

The plight of the engaged scholar

By **Jack Schneider**

Academic researchers may have valuable contributions to make as partners to K-12 school districts, but they can't assume that educators have the time or energy to use their work.

For three years, I've been doing on-the-ground research in an urban school district. It is the most rewarding work I have ever done. I have never felt more relevant.

But at the same time, this work has been a deep source of frustration for me. Like many scholars, I am more interested in solving intellectual puzzles than political ones. I'd like to create some tools, hand them over, and see them put to use — doing so at a distance, without having to participate in the hard work of implementation. Yet I'm well aware of what tends to happen when researchers take this approach: The tools get shelved; they gather dust.

Many would attribute this

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to organizational inefficiency, dysfunctional incentive systems, or the inertia of bureaucracy. The truth, however, is that everyone in the district is already hard at work on something else. They're racing full tilt to meet immediate needs. They're not waiting around for me to teach them a new skill any more than a juggler at the circus — busy keeping five balls in the air — would ask me for violin lessons.

To be clear, I believe that my work is extremely valuable. My team has built a comprehensive school quality framework that poses a direct challenge to the narrow definition of educational effectiveness that has dominated for the past two decades. We have assembled a battery of low-cost, reliable measures aligned with that framework. We have built a cutting-edge, web-based data system that visualizes information in an entirely new way. We believe these tools will empower stakeholders, facilitate cooperation, and restore the fuller purpose of schools. When I give talks about this work, I explain that current data systems have broken the public trust in public schools; better data systems can fix that.

It's a very important and promising approach.

But let's be realistic. I can't expect district leaders to drop what they're doing and rush

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to adopt and implement my framework. After all, they're hard at work educating thousands of kids. They are implementing state standards and developing aligned curricula. They are hiring teachers, planning professional development, supporting principals. They are working to engage families, to transport children, to provide meals. They are ensuring that the lights stay on, the halls stay clean, the playgrounds remain safe.

Will my work help? I think so. But it isn't going to radically transform day-to-day activities in the district. It's a valuable addition — like giving them a violin and some lessons — but it won't spark a revolution.

It strikes me that recognizing this fact is critical to maintaining a program of engaged scholarship. You can't give someone an instrument and expect to change the nature of their days. But you can offer the support that might lead to uptake. You can encourage and cajole. You can wait and be patient. You can build a friendship, a partnership. You can build trust. And over time, you may find that you are increasingly unnecessary — that people are choosing to bring out the instrument and play it on their own.

We scholars have some useful tools at our disposal, even some answers. We can help. We must remember, however, that we are not in charge, that we do not have all the answers, and that our work is not inherently more important and more meaningful than what schools and districts are already engaged in. That said, we are not mere salesclerks, either. We do not sit idly by, waiting to pull something from the case and ring it up for our customers.

Instead, we are allies and friends, teachers in some ways, pupils in others. We are outsiders, but we are outsiders with the power to forge partnerships — partnerships that bring us in, and that allow us to make important contributions. ◀

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