Conducting Research in the New York City Public Schools

PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF EDUCATION
Joel I. Klein, Chancellor
The New York City public school system, the largest and most complex in the nation, has much to offer educational researchers. Our students and staff are highly varied in terms of demographic, academic, cultural, and linguistic characteristics. There is a great variety of programs that meet the needs of our diverse population.

While we are eager to open our doors to researchers from outside our school system, we must ensure that their investigations do not compromise the privacy of our students and their parents, or disrupt the work of our students, teachers, and administrators. We can only approve proposals that meet professional standards for research design and ethical practices, and have merit and relevance for the school system. For this reason, the Division of Assessment & Accountability (DAA) has developed guidelines for investigators who wish to conduct research in our schools, and has convened a committee to review their proposals. This publication presents these guidelines and summarizes the proposal review process.

What is the Proposal Review Committee?

The Proposal Review Committee was established in 1980 to screen external requests to conduct research in New York City public schools. It is staffed by researchers and evaluators from the DAA. Representatives of various other offices and organizations within the school system join the committee as warranted by specific proposals. The committee reviews over 250 requests annually.

Who should submit a proposal to the committee?

Any person who wishes to conduct research at a school site, gather information on or from students, or survey school staff must obtain written approval from the DAA. Doctoral and master's degree candidates, university faculty, independent researchers, and private and public agencies must all submit proposals before conducting research. This procedure applies even if the researcher is employed by the school system in another capacity (e.g., teachers conducting research during sabbaticals, or school staff doing doctoral dissertations).

The procedure does not apply, however, to research conducted by and for an office of the New York City Board of Education. Similarly, if the research involves only the collection of aggregate student information that is already in the public domain, the committee need not be involved.

What materials should be sent to the committee?

The first step in the review process is submission of three copies of a complete research proposal, and a completed Proposal Summary, a copy of which is included on page 8 of these Guidelines. Please note that the proposal should be a final revision, not a draft, so that typographical, grammatical, and other errors have all been corrected. Additionally, the researcher should have obtained the approval of institutional boards of review, if any. This includes approval by human subjects committees, committees concerned with ethical practices in conducting research, and/or dissertation/thesis committees.

The proposal should include a statement of objectives of the research, a summary of the literature in this area of inquiry, a list of research hypotheses, a description of research methodology (i.e., subjects, materials, and procedures), a discussion of the data analysis (research design), and a discussion of the implications of the research or its significance to New York City students. The project description should be as specific
as possible, including the number of subjects and the estimated time required for research activities by participating students and staff.

Doctoral and master's degree candidates must submit their entire dissertation proposal with a letter indicating formal approval by their committee or mentor. Students seeking approval to meet a course requirement must submit a letter from their instructor indicating formal approval of the project.

Proposals must be accompanied by copies of all surveys, questionnaires, and test instruments that are not in common use, along with technical data describing the validity and reliability of the proposed instruments. Note that copyrighted material may not be reproduced.

Informed consent

For projects in which informed consent is required, a copy of the consent form should also be included. Regardless of university requirements, the consent form should be in the form of a letter addressed to parents/guardians or participants. The signature portion should simply state that "I agree to let my child ________ (name) participate in the study described above." Legalistic caveats should not be used (for example, "I understand that participation of my child is voluntary"). Such statements must be provided in the letter to parents, and not put into the parent's mouth. The researcher needs to provide the following information, in as conversational a manner as possible:

1. identification of the researcher(s) conducting the study (e.g., doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate School);
2. the purpose(s) for collecting data (no hidden agenda);
3. the activities participants will be asked to perform (e.g., complete a written survey, respond to a group interview with eight other seniors in this school, etc.);
4. the student may be audio- or videotaped; if applicable, request permission, giving a description of uses to which the tapes will be put, and what will happen to the tapes once the research is completed;
5. individual student data to which you seek access (e.g., citywide test scores, attendance records, and address and phone number for follow-up);
6. the amount of time required for participants;
7. that all information will remain anonymous and confidential;
8. that participation is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw from the study at any time, with no consequences;
9. telephone number of researcher(s), so that the parent or participant may call if there are questions or concerns;
10. space for a signature and check-off for either consent or refusal to participate. Most studies require active consent, that is, approval for participation. Sometimes passive consent is permitted. Passive consent is approved only when student records are not used and student activities are solely academic.

If there is the possibility that parents do not understand English, letters in appropriate alternative languages must be provided, even if the students participating in the study are proficient in English. The language used in the letter must be appropriate to the educational level and social class of the parents receiving the letter. It should not be a literal translation of the English version and must read as if it were written originally in that language. Letters that are not idiomatic and appropriate will be returned for revision. Letters in languages written with the Roman alphabet must be typed. For other languages, typed versions are preferred; however, if such versions are not readily avail-
able, the letter should be copied in good and legible handwriting. Chinese letters must be in two versions—one in traditional characters and one in simplified characters.

The researcher must retain all consent forms, and must be prepared to make them available if a parent, teacher, or school official questions a student’s participation.

To avoid any perceived coercion, the invitation to participate in research is to be printed on the researcher’s stationery, and not on that of any office or school of the New York City Public Schools. Also, school administrators or staff should not be mentioned as supporting the research.

What are the steps in the review process?

Once a proposal is received and is complete, it is reviewed by members of the committee and discussed at their monthly meeting. A letter is then sent to the researcher indicating whether the proposal has been approved. Before sending the letter, the committee may require the researcher to clarify or modify the proposal in order to satisfy Board of Education guidelines.

An approval letter indicates that the proposal has met the methodological and ethical standards required by the DAA. It provides entry to city schools, but it does NOT commit a superintendent, principal, teacher, or student to participate. For example, a principal may decide that the research is too time-consuming, and choose not to participate. Researchers must, on their own, obtain the superintendent’s and principal’s signatures indicating their permission to proceed with the research in their district or school. A signature form, which is enclosed with the approval letter, must be returned to the Proposal Review Committee with the appropriate signatures.

How long does the review take?

The length of time required to review and approve a proposal depends primarily on the completeness of the proposal and the researcher's prompt response to requests from the committee for clarification or additional information. Proposals received after April 1 cannot be assured of being reviewed for research to be conducted in the current school year. Teachers conducting sabbatical research should submit a request as soon as approval for a sabbatical has been granted. If the proposal is received at least seven days before a scheduled monthly meeting of the committee, it will be reviewed at the very next session. In most cases no more than four weeks are needed to complete the proposal review process. However, the process may be more protracted if a proposal requires much clarification and change. In this case, the committee will work with the researcher to obtain additional information and to resolve problems.

What criteria are applied by the committee in considering a research proposal?

The committee considers a number of factors in its review of a research proposal:

> The proposed research should be of educational value, either to city schools directly or as a contribution to current knowledge about the research topic. Projects that benefit the students or school directly will be considered more favorably, as will those that focus on the needs and priorities of the school district. The research should not be redundant in terms of the state-of-the-field.
> A sound research methodology that uses reliable and valid instruments is considered essential.
> The benefits of the research must outweigh the costs, which include staff and student time and other resources. Any potential effects on participants should be addressed in the research methods, and steps should be taken to eliminate any possible negative effects of the research. It is particularly important that investigators offer feedback to participants. The feedback may take a variety of forms (e.g., written summary, oral presentation).
> The study should embody procedures that respect student confidentiality and privacy rights of staff, students, and parents. Provision should be made for truly informed consent of participants and parents of students.

Follow-up. Researchers must provide feedback both to research participants and to the DAA. When the research is completed, a copy of the final report should be submitted to the DAA, which, at its discretion, may forward copies to interested persons at the Board of Education.

Are there special considerations for certain types of studies?

We welcome studies in the area of test development and norming. We urge test publishers to include New York City students in their item tryout procedures and then in their norming studies. We seldom participate in equating studies for tests in which we have not participated in the item tryout or norming procedures. Additionally, we do not participate in studies equating a test with IQ because group intelligence or scholastic aptitude tests are not administered to our general student body.

Cross-cultural studies that clearly identify strengths and therefore encourage improved educational practices may be considered for implementation in New York City public schools. Within this context, studies that explore diversities within groups will also be considered.

The Chancellor's Regulations on Non-Biased Assessment must be followed in such studies. Additionally, the assessment instrument and all other parent and student materials must be in the appropriate dialect and sociolect. Attention must be given to linguistic and cultural differences and evidence provided to indicate equivalence of instruments across languages and cultures.
PROPOSAL CHECKLIST

You can speed up the approval by checking to make sure that all necessary parts of the proposal are enclosed and that the materials to be reviewed are clear and legible.

Have you provided

☐ a Proposal Summary?
☐ a statement of the objectives of the research?
☐ a review of the relevant literature providing a rationale and/or theoretical development?
☐ a list of your research hypotheses?
☐ a discussion of your proposed methodology?
☐ a comprehensive description of all procedures, including the number of subjects and time required?
☐ copies of all instruments that will be used for data collection?
☐ a parental consent form (if students are included) in the appropriate language(s) as well as in English?
☐ the formal approval letter from your dissertation committee, thesis committee, or course instructor?
☐ a discussion of the educational significance of this study and its implications for New York City public schools?
☐ an address and phone number where you can be readily contacted?
☐ three copies of the complete proposal?

CONSENT LETTER CHECKLIST

Have you:

☐ Provided participants and/or parents with written information about the nature and purpose of the research, the activities, and how much time is involved for the participant?
☐ Assured anonymity and confidentiality of information to all participants?
☐ Told participants that participation is strictly voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without consequence?
☐ Provided space for signature, and check-off spaces for both consent or refusal to participate?
☐ Used your own stationery or letterhead of your institution?
☐ Ensured that the consent form is easily readable for the participant, and appropriate with respect to the participant's level of education and social class?
☐ Retained all forms to be made available to all concerned parties upon request?
TEST DEVELOPMENT AND NORMING STUDIES CHECKLIST

Have you:

☐ Provided a rationale and/or theoretical basis for the instrument?
☐ Included copies of all items (drafts are acceptable) that will be administered to students?
☐ Provided a parent consent letter that presents parents with written information about the nature and purpose of the activities and how much time is involved for the participant?
☐ Assured anonymity and confidentiality of information to all participants?

Where should the proposal be sent?

The proposal summary (see next page) and 3 copies of the proposal should be sent to:

Proposal Review Committee
Assessment & Accountability
New York City Department of Education
52 Chambers Street, Room 310
New York, NY 10007

NOTE: All researchers visiting schools will need to have their fingerprints on file at the Board of Education prior to the start of field work. This rule includes all research in schools conducted with students and/or staff. Researchers should be aware that the cost is $80.00.

To ask a specific research question, please contact the Division of Assessment and Accountability: daainfo@nycboe.net
PROPOSAL SUMMARY

To Researcher: Please submit this completed form with 3 copies of your proposal to the Proposal Review Committee, Assessment and Accountability, 52 Chambers Street, Room 310, New York NY 10007.

Name of Researcher ___________________________________ Telephone ____________________________
Mailing Address ____________________________________________________________________________
University or Professional Affiliation ____________________________________________________________
Graduate Student ☐          Professor ☐    Other _______________________________________________________________
If Investigator is a candidate for a degree, which degree? ____________________________________________
   Department ___________________________________________________________________________________
If Investigator is a grantee or independent evaluator, indicate name of agency, company funding project, address, telephone number, contact person:
Name of agency: ___________________________ Contact person: __________________________
Address: _________________________________________________________________
Title of Study ______________________________________________________________
List tests, questionnaires, interview schedules and other evaluation instruments to be used.*
_____________________________________________________________________________________________
If relevant, identify specific data from school records. _______________________________________________
Estimated duration of field work: ________________________________________________________________

If visiting schools, the researcher must have fingerprints on file at the Board of Education prior to the start of field work.
Study Subjects:     Students ☐     Faculty/Administration ☐    Other ________________________________

* Note: When you receive DAA approval, original copies of these instruments (no Xeroxes, if copyrighted), in addition to the signed approval letter, and a brief description of the project, should be attached to this form to obtain permission from superintendents and/or principals to conduct this research.