

Second Annual PEER Research Symposium Gathers VU, MNPS Leaders in Partnership

April 30, 2025

April 30th, 2025 - This spring, PEER held its second annual research symposium at the MNPS Employee Wellness Center. The event welcomed over 75 participants, including Vanderbilt faculty, MNPS staff and school board members, and community leaders to explore ongoing research from PEER's Working Groups and rapid response studies through detailed project poster presentations.

Kicking off the Symposium, the MNPS Director of Schools, Dr. Adrienne Battle, and the Dean of Peabody College, Dr. Camilla Benbow provided opening remarks.

"PEER is not just producing research – it's cultivating a partnership where learning is the work. It's building the capacity to reflect, learn, and act across all layers of the district," said Battle, reflecting on the partnership's impact to date.

Benbow added, "the research agenda set by PEER helps to ensure that our local investigations address the most pressing questions. PEER's orientation towards the needs of practitioners means that we ask the right questions, that the questions are rightly phrased to produce usable results."

Two small panel discussions also focused on pressing questions facing PEER and strategies for addressing key challenges in its collaborative work. The panel discussions covered pertinent issues facing Research Practice Partnerships, such as how to advance the field in uncertain times and how to accelerate change outside of the partnership.

Key insights from the panels include:

- **The cross-institutional working group and rapid response study structure enables PEER to address critical district priorities through a continuous process of research and engagement.** By providing essential infrastructure, PEER allows MNPS leaders to step back from

daily "boots on the ground" work and refine practices based on new and innovative research. This structure also helps PEER quickly pivot its priorities as needs within the district shift and to synthesize findings across disparate studies to facilitate more systemic change across the district.

- **Staying rooted in shared values, strategies, and goals is fundamental to pushing the work forward, even amidst external shifts.** The discussions emphasized that sustainability for PEER relies on four critical components: *relationships, shared goals, infrastructure, and financing*. PEER is recognized for providing the necessary infrastructure to operate effectively, sustainably, and at scale. Panelists also shared that maintaining a stable financial structure for PEER is critical for preserving the partnership long-term.
- **Bringing dedicated experts with different backgrounds together through shared goals is essential for developing actionable and effective solutions for MNPS.** A powerful recurring theme was the strength of collaboration within the PEER model. Panelists characterized PEER as doing research *with* practitioners, not just *on* them; a collaborative spirit establishes PEER as a true partnership.



Pictured: Student Absenteeism Working Group members Carol Brown, Joanne Golann, Kayla Fike, David Diehl, Catherine Knowles, Hanna Morris, Eli Rolfes, & Emily Waechtler



PEER Research Symposium was held at the MNPS Employee Wellness Center on April 30th, 2025.

Overview of Posters and Panels

Working Group Poster Presentations

Strengthening Pathways to Postsecondary Readiness

EPSOs—high school ‘Early Post-Secondary Opportunities’ that expose students to advanced coursework and build foundational career skills—serve as a key lever for increasing postsecondary enrollment and completion. Increasing EPSO participation and completion is part of a district-wide strategy aimed at improving college and career readiness for all students, particularly those from traditionally marginalized groups within MNPS. This study seeks to identify and address sources of disparities in EPSO participation and success within the district.

Posters:

- Early Postsecondary Course Access, Participation, and Success in MNPS
- Co-Design to Improve Access, Participation, and Success in EPSOs
- Effect of AVID on EPSO Milestones and College Enrollment
- How a Community Advisory Panel in a Research-Practice Partnership Supports Community-Engaged Research

Working Group Members:

- Vanderbilt: Sean Corcoran, Shaun Dougherty, Joshua Harman, Erin Henrick, Nicole Hinton, Changhee Lee, Mary Smith, & Richard Welsh
- MNPS: Brittaney Baker, Sanjana Ballal-Link, Peter Busienei, Kevin Edwards, Meri Kock, Emily Munn, Matt Nelson, Kwame Nti, David Williams, & Joseph Kelly

Supporting Educators to Provide High-Quality Instruction

To ensure that every student receives high-quality mathematics instruction, MNPS has developed a multifaceted system of supports for district mathematics teachers. Leaders across the district—each with varying levels of content expertise, coaching experience, and understanding of adult learning—are responsible for delivering these critical supports to create learning opportunities that meet the needs of all students.

This study aims to map the district's current systems of support for high school integrated math instruction, highlight effective practices, and collaborate with instructional leaders and mathematics teachers to develop tools and routines that strengthen the alignment and coherence of teacher support with the district's vision for high-quality mathematics teaching and learning.

Poster: Coherence Routine Study

Working Group Members:

- Vanderbilt: Jennifer Russell, Meghan Riling, & Daniel Marks
- MNPS: Jessica Slayton, David Williams, & Jill Petty

Leveraging the Educational Equity Ecosystem

MNPS and Vanderbilt are collaborating with community partners to develop equity strategies that support the district's focused outcomes and promote a shared, citywide accountability for the well-being and success of Nashville's youth.

The Working Group is currently developing a research framework for understanding the roles that various city agencies and community organizations in Nashville—beyond the school system—play in supporting the city's youth. Ultimately, the group seeks to build a “youth master plan,” an evidence-based roadmap for how these entities can collaborate to foster positive youth outcomes and address systemic inequities.

Poster: Understanding the Ecosystem Affecting Youth Safety and Wellbeing

Working Group Members:

- Vanderbilt: Maury Nation, Sarah Suiter, Nicole Hinton, Ellen Parks, Hannah Morris, & Sosina Tilahun
- MNPS: Elisa Norris, Allison D'Aurora, Sean Braisted, Ashford Hughes, Renita Perry, Tina Stenson, Krista Davis, Meghan England, & Nécole Elizer

Understanding and Reducing Student Absenteeism

In Nashville, as across the nation, chronic absenteeism presents a critical challenge that has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, district data indicate that, despite the deep-rooted and complex factors contributing to absenteeism, some schools have significantly improved student attendance over the past two years.

This study examines patterns and root causes of chronic absenteeism in MNPS and aims to leverage successful school strategies and other key insights to promote consistently high levels of attendance across the district.

Poster: Chronic Absenteeism and the Shift Toward Progressive Intervention

Working Group Members:

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- Vanderbilt: Joanne Golann, Kayla Fike, David Diehl, Changhee Lee, Amanda Addison, Eli Rolfes, & Emily Waechtler
- MNPS: Carol Brown, Catherine Knowles, & Taylor Biondi

Fostering Positive School Climate through Development of Positive Student Skills

This study focuses on examining MNPS strategies that support the development of positive student skills, recognizing the role these skills play in fostering a positive school climate.

Poster: Understanding the District Strategy for Developing Positive School Climate

Working Group Members:

- Vanderbilt: Marisa Cannata, Mary Louise Hemmeter, Aiden Hernandez, & Naomi Porter
- MNPS: Krista Davis, Jaime Lomax, Simyka Carlton, & Elisa Norris

Rapid Response Study Poster Presentations

Identification of Economically Disadvantaged Students

This project examines the significant decline in the identification of economically disadvantaged (ED) students in MNPS following Tennessee's shift from Free and Reduced-Price Lunch applications to direct certification in 2015. By analyzing student-level administrative data, the research will uncover how changes in identification criteria affect the distribution of resources to support ED students.

Team Members:

- Vanderbilt: Chris Candelaria, & Emily Hatch
- MNPS: Jorge Robles, Tina Stenson, Paul Changas, & Peter Busienei

Understanding How MNPS's Five Tiered Intervention Platforms Are Working to Improve Students' Literacy and Numeracy

This study examines how this tiered intervention program supports student improvement in math and literacy. Specifically, we explore how much skill and knowledge growth students assigned to each intervention experience compared to national norms, whether skill and knowledge growth are similar for the four literacy interventions, and the types of schools that are experiencing the most student growth while using these interventions.

Team Members:

- Vanderbilt: Kelley Durkin, Luke Rainey, Marcia Barnes, Bethany Rittle-Johnson, Rebecca Adler, Nicole Hinton, & Erin Henrick
- MNPS: Katie Pattullo, Krista Davis, Peter Busienei, & David Williams

Understanding Implementation of MNPS's Tiered Intervention Platforms and Enabling School-Wide Conditions for Accelerating Student Growth

MNPS has invested significantly in tiered interventions (materials, PD, teacher time, student time) to accelerate growth in students' learning and improve access to Tier 1 high-quality instruction. Ongoing PEER rapid response studies beginning in 2023 have focused on measuring and maximizing the effects of these interventions. Initial rapid response studies show that while students are benefiting from intervention programs, especially in the early grades, these benefits are mixed which is likely due to variability in implementation. The purpose of this proposal is to investigate how interventions are implemented in schools where students are demonstrating the highest growth in FastBridge scores to inform district decision-making around resource allocation and supports for effective implementation.

Team Members:

- Vanderbilt: Marica Barnes, Changhee Lee, & Katherine McKee
- MNPS: Melissa Brock, Krista Davis, & Katie Pattullo

University MNPS Scholarships: Utilization Patterns, Student Perceptions, and Organizational Supports

This project explores the underutilization of University MNPS scholarships, which provide critical financial support to help low-income students attend

college. The research will analyze student awareness, perceptions of the scholarship's benefits, and the role of school-level organizational supports in shaping student participation (and non-participation) in this scholarship program.

Team Members:

- Vanderbilt: Claire Smrekar, Amy Galloway, Justin Keaney, & Eliza Blades
- MNPS: Sanjana Ballal-Link, & Brittaney Baker

Investigating the Effectiveness of MNPS Teacher Retention Bonuses

This project investigates the effectiveness of teacher retention bonuses in stabilizing the workforce within MNPS, particularly in hard-to-staff schools and positions. The study will analyze detailed data on teacher characteristics, performance, and retention trends, comparing teachers at bonus-eligible schools with those at similar non-eligible schools.

Team Members:

- Vanderbilt: Nicole Mader, Laura Booker, Raven Powell, & Stone Dawson
- MNPS: Michael White & Laquita Stribling

Panel Discussions

Panel 1: Advancing the Field in Uncertain Times

PEER working groups include practitioners and researchers who bring relevant experience, expertise, and authority around district-centered research priority areas. The working groups engage in a unique process of co-creating research plans and mutual sense-making around research findings. In this panel, working group members discussed how the PEER partnership model supports learning and how it is working to address the challenges and uncertainties in the current political environment.

Panelists:

- Carol Brown (MNPS, Director, Attendance Services)
- Marisa Cannata (VU, Professor of the Practice)
- Maury Nation (VU, Professor of Human and Organizational Development)
- Matthew Nelson (MNPS, Executive Director, College and Career Readiness)

Moderator:

- Sarah Chin (MNPS, Chief Strategy Officer)

Panel 2: Accelerating Change Outside the Partnership

PEER's Postsecondary Readiness Working Group engages in an iterative cycle of co-design research in which small teams made of school personnel, district partners, and Vanderbilt researchers use evidence to develop and test interventions for improving access and participation in early postsecondary opportunities at three partner high schools. The work is also informed by a community advisory panel of constituents, or educators, families, and high school students, who are directly involved with or affected by EPSO policies and practices. In this panel, PEER partners discussed how the co-design research has accelerated change within schools and its potential to impact the greater Nashville community.

Panelists:

- Mary Brewer (MNPS, Transition Specialist, SIT Lead at Johnson Alternative Learning Center)
- Kendra Broome (MNPS, Director of College and Career Readiness, Antioch High School)
- Joanne Golann (VU, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Education)
- Stephen Sheaffer (MNPS, Principal, Hillwood High School)

Moderator:

- Renita Perry (MNPS, Chief of Academics and Schools)