Statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) can provide state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) with a wealth of research data. However, education agency expertise and resources are primarily focused on preparing state and federal reports and conducting analyses for state government, local school boards, and other stakeholders. SEAs and LEAs also value more generalizable education research that benefits from the combined expertise of agency staff and interdisciplinary education researchers. This issue brief draws on discussions with SEA and LEA staff and applied researchers to share helpful advice on forming effective partnerships.

Research Partnership Approaches

Research partnerships can be constructed to make the best use of each party's strengths, as described in Table 1.

Table 1. Relative expertise of SEAs/LEAs and researchers.

Relative Expertise	
SEA/LEA	• Extensive knowledge of data collection process • Extensive knowledge of local context and needs • Ability to communicate directly with stakeholders • Ability to implement and/or verify findings
Researchers	• Extensive knowledge of field and methodology • Extensive experience framing research questions • Access to research funding, staff, and statistical programs • Ability to disseminate actionable findings nationally

There are several different forms an effective research partnership can take. SEAs and LEAs may be participating in more than one type, including some through their P-20W partnerships (i.e., data sharing partnerships among preschool, K12, postsecondary, workforce, and other agencies).

Research consortia are funded groups of researchers at local universities or think tanks working directly with SEAs or LEAs to frame questions, prepare and analyze data, and disseminate and implement findings.

Capacity building partnerships exist where funded research institutions embed data analysts in sponsored LEAs or SEAs to work alongside staff cleaning and analyzing data. The sponsoring institution may also be authorized to use the data for longer-term research.

Research portals are created and managed by SEAs or LEAs in collaboration with higher education and other public service institutions. Data and analytic tools are made available online through secure portals for individuals to conduct their own analysis.

Academic researchers enter into memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with SEAs or LEAs and other agencies to access the data for long-term, sophisticated causal analysis or evaluations often funded by research grants from foundations and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Education agencies may be named as partners on the grant proposals.

Regional Educational Labs (RELs), funded by IES, form research alliances with SEAs and LEAs to research relevant education topics.

Producing Good Policy Research

Regardless of which form the partnership takes, there are several important steps to producing good policy research with administrative data and rigorous research methods. Determining clear roles early on can lead to sustainable, productive partnerships. While SEA/LEAs and their research partners have distinct roles and responsibilities, they also share some in common (see Figure 1, below).

1. Framing the research agenda

General policy questions of interest to agencies and stakeholders need to be framed in terms of research questions that can be explored using available data. Partners need to determine the form of the questions to be asked and the quality of the data elements necessary to answer them. (For more information, see Issue Brief 3, "Turning Administrative Data into Research-Ready Longitudinal Datasets," and Issue Brief 4, "Techniques for Analyzing Longitudinal Administrative Data.")

2. Determining the data sharing arrangements

Data sharing agreements vary according to the needs and details of the partnership. For example, in advanced data systems, partners may be able to choose a subset of data elements from a detailed codebook or data dictionary. An MOU specifies the subset of elements, as well as who may access them, by what method, and for how long. Alternatively, agencies may arrange for copies of all the data files to be housed at the partner's research institution, with an MOU specifying that the data's accessibility and use be restricted to secure research serving the stakeholder community. In exchange, the agency receives cleaned, merged, and de-identified data files.

3. Specifying the research and data deliverables

Researchers often tackle policy questions by undertaking long-term research agendas resulting in multiple peer-reviewed journal articles or in-depth reports. Education agencies that want to take advantage of this high level of research capacity may want to request additional, interim deliverables. These can take the form of white papers or conferences, and should be tailored to policymakers and educators. Finally, appropriate disclosure limitation procedures should be specified in advance for all disseminated products.

In addition to research findings, partners should have a requirement to share information about the data. Agencies will need to provide researchers with information about the data collection process and any concerns about the resulting files. This could be achieved through documentation or training. Researchers should in turn provide details on the construction of their analysis subsamples and composite variables.

4. Building in sustainability

Valuable research may be carried out over several years, during which time the data and questions will likely evolve. Partners will need to establish procedures for how data files are updated when errors are found or new data become available. High-quality, evolving research requires long-term access to the data files; at the same time, limiting access to too few researchers can limit the range of policy questions addressed. In addition to deciding on the number and length of MOUs, agencies will need to determine whether researchers are allowed to add new collaborators or graduate student research assistants to the original MOUs. **Visit the LDS Share on the SLDS website for sample MOUs and other resources, or to request technical assistance with forming research partnerships (*http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS/LDSShare/SLDS.aspx*).**

SEA/LEA Responsibilities
- Provide data access & support
- Provide data & data system training
- Review research findings & publications

Shared
- Participate in framing of research agenda & questions
- Assemble research-ready data set
- Participate in discussion of research findings & policy implications

Researcher Responsibilities
- Participate in data & data system training
- Provide training on research methods & interpreting findings
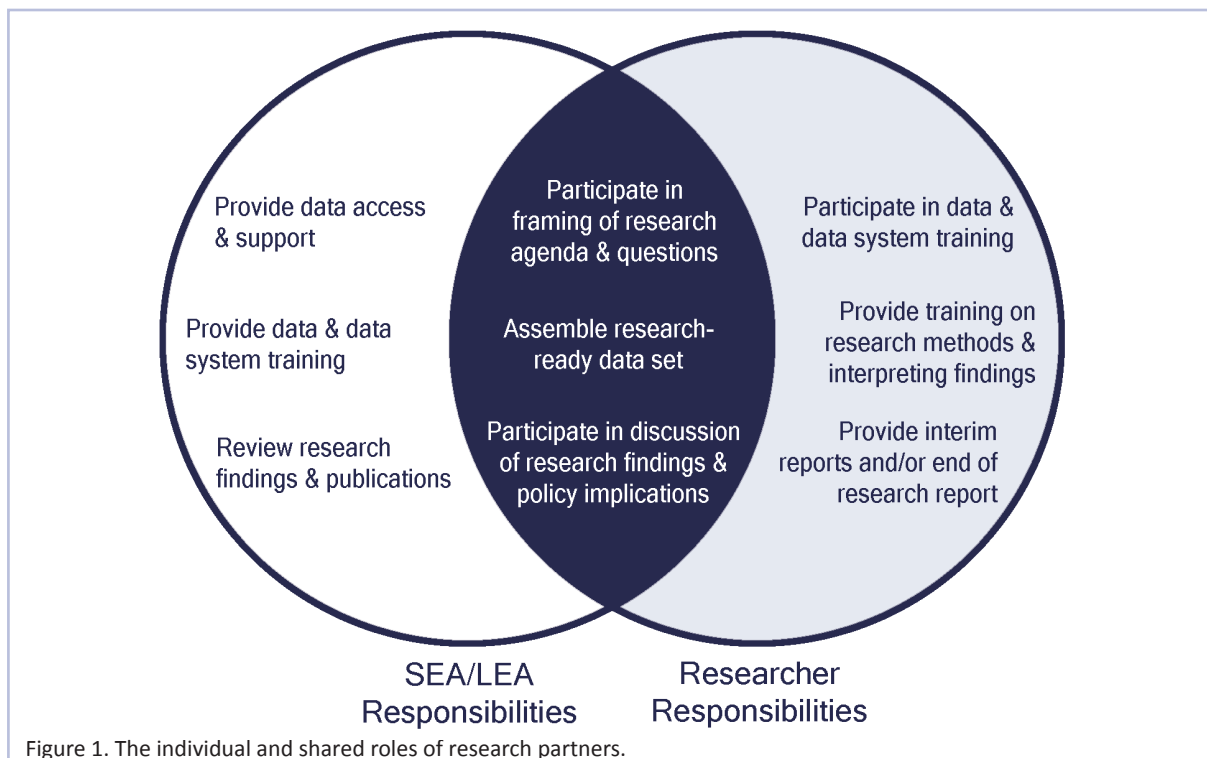- Provide interim reports and/or end of research report

Figure 1. The individual and shared roles of research partners.