

Findings from the District Research Leader Knowledge Mobilization Survey

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ABOUT THE SURVEY

Although district research leaders (DRLs) are viewed as an important lever in linking research and practice, there is little known about their work facilitating the flow and uptake of research evidence in district central offices—efforts we refer to as *knowledge mobilization*. Prior projects have explored the professional backgrounds, job descriptions, and context of DRL work through a knowledge mobilization lens. We build on those findings with a survey of a DRL community of practice to better understand their actual work as knowledge mobilizers. In this brief, we present key findings of a survey administered between June and September of 2021. Twelve members of the community of practice completed the survey in full (n=11) or in part (n=1). Although the number of respondents is small, these findings are a useful preliminary step in understanding, supporting, and leveraging the work of DRLs in strengthening research use in education policy and practice.

The survey was designed based on a research-informed framework consisting of (1) enabling conditions for engagement in knowledge mobilization, which we describe in terms of capabilities, motivations, and opportunities; (2) knowledge mobilization activities of DRLs within districts, (3) outputs or products resulting from DRLs activities, (4) outcomes that occur because of DRLs activities, and (5) the resulting use of research evidence by districts. The survey can be viewed in its entirety [here](#).

SURVEY FINDINGS

Below we summarize the results of the survey and what we learned about DRL knowledge mobilization work. Findings are also summarized quantitatively in Figure 1, which visualizes the distribution of responses across seven sets of items in the survey.

ENABLING CONDITIONS

Three sets of items focused on the conditions that enable DRLs to mobilize research knowledge, which we conceptualized in three ways: opportunities (i.e., all the factors that lie outside the DRL, n=12), capability (i.e., skills of DRLs, n=12), and motivation (e.g., DRLs goals and expectations for success, n=11).

Opportunities.

Most DRLs (n=10) at least ‘somewhat agreed’ that there is an **expectation to work collegially and share ideas, information, and suggestions to better accomplish the goals of the district**. Many also reported opportunities related to the **engagement of external stakeholders** in their district’s research and knowledge mobilization activities (n=9), the **existence of district policies that explicitly support the use of research evidence** (n=8), **DRLs’ inclusion in decision-making processes** (n=8), **district leaders who champion research use** and knowledge mobilization efforts, and **broad buy-in and commitment** to using research for evidence-based practice (n=8). There was less agreement amongst DRLs in terms of whether districts’ strategic goals that align with the use of evidence in policy and practice (n=6), the presence of organizational routines that support collaboration across departments (n=5) or that support knowledge sharing across the district (n=4), and adequacy of financial and human resources (n=3). Perceptions of opportunity to engage in knowledge mobilization work varied not only across districts, but also within individual responses. **Only one DRL at least ‘somewhat agreed’ that the 12 enabling factors we identified were present within their districts while another DRL only reported two enabling factors as being present within their district.** Some DRLs provided specific examples of the opportunities available within their districts, such as:

“Knowledge sharing at scale is extremely challenging, but we do have routines in place to try and communicate well across a large organization”

Capabilities

A second set of items focused on the importance of specific skills and DRLs' perception of their skill level. All respondents agreed that two skill sets were either 'important' or 'very important' for mobilizing knowledge: (1) **creating and/or managing an organizational culture** that supports evidence use, and **providing strategic oversight, management, or leadership** to support knowledge mobilization. Respondents also consistently reported that skills in **communicating with stakeholders** (n=11); **facilitating, liaising, or negotiating the translation of research** (n=11), and; **identifying, assessing, or integrating best practice or theory** were 'important' or 'important' for DRLs. There was less consensus on the importance of skill sets related to developing, discovering or consolidating research to be mobilized (n=9); measuring or tracking the impact of knowledge mobilization work (n=9); or building individual or organizational capacity related to research or data use. Respondents were least likely to agree that skill sets related to managing legal process related to research and/or data use (n=7), maintaining partnerships and sustaining relationship with external stakeholders (n=7), and establishing new partnerships and/or building connections (n=5) were important. DRLs' self-reported competency level (i.e., novice, emergent, competent, proficient, or expert) for the competencies DRLs reported as being 'important' or 'very important' for DRL work. **Most felt at least competent with important skills; however, only a few DRLs considered themselves as 'experts.'** More than half of respondents felt 'emergent' or 'novice' in at least one category.

Motivation

All DRLs (n=11) either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that **use of research is important for achieving the district's improvement goals**. Most DRLs (n=10) at least somewhat agreed that their **skills, knowledge, and experience can make a difference in their district's improvement goals**. Relatedly, most (n=9) DRLs reported being **confident that the work they do will lead to research use by the district and/or stakeholders**. Most (n=9) DRLs reported that external stakeholders expect the district to use research to inform decisions. Likewise, many (n=8) DRLs reported that they and/or their office is accountable to others for engaging in activities to facilitate the flow and uptake of research knowledge. **However, most DRLs also agree that there are internal (n=9) and/or external (n=7) barriers which inhibit their efforts to mobilize knowledge within their districts**. Some DRLs provided specific examples of what motivates them, such as:

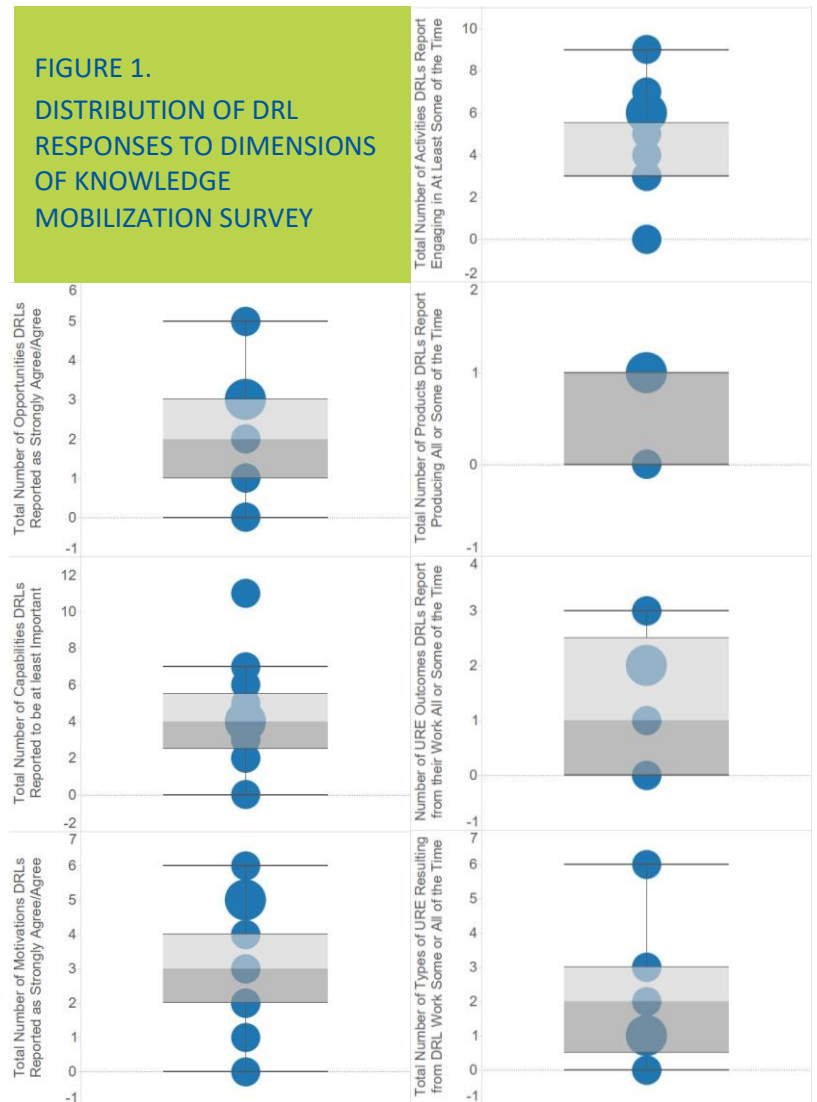
"We should base decisions and strategies on R[esearch]"

"That accountability from the community is critical"

ACTIVITIES OF DRLS

The next set of items focused on the knowledge mobilization activities of DRLs (n=11). Almost all (n=10) DRLs reported that they engaged four main activities: (1) **obtaining, summarizing, and/or review evidence** related to district priorities; (2) **identifying and/or engaging stakeholders** in research-related partnership; (3) **supporting communication and/or information sharing** about data and research, and (4) **facilitating relationships and/or collaboration** between internal stakeholders, partners, and/or research institutions. Most DRLs also engaged in developing systems, policies, or processes that support the sustainability of evidence use in the district (n=9); facilitating the development of staff skills (n=9), and; facilitating

FIGURE 1.
DISTRIBUTION OF DRL
RESPONSES TO DIMENSIONS
OF KNOWLEDGE
MOBILIZATION SURVEY



Note: Scores are composites of multiple items within each section of the survey, as indicated by section headers; each circle represents a respondent. Larger circles represent overlap of multiple respondents with the same score.

and/or evaluating evidence-informed change (n=9). DRLs reported more variability related to leading or coordinating district knowledge mobilization efforts (n=8); producing relevant research related to district priorities (n=8); creating tailored knowledge products (n=7), and developing or facilitating networks around research needs. **More than half of DRLs reported in engaging in 10-11 of these activities**, affirming centrality of many of these activities to DRL work.

OUTPUTS

Eleven DRLs reported on the outputs of their work, though we note that **no output was consistently reported by DRLs activities 'all' or 'most' of the time**. Most (n=9 of 11) DRLs reported **creating web-based products** (e.g., websites, resource libraries, online tools) to help stakeholders engage with research at least some of the time. Many (n=8) DRLs reported creating **capacity building events** that support school and district staff in understanding and using research and data for decision-making at least some of the time. In addition, some (n=6) DRLs reported creating new (to the district) approaches and techniques for sharing research. **DRLs were least likely to report creating written products** (e.g., policy briefs, policy or practice guidelines, reports or journal articles that feature research, etc.). Some DRLs provided specific examples of outputs, such as:

"Data conferences, research presentation, [and] workshops on continuous improvement"

"AERA presentations [and] school experience survey dashboards"

OUTCOMES

Another set of items captures outcomes of DRLs knowledge mobilization efforts. All DRLs (n=11) at least somewhat agreed that their efforts resulted in **increased engagement, collaboration, and partnership with external stakeholders** around research, with six of the 11 DRLs 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' with the sentiment. There was more mixed agreement about whether DRLs knowledge mobilization efforts resulted in increased knowledge and skills among school and district staff and improved policies/processes for research production and use. **Most DRLs felt that they at least somewhat agreed with these outcomes across all three; however, very few strongly agreed and some reported 'somewhat' disagreeing with the claims**. Some DRLs provided specific examples of outcomes, such as:

"We have regular meetings with [the] local university to discuss research their doctoral students (often our employees) are proposing in our district"

"[We are] continually updating process guidelines and other documentation for how we engage with others around research"

USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Lastly, the survey asked DRLs to indicate whether their work led to use of research evidence (URE). Responses were largely positive, indicating that their **knowledge mobilization work lead to at least 4 of 6 forms of URE 'some' to 'all' of the time**. All (n=11 of 11) DRLs reported that their work is used to validate a decision or persuade others to support a decision (i.e., tactical use) 'most' or 'some' of the time. Almost all (n=10) reported that their work is used to develop new or greater knowledge about an educational issue (i.e., conceptual use) 'most' or 'some' of the time. Many DRLs also reported that their efforts were used to comply with external expectations to use research evidence (i.e., imposed use; n=9) or to develop tools, resources, or routines in the district (i.e., embedded use, n=9). There was less consensus about whether their efforts have impacted direct action (i.e., instrumental use; n=8) or if their work was used to justify actions already taken (i.e., symbolic use; n=8).

CONCLUSION

The results of the survey demonstrate that knowledge mobilization is a central activity and that their work may lead to increased engagement with research among the district and its stakeholders. However, DRLs report varied opportunities and capabilities for engaging in knowledge mobilization, and, accordingly, different outcomes with respect to URE. This survey and its findings represent a first step in exploring the actual work of DRLs and are part of a series of research studies designed to contribute to our understanding of and ability to support and strengthen the role of DRLs in linking research and practice.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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