

Baltimore Education Research Consortium: A Consideration of Past, Present, and Future

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In this paper, we offer an overview of the history and development of the Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC). As a part of this overview, we describe challenges and dilemmas encountered during the founding years of this consortium. We also highlight particular benefits or sources of satisfaction we have realized in the course of pursuing this particular sort of university—school-district—community collaboration. We conclude by offering examples of our current studies, best practices we have come to prioritize during the past five years, and a brief statement of our future plans and visions.

History and Development – Distinctive Structural (“How We’re Organized”) and Cultural (“How We Do Our Work, and What We Tell Ourselves About Ourselves”) Features

Launched in Fall 2006, BERC is a partnership among Johns Hopkins University (JHU), Morgan State University (Morgan), and the Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools). During BERC’s planning stage (i.e., 2005 and 2006, and even in preliminary discussions and initial steps taking place years earlier), Baltimore-based partners intentionally looked to the highly regarded and nationally recognized Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) as an example. The account and goal that Baltimore-based funders (i.e., foundation presidents and program officers), university-based researchers, and some school district administrators were offering to each other was, “Let’s think about what a Baltimore version of the Chicago Consortium might look like – putting university researchers in partnership with City Schools and other local stakeholders in a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship, with the structure and culture of a Baltimore consortium responsive to the political, social, and historical realities of Baltimore.”

To frame local context, Baltimore ranks 21st among U.S. cities (or incorporated places) in terms of size, having had 620,961 residents in 2010 which represents a decline of one-third since the city’s population peak in 1950. According to the 2010 Census, 63.7% of Baltimore residents were Black, 29.6% were White, and the remaining 6.7% were American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, multi-racial, or from other categories (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). A relatively low 4.2% (regardless of race) was of Hispanic or Latino origin. One in five (21%) of Baltimore households live below the poverty level, and half (50%) own their homes.

After public school enrollments had declined in recent decades, a recent expansion places enrollment at 84,212 students in 2011-12. Eighty-six percent of City Schools students are Black, and 84% qualify to receive free or reduced price meals (Baltimore City Schools, 2011). Many children's lives in the city are impacted by two dominant and interrelated issues: intergenerational poverty

and hyper-segregated neighborhoods. The cyclical nature of Intergenerational poverty and the persistence of low-income, poorly-resourced, hyper-segregated neighborhoods challenge the city's attempts to address critical issues in public health, stable and safe housing, transportation, safety, and economic/workforce development.

As mentioned above, the Baltimore-based partners looked to CCSR as we sought to launch an education research consortium, and this manifested itself in several concrete ways. For one, in late 2005 an umbrella group of Baltimore-based foundations (namely, the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers) invited Paul Goren (then senior vice president of the Spencer Foundation) and John Easton (then Executive Director of CCSR) to come to Baltimore and talk about the founding and operation of CCSR, and also to join the assembled group in pondering what a Baltimore variant of CCSR might look like.

Secondly, well before that 2005 meeting, various individuals (at least five or six could be named, probably more) openly talked about their desire to establish something with the continuity and cumulatively building research agenda of CCSR – applying rigorous research methods and rich data to questions of practical value to City Schools and Baltimore's families, children, and civic health. Indeed, the Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) at JHU had made strides in this direction when Sam Stringfield (a principal research scientist at CSOS until 2004, now at the University of Louisville) and collaborators established a working relationship with City Schools. Since the late 1990s, data sharing and the collection of yearly administrative data files had occurred between the district research office and CSOS so that CSOS researchers could augment the district's research capabilities. This relationship benefitted both partners as CSOS was able to engage in applied research that impacted schools and district staff had a resource, a repository of longitudinal data, and institutional memory that the district was frequently in danger of losing with staff turnover. While these earlier arrangements between CSOS and City Schools were productive, they perhaps did not match the fuller vision of BERC that would eventually be developed by a broader set of partners.

Finally, regarding "looking toward CCSR," representatives from JHU and the Family League of Baltimore City traveled to CCSR in Spring 2006 to speak with its leadership and various staff members, asking many questions, seeking advice, and helping to shape the proposal we were crafting in Baltimore.

As this proposal was being crafted (a proposal seeking financial support, but just as importantly forging shared understandings among universities, City Schools, and other prospective partners), a set of priorities or working principles emerged – again in reaction to, or recognition of, local political, social, and historical considerations. Among the top priorities or agreements articulated were:

1. BERC should be a joint effort of multiple universities. BERC should not be (in reality, or as perceived) solely an entity existing at JHU (with its unique and sometimes fragile or troubled past relationships with some public agencies and citizen constituencies in

Baltimore). BERC should have some of its leadership and vision coming from one or more of the historically black colleges/universities in Baltimore (principally Morgan, with its twin teaching and research missions, and also possibly Coppin State University).¹ More generally, BERC should be designed from inception with the possibility and plan that it would grow to include an expanding set of universities and researchers over time.

2. City Schools should have representation on an executive committee, or whatever body would generate or approve BERC's research agenda.
3. Civic or community representatives (potentially from the business community, non-profit and advocacy organizations, parent groups, or public agencies other than City Schools) should also have representation in the group that would generate or approve BERC's research agenda.
4. While the research agenda should be co-invented by university partners, school district leadership, and civic/community representatives, assurances needed to be in place such that university-based research teams would have the ability to design, complete, and write about projects without political interference or inappropriate censoring. In brief, once a project was approved, it should be allowed to be seen through to completion, with findings and conclusions published and shared with local audiences, and beyond Baltimore, after City Schools and any other agencies providing access to data had had an initial period to review and comment on any research products.

In addition to general operating principles such as those listed above, a concise mission statement was desired to set expectations (and, indeed, boundaries) for BERC's endeavors. In the second half of 2006, as the proposal was being crafted to ask local and national foundations to support BERC's start-up phase and as an initial Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was being crafted with City Schools, BERC's first formal mission statement was:

BERC's mission is to conduct and disseminate strategic data analysis and research for the purpose of informing and improving public education in Baltimore City.

By Spring 2009, after working relationships among BERC's partners and a few demonstration products had come into existence, the formal mission statement was elaborated slightly to read:

BERC's mission is to conduct and disseminate long- and short-term strategic data analysis and research that informs decisions about policy and practice to improve the educational and life outcomes of children in Baltimore. BERC assembles a diverse coalition of partners to

¹ To the best of our knowledge, BERC is the only currently established university-district research consortium that features a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) as a central partner.

formulate questions worth asking, contribute to conversations worth having, and highlight policy implications worthy of action.

Organization. BERC is organized with a single governing structure, an Executive Committee that consists of nine voting members as well as a non-voting representative of BERC's local funders. The nine voting members comprise:

- Three individuals from City Schools (Chief Executive Officer, Chief Academic Officer, Accountability Officer, or their designees),
- Three from the participating universities (with the stipulation that these three should come from at least two institutions, one of which should be a historically black college/university), and
- Three civic/community partners (presently the President/CEO of the Greater Baltimore Urban League, the President/CEO of Associated Black Charities, and the Deputy Commissioner for Youth and Families for the Baltimore City Health Department).

The Executive Committee's primary responsibility is to approve a research agenda.² Having development and approval of a research agenda operate through the Executive Committee is intended to guarantee that the work completed by BERC is relevant to the school district and the community, and is scientifically rigorous to meet academic standards. In short, BERC's organization is guided by intentional efforts to balance the (largely but not fully overlapping) perceived needs and interests of community members, the school district, and the university partners.

The Work. BERC's work is completed in two primary ways. The first is a series of long-term research projects, each typically taking between 9 and 12 months to complete, sometimes longer if multi-year efforts at original data collection are involved. Second, a portion of staff time and resources are dedicated to filling Rapid Response requests made by City Schools. These Rapid Response tasks typically involve data assembly and analysis that can be completed in a month or less. Recent examples include examining the relationship (if any) between rates of absenteeism for students and for teachers within schools, and helping explore impacts a district *door-knocking* community intervention may have had on individual student attendance. These shorter projects advance the district's understanding of key issues and buy BERC goodwill through our willingness to provide support in instances where the university researchers know the work will not result in publications or products for dissemination beyond City Schools briefings.

As local foundations (including BERC's own funders) or other advocacy or non-profit organizations have started to inquire about whether they could make Rapid Response requests, our working

² The Executive Committee's charter also specifies six areas in which the committee is to provide consultation and advice to the university-based researchers, as distinct from the primary decision-making role in setting a research agenda.

principle has been to say we will gladly consider the request if the “third-party organization” can get a “champion” or advocate from within the City Schools central office to endorse the request (i.e., to identify it as a priority and a desired “need-to-know”). This working principle may need to be revisited in the future, but presently it serves well BERC’s need to limit or control workflow, and to have the ability to turn away requests that are not central to our self-defined mission; we would, however, become concerned if we thought data analytic tasks that could give valuable information to stakeholders or constituencies advocating for the interests of youth were being blocked, or found no mechanism by which BERC could consider attending to them.

Challenges and Dilemmas During the Start-Up Years of A Research Consortium

The strength of a consortium is based on the strength of its relationships. In BERC’s first three or four years of existence, we struggled to develop clear lines of communication between the universities and City Schools. As these have become more established and branched out from a single person of contact to a network, the work has flourished in both quality and utility.

Financial Support. Finding funding is always a challenge. In the start-up phase of a consortium, this is potentially very difficult because the newly formed organization has no track record of success (although individual affiliated researchers may have past records of accomplishment and funding sources they can draw upon as capital). The near-Catch-22 is that to create a track record and generate some successes you need money to support people and projects; you need money to create a record of accomplishment and a record of accomplishment is key to attracting money. We do not have definitive words of wisdom or strategies to offer others who are seeking financial support for a research consortium. BERC researchers and leadership do remind one another that it is important to strive for a balanced portfolio of funding from Baltimore-based foundations, national foundations, and federal agencies. Also, we must be responsive to year-to-year changes in the funding climate though without sacrificing or losing sight of our self-defined mission and prioritized areas of inquiry. Along those lines, we have needed to be adaptable when, for example, in 2010 several local foundations told us that with the current economic “belt-tightening,” they were focused on providing monies for direct services to youth and families, not research. Thus, we relied on a smaller number of other funding sources to support our work during that year. Now, in 2012, some of those foundations once focused solely on “direct services” have seen our work, participated in our participatory models of shaping projects, and attended community events. These foundations are now telling us they see clearly the value and importance of the work and are interested in providing direct support.

We think the keys to developing a sustainable financial model for BERC, and to allow for a certain amount of organizational and missional growth, are to strive for the balanced portfolio referenced above (and, thus, to be proficient at the range of proposal-writing implied) and to supplement projects that are focused solely on Baltimore with comparative projects pursued in partnership with

other locales. Regarding that second point, we are at various stages of proposal development or exploratory conversations with researchers from San Diego, Newark (NJ), Yonkers (NY), Chicago, New York City, and San Francisco.

Trust. After establishing relationships we had to make sure there was trust between all partners. This meant open communication, transparent processes, and sometimes-uncomfortable conversations. During a period when both universities hired new Presidents, we made sure to communicate with them about BERC, and its role in the university community as well as in the city as a whole. A well-leveraged consortium is an asset in any university's portfolio, assuming it is well-regarded by the community. To develop trust within the community we encourage multiple opportunities for groups to hear about our work, serve as a link to education research through symposia and opportunities to weigh in on our work as it is being developed. Vis-à-vis the school district, we have borrowed from CCSR the principle of "no surprises," meaning that we seek multiple opportunities to brief City Schools leadership and other staff as projects are being designed and mid-stream in their execution; we try to go "beyond the letter of the MOU" (which grants City Schools a 30-day period of review for any final draft that is approaching public release) by offering to sit with City Schools leadership as thought-partners (in face-to-face meetings) as they develop any responses or strategies in reaction to our research findings.

Balancing Rigorous Research and Accessibility. One of the biggest challenges facing any consortium is finding a way to conduct rigorous research yet present it to a lay audience in a meaningful way. To do this, we provide multiple opportunities to communicate with stakeholders. Most of our projects follow a participatory model that invites stakeholders to our research table to review research and comment on questions and preliminary findings. We also host *Donut Sessions* in the Central Office to discuss findings and implications for schools and staff. These internal sessions create a *safe* environment that allows staff to ask questions that challenge our work and the way we think about implications of our findings. In addition, these conversations guide us in how to respond in a way that is both accurate and easy-to-understand for non-researchers. These conversations help us in writing reports and policy briefs because we quickly become aware of where technical information becomes overwhelming to lay audiences, and when the implications of findings are at risk of becoming lost among technical details.

Utility. BERC's use of an Executive Committee to approve our research agenda and conversations with stakeholders through our participatory model are valuable for multiple reasons (e.g., relationship- and trust-building) and most certainly for the ways they provide rich information about what focuses and lines of inquiry have the greatest potential to inform and propel reform and school-improvement efforts in the district or community. Quite simply, keeping ourselves accountable to the Executive Committee and various stakeholder groups guards against university researchers pursuing esoteric, ivory-tower topics that don't offer compelling answers to "so what?" questions.

Benefits or Sources of Satisfaction in this “Consortium Style of Work”

As some of us affiliated with BERC ponder the sorts of projects we could undertake and the styles of research we were pursuing before BERC’s development, we can see a distinct set of benefits or sources of satisfaction (not to mention somewhat shifted professional identities and senses-of-self) that flow from this “consortium style of work.” We list them briefly, to be elaborated upon in future forums:

1. An “insider” perspective on school district initiatives and dynamics that one would otherwise not have.
2. Access to, and cultivated relationships with, champions and partners (within the school district, and the city’s advocacy and change-agent organizations) to help us pitch and launch projects.
3. A built-in audience for our research (existing as a potential, and something we must cultivate).
4. Pride or satisfaction (or sense of useful service) that comes with being some of the stability in an unstable institutional and organizational environment.
5. The opportunity to develop considerable continuity across projects.
 - One project can inform the next, and a sequence of 3 or 4 studies over 4 or 5 years can add up to a lot of cumulative learning, and a dialogic approach to framing questions and developing research priorities.
6. The opportunity to have a lot of contextual and ecological information about policy histories, neighborhoods, and other social service agencies that work in parallel with (potentially, in coordination with) the school district in interfacing with students and families.

Pitfalls, Hazards or Frustrations in the “Growth and Maintenance” Years of A Research Consortium³

Along with these benefits and sources of satisfaction, we are also highly aware of several potential pitfalls or frustrations that accompany this “consortium style of work.” These include:

1. (Once one’s existence, capabilities, and competence begin to be known), too many requests, and sometimes no clear roadmap or guidelines about which ones we can or should be responsive to.

³ Some BERC affiliates tended to talk about “our infant years” around 2006 through 2008. By 2009, we were inclined to call ourselves a “toddler.” We will leave it to the reader to judge whether we have now reached the developmental stage that follows toddler.

2. Concerns about objectivity and credibility

- When is the “quasi-insider” and “partner” too much of an insider?
- Do we sometimes censor ourselves (in the research topics we propose, or the findings we present, or the interpretations we lead with) maybe without even being fully aware that we’re doing so?

To this list of pitfalls and frustrations, we considered adding a point about “balancing local needs, relevance, audiences, and ‘marketability’ with broader (e.g., national) considerations.” We had in mind:

- the decisions a consortium must face about what funding to pursue,
- what projects or topics to prioritize,
- when we aspire to write briefings and reports that are “Baltimore-specific” and “actionable,” and
- when we aspire to describe trends, processes, and outcomes from Baltimore that can be interpreted in concert with data from other locales or national databases, and incorporated into national debates and dialogs.

Our team decided (as we composed the present paper) that these last concerns were not pitfalls, and we really should not allow ourselves to define them as frustrations either. That is, when one enters into this consortium-style work, one must interpret this set of issues as highlighting balance to be sought, or a dual-mission to be navigated. We concluded that the implied theme or lesson is about learning to be comfortable with the uncomfortable, and learning how to offer something of value in two or more distinct arenas (and being honest with ourselves that the arenas are distinct, and that we need to present ourselves and our work slightly differently in each arena).

Some Current Studies and Work

[A PreKindergarten/Kindergarten Study of Attendance and Its Correlates](#). We recently released the first part of a study that examines attendance in prekindergarten (PreK) and kindergarten and early grade performance. This study exemplifies our work strengths and style. We used a mixed methods design that included stakeholder input at multiple times.

For the first part of the project, Faith Connolly and Linda Olson conducted quantitative analysis of three separate cohorts of children. To do this we used our participatory model and convened a group of stakeholders from across the city initially to review our overarching research questions and a second time to review preliminary findings for feedback and suggestions. In addition, we shared more detailed findings with district staff at two additional meetings. This allowed them to react to

the data, make suggestions to us for interpretation and policy implications, and to be informed early rather than wait for a final report. As part of this process we invited Head Start to be a part of our conversation which then prompted an agreement between City Schools and Head Start to allow linking data from the two organizations in order to extend what we could know about our cohorts in the year before students enrolled in kindergarten.

The second part of this project, led by Tracy Rone, is in process and includes focus groups with parents to identify challenges, barriers and information that parents may or may not be receiving as it pertains to PreK opportunities and enrollment procedures and the importance participation in PreK has on the success of their child.

Pressures of the Season: An Examination of Classroom Quality and High-Stakes Accountability. One of the early BERC projects encouraged by City Schools CEO Andrés Alonso was a detailed examination of the experiences over successive years of students who had been relatively high-achieving first graders. Such a project, including classroom observation and fieldwork in Baltimore elementary schools, was conducted during 2008-09 and 2009-10 by Stephen Plank and a research team. As the CLASS observational protocol (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008) was employed at various times of the year in a set of second and third grade classrooms, an analytically powerful opportunity presented itself to explore possible influences of high-stakes accountability pressures on the quality of the classroom environment.

In a manuscript currently under journal review (and building upon a February 2011 BERC report), Plank and doctoral student Barbara Condliffe present a main finding that aspects of classroom quality in second and third grade classrooms differed in the months leading up to what was a low-stakes assessment in second grade but a high-stakes assessment in third grade, but were indistinguishable by May when the accountability pressure had been lifted. The analyses suggest that the educators in the third grade classrooms were affected by the pressures associated with high-stakes accountability in very specific ways. In particular, January in third grade (with high-stakes MSA administration six or eight weeks in the offing) was associated with (a) less warmth, sensitivity, and regard for student perspective in the emotional domain, (b) less rich conceptual development and teacher-student feedback in the instructional domain, and (c) learning formats that were more limited in scope or less effective in sparking student engagement. City Schools leadership has found the report useful in shaping the conversations they have with teachers and principals about the balance to be struck in shoring up basic skills of literacy and numeracy in advance of high-stakes tests without sacrificing broader goals regarding emotionally warm, conceptually rich, higher-order teaching and learning.

Predicting High School Outcomes in Baltimore City Schools. Martha Mac Iver and doctoral student Matthew Messel have recently completed a report and accompanying BERC brief, under the auspices of the Urban Research Fellowship Program of the Council of the Great City Schools. These analyses follow all first-time 9th graders from 2004-05 and 2005-06 via administrative records from City Schools

and the National Student Clearinghouse through Fall 2010. Mac Iver and Messel highlight specific implications of their analyses for City Schools' ongoing efforts to increase college readiness. In particular, the authors direct attention to details of reading and mathematics proficiency developed before high school, attendance during ninth grade, and freshman course grades and passing rates (and, by extension, educators' reactions to initial signs of disengagement or academic struggles during ninth grade).

College Enrollment and Completion. A report and accompanying brief, authored by Rachel Durham and Erik Westlund in Summer 2011, summarized college enrollment and completion trends over the past several years for cohorts of City Schools graduates. The report not only serves as a baseline for comparison with future data, but allowed us to identify areas where additional research and information could inform City Schools efforts to create a college-going climate throughout all its elementary, middle and high schools. The report has garnered attention within and beyond Baltimore, and in particular has sparked productive dialog between PreK-12 leadership and the leaders of Baltimore-area community colleges and other postsecondary institutions.

What We Have Learned So Far – Best Practices

Data Archiving. Through a strong MOU with City Schools and a long-established relationship with the Office of Achievement and Accountability, BERC has a large data archive that has been used to provide *lost* files back to the district when changing staff, enrollment systems, and data warehouses made locating specific files impossible. Just as the archive is an asset to the research BERC wants to pursue, so too has it proven to be an asset to City Schools as a single-source series of files that can support the district and its work.

Capacity Building. Our regular meetings with district staff are a means to model using data to inform decision-making and provide a valuable forum for staff who may at times feel overwhelmed with data and needing to allow the richness and nuances of what they are seeing percolate into their thinking about next steps. While we have established good initial practices in this area, we feel we have much room to improve and are looking for examples of multiple ways to engage with district staff in non-threatening data conversations.

Engaging Stakeholders. Our participatory model has expanded the range of ways that researchers, educators, and other stakeholders in Baltimore are engaging around topics of mutual interest. Additionally, we have begun a local symposium to bring in researchers and guest speakers on topics of interest to the community and allow them to become more aware of current trends and recent research.

Relationship Building and Establishing Trust. To establish and maintain trust, we are working to create and honor transparent processes when working with the district and other stakeholders. We adopted

the “No Surprises” model recommended by Chicago and share our publications with City Schools for 30 days before we publish and share findings and data with staff throughout the process.

Being Thankful. BERC would not exist if it were not for the committed efforts of Karl Alexander, Bob Balfanz, Lisa Bishop, Jeanetta Churchill, Rachel Durham, Benjamin Feldman, Gina Hewes, Bonnie Legro, Phillip Leaf, Doug Mac Iver, Martha Mac Iver, Obed Norman (our founding research co-director), Glenda Prime, Jane Sundius, Samuel Stringfield, Matthew Van Itallie, Patricia Welch, Ray Winbush, Lisa Wright, and Mary Yakimowski.

Future Direction – Plans and Visions

Communication. We continue to seek improvement in the ways we share our research with policy makers and advocates.

Expanding our sources of data and our geographic (and political-economic) range. While we have had some experiences and successes incorporating social service, foster care, Head Start, and neighborhood demographic data into our projects, we have only begun to scratch the surface of potential regarding the insights, analytic power, and practical utility of understanding students’ educational experiences within a broader ecology of supports and barriers. We are currently pursuing various partnerships and funding opportunities that would allow BERC to utilize a multi-domain longitudinal database that potentially combines individual-level and aggregated data from numerous city and state agencies with responsibility for youth and family well-being.

Additionally, it is important to remember that Baltimore (or any other city) exists within a metropolitan and state context. We are in the early stages of exploring partnerships with some of the counties or jurisdictions that border Baltimore City. In terms of residential moves, educational careers, adults’ employment histories, and extended family networks, there is considerable fluidity and interdependence across city-county lines. Assembling data sources and designing projects that are responsive to these metropolitan realities is a future area of growth for BERC.

Funding. As the economy struggles our local funders have limited funds to support an organization like BERC. We will have to ensure these local foundations see the work BERC creates and the value it has for City Schools and the community. Simultaneously, we will need to redouble our efforts to secure grants from national foundations and federal agencies. In some instances, projects based solely in Baltimore may yield compelling proposals, but in other instances it will be strategic and beneficial to the field to develop multi-city comparative projects in partnership with other consortia.

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