its inception, the partnership included 10 state leaders and four researchers (including the first and second authors). At the time of writing, the partnership comprises 30 state leaders from 28 states and seven researchers. While the state participants are confidential, leaders represent all regions of the country and a range of political contexts. The states also have varied ML population sizes, and MLs comprise different proportions of their overall student populations.

All members participate in the group on a voluntary basis. Members of the RPP meet every three weeks on Zoom to discuss shared challenges, exchange leadership strategies, and utilize research evidence to address current problems of practice. Example problems of practice include elevating the needs and assets of ML students in statewide literacy initiatives, improving services for ML students with disabilities, and developing statewide strategic visions for ML education³. To address these problems of practice, RPP members spend time during each meeting developing evidence-based resources by connecting research evidence to state leadership practice (see Weddle et al., 2024b for examples). Between RPP meetings, the researchers in the group incorporate feedback into the resource drafts for the next iteration of refinement.

Within this collaborative work, RPP members draw on existing research evidence that aligns with the partnership's vision for ML equity: promoting ML students' access to—and positive experiences within—rigorous learning environments that support their sense of belonging and build upon their cultural, linguistic, and experiential assets (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Importantly, this vision aligns with state leaders' professional responsibilities to uphold ML students' civil rights, which require their equitable participation in education. Beyond upholding civil rights, members share a commitment to elevating the many assets of ML students and families. The problems of practice and research⁴ discussed in the RPP span several aspects of ML education, such as access to qualified educators, culturally responsive instruction, and

advanced courses; English language proficiency growth; sense of belonging; student achievement; and family engagement (see Figure 1).

During each RPP meeting, about half the time is dedicated to co-developing evidence-based resources aligned with the group's shared vision. The remaining meeting time is used for other forms of collaboration, such as: "state spotlights" in which leaders share and discuss their current work (e.g., new initiatives or guidance), "research slams" in which researchers highlight emerging findings from their studies, and opportunities to sense-make together about the broader US political landscape and its impact on ML education.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this study include 130 interviews with state leaders and researchers and 85 h of meeting observation collected within the partnership between May 2020 and June 2025. Interviews were conducted annually in the spring with all leaders and researchers who were members of the partnership at that time. While the interview protocols differed over time based on the current work of the RPP, each year addressed similar overarching topics. Interviews provided opportunities for leaders to reflect on their current work and engagement in the partnership, enabling us to examine the practices and tools that support joint work. Questions focused on participants' roles and perceptions of state context, as well as their experiences engaging in the RPP. During years 3–5, state leaders were also asked to provide specific examples of how they use RPP ideas and resources in their work as part of a broader inquiry focused on research use. Observations of 85 h-long RPP meetings served as an additional data source to corroborate or clarify themes identified during interviews.

Analysis was ongoing throughout the study, and began with coding interview and observation data using a set of *a priori* codes (Miles et al., 2019) aligned with the constructs in our conceptual framework (e.g., *boundary practices* and *boundary objects*) as well as a series of codes aligned with the RPP literature (e.g., *relationship building*, *supporting members with their goals*, *use of RPP ideas*, *building capacity for partnership work*, and *suggestions for continued collaboration*). *A priori* codes also included concepts aligned with state leaders' work, such as *roles and responsibilities*, *state political context*, *ML population size*, and *language policy*. Data were coded annually after each round of interviews, beginning with a collaborative process across the research team. To start each round of coding, we engaged in calibration discussions to ensure consistency in our understanding of the codes and analysis approaches (Creswell and Poth, 2016). For example, we agreed on an expansive view of *boundary practices* and *boundary objects* for initial coding, so as to identify all routines and tools potentially supporting collaboration. Throughout each round of analysis, additional emic codes were added based on participants' reflections, such as *state agency culture* and *political shifts*.

Across the five years of the partnership, we created several analytic memos to support previous lines of inquiry (e.g., Weddle, 2023; Weddle et al., 2024a; Weddle et al., 2024b), helping us develop a deep understanding of the data. For the present study, we created a new analytic memo to document themes related to RPP engagement over time. The first section of the memo included a matrix outlining boundary practices and tools supporting engagement during each year of the study. To identify the

³ Additional details about the focus of the partnership, its development, and key activities are available in Weddle (2023) and Weddle et al. (2024b).

⁴ For more details about research use within the partnership, see Weddle et al. (under review).

Vision

The vision of the partnership is to engage in leadership capacity building to promote ML equity, defined as ML students' access to—and positive experiences within—rigorous and culturally responsive learning environments.



FIGURE 1
RPP vision.

approaches that helped to sustain the group, we reviewed all data coded as *boundary practices* and *boundary objects* across the years studied and identified examples that were explicitly described as helpful by a majority of members (either in interviews or during meeting discussions). To better understand how RPP engagement was sustained amidst shifts, we also captured examples of key changes, such as increases in membership and rising anti-equity politics during the second Trump administration. Meeting observation data and notes helped us to identify when and how these shifts took place. Once we identified these shifts, we went back to the coded interview data related to leaders' RPP experiences (e.g., *relationship building*, *supporting members with their goals*, *use of RPP ideas*, and *suggestions for continued collaboration*) to explore how the partnership sustained engagement over time.

By synthesizing across both interview and observation data, the memo described above served as a helpful strategy for transitioning from summarizing data to promoting deeper levels of understanding (Miles et al., 2019). Themes from the memo were used by the first authors to develop our initial assertions for this paper. The first and second authors then engaged in a series of analytic discussions to refine these themes, including bringing ideas from our conceptual framework back into conversation with the coded data. For example, we explored whether and how the identified boundary practices and objects aligned with the framing of stabilized routines and tools that elevate all members' expertise to address shared problems of practice (Penuel et al., 2015; Farrell et al., 2022). Through these analytic discussions, we refined the memo themes into the findings for this paper. Each subsection within the findings reflects the perspectives of almost all leaders in the partnership, unless otherwise noted. Many of the assertions reflect the experiences of all RPP members.

Throughout the analysis for this paper and previous inquiries situated within the RPP, we engaged in extensive member checking (Creswell and Poth, 2016) with state education leaders participating in the partnership. Our collaborative approach to data analysis reflected the broader group dynamic, characterized by trust, respect, and shared goals (see Weddle, 2023 and Weddle et al., 2024b for in-depth examinations of RPP dynamics). Each year, we shared key themes with RPP members during full-group meetings for their feedback. Members

typically confirmed the themes and sometimes suggested additional examples or nuances. During 1:1 interviews, we also revisited findings from the previous year with each participant to deepen member checking. These feedback opportunities allowed us to more accurately reflect the experiences of state leaders over time, thereby enhancing the validity of the present study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Findings

Findings demonstrate the importance of responsive partnership facilitation, as the group navigated significant shifts over time. First, the RPP more than tripled in size over the years studied, necessitating routines for maintaining a shared vision and ensuring that all members could contribute equitably to joint work. The RPP also responded to membership growth by focusing on the development of tailorable resources for a range of state contexts. Over time, the partnership also experienced political shifts at the federal level that impacted ML education, including reduced staff and capacity at the US Department of Education, increased immigration enforcement, and heightened pushback against diversity, equity, and inclusion. In response to these federal-level shifts, the partnership amended previous boundary practices to create more space for sense-making about politics and strategizing to protect ML programs and supports. The RPP also adjusted its norms regarding confidentiality and communication, which helped promote high engagement. These themes are explored in more detail in the following subsections, which are organized by shifts and corresponding responses.

Responding to significant increases in membership by adjusting boundary practices to maintain the shared vision and ensure all members could contribute to joint work

Over the five years of RPP collaboration studied, membership increased from 10 state leaders to 30 with many of these

members joining during the second and third years of the partnership. Almost all joined as a result of word-of-mouth referrals, as state leaders shared about the helpfulness of the group and ease of participating in virtual meetings. While growth was not an explicit goal of the group, we (the facilitators) and state leaders viewed new state members as an exciting opportunity to further advance ML equity across contexts. While exciting, the increase in RPP membership also necessitated new approaches to joint work to ensure all members maintained a shared vision and had opportunities to build relationships, provide insights, and contribute to the development of RPP resources. These refined boundary practices included facilitating regular meetings aligned with the group's vision, striking a balance between full and small-group collaboration, and developing tailorable resources. Across these practices and tools, RPP facilitators transparently documented next steps and takeaways. Beyond helping to sustain RPP engagement, these practices were also used by members to support collaboration in their contexts.

Engaging in regular meetings aligned with the group's shared vision

Throughout the period studied, members consistently cited meeting frequency as a key factor in supporting joint work. The RPP meets every three weeks for one hour on Zoom to share updates and collaboratively develop evidence-based resources. This frequent meeting cadence was particularly helpful amidst membership growth, with many members describing the value of “regular” and “consistent” opportunities to build relationships and move joint work forward. Within these frequent meetings, members expressed the importance of maintaining the group's shared vision. As described in the methods, the group is committed to upholding ML students' civil rights by promoting their equitable access to and positive experiences within rigorous learning environments that build upon their many assets. This vision was developed in the first year of collaboration and was woven across RPP conversations and resources as membership grew over time. Reflecting on her commitment to this vision, one leader explained, “multilingualism is about valuing all of the linguistic and cultural resources that our students come with [...] We have to value what our [ML] students come with, their identity, their race, their lived experiences, and build upon that.” Across interviews, leaders referenced similar beliefs about uplifting ML students' assets.

To ensure the shared vision was maintained over time, all RPP resources (boundary objects) foreground a commitment to ML equity. For example, a recent RPP resource on developing statewide frameworks for ML education outlines two grounding beliefs that are “necessary to promote equity and excellence in ML education: an asset orientation and a sense of shared responsibility” (Hopkins and Lowenhaupt, 2024, p. 7). While this commitment to building upon ML students' assets was developed by members, the vision also informed members' work over time. Reflecting on this bidirectional relationship between members' commitments and joint work in the partnership, one leader shared, “[RPP] is a great opportunity to meet other people that are doing similar work and that are invested [...] We are kind of teaching each other—the information is not just going one way”.

Striking a balance between full and small group collaboration focused on problems of practice

As membership grew, the RPP increasingly incorporated small group discussions into meetings to ensure all members had opportunities to connect and contribute to shared work. While relying primarily on full-group discussion made sense in the first year of RPP collaboration with only 10 state members, increases in membership made it impossible to hear from everyone in one conversation. Thus, the group began leveraging Zoom breakouts to allow for smaller discussions about the RPP's joint work. Members cited this mix of full and small group engagement opportunities as essential for supporting equitable RPP collaboration and “access to diverse perspectives,” as well as providing opportunities for emotional connection and sharing advice about similar responsibilities and challenges.

Participants consistently cited small group breakouts as venues for all members to inform the development of evidence-based resources aligned with leaders' current problems of practice. Reflecting on the importance of using small group time to develop these resources, a leader shared: “In [RPP], we are working towards a deliverable and so we can see the purpose. We can see that the investment in time is going to yield something.” Almost all participants echoed this sentiment, and many leaders emphasized the importance of prioritizing RPP meetings amidst their other pressing responsibilities. Connecting back to the RPP's shared vision, one leader described resource developments as helping to actualize their commitments. She explained:

We say ‘asset-based’ and that we think our students bring a lot to the table. But what are we actually practically *doing*? [...] What are our actual actions or behaviors that prove that we believe this?

For this leader and many others, the RPP was a space to move beyond rhetoric by developing actionable resources to improve ML policy and practice.

In such a large RPP, small group time also provided opportunities to dive into “behind-the-scenes” aspects of state-level work. One leader explained that these conversations provided space to ask, “How did you arrive at that [initiative]? What did you use for research? What did you use to convince your commissioner? How was that decision made?” She went on to explain that the RPP provided access to “how other people define and embody this role in different places— that has been really helpful.” Aligning with this perspective, RPP members shared how full and small-group conversations provided access to both a breadth and depth of insights about improving ML education that were distinct from their within-state collaborations.

Developing tailorable resources and clearly tracking next steps

In addition to leveraging small groups to move RPP work forward, leaders also emphasized how joint work focused on developing *tailorable* resources. This became increasingly important amid membership growth, as RPP meetings included a wider range of perspectives across diverse state contexts reflecting all geographic regions of the country and varied EL population sizes, linguistic diversity, and language policies. State-level politics also varied, with some leaders experiencing bans on words like “equity” and “culturally responsive” and others navigating more insidious forms of marginalization in ML education (Weddle and Hopkins, under

review). While RPP resource development focused on a shared problem of practice (e.g., improving ML program implementation), members were encouraged to share research and promising practices across their contexts, and to tailor collaboratively developed materials for use.

Reflecting on the value of developing tailorable RPP resources, one leader shared, “We are looking at ML program models differently, but at the same time, we are saying similar things. And so that helped me when I was talking [in my state], because I could provide examples from other states to consider.” Aligning with perspectives across the partnership, this leader also noted the value of bringing together state examples and research, as citing evidence helped to promote the “credibility” of ideas. Others mentioned how the RPP resources helped save them time in their work and avoid “reinventing the wheel.” One leader explained, “why would we put a hundred million hours into creating something when we could put 50 h into morphing (other states’ approaches) to meet our needs?” For this leader and others, developing tailorable resources in the RPP was a helpful way to learn from the partnership’s many members.

In addition to ensuring resources were tailorable, members also discussed the importance of transparent documentation and follow-through. Several leaders expressed appreciation for RPP boundary practices, including sharing clear agendas and resource drafts prior to each meeting, as well as concise takeaways after every conversation. This practice allowed members to focus on the main ideas and “jump back in” if they had to miss a meeting. Clear documentation was essential, as the large membership often meant different combinations of people were present from one meeting to the next. Finally, leaders emphasized the value of having specific researchers commit to advancing joint work between RPP meetings. One leader described this as the “magic sauce” that made state leaders prioritize the voluntary RPP meetings over other demands on their time. She explained:

I think the mistake that most other groups make is that they want the state leaders to do the work outside of the meeting, and it never happens. No one can. I mean, we just do not have a minute, even though we want to. So I think the magic piece of [RPP] is the researchers get the information [from leaders], they think about it, take it away, and bring [the resource] back advanced.

As reflected above, researchers being accountable for moving resource drafts forward between meetings helped to ensure the group made consistent progress towards shared goals.

Using RPP practices to support collaboration outside of the partnership

Members shared how boundary practices and routines not only supported RPP collaboration but also informed their approaches to subsequent collaborations in their contexts. This was an unexpected outcome of the RPP and may provide further evidence of the value of the RPP approaches outlined above. Many leaders described using RPP practices, such as agenda sharing, breakout structures, and routines for tracking takeaways, to facilitate collaboration within their state agencies or across districts. For example, one leader reached out

to the RPP facilitator to share how she used the group’s boundary practices to develop a new network in her state:

I just wanted to thank you again for your leadership in [RPP]. I am establishing a collaborative network here in [state]. Our first meeting was yesterday and it was a big success! Here is the agenda—you will see familiar structures.

Similarly, another leader shared that she used approaches from the RPP to inform “all working group meetings” in her state.

Researchers also provided examples of drawing on practices from the RPP in their other work, with one stating:

I look to [RPP facilitators] as models in terms of what they have done. Specifically around organization, things like the email from [facilitator] that always comes out on Friday after the meetings. So you know you are going to get that email, and it will have all of the essential information. [...] I aspire to be that organized.

Another researcher noted that she used practices from the RPP in her other projects to “make sure all voices are heard” when bringing “researchers and practitioners to the table to dig into topics of interest.” Excitingly, these examples suggest that the practices designed to sustain the work of our growing RPP may also be helpful for other collaborative settings.

Responding to increased anti-equity politics at the federal level by developing new RPP routines for collective strategizing while maintaining confidentiality

In addition to tripling in size over the period studied, the RPP also experienced significant political shifts impacting ML education. While anti-equity politics were mounting across the state and local levels for several years of the partnership (Weddle and Hopkins, under review), the second Trump administration brought new federal-level challenges. During the 2024–25 school year, the new presidential administration launched several anti-equity initiatives impacting ML education including cancelling grants and contracts, reducing staffing at the US Department of Education, increasing immigration enforcement in schools, threatening to withhold Title III funding, and declaring English as the official language of the country. To respond to these shifts, the RPP began dedicating more agenda time at each meeting to sense-making about politics and strategizing to protect ML programs and supports, alongside the existing routine of collaborative resource development. The partnership also revised its norms regarding information sharing and confidentiality, and increased communication between meetings so that state members could stay connected.

Dedicating more RPP meeting time for sense-making and strategizing

During recent years of RPP engagement, leaders increasingly described the RPP as a valuable space for collective strategizing amidst rising anti-equity politics and the shift in federal administration. While politics were always considered during conversations and resource development about problems of practice, in 2024–25 navigating the federal political context became its own shared problem of practice. The

partnership began dedicating more time at each meeting to make sense of federal policies and politics impacting ML education, helping promote responsiveness to leaders' increasingly complex work. For example, RPP members recently spent time unpacking Project 2025 (a set of conservative policy priorities authored by top Trump advisors) and identifying corresponding strategies for state and local education leaders to protect ML civil rights.

Importantly, time to sense make about federal politics did not replace existing RPP routines, but rather complemented ongoing resource development. One leader described appreciation for this balance, sharing, "our meetings are organized with an agenda and goals, but at the same time it is organic enough to address any pressing questions or topics we all need support with." Many leaders reiterated the importance of continuing structured resource development while also engaging in political strategizing amidst rapid changes. Reflecting this perspective, a leader shared, "With our RPP, I feel anchored because I know this work will not change and will not go away. So that is comforting because this is what we always do, even while things swirl around us".

Across the partnership, members shared similar sentiments about the importance of ongoing RPP collaboration during times of extreme uncertainty at the federal level. One leader described the group as a "lifeline" as federal and state politics became increasingly hostile towards immigrant students and families, because the group provided space to review existing protections for ML students and identify ways to strengthen state support. Another shared, "Meeting with you guys every three weeks is what keeps me going." While the partnership was viewed as highly important, it was also complex for some leaders to engage in equity-focused work amidst growing restrictions in their state contexts. The fragility of some leaders' roles required careful shifts in RPP facilitation, as explained below.

Protecting confidentiality and staying connected

As many leaders in the partnership navigated anti-equity politics in their states (and all leaders were concerned about political shifts at the federal level), members were increasingly worried about privacy. In earlier years of RPP collaboration, members appreciated the routine of recording Zoom meetings in case they needed to review the content later (Weddle, 2023). Understandably, this boundary practice required an adjustment in response to heightened concerns about political scrutiny and confidentiality. After asking for input from members, we (the RPP facilitators) decided to stop recording meetings and to no longer include state leaders' names or affiliations on RPP notes or resources. We also developed a new group norms sheet outlining our collective commitment to respecting one another's confidentiality. Members consistently expressed appreciation for these changes, with one noting that the shifts maintained the RPP as a safe space to engage. In this sense, prioritizing confidentiality helped to protect the trust that had been built over time.

Amidst rapid political shifts, members also expressed a desire for more opportunities to connect with one another. To support ongoing communication, a leader created an optional messaging group where members of the partnership can ask questions and share relevant guidance or research. In addition to providing a real-time opportunity for connection and support, the information shared has also informed our ongoing RPP activities, including presentations and the development of resources. In this sense, increased communication is helping to ensure that the RPP remains responsive to the current work of state leaders.

Members have shared positive feedback about incorporating new forms of communication into our partnership, with one leader sharing, "Thank you for continuing the innovative energy!"

Maintaining joy and hope amidst political challenges

While the RPP increasingly attended to political threats to ML education, members also reflected on the importance of maintaining joy and hope. Across the five years studied, members frequently described the RPP as "happy" and "fun," with many forming lasting friendships through the group. One leader who had been in the RPP since its inception recently explained, "There is such a friendship now because we know each other." Several leaders noted that these supportive relationships were especially important during the heightened stressors of the second Trump administration. One explained, "How the space has been facilitated and created definitely builds a sense of community and collaboration. [...] We have to do this work together to make sense of it." Aligning with this perspective, another leader noted that addressing the Trump administration's threats to education required "more community" both within states and through the national RPP.

Even alongside heavy conversations about shifts at the federal level, such as reductions in force and threats to Title III funding, members continued to laugh during RPP meetings, contribute to resource development, and share personal and professional successes. For example, during a recent meeting, members celebrated the birth of a leader's first child. Members also continued to share bright spots across their work. Reflecting on the importance of maintaining these routines, a leader described making space for "what is the *good* that folks are doing, and how can we build on that to continue to do good things for students?" Another leader explained that engaging in the RPP and learning from collaborators across the country "reminds me of why we do this work." In this sense, RPP engagement helped members stay committed to improving ML education, even in challenging sociopolitical contexts. Summarizing this perspective, a leader explained why RPP collaboration was essential to her amidst many other pressing responsibilities. She shared, "I am surrounded by people [in the RPP] who think critically and deeply about the work that they are doing, and about really trying to make national changes through local change. And that is motivating".

Discussion and conclusion

This study sheds light on how RPPs can support state leaders' engagement in ongoing collaboration that supports their politically complex work, highlighting facilitation strategies to navigate shifts over time. Within the RPP, members experienced significant growth in membership and disruptions in the federal political context as the second Trump administration fostered hostility towards immigrants, public education, and equity. The findings demonstrate how RPP collaboration was sustained through meeting regularly to advance a shared vision, engaging in a mix of full and small group activities, and developing tailorable resources. Across these practices, transparency and follow-through were important for both advancing work and fostering trust.

In response to shifts in politics and the federal administration, the RPP provided ongoing opportunities for members to engage in political sense-making and strategizing while maintaining confidentiality. While the RPP grappled directly with political stressors and threats to ML education, the group also maintained hope through continued relationship building and sharing examples of promising practices. Insights from this study may inform how future partnerships are facilitated to sustain shifts over time, as well as how researchers develop the capacity to engage in collaborative work. In this spirit, we offer the following implications for theory, practice, and future research below.

Implications for theory

Clear routines and responsibilities to sustain collaboration over time

While much prior research highlights the complexity and dynamism of RPPs, this study offers new insights into *how* RPPs can be facilitated to “weather all kinds of challenges” (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2024, p. 252) through examining specific boundary practices and tools that supported joint work. Findings shed light on strategies that sustained RPP work through shifts in membership, including maintaining a shared vision, ensuring all members could inform resource development, and transparently documenting and sharing key takeaways. Aligning with prior research on the importance of trusting relationships (Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Farrell et al., 2021; Henrick et al., 2023; López Turley and Stevens, 2015), these practices helped to create conditions in which RPP members felt “seen and heard” (Riedy and Penuel, 2024, p. 261) and could count on one another to follow through on commitments (Henrick et al., 2023).

Findings also demonstrate the value of clear processes and expected contributions for joint work, such as researchers acting on edits recommended by state members in order to move resource development forward between meetings. This routine helped to avoid challenges related to ambiguous roles or contributions that can stymie generative collaboration (Farrell et al., 2019). Our study also demonstrates how a deliberate balance of full and small group discussions during RPP meetings helped ensure all members’ perspectives were incorporated into joint work, reflecting the value of intentional co-design processes (Farrell et al., 2022; Supplee et al., 2023). Importantly, sustained collaboration was also supported by consistent opportunities for members to engage in these practices, corroborating previous scholarship on the value of communication through regular RPP meetings (Wentworth et al., 2024).

Attending to sociopolitical context

In addition to the above strategies, findings revealed the importance of attending to the sociopolitical context in RPP collaboration. During the most recent year of RPP collaboration, members navigated significant shifts in federal politics and policies that impact ML education (e.g., reductions in force, increased immigration enforcement, and threats to Title III funding). Aligning with Villavicencio et al.’ (2023) assertion that the political context of education “cannot be ignored” in equity-focused RPP work (p. 254), our findings demonstrate the value of adjusting boundary practices to address political shifts head-on. Importantly, expanded opportunities for political sense-making were designed for all members to contribute

questions, interpretations, and strategies (as opposed to being time for brief updates from leads). As illustrated in previous scholarship, positioning members as equal thought partners is integral to expanding collaborative learning opportunities (Sjölund and Lindvall, 2024). Within our partnership, adjusting previous routines to better protect members’ confidentiality helped to further promote open sharing and learning.

While dedicating more meeting time to political sense-making and strategizing amid the second Trump administration was critical, members also reflected on the importance of maintaining existing routines (e.g., developing evidence-based resources). In this sense, the findings highlight the need to strike a balance between consistent practices and flexibility to sustain RPP engagement over time. Similarly, members described benefiting from maintaining hope and joy in the partnership alongside addressing the new presidential administration and its many negative impacts on ML education. In their work exploring the political dimensions of partnership, Yamashiro et al. (2023) argue that whether RPPs can navigate political challenges is likely “dependent on whether the partnership has spent the time to develop relationships, trust, intentionally equitable collaborative structures and processes, and clear and shared commitments to equitable transformation” (p. 23). Our findings provide an example of how such existing infrastructure (e.g., shared vision, strong relationships, and equitable routines) helped to sustain RPP collaboration amidst a deeply challenging federal political shift.

Implications for practice

Responsive RPP facilitation

While the findings from this study offer several strategies that helped sustain RPP engagement over time, we recognize that each RPP is unique in its membership, goals, sociopolitical context, and challenges. Our work aimed to demystify the complex “how” of partnership work (Supplee et al., 2023), but should not be viewed as a comprehensive checklist of RPP strategies. Instead, we hope that others are inspired and supported by key ideas across the findings, including the importance of striking a balance between maintaining “anchoring” practices and tools and innovating in response to shifts over time. In our work, gaining regular feedback from members (through 1:1 interviews, feedback forms, and meeting discussions) was integral to informing our approach and sustaining high engagement. Thus, it may be important for RPP leaders to gain regular feedback from members on collaboration processes and tools, and to make corresponding adjustments to routines.

Findings also speak to the value of supporting collaborators with navigating political complexity. While our RPP has experienced high engagement since its inception, meeting attendance and participation have been exceptionally high in recent months. Creating more space within each RPP meeting to make sense of rapid federal-level political shifts and increasing communication outside of meetings reflect new forms of boundary infrastructuring (Farrell et al., 2022), helping promote the sustainability of the group. As national threats to public education and equity continue to mount, we encourage other RPPs to consider what adjustments may be needed to their practices to ensure collaboration supports members through uncertainty.

Protecting confidentiality

Findings also demonstrate the importance of protecting collaborators' confidentiality, particularly for leaders and educators whose roles may be fragile amidst political pushback against equity in education. As members of our RPP faced new political challenges, many no longer felt comfortable with the communication routines that had previously worked for the group. Recognizing that trusting relationships are built through interactions over time (López Turley and Stevens, 2015; Farrell et al., 2021; Henrick et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2023) and that RPP practices are dynamic (Farrell et al., 2022; Penuel et al., 2015), it was critical to adjust RPP facilitation in response to heightened privacy concerns. We encourage others who are engaged in RPPs to have open and ongoing discussions about their collaboration practices and to renegotiate specific approaches as needed.

Preparing future RPP researchers

Finally, recognizing that joint work is not simple or easy, findings from this study may also have implications for how researchers are prepared to engage in RPPs. For example, how might courses, trainings, or applied learning experiences be adjusted to better support researchers to develop and sustain RPP collaboration over time? We recommend that individuals and organizations offering such capacity-building opportunities address some of the complexities outlined in this study, such as navigating significant changes in the political context and ensuring that all members can contribute equitably to decision-making. As outlined by the Collaborative Education Research Collective (2023), preparing and supporting individuals to engage in collaborative research requires grappling with critical questions spanning the sociopolitical context of partnership work, relational dynamics, and resource mobilization. At the university level, preparation to engage in RPPs requires disrupting long-standing norms and traditions (Gamoran, 2023) including broadening conceptualizations of who is an intellectual and foregrounding responsiveness to community needs (Ghiso et al., 2019). These ethos are reflected in our findings related to the boundary practices supporting equitable contributions to joint work and the importance of understanding state leaders' realities amidst new political complexity.

Implications for future research

Building upon this study, future research is needed to examine a broader range of efforts to sustain equity-focused collaboration over time. We recommend that researchers explore boundary practices and tools across diverse RPPs to identify a repertoire of effective strategies. For example, future studies could explore RPPs with practice partners situated at different levels of the education system (e.g., schools, districts, community organizations, state agencies) or navigating different shifts than those addressed in this study (e.g., disruptions in funding, decreases in membership). Further, more research is needed to explore the balance between consistent practices that "anchor" shared work and innovative approaches designed to respond to change over time. Put another way, what should remain constant within RPPs, and how might this vary across groups with distinct

goals and membership? Such research is necessary to continue building a robust evidence base on sustaining joint work.

Aligning with the implications for practice above, future studies may also help identify effective strategies for supporting researchers with the preparation needed to establish and sustain partnerships. Such work may be particularly impactful as political polarization continues to heighten and RPPs necessitate increasingly nuanced facilitation. Recognizing the substantial threats facing public education, RPPs are positioned to play an influential role in protecting all students' access to high quality learning opportunities. Supporting the "next generation" of RPP scholars (Farrell et al., 2021) will be crucial for actualizing this goal and building more equitable systems.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data is confidential. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to hweddle@pitt.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

HW: Project administration, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft. MH: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. KS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. Thank you to the organizations that have funded research within this partnership, specifically the William T. Grant Foundation and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author(s) declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

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